

She jerked away, surprised by the motion, by the gentleness of his touch...

Brenna sighed softly as he took another step back. Apparently, he was not nearly as intrigued by her as she was by him. And she was most definitely intrigued by him. She'd never seen a man as tall, or as broad, as Tony. Charles was a short, slight man—looking very much as though a strong wind would blow him off his feet. Even her adored father was not a large man. Seamus had been tall, but reed-thin.

Tony was the exact opposite—strong and solid—and he was, without a doubt, the handsomest man she'd ever seen. The thought of his walking out of her life as quickly as he'd stepped into it lay heavily on her mind.

"My lady?"

She forced herself back to the present. "I'm-I'm sorry. I did not hear you."

"I asked if you were always so shy. You seem almost afraid of me. I've told you, no harm will come to you. You are perfectly safe in my company."

"I am not afraid." She turned away, unable to hold his gaze.

"You may claim to feel no fear, my lady," he pointed out, lowering his voice to a near-whisper. "But you cower as if you expect me to raise a hand to you. Is that how your father treats you?"

She jerked back towards him, anger flashing through her gut. "I told you, he is *not* my father."

"Have I struck a nerve, my lady?"

"Please, leave me be. I-I do not wish to speak of it."

He touched her cheek. "Is it?"

She jerked away, surprised by the motion, by the gentleness of his touch. "Nay."

"Nay what?" He closed the gap between them once more.

"Do not touch me..."

You Belong To Me

by

Kimberly Nee

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

You Belong to Me

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Dedication

For Samantha, because you love Tony and Brenna as much as I do.

CHAPTER ONE

Ireland, 1789

Nothing made Brenna McIntyre jump quite as badly as the short, no-nonsense rap she heard against the oak door of her chambers. That knock meant only one thing. Charles McIntyre stood on the opposite side of the threshold, and their meeting would not end well for her.

"Open the door, git." Charles's voice, deep and cold, like the black waters of a bottomless river, was soft but by no means gentle. In fact, when his wife was not around, he made no attempt a'tall to hide his dislike for his stepdaughter.

Brenna stared at the door, wondering if she dared ignore his command. It mattered not whether she obeyed or disobeyed. He would still *discipline* her, as he preferred to call it. And according to him, she was constantly in need of discipline. She was a disgrace, a harlot, reveling in the attentions of the men and boys whose paths she crossed, and it was his duty as her father to correct each fault. Especially, as he so often pointed out, if he ever hoped to marry her off.

He knocked again, louder this time. "I said, open up. Do so at once!"

She sighed softly, setting her book aside, and rose slowly from the comfortable chair in the corner where she had been enjoying a pleasant hour. She smoothed the wrinkles from the skirt of her emerald green silk gown, lest Charles see them and discipline her for allowing her clothes to become what he considered shabby.

The uneven floorboards beneath her feet creaked with each step. However, the key turned without protest, as the lock on her door was kept well oiled. Brenna fought to control the quiver in her hand as she twisted the knob and opened the door. "Moving a bit slow this eve?" Charles sneered, his dark gray eyes slivers of coal-infused ice as he stepped into the room, closing the door behind him.

She stepped back. "My foot had fallen asleep," she explained, making certain she kept her voice appropriately meek and quiet. "I did not wish to fall."

"I see." He continued to stare her down, arms folded over his narrow chest. He was a deceptive, slender man, but she knew from experience that a blow from him packed the strength of a man twice his size.

She stood there, her belly twisting into knots that made breathing most difficult. Charles did not seem particularly troubled and this was the mood she most feared. At least when he was angry, his attacks were not surprises. However, this calm demeanor could mean anything.

Lifting her eyes to his, she said, "Did you need me for something, Father?"

His stare raked her from head to toe. "You'll need to dress appropriately for supper this evening. I suggest the dark orange dress I brought from Dublin."

Brenna swallowed the flinch rising to her lips. The burnt orange silk and taffeta gown he'd brought her was one of the ugliest garments she'd ever seen, buried beneath yards of unfashionable, stiff ivory lace, and more bows than she would have thought possible to stitch onto a gown. Fortunately, it wasn't often she was told how to dress, and therefore could forget about it.

"Aye, Father," she replied, casting her gaze to the bare floor. The scuffed and scratched oak offered little warmth in the cold and withheld heat in the summer. Thankfully, it was a crisp September day, so the floor was neither too warm nor too cold.

"Are you not even the least bit curious as to why I wish you to dress in your finest?"

She forced herself to meet his cool gaze. "I must admit, I am a mite curious, sir."

An equally chilly grin lifted the corners of his thin mouth. "At last I have found the man to take your ungrateful hide from beneath my roof."

Though she was accustomed to his disparaging slurs, his words still stung. In the ten years since he'd wed her mother Dara, Brenna had tried to make Charles like her, to endear herself to him, all to no avail. He never hesitated to remind her of the burden she'd been to him, how he'd only allowed her to live beneath his roof because of his love for Dara. It was Brenna's own love for her mother that kept Charles' snide remarks and use of his fists on her a secret as well.

"You have?" she asked, unable to keep the surprise from her voice. Though she knew Charles intended to marry her off, it seemed it would never happen. After all, how was she to wed if he refused to allow her to be courted? As she approached her twenty-second year, she feared she'd remain firmly on the shelf, dying a spinster.

"Aye. I feared I'd never find an acceptable gent fool enough to actually *ask* for your hand, but it seems your witch's face is every bit the charm as I feared. Although, you'll not allow him to sample your charms ere vows are taken. Unlike the others I've caught you with."

"I've done nothing of the sort," she replied without thinking. "I know not why you accuse me otherwise, when I remain in this room most of my days."

Charles' eyes narrowed. She didn't see his hand move, but then he backhanded her soundly across the face. The blow sent her reeling, hitting the floor with a *whump*, and sliding across the polished surface.

"Liar!" he growled, standing over her, hands on his hips as he glared down at her. "Tve seen you, you little trollop. Smiling and flirting with gents at every turn."

Brenna blinked back the stinging tears in her eyes, lifting a hand to her cheek even as she glanced at his hand. Charles had removed the heavy gold and ruby ring he normally wore, so she was quite certain he'd left no mark. It was a gift, his ability to backhand her cheeks without leaving any trace of the blow. Only her back and legs bore signs of his temper, and those she took great pains to keep hidden at all times.

"I do not flirt," she choked, rubbing the throbbing spot on her cheek. "I bid a good morning or evening. That's all."

His foot caught her solidly between the ribs, cutting off her air for a long, painful moment. As she lay sputtering on the floor, he crouched beside her, gripping a handful of her long braid to yank her head up from the floor. "Hear me and hear me well, you little Irish trollop, I'll *not* tolerate this sass in front of Lord Halstead. If you do anything, anything at all, to ruin this evening, I promise, you will regret it." He released her hair with a jerk, as if touching her disgusted him. "Is that understood?"

Brenna swallowed against the choking sob rising in her throat, managing to whisper, "Aye, sir," as softly as she could.

"Very well. You will be down in one hour and you will wear the orange gown." He straightened up and moved back to the door. "Remember, anything at all."

She lay there as he left, closing the door softly behind him. Fire spread through her side as she tried to sit up, bringing fresh tears to her eyes. "Bastard," she whispered brokenly, staring at the closed door through tear-filled eyes. "I cannot be married soon enough. It isn't possible any man might be as great a monster as you, Charles McIntyre."

When she could breathe freely again, Brenna rose to her feet, trying hard not to hold the bruised area as she crossed to her fine cherry wardrobe. Over the years, she'd become most adept at dressing herself despite what she was certain were cracked bones, deep bruises, and various other welts. No maid had been sent up, and she did not expect one would be, which was fine with her. It was too uncomfortable, the looks of sympathy each maid gave her upon perusal of the various marks appearing on their mistress's body.

She withdrew the hated orange gown, sticking her tongue out at it as she laid it out over her narrow bed and slowly removed her clothes to don a fresh chemise and stockings that weren't sagging and wrinkled. As she struggled into the gown, another tap reached her ears.

"Brenna?"

She breathed a sigh of relief at her mother's gentle voice. "Do come in, Mother."

Dara McIntyre stepped into the room, closing the door behind her. She was a striking woman, with the same thick red-gold hair she'd bequeathed to her only child. Her eyes were a dark, velvety blue, the color of a summer sky at twilight and just as gentle. Brenna always wished she'd inherited those sapphire eyes rather than the odd aqua shade that was hers and hers alone.

She pushed the thought aside as Dara said, "Da has asked me to make sure you are ready for supper. Lord Halstead has arrived."

"He is not my da," she muttered, refusing to meet her mother's gaze. "He simply wishes to be rid of me."

"Aye, it does seen that way, love." Dara placed both hands on Brenna's shoulders. "But, I highly doubt that to be true."

Brenna wanted so much to tell her mother just how wrong she was, how terribly she'd misjudged her second husband. But fear of retribution held her tongue. She had no doubt Charles would *kill* her if she ever unburdened herself to Dara. It had taken so long for him to convince Dara to marry him. He would do whatever it took to keep her.

Instead, she said, "Charles has found me a husband."

Dara nodded. "Aye. He has. But do not look so glum, love. I've no doubt you will find happiness. No doubt a'tall."

"You might not, but I am overcome with them," Brenna remarked, sinking down onto the edge of her bed. "What if he finds as much fault with me as Charles does?"

"Oh, love, do not think such things," Dara scolded gently, sitting beside her and slipping an arm about her shoulders. "Charles is not so terrible a man, Brenna. He is merely one who cannot express what he feels."

Brenna simply stared at her mother, shaking her head as she finally said, "Make no excuses for him, Mother. I am not so daft that I am unable to see he cannot wait to be rid of me."

"Oh, love..." Dara smoothed a wisp of hair behind Brenna's left ear. "Charles is a man who doesn't know how to relate to you, I am afraid."

Those nervous knots returned to her belly, but she fought to ignore them as she rose from the bed and smoothed the burnt orange skirt, wincing at the frilly bow at her hip. "I suppose we should go down, then?"

Dara nodded. "Yes. Supper should be almost ready. I think it'd be best if the four of us had a chance to talk

before the meal begins."

Brenna linked her arm through Dara's and they made their way down the narrow staircase to the main floor. Candles flickered in gold sconces along the walls, throwing off ominous shadows as daylight began to fade. She could hear Charles in discussion with another a man—Viscount Halstead, no doubt.

She tried to ignore the butterflies ramming their wings into her belly as she and Dara stepped into the spacious dining room.

Charles McIntyre looked up from his seat at the head of the polished mahogany table. "Ah, I was wondering if you would be making your presence soon," he said, his eyes lighting up as they fell on Dara. He then turned to the gentleman sitting to his left. "Halstead, may I present to you my wife, Dara McIntyre?"

Viscount Halstead looked from Dara to Brenna. "A pleasure to meet you, my lady," he said smoothly, rising from his chair and crossing over to them. He lifted Dara's hand to brush his lips over its back.

Brenna's blood ran cold as his eyes fell on her. They were dark, bottomless pits with absolutely no warmth whatsoever. Glittering and flat, they reminded her of the rocks she'd found along the Grand Canal.

A smile lifted his lips. "And you must be Brenna."

Charles cleared his throat. "Aye. This is Dara's daughter, Brenna."

"Ah, even more stunning than Charles described, my lady," Halstead brought her hand to his lips. "I'd no inkling you were quite so beautiful."

She fought the urge to draw her hand away, feeling increasingly uncomfortable beneath his steady stare. "I-I thank you, my lord."

He released her hand then, gesturing to the seat across the table from him. "Please. Allow me, my lady."

She watched him draw back the chair, and then carefully lowered herself into it. He pushed it in, but not before she had the sneaking suspicion that he tried to peer down her bodice.

Dara took her seat at the foot of the table and Charles reached for the crystal bell alongside his plate. Servants bustled in and out, setting out the evening meal and pouring wine, and dashing all hopes for discussion.

Brenna felt Halstead's dark eyes on her the entire time, felt heat creeping into her cheeks repeatedly. He certainly did seem smitten with her. She only wished she could say the same.

He was handsome, with chestnut hair and almost angelic features, but his was a cold handsomeness and for reasons she could not explain, her skin crawled every time he looked her way. That heavy-lidded gaze made her feel as though she sat there naked, that he could see right through her gown, her chemise, to her bared skin. It made her terribly uncomfortable, so much that she could hardly wait for supper to be over, when she could retreat to her chambers.

He was to be her husband. In a very short time, she would have no escape from his seductive perusal. In fact, there would be nothing preventing him from undressing her with his hands instead of only his eyes.

A shudder raced through her as she sipped her wine. She could almost feel the black clouds gathering over her head. The black clouds of impending doom. If she listened closely, she thought she could hear the shrieking of the banshee outside the dining room windows.

After supper, Charles quickly excused her from the room, and she did not argue with him this time. She welcomed the banishment, for the air in that room had grown considerably icy and she felt as though she couldn't breathe. She wanted nothing more than to go up to her room, lock the door, and pray that Charles would find some reason to keep her from marrying the English lord.

Brenna blew out the single candle beside her bed and slipped beneath the covers. Her eyes felt heavy and she couldn't wait to lay her head on her pillow and escape into the world of her dreams.

She froze at the soft scrape of the door opening. Her eyes snapped open, but she couldn't see through the suffocating darkness.

A scream rose in her throat as a hand clamped down over her mouth, grinding her teeth into her lips. A silken voice purred in her ear, "Ah, you are so lovely, Brenna. As it's all but a certainty that we will wed, there is no reason for us to wait. I will not wait, but will have you now."

Her eyes went wide as a hand gripped the front of her chemise. She'd recognized Halstead's voice at once, knew it was his hand tearing at her chemise.

The only sound she could push past that hand was a muffled shriek. His hand pressed harder, and she tasted blood as her bottom lip ground against her teeth. Shame flooded her at the rending tear of her linen chemise splitting down the front. The pressure on her jaw was incredible—she was surprised it didn't shatter it with the way he pushed down on it.

"Oh, yes. You are quite the lovely wench indeed," he purred, his voice strangely husky. "I shall so enjoy carrying you to my bed every evening."

"Mpghlf!"

His laughter was warm against her cheek. "Shh... this will be quite painful for you, love. It's by far best that you lie still. Unless, of course, you find you don't mind the pain."

Anger mixed with terror at his deceptively sweet whisper. Her insides curdled at the thought of this man exercising husbandly rights that were not yet his to claim. However, she couldn't scream for help. Not with that paw slapped so firmly over her mouth.

She curled her hands into fists, with every intention of inflicting serious harm upon him. She had to stop him, could not allow him to shame her this way. He was far too quick though, grabbing her wrists in his free hand. "I think not, love."

She tried to bite down on the hand threatening to break her jaw. However, the only damage inflicted was to herself as she bit through her bottom lip.

'Dear God!' she thought feverishly, her eyes darting about the room, desperately searching for... for what? She didn't know, but she couldn't stop them. 'He is going to do this and there is nothing I can do to stop him!'

Then, as quickly as it'd happened, Brenna felt the *whoosh* of Halstead's weight lifted from her. She heard the low crunch of a fist hitting flesh, followed by the solid *thunk* of a body hitting the floor.

"I think not, English," a deep voice sneered through the darkness. Her relief turned to icy fright once more. There were *two* of them? And now they were going to fight over who took the first turn?

"Tony, what're you doing?" A third voice, also male but not nearly as deep, joined in the fray.

Three men? She groaned, fighting off the wave of dizziness threatening to engulf her. One man was bad enough. Two men - worse still. But *three*? Shame rose up from the pit of her belly to spread hotly through her. There was no way she'd ever be able to fight off *three* men.

Still, she took advantage of her sudden release, jumping up from the bed, slipping across to the far side. She tried to keep her voice from quavering with fear. "Whoever you are, take yourself from this room at once before I scream."

"Bloody hell," Tony sighed sharply. "Light a lamp, will you?"

She backed up, flat against the wall, as light suddenly flooded the room. Pulling the torn edges of her chemise together as heat flooded her face, she finally saw her attackers.

Two men stood on the far side of the bed, both looking at her and neither one looking particularly happy. The dark one was the taller of the two, and by far broader, but the fair man looked much friendlier than his partner did.

"Quite a winning creature, eh, Tony?" he said, with a grin as he nudged the dark haired man with an elbow.

Tony didn't smile, his eyes barely flicking to her as he growled, "We needs get this one out of here," and nudged Lord Halstead with his foot.

"Who are you?" She was more than a mite confused now, though some of her fear left her. Were these men not with Halstead? If not, then *who* were they? And more importantly, why were they in her chambers?

"Get him out of here?" she echoed, looking from one man to the other again, courage she hadn't felt in ages rising up. "What goes on here? Who are you and what are you doing in my chambers? Explain yourself at once."

Again, her questions went ignored as the fair one said, "Why not leave him here? By the time he's discovered, we'll be long gone." She felt a knot deep in the pit of her stomach as Tony replied, "I suppose it would be a waste of time. Have you the quilt?"

"Think you I'd forget?"

What the devil were they talking about? Quilt? She glanced over at Tony, hoping he would finally explain to her what was going on.

He did no such thing, but instead nodded at the fair one. "Shall we then?"

Both men came around the bed towards her. Her heart skipped a painful beat as she whispered, "What mean you by this? Explain yourselves!"

Tony reached her first. "There is no time for explanations, my lady. You will come with us now."

Go with them? Where? What did they want with her? She shook her head, her moment of courage faltering, but not completely gone. "I'll do no such thing! Come with you? Come with you where?"

"We've no time for this." Another impatient sigh. "Jackson, the rope?"

All feeling of relief vanished as she felt icy cold fingers of fear squeezing her heart. "Rope?"

Jackson didn't hesitate, drawing a length of rope from a small, rough sack he carried. He reached for her arm. "Please turn around, miss. I've no wish to hurt you."

"Are you mad?" Brenna whispered, looked from Tony to Jackson and back again. "I am not going to let you bind me!" She wanted to scream for her mother, for anyone she'd even welcome *Charles* at the moment. But the scream wouldn't come. It was too firmly lodged in her throat.

She briefly considered running, but Jackson was between her and the door. Should he grab her, which she didn't doubt in the least he *would* do, she'd never get away from him. A kick to his shin would be ineffective as he wore knee-high leather boots, and her feet were bare.

Her feet weren't unnoticed for long. Jackson moved to the oak armoire across from the bed and pulled it open. After rummaging about for a few minutes, he emerged with a pale blue linen gown, stockings and a pair of battered leather walking boots.

"Let me help you, my lady." He tugged the gown over

her torn chemise and then guided her over to perch on the edge of the bed. He crouched before her to take hold of her left ankle.

She stared down at him in disbelief and again considered kicking him. "Unhand me at once!" Her foot twitched of its own accord and Jackson tightened his grip on her ankle.

"Be still, my lady. I should hate to leave a bruise. McIntyre would be most put out, should we manhandle you too badly."

Brenna could only stare. They were here on *Charles'* orders? How was that possible? Had he found another suitor, one with a loftier title? Her belly curdled and the fight seeped from her. Should he learn she resisted, she had no doubt how he would punish her, though he'd apparently told these men she was to be unharmed. A shudder rippled through her and she went still, murmuring, "I'll give him no reason to hit, then."

He ignored her, slipping the boot on and fastening it. "I apologize that we've no time to make you more presentable, but this will suffice for now."

When Jackson finished with the boots, Tony reached for her, muttering under his breath. He spun her about, ordering, "Turn around."

"Gentle, Tony," Jackson said, winding rope about her wrists. "Remember, she knows not what is going on here."

Brenna bit her already sore bottom lip as the rough rope tightened about her wrists. She wanted to ask again, but knew her question would simply remain ignored. Tears filled her eyes as Jackson tightened the knot and stepped back to unroll a large, faded and battered looking quilt.

Without a word, Tony lifted her to his shoulder, bending to place her in the middle of the quilt. Then, before she could say anything else, they'd rolled the quilt tight about her, muffling her voice until it was no louder than a whisper.

CHAPTER TWO

Brenna wanted so much to scream, but knew it would be pointless. The quilt was hot and dusty, and she thought she just might choke on the musty odor assaulting her nose. She lost track of time in that bloody quilt, listening to one of the rummage about in her wardrobe.

Then the floor fell away. From the distant sound of Jackson's voice, she knew Tony held her and did so none too gently, simply tossing her over his shoulder like a sack of wool. She didn't know where they were going, but knew they were moving down the steps. Tony's shoulder bounced into her ribs with every step, making breathing almost impossible.

They moved without a sound, and the only way she knew they were outside was by the soft nickering of horses.

Dear Lord! They were snatching her from her home!

You ninny! she thought with a muffled groan. Why didn't you fight back? You simply let them bind you and snatch you away, like a lamb taken off to the slaughter.

Of course, if these men *were* taking her on Charles' orders, something worse than Halstead could await her. No. She'd not go quietly then. Not a'tall. Her arms trembled as she tugged and pulled at her bonds. The rope scraped her skin, burning as she twisted this way and that. It was all for naught. With her wrists tied firmly behind her back, and the quilt so tight about the rest of her body, she couldn't move much. As it was, she could barely breathe. Her heart hammered against her ribs, which refused to yield enough to take a deep breath, and a wave of dizziness slammed over her. Closing her eyes, she relaxed, sagging over Tony's shoulder and prayed she'd not lose consciousness.

Blood pounded through her skull as she drew in a

shaky breath and released the will to continue fighting her bonds. There was once a time when she would have not given up, but would fight with everything she had. Charles had been most effective in crushing that spirit that always made her so headstrong and so outspoken. One of the first things she learned upon her arrival at Hillcrest was that speaking her mind earned her the hardest blows. Acquiescence made her discipline easier to bear and left fainter bruises.

She whimpered, feeling herself lifted from Tony's shoulder. Mayhap they were going to unroll her and finally tell her what the devil was going on. All she knew was that she'd just been stolen right from her own bedchamber. Come morning, when Dara came to wake her, bedlam would ensue.

Little by little, her fingers grew numb. Her shoulders, back, and legs ached. Pain spread through her entire body. It was so dreadfully hot in that quilt. She winced, sweat dampening her skin from head to toe. Her hair stuck to her face. Breathing became most difficult.

The ache grew, building onto itself until she thought she just might go mad from it. A jolt reverberated up her legs as both of her feet hit the ground. Blessedly cool night air caressed her damp skin as the blanket fell away to crumple at her feet. She shivered as the breeze stirred, but no complaint rose to her lips, as it was the freshest air she'd ever breathed. She turned to see Tony was the one who'd freed her. "I thank y—"

The words died on her ips as a band of black fabric fell across her eyes. Her thanks melted into an indignant gasp as Tony moved behind her to tighten the blindfold. She could see nothing but a sliver of ground through the bottom of the cloth.

He was surprisingly gentle, though, as he tugged and tied it, saying, "Is that too tight, my lady?"

"No," she murmured. Compared to the blanket, the blindfold was perfect. "It is fine, I suppose."

"It is necessary. Now, come."

"Come *where*? I can see but the tips of my boots."

A heavy sigh skittered along her bared nape, and her belly tumbled as Tony swept her up from her feet. She bit her bottom lip to hold back any surprised yelps as she was lifted up, and then came down hard atop what she knew was one of the horses.

He caught her wrists, guiding her hands to the fall of coarse horsehair. "Hold on to this whilst I get settled," he grumbled.

Twisting her fingers into the thick mane, she nodded. "Aye."

She lurched, almost slipping as the horse stepped sideways. Her fingers clenched, almost pulling the hair from the horse's neck, but she remained on the animal's back. A sudden warmth engulfed her, and she knew Tony had climbed astride to settle behind her.

An arm slid around her waist. She stiffened, refusing to release the mane as the horse took its first step. She slid to the side, despite the easy gait, and choked back a cry as Tony's arm tightened about her, pulling her firmly against him. Convinced he'd not let her fall from the animal, she loosened her hold and settled back against him.

They ambled along, the steady clopping of hooves enough to lull her into a state of drowsiness. Tony and Jackson chatted softly, but she ignored them. It mattered not where they were going. She had no means of escape. She couldn't fight. There was precious little to do but let her eyes close, and let the horses' rhythm carry her off.

She stiffened, thrust from sleep when the horse stopped. She forced her heavy eyelids open and managed a shallow sigh of relief. Mayhap *now* they'd tell her exactly what was going on, and why they'd snatched her from her home.

"*Ooof*!" She couldn't hold back her groan as she was lifted down and set on her almost numb feet. The movement sent blood rushing through her limbs and her groan grew louder as pins and needles jabbed her without mercy.

"Shh..." Jackson's voice floated up from behind her. "We will have you out of there in a moment, my lady."

"Please," she whispered, feeling faint, "I cannot feel my feet. I needs sit."

The blindfold whisked away and she squinted, blinking up at a star-filled night sky. She dragged air deep into her lungs as Jackson peered down at her with concerned eyes.

"Do you need help sitting?"

She glared up at him, unable to hold back her sarcasm. "I can only barely feel my feet. I think I shall require at least a *bit* of help, yes."

He surprised her by smiling. "I think you have a bit of spirit in you, my lady. It's nice to see it finally."

She hurt too much to hold onto her anger. "Please, do untie me now."

He moved around to help her into a sitting position and knelt to loosen her bonds. She rubbed her sore wrists, still glaring at him. "Now, you will kindly tell me what you mean by this?"

"I am afraid that I cannot do," he replied, sitting cross-legged across from her. "You needs speak with Tony about that."

"Oh, I most certainly will speak to him," she grumbled, her gaze shifting to where Tony was re-rolling the quilt to stuff into a satchel. "Are we stopping, then?"

"No. We are but getting you more comfortably settled."

His words sent a chill rushing through her. "So, I am being kidnapped, then, am I?"

"I should think you'd be thanking us, my lady," Jackson replied softly. "After all, our intrusion halted your violation."

Heat crept into her cheeks, and she dropped her gaze. "Aye. I suppose I do owe you thanks for that."

"Your lord is lucky he will live to see the dawn of another day, my lady."

"Is that so?"

"Aye. Had time not been a factor, I've no doubt Tony would've taken the man apart."

"Why should he? It's not as though *he* was attacked."

Jackson shook his head. "Mayhap not, but he cannot abide by the mistreatment of any woman."

She found *that* hard to believe, what with how carelessly he'd tossed her over his shoulder earlier. However, she kept that to herself. "Where are we, then?"

Jackson gave her a gentle smile. "I'm afraid I cannot tell you that, either, my lady. I am rather unsure myself."

She sighed. "Is there *anything* you might be able to

tell me?"

"Only that we'll not harm you in the least. You are quite safe with us."

That offered her little comfort. She didn't answer him, but instead glanced about at her surroundings. They were in a great expanse of field, far from any other dwellings. She couldn't see so much as a shack in the distance no matter where she looked.

Tony finished stowing the quilt and turned to join them. Brenna fought back the urge to sigh as she watched him walk towards them. He was indeed tall and broad, and she felt more than a hint of awe at his sheer size. Glancing up at him, she felt a sudden shyness, murmuring, "I suppose I ought thank you, then. For stopping... what you stopped." She lifted her gaze from Tony to Jackson.

Tony did nothing more than shrug, while Jackson said, "That is entirely up to you, my lady. Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

Her lips did feel dry, her throat parched. "I would like a sip of something, yes."

"Then let's do something about that, shall we?" He rose to his feet, moving to one of the mares now grazing peacefully in the distance.

She rubbed her wrists again. The rope chafed her skin, leaving it an angry shade of red. She frowned down at the marks, and then up Tony, who was still about ten feet from where she sat. He said nothing, but simply watched. His gaze unsettled her and she let hers fall to the grass at her feet. The grass crunched, and a shadow fell over her. "My lady, tell me, who was that man?"

She looked up to see Tony now standing over her. "I beg your pardon?"

He crouched down. "The man in your chambers. Who was he?"

"He is my betrothed," she murmured, fresh heat creeping into her cheeks. The shame had yet to leave her and his soft question brought it back to the surface once more.

"Betrothed, you say? I suppose we did you a favor then, wouldn't you say?"

"A favor? How come you to that conclusion?"

He arched one brow. "You wish to marry a man who thinks nothing of raping you?"

"I'll not dignify such rudeness with an answer," she replied crisply, turning away from him.

"I am merely curious."

"Go away."

He didn't reply, and Brenna relaxed as she heard him walk away. A chilly breeze lifted her simple plait, sending shivers through her again. She sighed, clenching her jaw to keep her teeth from chattering in the chill of the early autumn night. The last thing she wanted was for either man to notice how she shivered. It wouldn't do to be more of a burden, though she didn't know why she should be concerned with that. It simply seemed that she ought to do her best *not* to annoy Tony. He was a veritable giant, and she had no doubt that he could crush her easily, if he so decided.

"Come along, now," Jackson said, stepping up to take her by the elbow. "We needs start moving again."

She fought back the sour retort rising to her lips. It was late and she was too tired to fight. All she wanted was to go back to sleep. "Must we?"

"Aye. We must. Worry not, though. It won't be long before you will be in a soft bed once more."

She didn't answer, but shot him her meanest glare as she stomped over to the horses. "It won't be long, indeed," she muttered as Jackson swung astride his mare and gripped her by the wrist to pull her up and settle her in front of him. The rest of her mutterings fell by the wayside as he kicked the horse into motion and Brenna had to focus her concentration on keeping her head from being rattled free from her neck.

CHAPTER THREE

It was one of the longest nights Brenna could remember. She remained free of the blindfold as she shared Jackson's mount, but it was awkward, to say the least. However, she was quite proud of the fact that she'd managed to hang on, keep her head from bobbling right off, and had even managed to doze a bit more.

Despite sharing Jackson's warmth, the night was chilly and she couldn't remember the last time she'd been so miserable. It was a wonder her teeth hadn't rattled right out of her skull, they'd clattered together so badly.

At dawn, they stopped for a quick breakfast of leftover bread and wine. Then, Brenna suffered another humiliation. She had to approach Tony, and ask him to allow her a few moments' privacy.

He smiled, surprising her by offering her his arm. "Come along, then."

"Are you going to go with me, then?"

"I'll walk you to the edge of the tree stand and I promise, no peeking."

She couldn't help but give him a slight smile at that. "I hope not."

He shook his head, lifting his shoulders in a careless shrug. "I suppose you'll simply have to trust me."

She let the matter drop as they parted at the trees. When she emerged a few minutes later, it was to ask, "Now will you tell me where we are going?"

"We are heading towards Dublin. Once we are there, your questions will all be answered.

"You'll tell me nothing, then."

"Exactly."

"Fine." Brenna stormed away from him, marching straight up to Jackson to demand, "Are we ready to venture on?"

"Oh, my lady, I needs allow my horse a rest. You will

ride the rest of the way with Tony."

This was *not* what she wished to hear. "Must I? I've no desire to be stuck on horseback with *him*, again," she said, gesturing to Tony as he neared them.

Jackson grinned. "That would be a first—a lady preferring my company to Tony's. He a little gruff with you this morning?"

"You might say that."

He threw back his head and laughed, "Ah, he's not much of a morning person, I'm afraid."

"So, he is only rude at dawn, then?"

"Rude? Not normally. He's usually quite the gentleman where a lady is concerned."

She sniffed, letting him exactly what she thought of that. "Well, I seem to bring out the worst in him, then."

"I'd not worry myself about that, my lady," he assured her, digging around in his satchel to come up with the bottle of wine.

"I thank you again, but nay," she said as he held it out to her. "I am fine."

"Are you certain? It will be some time still before we reach Dublin." He lifted the bottle to his own lips for a long swallow.

"Quite certain."

With that, Tony joined them. "We should begin moving. I'm sure her absence has been discovered by now."

Jackson recorked the bottle, stowing it back in the bag. "Good point. Let me just put away the meager remains of our meal, and we can begin moving again."

Tony nodded, reaching for Brenna's hand. "Come along, then."

She tried to ignore the warmth seeping into her hand as his long fingers curled about hers. He gave a not-sogentle tug, pulling her in the direction of the sleek black mare waiting patiently for them.

He climbed up into the saddle and reached for her hand. "Just put your foot in the stirrup, my lady. I'll pull you up."

She eyed the mare. It had been years since she'd been allowed to ride, despite the fact that Charles had a stable full of horses. It was one of the first pleasures he'd taken away from her, and the one she'd missed the most, until Jackson and Tony appeared, anyway.

Neither man rode sidesaddle, of course. But it wasn't exactly a problem when they were under cover of darkness. In the early dawn, however, it was another matter. She considered arguing against it, but thought better of it, having no desire to stoke Tony's temper. He was far too big, and far too frightening. She would sit astride the animal and try like mad to not feel any embarrassment. Although, after what she'd suffered since the previous evening, what was one more humiliation?

That in mind, she put her foot in the stirrup and, with Tony's help, managed to get herself up into the saddle. He eased her in front of him, reaching around her to gather up the reins.

She fought to ignore the butterflies fluttering about in the pit of her stomach as her back pressed solidly to his chest. She felt surrounded by him, which wasn't the worst feeling in the world. It was almost a comfort, really, feeling those strong arms around her. She tried to push it out of her mind as he nudged the mare's sides with his heels and they began moving once again.

"What is in Dublin?" Brenna peered over her shoulder at Tony, only to find him looking straight ahead. She cleared her throat and repeated the question.

He glanced down. "You will know soon enough."

She scowled as his gaze lifted. They'd been riding in silence for nearly an hour. Only the clop of hooves broke the stillness, and she'd had quite enough quiet. "I beg your pardon, of course," she twisted enough to look at him again, "but seeing as how you *stole* me from my home, the least you might do is tell me that much."

"I've told you all you need know, my lady." He didn't look down, but kept his eyes trained on the road before them. "Now, if you'd not mind?"

"If I'd not..." she scoffed, twisting back to face forward. "Unfair, that. I awake to find you in my chambers, only to be rolled in a dusty old quilt, had my wrists rubbed terribly raw, and my eyes blindfolded." A mirthless chuckle rose to her lips. "You steal me from my home, whisk me out into the damp, chilly night air, and refuse to tell me who or what awaits me in Dublin. How terribly unsporting of me, to dare question."

She wondered if she'd gone too far when Tony's eyes narrowed and he glared down at her. His right hand held the reins, his left rested upon the pommel to keep her from toppling off, so she had little fear that he would strike her. His expression remained unchanged, however, and his lack of a scowl gave her an added hint of gumption. "My mother will be terrifically upset, you realize, when she wakes to find me gone. Even if Charles instructed you to snatch me, she will be quite upset."

When he didn't answer, she sniffed. "I am her only child, you know. She will never stand for this... this folly. You do realize that, don't you? And when she shows her displeasure to Charles, you can be certain *he'll* pretend as though he's never laid eyes upon you before. He worships my mother, you know."

The hand resting near the pommel tensed, his knuckles going white. Fighting back a smug smile, Brenna rattled on, "He does not enjoy seeing her in tears, or angry. Will do whatever he might to calm her. Why else would he make certain my brui—" She pressed a hand to her mouth and shook her head. "That is to say, he—"

Tony no longer stared ahead, but instead, his dark gaze fell upon her. "He what, my lady?" he asked, his words bordering on harsh.

Heat climbed into her cheeks. "I am afraid I misspoke."

"Is that so?" He didn't appear to believe her, but then shrugged. "Perhaps you would do well to not speak at all."

"Perhaps. But it has been ages since I've last had someone *else* to speak to, and I must admit to being a bit nervous about this little adventure. You say Charles ordered this? It makes little sense, since Halstead was of his choosing. Why would he want you two to snatch me away?"

Tony let out a heavy sigh. "I cannot possibly claim to know what the man was thinking, can I, my lady? But I can claim a headache, and that is just what your relentless prattle is giving me. Now, do be quiet. See, we've reached our destination and, in a very short while, your questions will be answered. Until then, I beg of you, do be quiet!"

His voice rose on the last word and her courage fled. Sinking back down against him, she stared straight ahead as they made their way along St. Stephen's Green. She fought the urge to squirm in the saddle, but it had been far too long since she'd last been on horseback and her already sore muscles let her know their even greater displeasure. The urge to needle Tony a bit more died completely as they left the green in the distance, and traveled east, towards the waterfront.

Dublin was a welcomed sight. The city was alive with activity and it had been years since she'd last seen it. She'd forgotten how much she loved the city, having spent the last ten years hidden away at Hillcrest.

"I don't suppose we might spend a bit of time in Grafton Street?" She twisted about to look up at him again. "There are some lovely shops, and I am a bit hungry. Perhaps we could stop at one of the pubs?"

"No. We've no time for shopping or any other such nonsense," he replied, his voice taut. He turned away from her, glancing over at Jackson. "She wishes to shop, and perhaps stop for tea."

Brenna bit her bottom lip as Jackson laughed. "Are you surprised? What lady *doesn't* wish to shop?"

Tony chuckled, facing forward again and shaking his head. "One would think we were here on holiday. Shopping, indeed. Do be quiet again, my lady. I've no desire to listen to any more ramblings."

Pressing her lips together, Brenna swallowed her sour retort, happy to give both men her icy silence instead. They continued moving east, towards the harbor, and she almost shrank back into him as the people on the walkways became seedier and rather unsavory-looking. Her belly flipped, sending a chill through her as the shops and pubs gave way to the waterfront. They crossed over several quays before they drew to a halt outside the Valmont Inn, a weathered stone building not far from the River Liffey.

"Wait here," Tony said to Jackson as he dismounted and tossed him the reins. "I'll go and make certain rooms have been secured."

Brenna shifted in the saddle. She'd been but a child

the last time she'd been astride a horse, allowed to ride in breeches. When they first started their journey, it took her several long moments to adjust her skirts to keep her legs from showing. Now however, she could barely even feel her legs and did not care *what* showed.

She was even more confused now. Who could have secured rooms for them? Her stomach gave a lurch. What if these men had lied to her? What if Viscount Halstead *was* behind this? What if he'd arranged her kidnapping in order to take her without having to wed her?

Before she could ask again, Tony came out to tell them that everything was set. He walked over to her, reaching for her hand. "Come along, my lady. Let's get you settled and then we wait."

"For what?" she asked, wincing as she slipped down from the saddle and tried to take a step.

"For the person responsible for this entire mess," he replied brusquely, taking her hand and fairly pulling her into the shadowy inn.

They marched right past the tired-looking, heavy-set woman behind the front desk, up a flight of rickety steps, and down a shadowy hallway. Tony paused outside of a grimy, battered door, giving the knob a sharp twist, and thrusting it open.

"After you, my lady."

She stepped into the tiny room, her nose wrinkling at the musty smell lingering in the air. It was the smallest room she'd ever seen, with barely enough room for a bed, a bedside table, and a washstand.

"Am I to stay here?"

He nodded. "For now. As for tonight, I cannot answer that."

"And where are you staying?"

"My ship, docked in the harbor. Come dawn, we set sail away from these shores."

She paused at that, hand hovering over the bedside table, where she'd been about to dust the grime from the surface. "You're leaving?"

"I am." He closed the door behind him, leaning up against it. "Jackson and I both."

This was a surprise. "So, this is my final destination?"

"As I said, my lady, I've no idea what your future holds. My duty was to bring you here. That was all."

"Did Viscount Halstead hire you?" she asked quietly, feeling the knot tighten in the pit of her stomach.

"The man who thought nothing of forcing himself on you?" He arched that blasted brow once more. "Nay. I can assure you, he had nothing to do with this. As I said, it was Charles McIntyre's doing."

The relief washed over her, almost knocking her off her feet as she sighed, "Thank the Lord."

"I take it, then, you are happy to be away from your intended?"

"Aye."

"I thought as much. Tell me, why did you accept a proposal from a man you supposedly cannot tolerate?"

"I accepted nothing. It was accepted for me."

He folded his arms over his broad chest, pulling his shirtsleeves taut over the cords of muscle wrapping his arms, defining them clearly. "Arranged marriage, then?"

"Something of that sort." She glanced over at him before turning to the grease-coated window, murmuring, "It was decided for me, without any input from me."

"Your father?"

"He is *not* my father, but my stepfather." She turned to look at him, shaking her head against the pang she felt. "Most definitely *not* my father. Which is why I am so confused that *he* is responsible for this." She swept a hand between them. "It makes little sense to me."

"I am certain he had his reasons." He stepped over to her, placing his hands on her shoulders. "But tell me this, was he the one who put the bruises on you, my lady?"

His voice was soft, and she looked away, squinting to see through the grime smearing the windowpane. She tried to ignore the warmth spreading through her. "I wish not to speak of it, my lord."

"Let us get one thing straight, my lady," he replied, crooking a forefinger beneath her chin and turning her gaze to meet his once more. "I am not a sir and I am not a lord. If Tony is too intimate for you, Anthony is fine."

His words were a mere whisper and she felt a chill race down her spine at the word *intimate*. She held his gaze for a long moment, and then forced herself to look away. "I am sorry."

He sighed sharply. "There is no need for apologies, my lady. You apologize far too often, you know. You've not offended me. There is simply no need to be so formal. I hold no title."

"You are not English, then?"

A smile lifted the corners of his lips. "Hardly, my lady. Born and raised in the United States."

"American?" This was surprise. He was the first American she'd ever met. She knew very little about that country so far away across the endless ocean. She knew a war had been fought there not too many years ago. Charles still ranted and raved about the upstarts who'd bested his adored England. Aside from that, she knew nothing.

"Aye, my lady. American." He stepped back, pulling his hand at the same time

She looked up at him. To her surprise, his eyes weren't dark at all. Rather, they were a very deep blue, surrounded by a fringe of thick black lashes. The striking contrast between the blackness of his hair and the sapphire of his eyes caught her completely by surprise. Much to her dismay, all she could muster was a lame, "Tve never met an American before."

"Well, now you have."

"Aye, I have," she murmured, nodding slowly.

"My lady, are you always so shy?"

Brenna sighed softly as he took another step back. Apparently, he was not nearly as intrigued by her as she was by him. And she was most definitely intrigued by him. She'd never seen a man as tall, or as broad, as Tony. Charles was a short, slight man—looking very much as though a strong wind would blow him off his feet. Even her adored father was not a large man. Seamus had been tall, but reed-thin.

Tony was the exact opposite—strong and solid—and he was, without a doubt, the handsomest man she'd ever seen. The thought of his walking out of her life as quickly as he'd stepped into it lay heavily on her mind.

"My lady?"

She forced herself back to the present. "I'm-I'm sorry. I did not hear you." "I asked if you were always so shy. You seem almost afraid of me. I've told you, no harm will come to you. You are perfectly safe in my company."

"I am not afraid." She turned away, unable to hold his gaze.

"You may claim to feel no fear, my lady," he pointed out, lowering his voice to a near-whisper. "But you cower as if you expect me to raise a hand to you. Is that how your father treats you?"

She jerked back towards him, anger flashing through her gut. "I told you, he is *not* my father."

"Have I struck a nerve?"

"Please, leave me be. I-I do not wish to speak of it."

He touched her cheek. "Is it?"

She jerked away, surprised by the motion, by the gentleness of his touch. "Nay."

"Nay what?" He closed the gap between them once more.

"Do not touch me..."

"I'm not going to hurt you." His hand cupped her cheek now, his fingers gently brushing across it. "Tell me, is he the one who thinks nothing of leaving bruises on you?"

"And what difference is it to you?" she asked, wanting to pull away and not wanting to at the same time. There was something about him that drew her to him, that made her feel safe. Safer than she had felt in a very long time.

His voice was a low growl. "I have no use for a man who raises his hand to a woman."

"Well, that isn't of your concern now, is it?"

"Ah, I wondered if there was spirit hidden beneath the mouse. Such as the spirit you showed when you pestered me with idle chitchat earlier."

She fought the urge to let her eyes close as he brought his other hand up and cradled her face. "Mouse?"

"Mouse." His thumbs brushed over her cheeks. "You no longer need live in fear, my lady."

She had the sudden feeling he was going to kiss her. His fingers were so warm on her skin, making her eyelids feel even heavier. She craned her neck, as he stood at least a foot taller. Glancing up, she saw his eyes had darkened to a deep indigo blue, and her heart skipped a beat.

"Tony?" Jackson's voice floated through the door. "Is everything all right in there?"

Tony sighed softly, swearing under his breath as he dropped his hands and stepped away from her. "Everything is fine. Is she here yet?"

"Aye. I just spoke to her. She is waiting for us in the dining room."

She? Didn't Jackson mean *he*? Tony had said they acted on Charles' orders, so for Jackson to refer to a she made no sense to Brenna, but she didn't voice her question. She took an even bigger step away from Tony, trying to force her heart to return to its normal rhythms. The room swam before her eyes, and she couldn't help but feel a pang of disappointment as he turned away to go to the door.

Jackson stepped into the room, smiling at her and offering her his arm. "Shall we, my lady?"

Brenna hesitated before slipping her arm through his. She was more than a little curious to find out who awaited them down below.

Tony scowled, his eyes darkening. For a moment, Brenna thought he was going to take Jackson to task for offering his arm. But then the darkness passed and she wondered if, mayhap, she'd simply imagined it.

Without a word, Tony pulled open the door and disappeared through it. She turned to Jackson. "He seems a mite peeved about something."

"Aye," Jackson replied thoughtfully, guiding her through the open doorway. "He does, doesn't he?"

"What on earth could he be annoyed about?"

He shrugged. "With Tony, it could be just about anything. He's not what you would call the most eventempered man walking."

That sent a shiver down her back. "I suppose then, it's a good thing our journey is over. I should hate to be the one to set him off."

He gave her a look of surprise. "Oh, I highly doubt you would have to worry, my lady. He is not one to take his temper out on a woman. He prefers his opponents to fight back and offer him a least some semblance of a challenge."

She said nothing as they made their way down to inn's dining room. There were only a handful of people already seated in the small, smoky room at the back of the building. Without hesitation, Jackson steered her towards a table in a dark, almost seedy-looking corner.

"When will someone tell me why I am here?" She could see that someone already occupied that table and, she could see that person was another woman.

"Your questions will all be answered in a moment, my lady," Jackson assured her, patting her hand gently.

She certainly hoped so, watching as the woman stood to greet Tony as if she knew him. Then, as they drew nearer, she gasped. He wasn't the only one who knew their guest.

She recognized her mother at once.

CHAPTER FOUR

Brenna pulled free from Jackson, hurrying over to Dara. "Momma? What are you doing here?" she gasped, throwing her arms about her mother's neck and giving her a squeeze.

Dara McIntyre laughed softly as she untangled herself from her daughter. "I will explain everything after we've eaten. Now, we must be quick. We haven't much time."

"But—"

Dara shook her head. "No 'buts', dear. Sit and eat and I will answer everything for you."

With that, they all settled at the table and ordered a light supper. As they ate, Brenna couldn't help but notice Tony's eyes seemed to do more than a bit of wandering over in her direction. It caused no little discomfort for her, as she now had to pay careful attention to how she ate. She felt starved, having had nothing more than a nibble of bread and sip of wine in nearly an entire day, but refused to do more than pick at her meal, despite the ominous rumbling in her stomach.

Finally, the meal was over and Dara smiled at her once more. "Now, you may ask your questions, Brenna."

There were so many, she wasn't certain exactly where to start. She fixed her mother with a wide-eyed stare. "You arranged for this?"

"Aye, I did."

"Why?"

Before Dara could answer, Tony broke in. "My lady, if you will excuse us. We will allow you a little privacy."

"Oh, that is hardly necessary." Dara smiled up at him as he and Jackson rose from their chairs. "Please, sit. I've no secrets."

Tony looked more than a bit uncomfortable. "Be that as it may, my lady. I have much to do to ready my ship for departure." He gazed at Brenna for a brief moment before turning back to Dara. "We will return in an hour or so and settle everything up, then."

Dara didn't look happy, but didn't push the matter. "Of course, Captain Radcliffe."

After both men left the table, Brenna turned her attention to her mother. "What the devil is going on, Momma?

Dara sipped her wine. "I tried to convince Charles that marriage to Viscount Halstead would be a terrible mistake. You should be allowed to marry someone here, to remain close to your family.

"When he refused to even consider the option, he left me no choice. Halstead is a horrible person—a monster, from what I've heard. Nevertheless, he *is* a peer, and you know how much emphasis Charles has put on bettering himself in the eyes of the English. What could be better than forging a strong alliance with a family such as Halstead's?"

Brenna's throat tightened as she remembered what he'd attempted to do the night before. "A monster? That would be putting it mildly."

Dara gave her a long look, but let her remark pass without comment. "As I said, I have been against this marriage since the beginning. When Charles refused to listen to reason, I took matters into my own hands.

"I posted a notice at the harbor some months ago. I said nothing but that I needed two able-bodied men to perform a little task for me. There were many who were interested—I spent quite some time here interviewing each and every one until I found the right one."

"How did you explain this to Charles?" Brenna asked, remembering the many trips her mother had made to Dublin over the past six months.

She smiled. "Shopping trips. Like most men, once he heard the word 'shopping', Charles tended to ignore the rest of my words. It was quite easy, actually."

"So, you hired these two men to *steal* me? Why?"

"It was the only way I could think of to get you far enough away from Hillcrest to secure you another marriage."

Brenna's relief faded. "Another marriage, Momma?"

Dara nodded. "Halstead will be furious when he learns of your disappearance, and I don't doubt for a moment he will come after you. Therefore, we must find you a husband, and quickly."

"And, how, pray tell, are you going to explain your absence?"

Dara waved the question away. "You need not trouble yourself with that, love. I will deal with Charles as necessary. I'm certain he will just as furious when he learns of my treachery."

"When did you leave?"

"I left at dawn, taking the main road here. I needed to be here before you arrived, to make certain you had a place to sleep this evening. Do not trouble yourself, Brenna. I will think of something to tell Charles."

"And how much time do I have, then?" Brenna cast a quick glance around the room. "It'll take some time to find a husband, don't you think?"

"No. I have one in mind already and I think he will be most agreeable."

Brenna sighed. From one arranged marriage to another. For some reason, that did nothing to cheer her at all. "You have already made the arrangements?"

"Not yet. I will do so in a short while." Dara reached across the table to pat her hand. "Come now, there is no need for that look of horror, Brenna. I think you will be most satisfied with my choice. Most satisfied, indeed."

"It isn't that I'm afraid I'll not be satisfied, Momma," she hedged, running a finger along the rim of her plate. "It's just that...well, I have always hoped of selecting my own husband, that's all."

Dara's expression became pained. "I'm afraid we haven't the time for that, love," she said softly, curling her fingers about Brenna's. "I need return to Hillcrest as soon as possible, lest Charles become even more suspicious."

"How did you explain my absence?"

Dara gave her a sneaky smile. "I told him I was leaving at daybreak and that you would be going with me. He thinks we are out shopping for your trousseau."

Brenna felt ice-cold fingers curl about her heart. "But, Momma, there might be a problem with that."

"A problem? What problem?"

She sat back in her chair, taking a deep breath. She had no choice but to tell her mother what had happened the night before. "Halstead came to my chambers last eve."

Dara's eyes went round. "He came to your room?"

Brenna nodded miserably, feeling shame flood through her. She could barely force her voice above a whisper as she said, "Your hirelings thwarted him, though."

"Thwarted him from what?"

She just stared. "Mother."

A deep crimson stain rose to Dara McIntyre's pale cheeks. "Oh dear..." she breathed, a hand coming up to press against her mouth. "What happened?"

"I'm not entirely certain." Brenna shook her head. "All I know is that he was trying to rip my chemise open and, the next thing, he was on the carpet, out cold."

"Well, that settles things, then. You will go up to your room and wait for me, Brenna. We needs marry you off at once and get you far, far away from here."

"What?"

"We've no choice, love. Now, you go on. I'll be there as soon as I can and then we will see about getting you married."

"But, Momma-"

"Nay, there will be no 'buts'. You will do as I say and simply have to trust me."

Brenna knew that stern tone so well, knew there was no arguing her way out of the predicament. Like it or not, she was going to be married as soon as possible, and to a complete stranger.

"Yes, Momma," she murmured, rising from her chair and pushing it back. "Momma?"

"Yes, love?"

"Will you at least tell me his name?"

"You will know soon enough."

Brenna sighed, her shoulders slumping as she turned away from the table. Ignoring the other diners now staring at her, she made her way out of the dining room and back up the stairs to her small, cramped room.

"That's hardly fair," she muttered, throwing herself across the narrow bed, which groaned in protest. "I escape one arranged marriage, only to be forced into another."

Her gaze fell on the small window across from her. For one wild moment, she considered running away, to see what the city of Dublin had to offer. Then reality sank in. She had no money, had no skills—had no prospects for supporting herself in any way. The fantasy of running away was wildly romantic. She had no doubt the reality of it would be most unpleasant.

She got up, crossing the warped floorboards to peer out that window. She was on the third floor. There was no way possible she could jump out the window and land safely. At best, she'd break her legs. At worst? A shudder ran up her spine.

"I'd most likely break my neck," she muttered, tapping a fingertip against the rippled, smudged glass. "Besides, where would I go from here? I know not a soul in the whole of this city."

Turning away from the window, Brenna wondered just who her mother could have in mind. Who did she know in Dublin in search of a wife? She knew her mother spent a good deal of time there, as it was one of her favorite places to shop. So it was entirely possible that she knew quite a few people. Charles was certainly well connected, although he tended to steer clear of the Irish, preferring his company to be English instead.

She sank down onto the edge of the bed. It was hopeless. Utterly hopeless. "Well, there is nothing I can do, I suppose. It's best to just not dwell on it and trust that Momma knows what she is doing."

"Please, do keep your voice down!" Dara ordered in a hot whisper, frowning as she leaned over the table towards Tony.

"You are mad, woman," he growled, leaning in to meet her. "I have fulfilled my end of the bargain. I brought her here. That is it. I am done."

"Do you not understand the seriousness of the situation?" she shot back, reaching over to grip his wrist. "I cannot allow her to go to that man! You saw for yourself how he will treat her, did you not?"

He shook her hand from him. "That is none of my concern now, my lady," he replied evenly, shaking his head. "I will not be forced into a noose. I upheld my end of the bargain, as I said."

Dara gave him a long, level look through eyes that were a much darker blue than her daughter's. From past experiences, he had the feeling this conversation was not going to bode well for him. "I am afraid I must disagree with you, Captain Radcliffe. You are not done. Not quite yet."

The tightness in his chest signaled trouble. Had she been a man, Dara McIntyre would already be lying on her back, staring up at the ceiling and wondering what hit her. However, he could do no more than sit and stew at her bold suggestion that *he* take Brenna McIntyre as his wife.

Out of the question. He did not accept the job to find a bride. He had no desire whatsoever to marry just yet. Moreover, if he was even *thinking* about marriage, he already had his future wife chosen and her name was *not* Brenna McIntyre.

"This conversation is over," he replied stiffly, placing both hands on the table to push his chair back.

Dara's hands slapped down over his. "I think not, Captain Radcliffe, lest you wish to be explaining to the magistrate why you *stole* my daughter from her chambers."

Her voice was mild, but he didn't mistake the seriousness of her threat. Tony felt an icy chill shoot through him. "You would not dare," he growled.

"Oh, but wouldn't I?"

He quickly swallowed the oath bubbling to his lips, trying to swallow his irritation as easily. "And what makes you think a magistrate would believe this wild tale you intend to tell?"

"What magistrate would believe a mother would arrange for the kidnapping of her own daughter?" Dara retorted sharply. "A mite hard to swallow, don't you think?"

He knew he didn't stand a chance. She was right. It was madness to think that a mother would do such a thing. Still, he was not about to merely cave in and bow to her wishes. "I'll have you know, Madam McIntyre, that I have an intended awaiting my return to the States. How am I to explain that?"

"That isn't my concern. My concern is my daughter." Dara sat back in her chair, her eyes holding his and her jaw set at a stubborn angle. "Her safety is my first worry and as long as she remains in Ireland, that safety is in jeopardy. I will not allow my husband or that monster to whom she's been betrothed anywhere near her and *you* are going to make certain that does not happen." She jabbed her forefinger into the scratched tabletop. "Should you choose to oppose me, you can be sure I *will* go to the magistrate. My husband is a powerful man, with many friends. Understand you this, I *can* make this happen and I *will.*"

Tony swore softly beneath his breath. He didn't doubt that this woman would make good on her threats. He had no desire to land inside a jail cell.

"Very well," he said after a long pause. "I will marry her. But, know this—it will be in name only. When we reach America, I fully intend to remedy the situation."

"Remedy the situation?"

"Do not disillusion yourself, my lady. This is no love match and I'll not pretend otherwise. I will protect your daughter until such time as we reach New Jersey. Then, I will seek either annulment or divorce."

"You would turn her out, in a strange land?"

Tony ignored her gasp of surprise. "I will see to it that she is taken care of, but she will live her life and I will live mine. It's the only way I will agree to this."

Dara frowned, her forehead creasing sharply. "I will not have my daughter live with the stigma of divorce attached to her name."

"I can assure you, my lady, annulment will not be a problem, either. I have no intention of consummating this sham of a union. I will not be touching your daughter." He didn't miss the blush creeping into Dara's face. "I apologize, my lady, if I seem forward, but I just want you to know the reality of this situation. I have no interest in your daughter. I have no interest in marrying her. I am doing this strictly to preserve my neck."

"If that is how you feel, fine. I will make certain you are paid well for your—ah—sacrifice."

He didn't miss the sarcasm in that last word. "That is

not necessary. I've no need for it." This time, he did push away from the table. Rising to his feet, he said, "And when do you wish this ceremony to take place?"

"Before sunset tomorrow. It will take some doing, but there are a few strings I can pull to make this happen."

"I will be on my ship. Send word when the final preparations are made."

With that, Tony shoved his chair back under the table and stalked from the room, swearing to himself the entire way. Jackson was right. He should've never accepted this job.

"Well done," he muttered to himself as he stormed from the inn and to his horse. "You wanted a challenge? Here's one—extricate yourself from this mess, jackass."

CHAPTER FIVE

"You must be joking!" Brenna gasped, whirling away from the window, where she'd been gazing down at the cobblestone streets below. "Absolutely not!"

Dara was unperturbed by her daughter's outburst. Obviously, she'd fully expected Brenna to react with such horror to the notion of marrying Captain Radcliffe. "You *will* and that is final. Do you not see the seriousness of the situation? Halstead *will* come after you, Brenna. You needs be married and soon. That Captain Radcliffe is American is a blessing, for he will take you far away from here."

"But, Mother, *marry* him? Have you gone mad? What makes you think he'll not be as bad as Halstead? He might be worse!"

Just when she thought she was free of the specter of an arranged marriage, Dara arrived to tell her otherwise. She was to marry the dark-haired American, and she was to do so as soon as possible.

Married to Captain Radcliffe. Brenna suppressed a groan at the thought. If she must be married to one of the Americans, why could it not be Jackson? She felt quite comfortable with the blonde haired man with the warm blue-gray eyes. Of the two, he was most definitely her first choice.

But no. She was to marry Tony instead. The man who looked as if he could take her apart with no effort at all. That he could not tolerate the mistreatment of the fairer sex meant nothing to her. It was funny how quickly that could change, when the situation was right.

"Fear not, love. The captain is a good man. He will protect you, should Halstead come after you."

"Why? Why would he do such a thing? He does not care for me. He does not even know me."

"Ah, but trust me, he will. You will see."

She sighed softly, shaking her head. "This is a mistake," she murmured, watching a carriage make its way along the cobbled street below her. "You cannot force a man like him to take a wife if he does not want one, Mother."

"He has not been forced, but was most willing."

"He was?" She couldn't keep the surprise from her voice. "Why would he be?"

Dara shrugged. "I cannot answer that, my dear. Now, you get some rest whilst I go pay a call on an old friend. We must have you married and married soon."

Jackson didn't even bother to try hiding his smile. "Married, Tony?"

"Aye, don't remind me," he replied darkly.

"Well, if this isn't just a kick in the-"

"Keep it up, and you'll see just how much I'm in no mood for jokes," he interrupted, struggling with his cravat. "Now, if you're done blathering, might I finish here?"

Jackson grinned even as Tony scowled at him in the looking glass. "It could be worse, Tony. At least she is a sight to behold."

Tony didn't bother replying. Yes, Brenna McIntyre was lovely, to be sure. Beautiful, even. However, there were an abundance of beautiful women to be had. It didn't mean he had to marry them, did it?

Marriage. Tony fought to keep his temper in check every time he thought of Dara McIntyre sitting across from him, all calmness as she informed him that he would sorely regret not bending to her will.

Now he was to be trapped with a wife he neither wanted nor needed. How the hell was he going to explain this to Charlotte Madison, awaiting his return to America?

He scowled at the glass as he finally got the cravat wound right. He hated the stiffness, the formality, of such things. Back home he wore a stock only when absolutely necessary, but an occasion such as his own wedding called for a modicum of formality, no matter how dead set against it he might be.

His gut burned each time he thought about the fact

that he would be leaving the shores of Ireland with one extra body on board the *Pegasus*. That extra body would be the albatross about his neck until they reached the United States and he could see about removing it permanently.

Dara would be too far away to prevent him from ending his so-called marriage. And ending it was exactly what he planned to do. Madam McIntyre may have influential friends in Ireland, but *he* had a few of his own in America. He was going to make damn certain to do whatever it took to rid himself of the wife he didn't want in the first place.

He shook his head, stepping away from the glass. "A sight to behold, perhaps, but an unwelcome sight."

"Ah, it's not so bad, is it? River Oaks will only benefit from having a mistress, you know. After all, it's been years since it has seen a woman's touch."

"I am well aware of that."

"And we both know Miss Charlotte has never stood a chance of becoming her mistress to begin with."

"Do we?" Tony asked mildly, slipping into a formal frock coat of midnight blue velvet.

"We do. You forget how well I know you, Tony. If you felt anything other than lust for Miss Charlotte, you'd have married her by now. You've been more than happy to let things linger the way they have for nearly three years."

"And of those three years, I've been away from home for a third of it."

Jackson snorted at that. "Ah, someone a little less familiar with you might actually believe you were planning to ask for Miss Charlotte's hand. Those of us on the inside, though, know the truth." He pushed up and away from the wall he'd been leaning against. "Besides, Miss Brenna will be like a welcomed breath of air at River Oaks."

"Well, enjoy that breath whilst you can," Tony muttered, dropping into a chair to tug on his boots. "I plan on voiding this farce of a marriage within the first hour of setting foot on American soil."

"You plan to spend the entire voyage across the Atlantic avoiding your bride? It'll be rather close quarters

for that, don't you think?"

"I've no intention of touching her," he growled, rising from the chair when he finished with his boots. "She will remain as untouched as she is now."

"That I *have* to see," Jackson smirked, pulling open the door. "As a matter of fact, I may have to start placing wagers on how long you'll be able to resist her. She is a lovely piece, Tony."

"She is a noose about my neck and an iron about my leg. Nothing more and nothing less and I'll be damned if she'll enjoy any benefit from being married to me."

"Rather sure of yourself, aren't you?" he replied mildly, stepping out into the narrow corridor. "Besides, why take it out on her? The lass has no more say in this than you do."

"I certainly can't lash out at her mother now, can I? I've an aversion to jail cells, you know. Especially those in foreign countries."

"So you'll take it out on an innocent girl who's already been put through hell?" Jackson asked softly. "Why make her suffer when she is guiltless, Tony? She's done nothing to earn it."

The reminder of her mistreatment caused another rush of anger to sweep through Tony, followed by a flutter of annoyance. He didn't want to pity her. Didn't want to grow angry on her behalf. He was trapped with her now, whether he wanted her or not, and that alone was enough to make him want to lash out at the nearest body.

"That is neither here nor there," he snapped as they made their way topside. "All I care about getting the hell out of here. The sooner we get away from these shores, the sooner I can go about getting my life back. At the moment, that is the most pressing thing on my mind."

CHAPTER SIX

Brenna blinked back tears as Dara embraced her warmly and whispered, "Do not be afraid, my dear." She kissed her daughter on the temple. "The captain is a good man. He will see to it that you are well cared for."

There was a solid lump in Brenna's throat. Tony Radcliffe might be a good man, but he certainly wasn't a *happy* man at the moment. He stood by one of the two carriages waiting at the inn's front entrance, glowering at them as they bid a tearful farewell to one another. She could see him out of the corner of one eye, standing there with his arms folded over his broad chest, dark brows pulled low, and a scowl darkening his face.

Her husband.

There had been no fanfare, no celebration, just a brief, simple wedding ceremony taking place before a stern-faced priest.

She didn't even have a proper wedding ring. Just a simple plain band of silver that Dara had brought with her. Not gold. Silver.

The ceremony was quick—simple vows, a chaste kiss, and then Brenna was led away from the altar on her husband's arm.

Her husband.

The words sounded so odd in her mind. Theirs had to be the most solemn wedding in the history of marriage. Neither bride nor groom smiled, or gave any indication that either felt any of the joy they were supposed to feel. The air was rife with tension as Brenna dutifully recited the vows that would forever bind her to Tony.

When they'd been declared man and wife, he leaned in towards her, brushing her lips with a simple kiss. His expression remained neutral, but she felt the shock of his lips against hers all the way down to her toes. Tony was quick to pull away, though he did tuck his bride's arm through his as they left the church. He informed her that they would spend their wedding night aboard his ship. In the morning, when the tides were favorable, they would leave Ireland's shores to journey to America.

Now, she faced the reality of saying goodbye to her mother—possibly forever. Despite Tony's obvious impatience, she could not simply bid her mother farewell and turn away.

"I shall miss you, Momma," she murmured, throwing her arms about her mother's neck and squeezing.

Dara's voice cracked as she whispered, "As I will miss you, my dear. However, do not trouble yourself. You will be far too busy settling in to your new life to waste precious moments missing me. And I promise you, I will come to see you when I am able."

Brenna blinked back hot tears, sniffing as she said, "Please, do make it soon."

"As soon as I am able."

Tony cleared his throat, stepping up to gently separate mother and daughter. "As much as I hate to rush this," he said gruffly, "we really must be moving on. I should like to get some sleep before setting sail."

Dara nodded, stepping back and swiping at the tears streaking over her cheeks. "Of course." She turned stern eyes to him. "You *will* take care of my daughter, won't you, Captain Radcliffe?"

Tony nodded solemnly. "I gave you my word, my lady. And, unlike some people, *I* keep my word."

Brenna saw the delicate flush sweeping up into her mother's hairline. It made no sense to her why his words should cause such a flush, but she kept her questions to herself. A moment later, Dara climbed into one carriage, while Tony led Brenna to the second carriage.

She sank back into the rich wine-colored velvet seat, gazing out the window and not bothering to wipe away her own tears. As they began moving towards the harbor, she sniffed, watching her mother's carriage start off in the opposite direction.

Tony sat across from her, legs stretched out before him, arms still crossed over his chest. She paid scant attention to him, though. Her nose almost pressed to the glass, she watched as the carriage carrying her mother off grew smaller and smaller.

As Dara's carriage disappeared around a corner, Brenna forced herself to face Tony. A chill went through her at the dark scowl shadowing his features. Still, she cleared her throat. "So, we are to leave in the morning?"

He gave a brusque nod. "Aye. At dawn."

"How long will it take? To reach America, that is?" "Several weeks."

"And where am I to spend the next several weeks?"

"Do not ask such silly questions."

She didn't think her question was so silly, but apparently she was wrong. Feeling the heat climb into her cheeks, she turned back to the window, murmuring, "I am sorry."

He uncrossed his arms, his hands coming to rest flat on his thighs. "You are my wife, now, Brenna, though it behooves me to admit to such a thing. Still, you are and as such, you will share my cabin. It would only raise eyebrows were you to do anything else. Besides, there are no empty cabins on board the *Pegasus*. I sailed here with a full crew."

Her blush grew stronger. She would spend the next weeks in very close quarters with the man sitting across from her. It unnerved her to no end. It wouldn't be long before she was introduced to her husband in a way that was a total unknown to her, even though Dara made certain to impart *some* knowledge to her regarding the activities shared between a husband and wife.

She'd wanted to squirm when Dara pulled her aside to instruct her as to what would be expected of her wedding night. The words took on an almost ominous tone as she glanced over at Tony once more.

The thought of sharing his bed sent more than a ripple of fear through her. Tony Radcliffe was such a large man that she didn't doubt for a moment *all* of his parts were in proportion with one another. She didn't even want to think about having to accommodate a man of his size. Far too frightening.

Tony shifted in his seat, sinking lower, his hands dangling between his knees. His eyes were closed, but then they suddenly opened, his gaze unwavering as it met hers. She held his stare easily, but then a slight smile lifted his lips to send a jolt zinging clear through her

She couldn't imagine what he was smiling about. His eyes darkened a bit as they held hers, and the zing blossomed into a small quiver. It unnerved her even more and she broke the stare, her gaze dropping to her hands, now folded in her lap. She could feel his eyes still upon her, which gave her the urge to fidget about in her seat.

The air wafting in through the open carriage window grew tangier as they neared the harbor. She peered through that window to catch her first glimpse of Dublin's docks, where the Liffey emptied into Dublin Bay. She'd never ventured into this part of the city, and was taken aback at the depressing scene before her.

This part of Dublin was not the nicest, as she could see by the raggedy looking people crowding the streets. *Ragamuffin* was the first word leaping to mind. Children darted about, some being chased by adults yelling about stolen reticules or coins. There were rough-looking sailors, heavily rouged strumpets, and beggars with unashamed hands held out to the passers-by.

A shudder tore down her spine. This would have been her fate, had she not thought better about jumping out the window of her room at the inn.

They rocked to a halt and Tony cleared his throat. "Shall we?"

She stepped down from the carriage behind him, slipping her arm through his and trying to ignore the heat seeping into her hand. Her fingers instinctively curled about the solid muscle of his forearm. She certainly did not wish to become separated from him. It would take but a heartbeat before she lost him in that crowd.

Covering her hand with his, he leaned closer. "You've nothing to worry about, my lady. I'm not about to lose you to the masses."

She nodded, but held firmly onto him all the same. He sighed softly, giving a gentle tug to pull her closer still, tucking her arm firmly beneath his.

As they strolled along, she gazed about at the ships crowding the docks, and those moored farther out in the harbor. There were vessels of all sizes and shapes, some dormant, and some buzzing with activity. Flags from all around the world fluttered in the breeze and accents from many walks of life filled her ears.

Tony cut through the crowds with ease. People seemed to simply step aside for him. She tagged along, clutching his arm, trying not to get lost in everything going on around her.

"Where is your ship?" she asked, raising her voice above the din.

"Right over there."

He pointed to a large, four-masted vessel anchored in the last slip. The *Pegasus* was a sturdy-looking ship, with taut rigging and pure white sails filling with wind. The ropes lashing the ship to the docks pulled taut as the ship tried to slip free of its berth.

She'd never seen anything so huge before. It eased her nervousness somewhat, knowing she'd be sailing on so solid a ship. This would be her first ever ocean voyage and she'd been more than a little anxious about setting sail.

He gave her a proud smile as he led her up the gangplank to the deck. "Welcome aboard the *Pegasus*, my lady."

There was genuine warmth in his voice as he swept a hand outward, gesturing to the immense deck spread out before her. It teemed with life as nearly two dozen men rushed about, shouting and laughing amongst themselves.

She tried to take it all in, everything around her. It was impossible. There was far too much activity going on around her. Men were busy stowing cargo, securing it below deck as they prepared to take on the mighty Atlantic.

He didn't give her time to gawk about, but gave a gentle tug on her arm, leading her across the deck towards a flight of stairs disappearing below. There, they descended into a shadowy corridor. "My cabin is at the end of the corridor, my lady," he said, pulling her along and stopping at a closed door. "Or, I suppose I ought to say, *our* cabin."

She glanced about at the gleaming dark wood surrounding her. She might not know a thing about ships, but she could certainly tell that this one was major source of pride for him. The wood was polished to a shine, the floors nearly spotless, and the sconces lining the walls free of wax from the flickering candles encased in elegant glass globes.

He threw open the door, gesturing for her to enter. "Please, do come in."

She stepped through the door, her jaw going slack at the elegance surrounding her. The furnishings were unadorned, dark oak and waxed to a sheen. Her gaze moved over a wardrobe in the far corner, a large desk littered with papers, charts, quills, and bottles of ink, and a washstand over by the window. A comfortable-looking chair had been placed on the far side of the desk, and there was also a small, round table in the middle of the floor, with four chairs around it.

The largest piece of furniture in the room was the bed anchored along the left-hand wall. It was mammoth, piled high with fluffy-looking pillows, and covered with a red and gold quilt.

The room was tidy, save for that mess on the desk, and the heels of her staid walking boots clicked softly against the bare, varnished wood planks beneath them. Only the floor alongside the bed was covered, where a thick Persian carpet in dark ruby and gold had been laid out.

Tony moved to the wardrobe, reaching up to unwind his cravat. "I'll have James bring your chest in here," he said, turning to face her. "And I will also have one of the boys bring up a screen from the hold to give you some privacy."

She managed a smile, despite her tossing belly. "Thank you."

"There is no need to thank me," he replied gruffly, turning away once more. "I have no desire to have one of my men startle you in the bath, or getting dressed. Some have a very bad habit of entering without knocking."

At least she wouldn't have that to worry about, she thought, wondering if she should sit or not. It seemed silly to fuss over something so simple, but she felt like a guest on board the *Pegasus*, that she should wait for the invitation to sit before actually doing so.

Tony slipped the linen cravat from his neck, folding it before stowing it in the wardrobe. "What troubles you, my lady?" he asked softly, closing the door and turning to her once more.

She jumped at the abrupt shattering of the silence. "I—I beg your pardon?"

"You look as though you've something on your mind. What is it?"

"N-nothing," she replied, an embarrassed heat crawling up into her face.

"Make yourself at home, then." He gestured to the table in the middle of the room. "After all, you are the captain's wife. That affords you the right to think of my ship as your home."

She didn't miss the darkness that crept into his eyes, nor did she miss the tightness of his voice. "Aye, Captain."

"Please, there is no need for formality, my lady," he said, his voice almost ringing with exasperation. "As I said before, if Tony is too intimate to pass your lips, please, call me Anthony."

"Anthony." It was the first time she had spoken his name aloud and she couldn't miss the slight flutter in her belly at this first utterance. It made everything seem so...real.

"See? It's not so difficult, now, is it?"

"No, I don't suppose it is."

He sighed, slipping out of his frock coat and draping it over the back of the leather chair in the corner. "Now, if you will excuse me, there are several things to which I need attend. I will be back for supper."

"And what should I do in the meanwhile?" she asked, forcing herself to meet his eyes.

"Whatever makes you happy. Do you read?"

Her back straightened, her chin rising. "I do."

"You do?"

She didn't miss the surprise in his question and felt no small hint of pride as she nodded. "Aye. I do."

"Then, please, feel free." He motioned to the shelves of books above the desk. "Help yourself to any title that catches your fancy."

"Thank you."

"Or, if you wish to sleep, then do so. I am afraid you are going to have quite a bit of free time on your hands. Do you sew?"

"Not well, but I can manage the less difficult things,

such as mending."

He nodded. "Good. That will be your job, then, should you find yourself with too much time to spare."

"Of course."

Tony moved to the door. "As I said, I will return in time for supper. In the meantime, make yourself comfortable."

"Of course."

With that, he disappeared through the door, closing it firmly behind him. She sighed, sinking down into one of the chairs around the table. Hopefully, everything wouldn't remain quite so stiff, so formal, between them. Indeed, it would prove to be a very long voyage.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tony spotted Jackson up on the main deck and crossed to him. "Are we almost ready to leave?"

Jackson seemed a bit surprised by his sudden appearance. "I daresay yes. I'd be too afraid to tell you otherwise. Why the frown?"

"My wife is settled in below."

"Ah, yes. Preparing herself for the all-important wedding night, I assume?"

"I'll warn you only once, Jackson."

Jackson leaned back against the railing, arms crossed over his chest. "Are you truly going to deny yourself that woman, Tony? She's yours now. You have every right to enjoy her now if you wish."

"A right I neither want nor asked for," Tony reminded him in a low voice, already weary of the subject. "And I hardly see it as a denial of any sort. It'd only be such if I wanted her, which I do not."

"You are mad, know you this? What is wrong with her? She's a bit on the timid side, mayhap, but otherwise quite lovely in all aspects."

"She is a reminder that my life is no longer my own and that the decision to marry was yanked from my hands."

"Please. Spare me, won't you? If you ask me, Dara McIntyre has done you a favor."

"Some favor."

"Mark my words, Tony. The day will come when you will fall to your knees and thank God Himself that your hand was forced this way." Jackson gave him an infuriating grin. "I'll wager, once she gets that spirit back, you'll wonder why you put up such a fuss in the first place."

"T'll accept your wager," Tony said, not at all amused by his smugness. "And I will prove you wrong. I care not what spirit lurks beneath the mousy exterior. She is not here by my choosing and each time my eyes fall upon her, I will be reminded of that."

"Be that as it may, it'll be most difficult to ignore her when the two of you will be sharing such close quarters."

"Not as difficult as you might think, Jackson. I only hope someday, you find yourself in the same situation. Then, perhaps, you will realize the folly of your words."

Jackson gave him a sly smile. "Trust me, Tony. If Madam McIntyre *had* chosen me, you'd not hear one word of complaint pass my lips. I happen to find Miss Brenna most fascinating."

That struck a nerve. Tony felt a sudden tightness in the pit of his stomach. His hands clenched into fists at his sides and it surprised him that he wanted to haul off and punch his closest friend for his gall.

Jackson must've noticed, for he was all innocence as he replied, "Have I said something wrong, then?"

"If I were you," he growled, taking a deep breath to relieve some of the tension, "I would stop talking right now."

"Hmm...seems to me we've gotten a wee bit possessive of the wife we didn't want, haven't we? And rather quickly."

His gut twisted tighter. "I am not joking."

"Of course you aren't. I know you, Tony. You forget how well I know you." Jackson shook his head slowly. "I would have to be crazy to even consider approaching her. But that doesn't mean I cannot admire her from afar, does it?"

"It means we'd best change the subject," Tony snapped, reaching up to rub his forehead. "Is everything just about ready?"

"Aye. We should be leaving the shores of Ireland within the hour."

"Good." He sighed deeply as he leaned up against the railing, gazing out at the choppy waters of the Irish Sea. He was tired and eager to leave as soon as possible, before anything else could go wrong. "I am most anxious to get as far away from this land as possible."

Of course, it mattered not how far away from Ireland he was, he was trapped with a reminder of this trip that he didn't want. Still, he wanted to get back to America with more impatience than ever. The sooner he was back on his home soil, the better he'd feel. At least then, he wouldn't feel as if his life had spun completely out of control.

He left Jackson to go below and double check the cargoes stored in the hold. He needed to look over the inventory and make certain everything was accounted for. His was a good crew, and he trusted them, but that was no reason to be careless and possibly overlook something.

He'd hoped the mind-numbing task would take his thoughts away from Brenna, where they stubbornly seemed to focus. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't keep them from wandering in her direction.

His wedding seemed to be nothing but a blur, save for one moment. Their kiss. That kiss was affixed in his mind, for the moment his lips touched Brenna's, he'd felt a rush of heat burn through him unlike any other he'd ever experienced. His blood seemed to do a slow boil at the first caress of those soft lips. It startled him, causing him to jerk away.

He'd been kicking himself about that all day. It wasn't how he wished to kiss her. Not the way she should be kissed. Her lips were lush, full, and practically begged to feel the full weight of his. They were to be savored like a fine wine, and he'd wanted to do just that. If not for that surprising jolt to his system, that is exactly what he would've done.

Tony groaned as he counted the same crate for the fourth time. "Damn it to hell," he growled, starting over. Damned wench was driving him mad, making it impossible to think about anything else.

Jackson was right, of course. He would be well within his rights to take Brenna to bed. After all, she was his wife. But, much as he might want to kiss her, he had no intention of asserting his husbandly rights. She was not there by his choosing, but by someone else's, and it rubbed him raw in ways he'd never thought possible.

He forced all thoughts of Brenna McIntyre—Brenna *Radcliffe*—from his mind, trying hard to focus on his task. It wasn't easy, but if nothing else, he possessed the hardheaded stubbornness that marked him as a Radcliffe.

Brenna sighed softly as she turned away from the window. They were moving now, cutting through the swirling black waters as the *Pegasus*'s sails filled and the tides carried them out to sea.

It was difficult, watching Ireland shrink into the distance. Her heart was heavy, her eyes teary, and her head began to ache as she fought to hold back the moisture filling her eyes. Finally it became too much and she sank down into the leather chair, face in her hands, and sobbed like a child.

When she'd cried herself dry, she sat back in the chair, raggedly drawing air into her lungs. She didn't bother swiping at the tears still coursing over her cheeks, leaving hot, damp trails in their wake. She felt drained, spent and hollow.

Shadows crept into the cabin as daylight faded. She had no desire to move, so there she sat in the darkness, moving only when the door opened and Tony filled the doorway.

"Why is there no light in here?" he demanded, stepping into the cabin and closing the door firmly behind him.

"I am sorry."

His annoyance was palpable in the sigh leaking through his teeth, a sound she'd heard more than once already. Trying to ignore it, she remained huddled in her chair, even as he lit two of the lamps and she could now see him looking back at her. "My lady?"

The gentleness of his voice surprised her, but she tried not to show it. "What?"

"Why are you sitting here in the dark?"

"I hadn't realized it had grown so dark."

He frowned, reaching out to brush his fingertips over her cheek. Drawing them back, he held them up to her. "You are sitting here, in the dark, crying?"

She hastily swiped at her cheeks, wishing she could deny his accusation. "I am sorry."

"There is no need to apologize, my lady. In fact, it would please me greatly if you would actually *cease* with apologizing for everything. The words 'I'm sorry' are grating terribly on my nerves." He pulled out one of the chairs from the table and sank down into it, facing her. "What troubles you so that you're content to cry in the dark?"

"It's nothing."

"It most definitely is not nothing," he chided her gently. "Now, tell me what troubles you?"

Her resolve drained away, her sorrow overwhelming it. Shoulders slumping, she murmured, "That I am here."

"Ah, yes, I see. You'd rather be in Ireland, betrothed to a man who thinks nothing of raping his bride. I can see how that might be an improvement."

He sounded very annoyed now, but that didn't stop her from retorting, "I said naught about marrying Viscount Halstead."

His lowered brows rose, his forehead smooth again. "I thought you said your father chose him?"

"Stepfather."

"Very well, *stepfather*." A slight smile pulled up his lips, his eyes no longer angry, but softer as he shook his head. "Do you think he would have had a change of heart?"

She knew the answer to that without even having to offer it any thought. "I don't suppose he would, no."

"Then Halstead is what you'd be going back to, my lady," he reminded her, entwining his fingers as he rested his hands on the table. "Do not fool yourself. Your father would have seen that through, despite what your lord attempted to do to you."

"I've told you, he is *not* my father."

"I apologize, of course. Stepfather, then."

"Be that as it may—"

"It's a fact. Do you think it would stop once you married him? It wouldn't matter to a man such as him. If the mood struck, you'd find yourself fighting a losing battle. Most likely night after night. Is that how you wish to live your life?"

This was heading in a direction she did not wish to travel. Scowling, she replied, "You should not be saying such things to me, sir," she replied crisply.

"Why not? It's the truth."

"Because it's not a subject which should be discussed."

He arched one brow. "So, it's all right for me to stop him from committing rape, but not so right for me to say he'd do it again?"

"We should not speak of such things, a'tall." Her face suddenly felt too hot for comfort.

"Am I embarrassing you, my lady?"

Brenna had the urge to squirm in her seat under the weight of his sensuous blue eyes. They were far too knowing. "Of course not. But it isn't proper. Subjects such as these ought not be discussed."

"So, let me get this straight, then. It's quite acceptable for me to *know* about sex, as long as I keep any thoughts on the subject to myself."

Her heart skipped a beat at the grin accompanying his words. The heat in her face grew stronger as his eyes fell on her, locking into place.

His voice was soft, almost teasing, "You didn't answer me, my lady. Is that what you are trying to say?"

"Aye—that is, I mean, no." Dear Lord, his grin fairly stole the thoughts from her brain. It was impossible to think straight, with those eyes blazing through her. She frowned harder still. "Oh, that's not what I said," she sputtered, feeling the warmth spread like fire through her entire body. "Please, do not twist my words so."

Tony rose from his chair and crossed over to her. He leaned over, a hand braced on each of the chair's arms, his lips mere inches from hers as he murmured, "You do realize, that everyone suspects that *we* are making love right now, don't you? Especially this night. That at this very moment, they are smiling and nudging one another, thinking I am down here, peeling that simple gown from your body. That I am carrying you to our bed in order—"

"Stop," she muttered, jerking her eyes from his as she did squirm. Her face was going to melt if it got any hotter. She averted her eyes at once, letting her gaze fall to the floor, to the walls, anywhere but locked with his.

Tony caught her chin in one hand, lifting her face back to his, and forcing her to meet his gaze. "Shall I show you how a wedding night is *supposed* to be spent?"

"Oh my..." The breathless whisper rose to her lips before she could quell it.

Up close, his eyes were even bluer, soft and smoky.

You Belong to Me

His lips were mere inches from hers, practically brushing them as he whispered, "Come with me to bed, my lady, and we can get started."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Brenna's belly clenched. A faintly brackish taste filled her mouth as she was suddenly afraid of him, of what he expected from her. "I—I cannot possibly..."

"Of course you could. You are my wife now, my lady. It's perfectly acceptable. In fact, as I said, it's expected, tonight of all nights."

"No, I—I..."

He didn't let her finish, but leaned closer, his lips coming down onto hers, smothering her protest.

She froze, heat blooming where that knot had been in her belly. Her toes actually curled in her boots as his soft lips moved against hers. He caressed her bottom lip teasingly with just the tip of his tongue, pulling away to whisper, "Open your mouth, sweetheart. I promise you, I'll not bite."

Open her mouth? She fairly shuddered at the very idea. Still, as his lips captured hers again, she found him most insistent. His tongue fluttered over her bottom lip once more, her initial surprise giving way as the gentle stroke sent a rush of tingles through her. It wasn't so bad, really, and she couldn't help but wonder what he would do if she did part her lips. She relaxed them a tad. His tongue probed again, this time slipping between her lips to delve down into her mouth while his hands came up to cradle her face.

Unlike at the inn, there were no interruptions this time. There was nothing but the velvety warmth of Tony's kiss, of his thumbs smoothing over her cheeks, of his nose as it gently brushed hers. The flush seemed to drain from her at the first touch of his lips. The warmth remained, but it wasn't uncomfortable, as the blush had been. Instead of filling only her face, it seemed to spread through her body, causing her nerves to tingle and a tightness to form deep within her core. He pulled away then, nibbling gently at her bottom lip. "Shall we, my lady?"

"Shall we what?" She almost giggled at her breathless reply. But that was how she felt—breathless and giddy, and on the edge of a veritable swoon, actually.

"Make love."

"Oh." Those blasted nervous butterflies filled her belly again at his husky words. Their wings beat wildly against her ribs, leaving her even more breathless and lightheaded. It grew worse still when Tony released her face to slide his arms about her waist and lift her from the chair. His body was hot and firm against hers, sending the strangest of shivers clear through to the center of her being.

He spirited her to the bed and she knew she should stop him, but he had awakened something primal inside her, something that would not let the word *nay* pass her lips. She wanted to feel his lips on her again, to feel his hands on her, no matter how brazen it might seem.

He pressed her back into the bed, covering her with his body. She welcomed his weight against her, reveled in the solid feel of him. It sent a rush of shivers down her spine, being surrounded by such complete maleness.

His lips left hers to smoke a trail down the curve of her neck. They brushed over the delicate beat of her pulse, into the hollow at her throat, and crept down further.

Her eyelids were so heavy, but she forced them to remain open, wanted to take in the very sight of him. The soft light from the lamps glinted off his ebony hair and as she reached up a trembling hand to finally touch it, she was surprised to find it was as soft as it looked. Incredibly soft and silken beneath her fingers and she couldn't help her whispered, "Oh, my."

Tony lifted his head then, gazing down at her through eyes that had gone indigo with passion, and gave her a roguish smile before dipping back down once more. He crept up then, blazing the same trail, his mouth slashing down on hers.

Then she felt it. A gentle pressure, increasing with each passing moment, rising up against her hip.

There was no way to describe the thunder coursing

through her at the feel of him against her, only this time it was more fear. Her pleasant chills twisted and tightened into the sharpest of icicles, piercing through the heat swarming through her.

He pressed into her feeling solid, immense even, and her mind brought forth images which very nearly terrified her to her soul as she imagined what *that* part of him must look like. Dear Lord, that part of him was *still* growing!

She pulled away abruptly, but could do no more than whisper, "Nay. Please. Stop. I cannot do this..."

"Of course you can, love," he murmured, his lips brushing her ear. "It's perfectly acceptable, you know. As I said, tonight it's expected you are doing just this."

She shook her head. "Nay. Stop." That pressure frightened her. His size frightened her. There was no way possible she could ever accommodate him. The very thought sent fear prickling through her entire body.

"Oh, I can assure you, you *can* do this."

"Please."

He groaned, sighing and dropping his head to her breast. His breathing was equally ragged as he murmured, "My lady, you need not fear me. I promise you, I'll not hurt you any more than necessary."

She froze, all pleasure draining away as she whispered, "Hurt me?"

"That came out all wrong, I'm afraid," he groaned, shifting to lie beside her. "What I meant was—"

"And yet you pummeled a man for doing the same thing!" she gasped, yanking the quilt up to her chin. "How typical! Punish one man and yet follow in his footsteps!"

Tony combed his fingers through his hair. "Let me finish. What I meant was-"

She shook her head. "I care not what you meant! I heard you! Hurt me, indeed. It will be a cold day in hell before I allow you to lay another hand on me!"

His jaw tightened, a muscle bulging as he growled, "You've nothing to worry about then." He rose from the bed and crossed to the far corner of the cabin. "I will not look to lay another hand upon you."

"Fine!"

"Fine."

She wanted to scream, but one look at the ice in his eyes and she knew better than to provoke him further. Her gaze fell to the floor and her voice went soft. "I would like to sleep now. That is, if you do not mind."

"Do whatever the hell you wish," he retorted, dropping down into the leather chair and glaring at her.

She didn't reply, but sank to the pillow and rolled onto her side, giving him her back. Pulling the quilt to her ear, she pressed down into the tick, determined to ignore him.

The bed dipped. As he stretched out beside her, she stiffened, not wanting to come into contact with him.

He gently lifted her braid, his fingers light as they brushed her nape, where she knew he'd seen the remnants of a bruise. Still, that didn't stop her from groaning inwardly as he murmured, "You have nothing to fear, my lady. The one who did this will never raise his hand to you again."

She squeezed her eyes shut, willing him to leave her be. She tried to ignore the soft flutter of his fingertips against her bared skin, to ignore the way her nerves seemed to spring to life at the soft caress. All she wanted was to be left alone.

But he didn't go away, didn't relent. Instead, he lay there, letting his fingers skim over her nape with a gentleness she'd never felt before. Little by little, she lost her battle with her exhaustion and slipped off into a peaceful sleep.

CHAPTER NINE

When Brenna opened her eyes again, it was morning. Tony was sound asleep beside her, still fully dressed, just as she was. He lay on his back, one arm flung up over his head, the other folded over his belly. His dark hair tumbled over his forehead in unruly waves and she had to fight back a most unusual urge to brush it away from his face.

His brows were ebony slashes against his sun kissed skin, his lashes black crescents against his cheeks. Her eyes followed the line of his aquiline nose, down to the curve of his lips.

She remembered how those lips caressed upon hers the night before, the wonderful things they sent spinning through her. At first, she smiled. But then she remembered what had happened afterwards, and her smile faded. He wanted to hurt her. It would be pleasure for him, but pain for her.

Still, as her eyes roamed over him, she had to admit to being a wee bit curious where the marital bed was concerned. It was certainly pleasant enough when his lips skimmed her flesh. She hadn't even truly minded that part of him pressing up into her. It felt a bit odd, to be sure, but that was all. Of course, it pressed up into her leg and not into her other parts. Mayhap that was what made the difference?

Tony groaned in his sleep, rolling over onto his side to face her. His wrinkled shirt puckered at the throat, giving her a glimpse of his bare chest. She shifted as heat rose within her. *How silly is that?* she thought, still scrunching away from him. Why should that little sliver of chest cause her any discomfort?

She didn't want to fear him, but she couldn't help it. If the mood struck, he could most assuredly crush her with his bare hands. She glanced down at his left hand, now pressed flat against the tick. Like the rest of him, it was huge. Huge enough to do great damage, should he so desire.

Brenna dropped her head back to the pillow. Despite her discomfort, she had to admit, she didn't remember the last time she'd slept so well. The pillows were soft, the bed softer still, and between the blankets and the heat generated from Tony's body, she'd been more than adequately kept from the cold.

She wondered if she should wake him. Was that a wife's job? Did one of his crew members have that responsibility?

His eyes opened and he yawned, stretching and sighing at the same time. Lifting his head from the pillow, he said, "Morning already?"

"Aye."

"I don't even recall falling asleep." He sat up, raking his fingers through his hair. A grin lifted his lips and some of her apprehension faded. Then, as he kicked the back the quilts, his grin faded, much to her dismay.

He crossed to the door, pulling it open. "Ah, good. Mitchell wasn't derelict in his duties," he said, returning with an ewer in one hand. He moved to the washstand, where he set it alongside the basin.

Scrunched down beneath the quilt, she watched him with utter fascination. He seemed to have forgotten she was even in the room as he stripped off the wrinkled lawn shirt, carelessly tossing it into the leather chair.

Crimson heat swept through her face as her eyes fell upon his broad back. As he moved, the muscles beneath his swarthy skin bunched with the slightest gesture. He poured water into the fine china basin, then bent forward to cup a handful and splash his face. A soft sigh bubbled to her lips. It was quite interesting to watch, really, and she felt a flash of something akin to pride. This finelooking man was *her* husband.

He turned then and she squeezed her eyes shut before catching her first full view of his naked chest. Her cheeks burned as she heard his chuckle.

"Not quite quick enough, my lady," he said. Her face only burned hotter as he added, "It is quite all right if you wish to look. I've nothing to hide." That scorching heat filling her did nothing to ease her growing discomfort. She buried her face in the pillow, tugging the quilt to her ear. "Thank you, but no."

He didn't answer, but surprised her instead by laughing. Feeling decidedly more relaxed, she was just about to emerge from her cocoon when the dull *thump* of his breeches hitting the floor gave her a start. *Dear Lord*, she thought, her face growing warmer still. *He is* naked!

The thought of Anthony Radcliffe standing only a few feet away from her, completely undressed, was almost her undoing. The images springing to her mind did nothing to ease her thoughts, all based on that one glimpse of bared chest she'd gotten. True, it was mostly imagination, as she'd never before laid eyes upon a man in his natural state, but it was enough to flood her with that bloody heat once more.

When she was brave enough to crack one eye, she was relieved to see he'd donned a pair of buff colored breeches and was in the process of easing white linen over his shoulders. She breathed a soft sigh of relief. Now mayhap she wouldn't feel so terribly hot.

Tony faced her once more. "I will send Mitchell up with your morning meal, my lady."

She nodded, wondering if he would ever address her by name. He remained stiffly formal in that respect, despite his insistence that she use his given name. "Thank you, sir."

He frowned, dropping into the leather-upholstered chair to tug on his boots. "I've told you. I'm neither a lord nor a sir. If you wish a response, you will use my given name. Otherwise, your words will be met with silence."

She swallowed hard, choking down her embarrassment. "I am sorry."

All traces of humor vanished from his face and he bent to tug on his boots. When he finished, he rose from the chair, and without a word, left the cabin, slamming the door shut with more force than necessary.

She jumped at the sudden bang, flinching as a seascape painting crashed to the floor. "How could I have angered him?" she wondered, kicking back the quilts and finally rising to her feet. As promised, her chest had been brought to his cabin and she knelt before it. She rummaged through the neatly folded gowns, finally coming up with a soft muslin in pale lilac color and fresh chemise.

She dressed quickly, in case Tony decided to return. She couldn't forget the way he'd kissed her last eve, couldn't forget the way his body felt against hers. The last thing she wanted to do was provoke him further. He'd stopped when she asked him to. She might not be so lucky again.

"Well, there'll not be an *again*," she muttered, lifting her comb from the chest and setting to work on her hair.

Though she'd had maids to wait on her at Hillcrest, she much preferred seeing to her own toilette. As a child, she had no exposure to servants and their ilk. Seamus O'Neill hadn't been able to afford any outside help. As a result, she had learned at a young age to do for herself.

Once Charles and his airs came into their lives however, she'd been forced to accept that she'd not be permitted to do for herself. It drove her mad to have to stand perfectly still whilst some chattering maid dressed her and yanked a less-than-gentle comb through her hair, not to mention her embarrassment with each fresh bruise.

Now, she was happy to do these things on her own once more. Far preferable over being treated like she was too dense to handle such tasks by herself.

A looking glass had not been packed amongst her gowns, chemises, stockings, and shoes. She recalled seeing one on the inside of the wardrobe door. She hesitated, uncertain if Tony would mind her opening his wardrobe. He might be fussy about his personal belongings.

Still, he wasn't there, so what was the harm?

She crossed to the immense oak piece, tugged open the door, and stood on her tiptoes to catch a glimpse of her reflection in the clean glass.

It wasn't easy, trying to get her hair combed and styled. The glass was far too high up, causing a slow, steady ache to creep into her neck as she craned it to catch her reflection.

She gritted her teeth, trying to work the silver comb through her snarled hair. Her arms ached, her neck stiffened, and she was ready to throw the blasted comb across the room before she was even close to being finished.

Involved in her struggle, Brenna didn't hear the door open. Then, Tony's face suddenly loomed in the glass and she gasped, the comb clattering to the floor, as his hand came over her shoulder to lift the glass from its nail.

"This would suit a lady of your height much better," he said softly, repositioning the looking glass on a lower nail.

"You startled me," she breathed, willing her heart to start beating once more. He stood so close to her, she could almost feel the heat coming off his body in gentle waves.

He bent to swipe the comb from the floor. "That wasn't my intention. I came to see if you needed help dressing, as you are without your lady's maid."

A gentle flush swept through her at the thought of his performing so intimate a task as helping her dress. "Nay. I am fine, thank you. I actually fare much better without assistance."

Her eyes met his in the mirror and he smiled, pressing the comb into her hand. "A lady who prefers to *not* be waited upon? Most unusual, indeed."

"Well, for many years, there was no lady's maid in my employ." She lifted the comb to her hair once more. "And I developed the aversion to having any aid."

He suddenly cleared his throat, taking a step back at the same time. "Our morning meal should be here soon."

His actions were odd, no doubt. Why would he suddenly jerk back? It made no sense, but she tried not to dwell on it, instead focusing her attention on finishing her hair. It was nerve-wracking with him standing so close, though. Slowly turning to glance over one shoulder, she murmured, "If you'd not mind..."

"Of course not," he said, at once turning and walking over to his desk.

The soft knock on the door startled Brenna and the comb clattered to the floor once more. As she crouched to swipe it up, she saw Tony rise from his chair and cross to the door.

"Captain Radcliffe?"

Tony pulled open the door. "Ah, come in, Mitchell.

Come in."

Mitchell was carrying a silver tray heavily laden with dishes of heavenly-smelling fare. Her nose twitched as the wonderful aromas floated in her direction.

"There you are, Captain," Mitchell was saying as he set the tray on the table. "Is there anything else I can get for you?"

"Thank you, no, Mitchell. This will suffice."

Mitchell bobbed his head, moving back to the door. "Aye, Captain. Mr. Grant has asked to have a word with you, when you've finished your meal."

"Tell him I'll be along directly," Tony replied easily, drawing a chair away from the table.

The cabin boy nodded. "Aye, Captain," he replied, leaving the cabin and closing the door firmly behind him.

"My lady." Tony gestured to the chair he'd pulled from the table.

She quickly wound her hair into a single plait falling halfway down her back, secured it with a lilac ribbon, and returned the comb to her trunk before moving to the chair. "Thank you."

He eased her towards the table, circling it to take his own seat across from her. "You are quite welcome."

She reached for the square of snowy-white linen, flicking it open and set it over her lap. The air filled with the mouth-watering scents of rich, roasted coffee, fluffy eggs, and thickly sliced ham beneath a honeyed glaze, and she was amazed that such fare was available on board a ship.

She savored each sip of the somewhat bitter coffee, each bite of buttery, sweet eggs, and each nibble of the juicy ham. Before long, her belly was comfortably full. She dabbed at her lips with the linen and sipped her tea. "I must admit, it's not what I expected, on board a ship."

"I prefer making a long sea voyage as comfortable as possible," he said, finishing his coffee. "There are enough miseries that accompany such a voyage as it is."

A hint of apprehension rippled through her. "Miseries?"

"Storms, less-than-friendly encounters in open waters, that sort of misery." At her hard stare, he quickly added, "Of course, such things do not happen with every voyage. With any luck, the weather will hold out."

'And the less-than-friendly encounters?"

"You've nothing to worry about, my lady. We are outfitted with cannon and my crew is highly skilled in the arts of combat. Many served in the war, you know, and are well-trained."

She breathed a silent sigh of relief. The last thing she wished to think about was that they might fall under attack. "Have you ever encountered a skirmish at sea?"

"Of course. I've been sailing since I was a boy. There haven't been many, but some have been quite memorable." He leaned an elbow on the table and gave her a smile. "I am also equally skilled, my lady. You've nothing to worry about."

She briefly met his gaze. "I thank you."

"No need to thank me. You are my wife." His expression darkened a tad. "And I am possessive of what is mine."

"Possessive of what is yours?" she echoed, eyes widening. "Is that what I am? A possession?"

"In a manner of speaking, you are."

That didn't surprise her in the least. She didn't like it, but she expected as much. It was typical. She knew Charles considered both his wife and step-daughter as chattel. She would be more surprised to learn Tony Radcliffe felt any differently. However, she found his reaction more comforting than not. Much more comforting.

He pushed away from the table. "If you will excuse me, then. I have duties to which I must attend."

"Of course."

"If you wish, later, I will give you a tour of the ship. Give you a chance to catch a breath of fresh air."

His offer was a surprise and a welcome one at that. Unable to hold back her smile, she nodded as she met his gaze. "That would be lovely. I thank you."

Tony seemed as surprised by her acceptance as she was by his offer. Still, he returned her smile as he paused by the door to shrug into a dark blue greatcoat and lift his hat from its peg. "Very well, then. I shall return in a while and we will take our walk then."

Brenna nodded again. "I look forward to it."

You Belong to Me

He flashed her a knee-weakening smile and pulled open the door. "As do I, my lady," he said just before disappearing into the corridor.

CHAPTER TEN

Brenna moved to the window, hoping a view of the calm sea would sooth her troubled thoughts and knotted belly. Her insides felt as if they'd been tangled into a jumble, like wool that had been carelessly balled until it was nothing but a giant knot. She couldn't deny she had enjoyed the way Tony's lips felt on her skin, the way they felt on hers. Had enjoyed those gentle caresses very much, actually. Mayhap she did have nothing to fear from Tony. Mayhap there was no basis for her fear of him. Despite the heated words he did not hesitate to fling at her, his anger went no further than just that—words.

Still, it seemed a great risk to take. He was a stranger to her, after all, and she had no idea how tight a hold he wielded on his temper. To provoke him could turn out to have horrifying results. Results she might sorely regret.

But when he smiled at her—oh! Her insides fairly melted each time she thought about the way he'd gazed upon her with those sinfully blue eyes of his. His smile was enough to make her wish she had the power to shed her fear and melt into him. When he smiled, his eyes softened. When he'd lifted his head to answer her foolish questions, she was surprised to see that though they were soft, they had darkened as well, to a cobalt shade she'd never seen before.

Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined a man as magnificent as Anthony Radcliffe coming into her life, never mind that she would find herself married to a man such as he.

She turned away from the window and sank down into the chair alongside it. Mayhap, if she made certain to never displease him, he would release his anger entirely. If she did nothing to anger him, she would have nothing to fear from him.

"So, how was your wedding night?" Jackson asked with a grin as Tony joined him on the quarterdeck.

Tony resisted the urge to scowl. The last thing he wanted was to listen to Jackson's jokes, to see his knowing smirk. "My wedding night was just fine, thank you very much."

"I'm certain it was," Jackson replied. "And where is the lovely bride this morning?"

"Still in my cabin."

"Planning on keeping her locked away, out of sight of every soul on board?"

Tony shook his head. "Hardly. She is not my prisoner. She's more than free to come out if she so desires."

"That eases my mind a bit."

"Why are you so concerned with her well-being? Think you I'll mistreat her?"

Jackson turned to lean back against the railing. "No. I think nothing of the sort. I just know your tendency to be a bit—uh—high-handed at times. She is frightened enough of you. I'd hate to see you make it worse."

"I've assured her again and again that she has nothing to fear from me." Tony leaned up against the railing alongside Jackson, forearms against the gleaming wood, one hand atop the other. He felt a heaviness pressing down on him, one he couldn't explain but knew he disliked. "Every time my eyes fall upon that bruise, I reassure her."

"I should hope so. It wouldn't take much to send her scurrying into the farthest corner in fear."

"I've told her she is perfectly safe in my company."

"It'll take more than words, Tony. Much more, I'm afraid. You've got your work cut out for you, where Miss Brenna is concerned."

"Aye, I suppose I do." He thought back to the night before, when he'd made the mistake of using the word 'hurt' in conjunction with the idea of making love. A stupid mistake, no doubt. If she wasn't already frightened of him, she certainly was by now.

Despite his heated words that he'd not lay a hand upon her in desire again, Tony knew just the opposite was true. She'd awakened a lust in him he didn't know existed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd wanted a woman as strongly as he wanted the one now in his cabin. She was his wife. He would be well within his rights to coerce her into fulfilling her wifely duties.

But he could not do that to her. He could not—would not—force her. She would have to be as willing a participant as he was. It was the only way to assuage any fears she might still harbor.

"Aye. You do." Jackson gave him a long look. "But you would do well to keep that in mind, Tony. You have no idea what she has been through. Halstead might not have been the first man to—well—you know."

"I know." Tony felt a knot tighten in his gut at the very thought. He'd assumed Brenna was still very much an innocent maiden. But what if his assumptions were incorrect? What if another had forced his attentions upon her, aside from Halstead's failed attempt? Mayhap that was the origin of that mottled bruise on her back. Mayhap it was a regular occurrence.

Fury burned through him at the thought. How could any mother allow her daughter to be abused in such a vile manner? Unless, of course she herself was mistreated. It wouldn't make it acceptable, but it would make it a bit more understandable.

Tony shook his head. "I will find out the truth eventually. As of now, she refuses to discuss her relationship with her stepfather. I've the feeling he is the one responsible for the mark on her back."

Jackson let out a low whistle. "Should I expect then, that we will be making a return trip to Ireland to settle the score?"

"Not likely. Home is calling and there I shall stay for a while. I've been away far too long."

"And there is the matter of a bride to get settled in."

Tony couldn't help but grin. It sounded too odd still. "That, too."

"Just tread lightly," Jackson said solemnly. "This is dangerous ground you are about to step on."

"Don't worry about me, Jackson. I'll be fine. There has yet to be a lady I cannot handle."

"Ah, but you've never had a wife before. Things have

changed now."

He sighed heavily, gazing out over the water. "I beg you, do not remind me. And all thanks go to Dara McIntyre for forcing me into this situation."

"Ah, and as I said, mark my words, Tony. The day will come when you *will* thank her and there'll be no sarcasm behind your words."

Tony didn't bother to reply, but simply shook his head as Jackson took himself off to return to his duties. "Somehow," he muttered to himself, turning to gaze out over the water, "I highly doubt that."

But even as he said it, he couldn't deny there was something about Brenna that drew him to her. He'd felt it the first time he'd touched her. Hell, if he was being honest with himself, he had to admit he felt it the first time he'd *seen* her.

He tried to push the thoughts from his mind as he turned away from the water and made his way along the deck back towards the wheelhouse. It was time he forgot about his marital state for a while and concentrated on getting them safely to America.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It wasn't until late afternoon when Tony finally returned to the cabin. Brenna sat curled up in the chair by the window, a book opened on her lap. She looked up when the door scraped shut, and when she saw Tony, her back straightened automatically.

"Am I disturbing you?" he asked as she eased a strip of watered green silk between the pages and closed the book.

"Of course not," she replied, absently tracing her forefinger over the gold lettering on the front cover. "I did not expect you to return so soon."

"Why is that?" He moved to the table to sink into one of the straight-backed chairs. "I promised you a bit of fresh air, did I not?"

She was a little surprised, and a mite touched, that he remembered his promise to let her take in some air. "Aye, but I assumed you to be busy. It could wait."

He leaned back into the chair, his eyes moving slowly over her. It was so very much like how Charles would sit and study her, searching for faults in need of correcting, that she felt instantly on her guard. Without thinking, she did what came naturally. Her back stiffened, her carriage perfectly erect, chin raised ever so slightly, eyes never meeting Tony's. As with Charles, she would show no defiance.

It must've irked him, for his voice was taut as he said, "Look at me, lady."

That growl raked over her and she didn't hesitate to do as she was told. "Yes?"

"Do you wish to go topside?"

Her finger went still against the leather as she pondered his question, still holding his gaze as she tried to read his emotion. Of course, she still wanted to go above deck, wanted to breathe in the fresh air and see the amazing sight of nothing but water all around. However, the better question was, did he really wish to show her, and what would be the correct answer?

"Do you?" he repeated.

She pressed her lips together, her stomach tossing a bit as she murmured, "If you'd not mind."

"I would not offer if I minded." He leaned an elbow on the table, resting his head against his fist as he continued with, "And even if I *did* mind, it would be a small sacrifice, I assure you."

"Still-"

"Nay, no *still*. Do you think I wouldn't put myself out for something as simple as that? It's a walk. Not exactly the most strenuous activity for me to undertake." He growled beneath his breath as she averted her eyes once more. "Lady, look at me."

She heard the heat creeping into his words and wanted to kick herself. *Blast it all, you ninny,* she thought, irritated at herself. *Already you've set him off.*

She lifted her eyes again. "I am sorry."

"Please, I beg you. Stop with the apologies. Do you think I am going to blow over something as silly as taking you topside? Am I so seemingly short-tempered to you?"

There was no way for her to answer that and she knew it. "I merely wish to remain as little a burden to you as possible, Anthony."

He rose with a sigh, and crossed over to crouch before her. "You are not a burden."

"But I am. I am the wife you did not wish to take."

"Ah, this is true, but that does not mean I consider you a burden."

"How is that possible?" she asked, her eyes falling once more to her hands resting on the book's cover.

"Lady, if I-" Tony paused and then growled, "Please, look at me, sweet."

It wasn't at all easy, but she managed to lift her eyes to his once more, only to find them as soft as they had been the previous afternoon, when he'd trapped her beneath him.

"Much better, sweetheart," he whispered, reaching out to thread his fingers through hers. "You need not fear making eye contact with me. I am not about to turn you to stone, you realize."

The playfulness of his voice was a welcome relief and she couldn't help but smile. "Now, that would be silly, don't you think? Even I am not so much a ninny as to believe that."

Holding her gaze, he lifted her hand to brush a light kiss over the back of it. "Now this is a sight I far prefer. Know you when you smile, your eyes become the most stunning shade of green I have ever seen?"

She had to fight to hold his long look, as it did something funny to her insides to hear him say such a thing to her, melting them and twisting them at the same time. "Thank you."

He stood then, drawing her up beside him and offering his arm. "You are most welcome, sweet. Now, about that stroll?"

She accepted with a smile, letting her hand rest lightly upon his forearm as he escorted her from the cabin.

The sun approached the horizon and, in the distance, Brenna could see the faint, white globe of the moon making its appearance in the late afternoon sky. The wind was brisk but refreshing, and heavy with the tang of salt. It was odd, hearing only the whistle of that wind and the swish of water all around them as the *Pegasus* cut through the waves like a scythe. There were no other signs of life around them—no birds chattering overhead, no rustle of tree branches—nothing but the water, air, and fading sun.

She gazed out over the water, sparkling in the waning sunlight. "I feel as though all of mankind has vanished from the face of the earth," she murmured, giving his forearm a squeeze.

It was exhilarating, to say the least. She'd forgone a bonnet, and the wind played with her hair, lifting the loose tendrils about her face to blow them this way and that, pulling it free from its moorings. She didn't care, but lifted her chin to smile into the crisp, tangy wind.

Tony caught one such wayward tendril, tucking it behind her ear, and letting his fingers linger for a moment along her cheek. "At times, I can see how it might. There is something quite lonely about being on the ocean, wouldn't you say?"

"Lonely, aye, but peaceful as well." She cast a sidelong look up at him, as if seeing him for the first time.

Gone was the rogue who'd snatched her from her chambers and rolled her in a quilt. In his place was a rakish sea captain, for certain. He looked almost a part of his ship as he stood there in the buff-colored breeches that hugged the heavy muscle layering his long legs, and the loose linen shirt that did nothing to hide the thick cords of muscle she knew banded his arms.

In Ireland, he'd kept his shoulder-length black hair tied back in a small ribbon. Now, that ribbon was gone, the ebony waves falling wherever the wind decided to place them, curling about his temples, falling in a tossed jumble. He was no longer a mortal man, but one of the heroes come to life from the stories she'd so loved as a child. He was Hercules, Adonis, Achilles, all rolled into one man and she was suddenly ever so thankful that her mother had chosen him.

She gazed down to see that her fingers were not still against his arm, but instead stroked forward and back with the lightest of touches. She hadn't even realized what she'd been doing, but had no doubt that he noticed, for his hand now came down to rest upon hers. Not to still it, but merely to cover it and give a gentle squeeze.

"Please, continue," he murmured as her fingers fell idle. "I mind not."

Her belly fluttered at his soft words, those flutters growing stronger as his thumb swept over the back of her hand. Smiling up at him, she said, "Thank you."

"Thanking me again, lady?" he asked mildly, gazing down at her and arching one brow. "And what have I done to be thanked for now?"

"Bringing me up here. This is a sight I know I shall never forget." Of course, the sight to which she referred had nothing to do with the water, but there was no reason to share that and have him think her a complete ninny.

"Lady, you need not thank me. You need only say the word and I will take great pleasure in escorting you wherever you wish to venture." He leaned closer to brush his lips over her ear as he whispered, "If you'd like, I will even allow you to guide our path." She couldn't help her giggle even as a shiver tickled along her spine. "Oh, I think that is a decision you would surely regret, Captain," she chuckled, shaking her head. "I would most likely ground us or hit a rock or something equally terrible."

His laughter mingled with hers. "I highly doubt that would be a problem, love, as we are out in the middle of the ocean."

She didn't miss the word *love* as it rolled off his lips, nor could she miss the way it made her heart jump. Was it possible that her hopes were coming to fruition so quickly?

Of course, that would be silly, and she knew it. It was entirely too soon for that to be true. Still, things were most peaceful now and she wanted nothing more than to keep everything that way for as long as possible.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Brenna frowned at the stocking she darned. Night crept in, stealing across the cabin, making it most difficult to see the needle in her hand, even with every lamp in the cabin lit.

She sat at Anthony's desk, lost in her task, and whirled about when the door scraped open. The cabin had been so quiet, so still, that the slight noise had the effect of a sharp crack behind her, and she felt more than a mite foolish at her gasp.

Anthony smiled as he closed the door. "Sorry to startle you, lady," he said, crossing to the center of the cabin to pull one of the chairs away from the table. "I do hope you are hungry, since Mitchell will be here shortly with supper."

She couldn't help the nervous giggle bubbling to her lips. She felt so simple, jumping like a frightened mouse over something as ridiculous as the door opening. Setting the stocking on the desk, she stood and sheepishly confessed, "I must admit, my stomach has let out a growl or two."

"Then come and sit. He will be here in but a few moments." Anthony gestured to the chair he'd drawn back. "And I do hope you'll not pick at it like a bird."

Brenna glanced up at him as she sank into the chair. "You'd rather I eat the way a man would?" she asked, a bit surprised by his request.

He pushed her chair in. "Of course not, but I certainly don't wish to see you starve yourself over some silly notion, either."

"Silly?"

"Silly." His voice rang with a note of finality. "I find the idea that you need only air to survive ludicrous, sweet."

His voice was soft, floating over her shoulder as he

stood behind her. Her back instinctively straightened as his hand came down to rest on her shoulder. His fingers were warm, refusing to be still. Instead, they skimmed over her skin, slid up over her shoulder, up her neck to let loose a flurry of goose bumps. She fought the urge to shiver as his fingers crept into her loose hair. It seemed to take a great deal of time for her brain to form a reply, and she winced at how airy she sounded as she said, "Aye, but that is only proper, is it not?"

She felt him gather her hair, felt the slight breeze as it rose away from her nape. A prickle crept over her skin as his fingers brushed her, and she had trouble catching her breath. It might be easier, if her heart wasn't beating quite so fast. It left her almost dizzy, unable to do more than murmur, "Anthony?"

His sharp intake of breath confused her. The way he tugged on her hair, as if gathering it more tightly, confused her. What was he doing? Why was he doing it? He didn't want her there. He didn't want her, period. So why the tender caresses? Charles would grab a handful of her hair to subdue her, but she didn't think that was Anthony's intention at all. No. His touch was far too gentle. Did he just *sniff* her hair? What the devil—.

"Yes?" His voice was a whisper gone ragged around the edges.

"Is something the matter?" His fingers swept lightly over her skin, and her eyelids grew heavy. In fact, her entire body felt leaden. She wanted to melt into him.

He broke contact then, releasing her hair and taking a slow, deep breath. He backed away from her. "Nay, my lady. Everything is fine."

She looked up at him as he came back around to sit across from her once more. His eyes seemed darker, glittering almost as if he was angry about something. Of course, she couldn't imagine what that something might be, and she couldn't bring herself to ask.

If only I was not such a coward, she thought, her eyes dropping down to her lap beneath his penetrating stare. Then, mayhap, I would be able to draw him out.

"What is on your mind?" he asked suddenly, his chair creaking. "Brenna?"

She looked up at that, finding his eyes still glittering,

and even darker. But she was almost positive it wasn't his stare that filled her with the flapping wings of a thousand butterflies. Rather, it was that softly growled *Brenna* that had set them free. She liked the way her name sounded when it passed his lips, for he did not speak it, but instead caressed it with his voice. It was enough to bring on another attack of the shivers.

Her stomach twisted as a thousand questions about him batted about the inside of her head. There were so many things she wished to ask him, so much she wished to know about him, to know about America, about everything that was all so new to her.

She cleared her throat, her eyes shifting so she no longer held his gaze, but instead stared over his shoulder. "I was wondering if...mayhap..."

"If what?"

"Well, I know nothing about you," she blurted in a heated rush, her gaze dropping back to her lap, then lifting to meet his again. "Aside from your name, that is."

"And is there something in particular you wish to know?" he asked, leaning forward to rest an elbow on the table, a smile playing at his lips.

She glanced down as her fingers crimped the heavy cream-colored linen napkin she'd spread over her lap. "Aye. I know not even how old you are."

"How old do you think I am?"

Brenna bit her bottom lip. She thought she heard a teasing note to his question, but wasn't entirely certain. Lifting her head, she forced herself to meet his eyes again, wondering how she should answer. The very last thing she wished to do was offend him by suggesting he was either far older or far younger than his true age.

"Go on, then. Take a stab at it, sweet. I promise not to bite your head off if you are wrong."

She studied him for a long moment. His hair was thick and dark, without a hint of silver amongst the ebony waves. His eyes were that deep, sensual cobalt, with only a few lines at their corners.

Her gaze dropped to his lips and she regretted it at once. Heat streaked through her as she took in the fullness of those lips, remembered how wonderful they'd felt against her. Again, there were only a few laugh lines on either side of his mouth and she knew these were laugh lines, for they creased his face with each smile.

He smiled now and she noticed, for the first time, the dimple that appeared in his right cheek as he did. Another wave of heat coursed through her, much to her surprise.

"Well?" he growled, lifting one black brow.

She took a deep breath. "I would say mayhap a score and six."

He let her dangle for a long moment, just staring at her. Even though her cheeks grew hotter still, she boldly held his stare. The hint of pride she felt helped diminish the heat a tad.

Then he relented. "I thank you for your generosity, my lady," he replied evenly. "But the truth is I am a score and ten."

She scowled, the heat draining away completely. "You ought not tease me. I thought my heart would stop beating."

"Did you now? Why?"

"I meant not to offend you."

He chuckled then, shaking his head. "Offend me? By lopping nearly five years from my age? How would that offend me?"

"Some men are touchy about looking young."

He shook his head. "And I can assure you, I am not one of them. Though I must admit, it's quite flattering that you think me younger. And I am most impressed by your complaint."

"Complaint?" What could he have taken as a complaint? "But I voiced no such things."

"Ah, but you did, lady. You scolded me for teasing you."

Heat flooded her cheeks and she had the horrible feeling that her heart had, indeed, ceased to beat. "Oh, did I, then?"

"Do not dare apologize." A bit of the devil glinted in his eyes. "It was most refreshing, actually. And as you can see, I did not explode over it."

Relief eased the tightness in her shoulders, and they relaxed, as if with a mighty exhale. "Still-"

"Nay, lady. No still. There is no need for you to be

afraid to voice any displeasure." That wicked smile played at his lips again. "Just as you should never fear voicing pleasure to me, either."

Oh, his grin was enough to make her blood bubble to its boiling point! Brenna shifted in her chair as a strange tightness took root in the pit of her belly. "Captain, please..."

"Ah, lady, you blush almost as often as you apologize," he said, lowering his voice as he leaned closer still. "Although, I far prefer the color in your cheeks to the lack of it in your demeanor."

He rose then, and her heart began hammering wildly against her ribs as he came around to her side of the table again and bent over her to whisper, "Mayhap one day, it'll be only color remaining?"

As he spoke, his hand dropped down to curve against her cheek. He leaned close, his lips brushing hers to make breathing that much more difficult. His lips were light at first, so light that she barely felt them. It all changed a moment later, as they caught hers fully. His fingers danced over her jaw as the tip of his tongue traced the contour of her lips.

That gentle caress was unlike anything she'd ever felt before, sending those butterflies racing through her now, their beating wings driving her blood more quickly through her veins, causing her heart to beat at irregular intervals as a delicious heat mingled with her blood to fill her from the inside out.

He parted her lips, his tongue plunging through to caress hers with a heady rush of sparkling pleasure. It caught hers in a slow, sensual embrace, entwining with hers to draw back into his mouth.

She shuddered at the welcoming heat of his mouth, at the rich, sensual taste of him, at the way his fingers curved against her jaw to draw her closer still. They skimmed over her neck, back up to slip into her hair once more, and she couldn't hold back her soft groan.

He broke their kiss then, whispering, "Ah, sweet," as his lips swept over her cheek, up to her temple, to press into her hair, "you tempt me unlike any other woman ever has."

Her head fairly spun from his husky words. She

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could no longer fight the heaviness of her eyelids, letting them close as he pressed another kiss into her hair. Her entire body felt that way, as if her limbs had become liquid and wished only to mold against the hard planes of his body. That strange tightness was making its presence known again, but this time it seemed to center lower than her belly. She cleared her throat. "I tempt you?"

"God, yes." His reply was hoarse, his lips skimming her hair for a third pass. "It is a good thing you are in that chair and I am here, as opposed to the other way around. Otherwise, I'd be pulling you down in the blink of an eye."

Another shiver tore through her. "You would?"

"As long as you allow me."

That was not how she'd expected him to respond. "And if I said nay?"

He brushed another kiss over her temple, his breath warm against her skin as he said, "Then I would have to be satisfied with simply holding you, I suppose."

Pulling away, he caught her face, tilting her head back to meet his gaze as his fingers swept in short strokes over her cheeks. "Brenna, I give you my word that I would never attempt to coerce you into something. I will not use anger, I will *never* use force."

Before she could answer, he kissed her again, his lips just barely sweeping against hers as he whispered, "If you are to come to me, you must be willing. It will not happen otherwise."

She believed him. She had to, because he aroused the most urgent curiosity she'd ever felt. Her fear was still there, of course, but it was being pounded into submission by that unyielding need to feel him against her, to feel what it was he insisted she would.

She sighed again as his lips crept down over the hollow of her throat. He wasn't the only one tempted, to be sure. She found that she felt every bit as much temptation as he did.

"Anthony?"

He halted his perusal of her throat. A soft groan floated into the air and his breath was warm against her neck. "Aye, love?"

"I-"

The sharp knock at the door halted her words, then

Mitchell called, "Captain Radcliffe? I've supper." "Damn it," Tony breathed, pulling away from her, pausing only to sweep her temple once more. "We will continue this after he leaves, my lady."

She swallowed an oath of her own as he moved to let Mitchell in with his tray. The moment was lost now, and she knew it.

What she didn't know, however, was how to make certain there was another moment.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Supper was a most pleasant meal to share with Anthony. Little by little, the fruity wine loosened her tongue to the point where she felt no hesitation at peppering him with questions about himself and his business.

"Have you been sailing long?" she asked, wiping her mouth with the crisp linen napkin before returning it to her lap.

He sipped his wine before answering. "Most of my life. I learned about ships under the ever-so-vigilant eye of my father. Cygnet Shipping was his dream. Now it's my reality."

"Cygnet Shipping?"

"His company. Well, *my* company now. I took full control nearly two years ago, upon his death."

She didn't miss the note of sadness in his voice. "I'm sorry to hear your father passed on."

"Thank you."

"So how long have you been Captain Radcliffe?"

He smiled. 'It's almost ten years now. I took over the helm at the tender age of twenty, when my father decided to spend his remaining days on dry land. At that point, I'd been on a ship in some capacity or other since I was twelve. I was more than ready."

She nodded. "It certainly sounds that way."

He pushed his plate forward, folding his hands to rest on the table as he leaned towards her. "I prefer this lady far better than the apologetic one."

She frowned, setting down her fork. "I'm afraid I'm a bit confused."

"What I mean is, I am tired of the apologies, my lady. I prefer a bit more spirit, to be honest."

She bit her bottom lip, her eyes falling to the delicate china plate before her. His words surprised her. She assumed he would prefer his ladies to be ladies in every sense of the word, delicate and demure, and never secondguessing his words. To hear otherwise was quite the surprise indeed.

"You have no cause to be afraid of me, Brenna," he continued, still watching her intently. "I will never raise my hand to you in anger. Or for any other reason."

It startled her to hear him speak her name aloud, as it was so rare for him to do so. Still, she hadn't missed what he'd said. "I am afraid I have no idea what you are talking about."

"I'm talking about this constant looking at your shoes, or the floor, or anything but me. I'm talking about your apologizing for every little imagined transgression. I do not hit my women. I have no tolerance for the coward who does. That healing bruise on your back is the last you shall ever suffer at the hands of a man. I give you my word on that."

Her belly pulled into taut knot. "You do not know of which you speak, Captain."

"I know exactly of which I speak," he growled in a low voice. "And you know it as well. I wish to see the true Brenna Radcliffe, not this little mouse she offers to the world."

"Please ... "

"Please what, my lady?"

"I-I do not wish to discuss this matter any further."

"And if I do?" he countered.

Her eyes widened as they met his and her mouth went dry. There was no hint of the devil in his eyes now. Instead, he looked aggravated and frustrated, and that knot tightened further. She almost flinched at the darkness clouding his face. Dear lord, what had she done? And more importantly, what was he about to do?

"Come with me," Tony said brusquely, throwing down his napkin as he rose from his chair to skirt the table and reached for her hand.

"Where are we going?"

"I am going to prove to you, for once and for all, that you've nothing to fear from me."

Her blood turned to ice as he tugged her from her chair. "Captain—"

"Tony."

She ignored his growl. "Captain, please..."

He swept her up into his arms, lifting her easily to meet his gaze. His voice was low and throaty. "I will *prove* to you that you have nothing to fear."

But fear was the *only* thing she felt at the moment. As effortlessly as he snatched her off her feet, she wondered if he was about to hurl her across the room. Her stomach churned painfully and, for a moment, she thought about trying to fight him off. But for what? Tony was her husband. He had every right to take her, whether she was willing or not. It was pointless and she knew it. Instead, she went limp against him, trying hard to ignore the heat now sweeping through her.

His lips found hers then, and they were nothing but gentle as they captured hers. This stunned her. No anger. No violence. Just that soft caress of his lips on hers. The surprisingly soft caress of his lips on hers.

Heat spread slowly through her, starting deep in the pit of her belly and working its way outward. Without thinking, Brenna wound her arms about his neck, pulling him closer. Her fingers brushed his nape with short, timid strokes, and she marveled over how smooth his skin felt beneath them.

He pressed her closer, much to her delight. His tongue nudged against her closed lips, wanting to slip between them to caress hers, to entwine with hers, to draw it back into his mouth. A soft laugh escaped him at her initial reticence, at the way she tried to keep her lips together despite his persistence. Then, she relented, accepting his kiss, hesitantly returning it, wondering why she'd so foolishly resisted at all.

He held her in one arm, bringing his free hand up to cup her cheek, to let his thumb brush over the soft curve. His fingers slid through her hair, pressing in and holding her head in place as he thoroughly explored her mouth.

Brenna couldn't believe the sensations coursing through her with the slow caress of his lips, his tongue thrusting between her lips to stroke along hers. It unnerved her at first, but then something else happened. After that initial stroke, it no longer felt so odd. Instead, she could feel a strange, fluttery motion in the pit of her belly. It started out small, but quickly expanded.

Wanting to feel whatever Tony did from their kiss, she drew on a courage she didn't know she possessed to urge her own tongue to dip into the velvety warmth of his mouth. It felt so forward to her, but she quickly learned he didn't share the sentiment as that arm about her waist suddenly tightened, pulling her even closer.

Tony groaned softly in the back of his throat as she swept her tongue along his. He inched towards the bed, bending forward and setting her gently in the middle. He pulled away from her to straighten up, smiling down at her as he reached for the laces of his shirt.

"I promise you, my lady," his voice emerged as a husky whisper, "you will never need fear me."

She barely heard him, watching with unabashed curiosity, with almost bated breath, as he slipped the silk from his shoulders. Her fear had yet to leave her entirely, but her curiosity was overpowering it. It was her first good look at a naked male chest and she was most fascinated by it, wanted to savor it if at all possible.

If she'd thought him impressive before he eased out of his shirt, it was nothing compared to what she thought now. Peering up through the veil of her eyelashes, she could see the thick cords of muscle in his upper arms and shoulders, the sculpted rise of his chest. Black hair spread from one nipple to the other, down to his navel. Below it, that hair thinned into a trail disappearing into his breeches.

She felt the warmth spread to her face as she slowly lifted it back to meet his heated blue-eyed gaze. She felt a jolt of surprise to see a grin lifting the corners of his lips.

"I pass muster, I hope." His eyes remained locked with hers as he moved closer, towering over her as she sat on the bed. He reached for her hand, whispering, "Come here."

She allowed him to take her hand and draw her up to her knees. Those flutters grew worse in her belly as he released her hand to catch her face in both of his and, his lips brushing hers, murmuring, "I want you, my lady."

"Very well," she replied without hesitation. Even if she didn't feel that blasted curiosity, she wouldn't bid him halt. Not a chance. Besides, she'd enjoyed everything so far. She had to see what happened next.

However, his smile faded. "Is that all you have to say?"

"Aye. It is your right to take me, if you so desire."

Tony sighed heavily. "Do you wish to make love with me?"

She hesitated and then slowly replied with, "But it matters not what I wish, does it?"

"Of course it matters!" He released her then, stepping back to throw his hands into the air. "Think you I'd prefer to use force?"

As she bowed her head, he caught her face between his hands, refusing to let her look away. "This is exactly what I was referring to, Brenna. Look at me."

She bit her bottom lip again as she met his gaze. Her belly churned wildly in a way that had nothing to do with desire and all to do with terror. "Please-"

"Please what?" he asked softly, his thumbs once again sweeping over her cheeks.

His actions surprised her to her core. He touched her with such tenderness that she wondered if she dared hope he wasn't angry. Her throat tightened. "Just don't hurt me...Please..."

Another frustrated hiss. "Why would I, Brenna? Haven't I told you I do not hurt women? I never have." He caught her hand, lifting it to press against his chest. "See for yourself, sweetheart. I'm flesh and blood, just as you. I'm just a man, not a monster."

She remained stiff against his firm flesh, her hand a pale contrast against his swarthy skin. She tried not to notice how soft that black hair was, tried not to notice how warm his skin felt. Part of her wanted to pull free, to break the contact. The other part, though, wanted to caress him, to let the heat rising from him seep into her and take away that chill that always pervaded her.

"If ever you wish me to stop, love, you need only say so. At any time, no matter what. Just as you did the other evening. I will stop." His voice dropped to a low growl. "I am not going to do as your lord was. I will not rape you. You have my word."

"You are my husband," she whispered back, taking a deep breath. "It would be within your rights."

"To hell with my *rights*. I do not want you thinking every man uses force to get what he wants. I prefer my bedmates to enjoy themselves of their own free will."

The renewed heat must've grown into a fiery blush, for he caught her chin as she made to duck her head. "If you look away once more, my lady, I am going to hold your face in my hands to render you unable to look anywhere but at me."

Trying to quell her roiling belly, she forced herself to meet his gaze. "I am sorry."

"We do need to do something about this," he sighed, releasing her to sit beside her, and then reached down to yank off his boots. He tossed each into the far corner. "Yell at me for something."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me, lady. Yell at me. I am curious as to how loud your voice can be when you wish it to."

"I'll do no such thing."

"Oh, come now. There must be something about me that makes you want to yell, lady."

Brenna cast her eyes to her hands, now folded against her thighs as she remained kneeling on the bed. Was he trying to provoke a fight between them? If so, why? Was there no one else he could take his frustrations out on?

The bed shifted and his fingers brushed her jaw, curling about her chin to lift her face. Her breath caught at the smoldering heat she saw in the depths of his cobalt eyes. "You mean to tell me there is nothing about me that displeases you?"

"Nay, sir. I find no fault with you."

"Why?"

Why indeed? She shrugged. "It isn't my place to point out your faults, then."

"Oh, shall I do it for you?" His voice dropped to a whisper. "I can, if you'd like."

"Nay. That isn't necessary," she whispered back.

"Then yell at me, lady. Show me some spirit. I know it's there. I can see it in those beautiful eyes of yours."

Her mouth went dry, her belly suddenly calm. He found her eyes beautiful? For a reason she could not fathom, that thought pleased her and she couldn't keep her lips from lifting into a slight smile.

He touched her cheek again, gentle as a summer breeze. "Did I say something that does not frighten you?" "Captain..."

"What, sweet?" He leaned closer, so that they were almost nose to nose. "Speak your mind. I am most interested in what goes on beneath those auburn curls."

"I cannot."

"Why?"

Her cheeks burned as the urge to lean into him for another of his wonderful kisses. There was no way possible for her to tell him *that*, though.

"That is a lovely blush," he murmured, his fingers moving lightly over her jaw. "Now, tell me what is on your mind."

"There is nothing."

Tony brushed her lips with a light kiss. "Understand this, my lady, you will never find yourself beneath me if you do not wish to be there in the first place." Another kiss. "Nor will I drag you down on top of me."

Her face burned at those words. "You ought not say such things."

His laughter was a gentle, warm rush against her skin. "Ah, but that is something I cannot get out of my mind," he murmured, his lips now creeping over her neck with the utmost care. "The thought of you under me, wrapped all around me..."

"Captain..." Brenna winced at how breathless she sounded but he made it so difficult for her to concentrate on the words rattling about inside her head. The feel of his lips on her skin drove all rational thoughts from her mind. "Please...you should not..."

"Am I embarrassing you, then? Mayhap I ought to be whispering how it would be just as enticing to see you astride me instead?" He laughed again as she groaned, nuzzling him. "Ah, so that is how I thaw an ice maiden such as yourself—by appealing to her lustier nature?"

"Tony..."

Her fingers curled about his wrist as he still held her by her nape. His voice was a low rumble. "Have I said yet another thing I shouldn't have?"

"Aye...you wish me to be a trollop?"

"Hardly, sweet. I wish you to be a woman. I see fire in you, Brenna. When you stop fighting so hard to hide it, I see it in your eyes. Stop fighting it."

His words were soft, a low, throaty growl that did nothing to ease her rattled senses. Aye, he was a talented rake, her husband. She wished it was that simple, wished she could just throw herself at him that he might stop tormenting her.

But it wasn't that simple. What if he found fault with her? What if she should displease him?

Swallowing hard and fighting to keep her eyes open, she whispered, "And if I disappoint you?"

He pulled away at that. "Disappoint me? How on earth could you ever even think that might happen?"

His eyes were direct, though cloudy with confusion. Still, she couldn't bring herself to say it out loud. Instead, she hedged, "I will not know what you expect of me."

"I expect that, sweet," he said, his eyes growing soft. "Trust me, you've nothing to worry about. Whatever you need know, I shall take great delight in teaching you."

She fidgeted beneath his sensual gaze. It was as if he could see right through her clothes down to her bare flesh. Unnerving to say the least, and it did nothing to ease her concerns. "There is one other thing..."

"What is it, Brenna?" His voice was the gentlest she'd ever heard. It was calm and even, not flat, but warm and soothing. It helped ease her discomfort, though not completely. Try as she might, she couldn't stop stammering. "I—that is to say, you—"

"What about me?"

"Well, look at the size of you, then, and the size of me. We are most incompatible." She frowned as his laughter brushed her ear. Was he mocking her? "I beg your pardon, sir, but I fail to see what is so amusing."

"You are, sweetheart." He smiled, shaking his head at her. "Your innocence is undoubtedly one of your finest qualities. And, as for your concern, you've nothing to worry about there, either. Trust me, I've yet to come across a woman my size."

She couldn't help but chuckle at the very image springing to her mind of a giant woman. "I don't suppose you have." His laughter mingled with hers and she felt the delicious delight of sharing a special moment with him. A wonderful feeling, to say the least. As his laughter died away, Tony shook his head. "Trust me, sweet. You will be more than ready for me when the time comes."

And like that, the moment evaporated, leaving behind no trace as she asked, "Then there will be no pain?"

His brow knit. "Now I am afraid I am lost."

Her fingers went to work at her skirt, twisting and smoothing it as she whispered, "You said you would hurt me."

To her surprise, Tony eased his arms about her, drawing her close, tucking her head beneath his chin. "Brenna, believe me when I say I would *not* do so, had I a choice. The decision is not mine, but nature's."

Looking up at him, at the strong line of his jaw, she murmured, "Are you being honest with me?"

"My lady, I would never lie to you about something that seems to cause you such terror." His eyes then danced with a devilish glint, adding, "Besides, what purpose would it serve? Why should I wish to scare you when you would soon discover the truth for yourself?"

She managed to return his smile, feeling the urge to tease him. "And what is the truth, then?"

He caught her chin in his hand, the warmth from his fingers seeping into her, loosening her muscles and her tension at the same time. His thumb stroked along her cheek once more. That warmth was back, gliding through her veins and making her blood bubble warmly within her. His voice was a gravelly rumble that threatened to weaken her knees as he murmured, "A man can give incredible pleasure to a woman, love. Just as she can give the same to him."

She fell silent, her eyes focusing on the fabric caught between her fingers. It was most wonderful there, in his arms, with her head resting against his chest. There was something about having those arms wrapped about her that gave her the strongest feeling of comfort.

Brenna was curious regarding this great pleasure of which he spoke. She could not imagine something which caused pain could be pleasant as well. The very thought of his causing her pain was enough to chill her, but the tenderness he'd shown her certainly seemed to belie the fact that he *wished* to hurt her.

She chewed her bottom lip slowly, mulling over what he'd just said. She wasn't so certain that she should believe him. Indeed, she wasn't so certain she could believe anything any man ever said to her. Despite Tony's reassurances that he'd not hurt her, she couldn't make herself believe him.

Her eyes moved over him again and he gave her a knowing smile as he said, "You've nothing to fear from me, Brenna. I promise you. Nothing at all." His lips brushed her ear. "You and I will fit together as if made for one another." As she shivered against him, he kissed her temple. "And we will make quite a perfect fit, if I may be so bold."

The warmth coursing through her became heat, her limbs feeling quite buttery and pliant now. "Tony?" she whispered, glancing up at him.

"Yes?"

She took a slow, deep breath before blurting out, "Will you show me what I need know?"

He chuckled softly as he gazed down at her. "I will show you anything your heart desires, love."

Her mind was awhirl with a million different questions she wished to ask about relations between men and women, but she shoved them from her mind. She no longer cared about questions and answers now. She took another deep breath, knowing there would be no turning back as she whispered, "Show me, Tony."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tony smoothed her hair away from her face. "Are you certain?"

She nodded, her curiosity practically eating her alive, demanding to be satisfied. Lifting her eyes to his once more, she said, "I am."

His left hand was warm against her cheek as he caressed it with gentle fingertips, and she almost groaned aloud from the stroke, a shiver racing wildly along her spine. Her belly jumped as his eyes grew smoky, a feeling of liquid heat spilling through her entire body at the fire she now saw smoldering in his eyes.

"We need undress you as well, love," he said softly, rising from the bed and reaching for her hand to draw her up beside him.

Brenna worried her bottom lip as he folded his arms about her and she felt her gown part. The jumping in her belly grew worse, and stronger than before. Her heart seemed to be beating at twice its normal speed, and her mouth was terribly dry.

His fingers were warm against her bared skin as he gently tugged the silk from her shoulders, then reached for the ribbon holding her chemise closed. She held her breath as the gown crumpled at her feet. Fighting to keep her eyes open despite the delicious drowsiness, she watched with fascination as he pulled at the ribbon and the linen parted easily.

Knowing Tony's blue eyes raked over her with such care, with such slowness, was enough to make her want to snatch her chemise from his hands and yank it closed. She couldn't remember ever feeling quite so uncomfortable. Never in her wildest imaginings did she envision a man gazing at her with such apparent fascination.

It was impossible to miss how Tony sucked in his

breath as the pale fabric slipped aside to reveal the inner curves of her breasts. He eased her chemise from her body and she wanted only to cross her arms over her chest as he gazed upon her bared flesh.

Her yelp was involuntary, his heated palm against her left breast a sudden shock to her system. Fire shot through her with that first contact and it was her turn to suck in a breath as his thumb brushed her nipple. The fire billowed with fury to send her blood bubbling, racing through her veins, filling her ears with the sudden, deafening rush and her body with a sweetly unbearable heat.

"Beautiful." Tony's whisper rose above the pounding blood. "My lady, you are stunning."

A flush burned in her cheeks once more as his sapphire eyes met hers. No one had ever used the words *beautiful* or *stunning* when describing her. In fact, Charles had always made certain she knew she was just the opposite—as hard on the eyes as sin itself. Still, her breath caught at his gentle caress, and then grew ragged as his eyes darkened.

Her nerves sprang to life as he fondled her breast, her discomfort becoming a distant memory at his touch. No one had ever touched her with such gentleness and wrought such havoc on her senses at the same time. The butterflies had grown into giants as their wings hammered a steady beat against her ribs.

The heat began where his flesh touched hers, spiraling through her and growing stronger. An unfamiliar tightness wound into a knot deep within her belly as he continued to caress her breast. He leaned into her to catch her lips with his, and she melted against him, her arms dangling at her sides, but her lips parting at once as he delved down to taste her. As his tongue skimmed along hers, she reciprocated, allowing hers to dance a slow, sensual beat with his.

He slid his arms about her waist, pulling her closer, groaning softly in the back of his throat as her breasts pressed into his chest. As he continued to tease her by dueling sensually with his tongue, she slowly wound her arms about his neck.

He backed her up, holding her close as he bent to

gently push her down onto the bed and covered her with his body. His lips skimmed along the slope of her neck, dipped into the hollow at the base of her throat, crept down over her breastbone.

A soft growl rose in the back of his throat as he trailed his lips over the rise of her breast, but it was her turn to reciprocate the throaty purr when he then caught the nipple between his lips. Her fingernails, acting on their own, sank into his shoulders at the unexpected, delicious tingle, the sensual tightening of that nub as it pebbled beneath his caress.

"Oh, my..." she couldn't hold back her breathless moan. The sensations tearing through her were unlike any she'd ever felt before. That heat smoldered into a fire of epic proportions, spilling through her to fill her, melding into an ache taking root deep within her core. A pleasurable ache, but an ache nonetheless, and she needed him to ease it and do so soon.

She had the wildest urge to let her fingers roam over him, to familiarize herself with his flesh and sinew. She fairly burned to trace the solid cords of his muscle, the flat planes of his body, and everything in between.

Her belly lurched as she felt his arousal. Knowing what it was, knowing what it meant, was enough to make her feel light-headed. Part of her wanted to open his breeches and explore that massive part of his body but the other part of her wanted to run and hide from him.

"Touch me, love," he whispered, his words rough around the edges. "Let those soft, delicate hands of yours roam over my body."

Her tongue felt thick, not wanting to obey as she forced out a throaty, "Touch you where?

"Anywhere and everywhere."

She shuddered at the huskiness of voice, the gentleness of his kisses. "Tony?"

"What, sweet?"

"What if we...that is..." Heat filled her face, but not that same pleasant heat he stirred, but one of embarrassment. That pressure against her leg was incredible, to say the least, and she had no doubt he would rent her flesh something terrible with that hard maleness hidden beneath the fine material of his breeches.

He suddenly broke away, straightened up, unfastening the falls of his breeches. She could only pray her astonishment wasn't apparent on her face, but she felt about to drop dead from the total shock. Her belly lurched, her mouth went as dry as dust, and she thought her eyes might pop clear from their sockets as he offered up her first look at a naked man. And what a look it was, she thought with renewed lightheadedness, her eyes involuntarily raking over him in a way that embarrassed her, but obviously amused him, judging by the slow smile tugging at his lips.

"Oh, my..." she breathed again, lifting a hand to her lips as her eyes slowly moved over what he'd bared. "This is not possible..."

Tony laughed softly, much to her surprise. She'd expected him to be annoyed with her for disrupting the moment, not amused by her idiotic innocence. "Oh, it is entirely possible, love," he corrected gently, nudging the crumpled breeches aside with his foot before stretching out beside her. "But, mayhap we should wait a while longer." He reached out to trail his fingers down over the curve of her belly. "For now, I will be content with holding you close until you overcome this fear you have of me."

"I am not afraid of you," she countered, shaking her head. "Only...parts of you..."

He grinned then, skimming his hand down lower over her belly. "Parts of me? What parts might those be?"

Damn that blasted heat in her cheeks! It gave her no peace, no ability to fool herself into thinking that mayhap she had nothing to fear. Her blushes gave away her every thought, and she knew it. "Aye. Parts of you. And you must know which I mean."

Tony pulled her into his arms and gave her a gentle squeeze. "Well, you need not fear *parts* of me, either." His lips grazed her shoulder. "As I've said several times, you have no need to fear me. I will never use force against you, no matter what. And most importantly, my lady, I will *never* assert *rights* that you do not wish asserted upon you."

As he spoke, his lips crept up her neck, towards her ear. She couldn't help her giggle at the feathery tickling against her skin. It was hard to imagine a man as large as Tony being so gentle, yet that was exactly what he was. Gentle. She barely felt his caress, but at the same time, she felt it clear through to the soles of her feet.

Tony continued his onslaught, catching her earlobe between his teeth, letting his tongue trace the shell of her ear. At her breathless sigh, he shifted to cover her once more, easing one thigh up to settle between hers.

She didn't miss the friction, the sensations skittering through her as that solid thigh came up between hers. The heat that filled her face now swept through her entire body, coming to settle where he met her at the apex of her thighs. He thrust his leg forward slightly and she couldn't contain her gasp as the sensual stroke sent a rush of tingles through her.

All words were forgotten, all questions remained unasked as Brenna surrendered to her curiosity, letting her hands slide up over his smooth back. The muscles were like slabs of rock, solid and sharply defined, and his skin rose into a colony of goosebumps as her fingernails raked over a sensitive spot. His laughter was warm against her neck as he murmured, "Careful, love...you might draw blood with those talons."

Immediately, her hands stilled. "Oh..."

He lifted his head to gaze down at her with tender blue eyes. "I am but teasing you, Brenna. Please, continue. It feels wonderful."

She held his eyes for a long moment, wanting to reach up and thread her fingers through his thick hair. It fell in unruly waves, tumbling over his forehead in a rakish manner, adding to his already powerful good looks.

Without waiting for her response, he resumed his slow caress of her skin with his lips. Her breath caught as his fingers trailed down over her belly, to dip into the triangle of curls at the apex of her thighs. She froze at the first brush of his fingers against her sensitive flesh. Even as his hand slipped between her thighs and pressed against one to part them, she refused to move.

"It's all right, Brenna," he whispered, stroking her inner thigh with his fingertips. "Let me do this, love. I promise, it will not hurt."

Squeezing her eyes shut against her rising

embarrassment, she reluctantly let him nudge her legs apart with those gentle fingers. The flames were back now, roaring their way up her calves, over her thighs, centering directly where he stroked her with such careful, sensual caresses.

Those sensations flared through her, threatening to consume her as Tony relentlessly brought her entire body to life. She no longer cared about the thought of his hurting her. She knew he never would, not with as tender as he had been thus far. It simply was not possible. Instead, she burned with curiosity, eager to explore that part of him that scared her so.

Her hand slid tentatively along the flat plane of his hard belly, her fingers only barely brushing over that steely part of him pressing so firmly against her. His breath was hot against her skin as it left his body in a heavy *hiss*. She jerked away at that, wondering if she'd hurt him in some manner.

He brushed a kiss over her breast, whispering, "Why did you stop, love?"

Again, he didn't wait for her answer. Instead, he curled his fingers about her wrist, guiding her back to him. After her initial hesitation, she felt emboldened and took her time exploring that forbidden part of him, using his soft sighs and sharp inhales to guide her. Glancing up, she could see his eyes had closed, his lips slightly parted, and a deep, heavy sigh eased from between them.

"Is this all right?" Mayhap she was actually hurting him.

"Oh, it's fine, love," he growled, his fingers now sweeping over her cheek in a tender caress. "Your touch is setting me on fire, sweetheart."

As if to prove his point, he reached out, gently parting her thighs. She shivered uncontrollably at the gentle caress and then—

"Oh...my..." she murmured, her hand now going still at his caress of her sensitive flesh. Her toes actually curled as he eased one finger inside her, teasing her with it as the sweet pleasure grew, twisting and writhing, spilling a sensual heat all through her.

Without thinking, she tightened her fingers about him. Tony sucked in his breath, then groaned softly. Pulling free, he wrapped his arms about her and rolled, pinning her beneath him. His hips settled between her thighs, and she felt his powerful need for her. Her toes curled again and the drowsiness returned for a brief moment.

But then, her heavy lids snapped open, the drowsiness forgotten, as she couldn't help but smile at the sensations crackling and popping through her. Heavenly and deliciously wicked at the same time, her entire body erupted in a shower of sensual tingles, and she almost laughed out loud in sheer delight. How could she have been so terrified at something that felt so absolutely delightful? It was pleasure beyond her wildest imaginings, to be sure.

Awhirl in the shattering pleasure of his hands, his lips on her body, she barely noticed the slight pop and brief twinge as he thrust deep into her. She gasped at that pressure, at the sensuous pressure deep inside her, unable to believe that she felt none of that pain she'd so feared. Instead, a bliss she never knew could exist swirled through her, the urge to draw him closer and hold him tight bringing a smile to her lips as she chided herself for her foolishness.

Tony went still against her, murmuring, "What is so amusing, love?"

"Oh, I never thought—" she shivered at the crackling pleasure still alive inside her. "I never thought it would feel... I mean..." A hot blush stung her cheeks and she finished with a lame, "You know what I mean..."

His eyes softened, growing tender. "Aye, love. I know what you mean."

All conversation was forgotten as he began moving inside her. The fire was back now, only it had erupted into an inferno, sparks shooting through her like fireworks with each slow, sensual thrust. Heady pleasure tore through her as he lifted her hips to accept him completely. It was incredible, those feelings whirling through her.

Ablaze with a passion she never thought she could feel, Brenna surrendered herself entirely to him and the pleasure spinning wildly through her. Each thrust brought forth a delectable, entirely new delight that threatened to reduce her to a smoldering cinder. The waves fed upon one another as Tony thrust faster. There was no halting those waves as they gathered up speed and strength. He arched deeply into her and she cried out as a shower of sparks burst forth from where they joined to shoot through her entire body. Her back arched, her fingernails sank into his flesh. She was rendered senseless by the incredible heat and searing flash of her first climax.

Tony crushed her close as he gave one last, powerful, mind-scrambling thrust. He climaxed in a long, blissful shudder, arching into her with a throaty growl, groaning, "Oh, God..." as he sank into her and buried his face in the curve of her neck. "Holy Christ..."

His back was damp with sweat and Brenna felt a brief flicker of fear, thinking he'd hurt himself. She felt molten, as if she'd become a part of him, and the sense of awe was unlike anything she'd ever felt before. This time, she let her fingers slip through the ebony waves at his nape as she whispered, "Is everything all right?"

"Everything is fine, sweet. I am merely a bit winded, that's all." His words were slow, sluggish, as if speaking required great effort.

His words didn't surprise her. She could hear him, could feel him, fighting to regain his breath. Still, she smiled up at him, murmuring, "Winded?"

He chuckled, shifting to lay beside her and gathered her in his arms. "Winded."

"Am I so much work, then?" she asked softly.

"Now, do not go getting all mealy-mouthed on me again, my lady. If you so much as hint that you are going to apologize to me, so help me I'll chain you in the hold."

"You would do that?"

"Only if you apologize for something you have no control over, love. It's nature that tires me, not you. Now, hush and be content to lie here a while longer before my duties take me from this most comfortable bed and the soft arms of a sweet woman."

His words brought a smile to her lips. It wasn't something she expected to hear from him. He had previously seemed so angry about their situation, but there seemed to be no trace of that anger now.

"Is it so tiring for you, then?"

"You are quite full of questions now, my lady," he replied, pulling her closer still, his fingers stroking her arm. "It's tiring, but in a most pleasant way."

She agreed, feeling incredibly sleepy herself, lying there with him. Her arms and legs felt liquefied, as if she lie could there forever and never move again, and still be most content.

His lips skimmed the top of her head. "And you have nothing more to fear, sweet. It will never hurt again."

That she could believe. The pain had been nothing compared to the wonderful pleasure he had given her. Feeling a bit braver now, she brought her right arm up to drape over his hips. His response was to pull her closer still.

"Must you leave soon?" she whispered after a long, comfortable silence.

"I should," he replied, his voice barely above a whisper. "But, I think I will let Jackson run things for a while." As he spoke, he rolled to pin her beneath him. "There is something else I much prefer to be doing right now."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Brenna sighed, pushing her needle through the heavy linen breeches she was mending. It took some doing, as the rocking of the ship and the shivering of her own body made doing anything so intricate almost impossible. They had crossed into the icier waters of the North Atlantic two days earlier. No matter how she tried, she just could not seem to find a way to stay warm. Most of her days were spent wrapped in a quilt, curled into the chair she dragged over by stove.

She bit off the end of the thread to knot it, and then tossed the breeches into the basket at her feet. A bitter draft leaked in about the window, adding to the alreadyslicing chill, and she snuggled down even further into her quilt.

"It will be nice to finally be out of the cold," she muttered, casting a long glare at the window. "I'm by far tired of never feeling warm enough."

A particularly brutal gust of wind rattled the glass in the brass frame. The latch sprung and the window burst open to let in a blast of icy wind. She shivered again, dropping the quilt to hurry over and slam it shut. As she did, a rogue wave slapped up against the side of the ship, drenching her in icy water and leaving her gasping and sputtering for breath at the sharp stab of cold in each droplet.

"Bloody hell..." she groaned, shaking water from the sleeves of her heavy velvet gown, sending droplets splattering about the room.

After slamming the window shut once more, she squelched over to her chest, tucked in alongside the wardrobe. Though Anthony had told her to make use of the wardrobe, the brusqueness of his voice gave her pause. He wasn't happy about sharing his space, that much was clear, and she did not wish to make him any unhappier than he already was.

She had already peeled off sopping, heavy velvet when the door unexpectedly scraped open, and Anthony stepped into the room. Clad in only her chemise, she gasped, whirling about and flinging her arms up to cover herself. Cheeks burning, she snapped, "Would it be too much trouble to knock, then?"

He closed the door behind him, leaning back against it to give her a hard look that slowly melted into a grin. "I apologize, my lady. It's not normally a habit of mine to knock before entering my own cabin." His eyes slowly moved up from her feet to her wet hair now streaming over her shoulders. "You're soaking wet. What happened?"

"That bloody window refuses to stay shut," she snapped, peeved enough at the newest chill biting into her bones to not restrain her flash of temper. "I went to close it—yet again, I might add—and a wave splashed me."

He frowned, shaking his head. "I'll speak to Howard at once about it."

"Please do so." She dove back into the chest, impatient to be warm, dry, and—most importantly—no longer on display. She hadn't missed the way his eyes darkened, and was all too aware of the fact that her wet chemise was quite transparent. If Anthony no longer seemed so angry, she had the feeling she knew why. Anger was *not* the dominant feeling at the moment.

Of course since the night he'd made love to her, he didn't scowl quite as much. In fact, she almost wondered if he even remembered he hadn't wanted her with him. True, he didn't exactly fawn over her, but he was at least civil towards her. In fact, she would almost say she sensed a hint of thaw. Then again, perhaps *that* sort of outlet was all a man needed to forget fury. She didn't know, but she wanted only to make certain that civility was not lost between them.

He knelt beside her. "Allow me to help you, lady."

She ignored the request, pawing through the gowns neatly folded into the chest. He silently watched her for a moment, then reached out to take her by the arm, pausing her dig. "I thought I told you it was perfectly acceptable to make use of the wardrobe."

"Aye, you did." She nodded, jerking free as her

fingers brushed a fresh chemise, buried beneath several linen nightdresses. Frowning, she yanked to free it and added, "But I did not wish to usurp any more space than necessary."

"Use the wardrobe, lady. I have an aversion to seeing you in wrinkled clothing." There was no mistaking the order in his voice.

Finally, the dratted chemise slipped out from beneath the nightgowns. Rocking back awkwardly, she grabbed hold of the chest's lip to steady herself. Glancing up, it was to find Tony watching her, his blue eyes almost dancing with amusement at her stumble. Shaking his head at her, he reached into the chest, rummaging about for a long moment before lifting out a rich jade velvet gown.

"If you don't mind my saying, this would look quite becoming on you, Madam Radcliffe," he said, his voice dropping to a low growl. "Quite becoming, indeed."

About to pull at the ribbon holding the dripping chemise closed, she looked up again at the gown he held. It was one of her favorites, but it was hard to be appreciative when her teeth threatened to rattle clear out of her jaw. "If you'd not mind..."

He ignored her gesture towards the door, instead rising and turning to the wardrobe, muttering, "There is something else..."

The icy wet linen was forgotten, as was the puddle at her feet when he turned, holding out the strangest looking garment she had ever seen. It was white and looked to be made of heavy linen, with yards of frilly lace. "Anthony?"

He cleared his throat as he shook out the lace and they became breeches unlike any she'd ever seen. At her stare, he explained, "I took the liberty back in Dublin. Thought you might need something to wear beneath your skirts...for a bit of extra warmth."

She couldn't hold back her surprise, nor her sudden laugh. "You wish me to wear breeches?"

"They are not breeches, my lady. Trust me."

Reluctantly, she accepted them. They were actually heavily starched linen, with ruffles of lace sewn on to make them more feminine. Hoping they weren't at all scratchy, she hedged, "Very well. If you insist..." "Try them. If they do not keep you any warmer, or you find them uncomfortable, we can burn them."

Still eyeballing them with suspicion, she muttered, "I am tired of always feeling so cold...I don't suppose there'd be any harm in trying them, would there?"

Stepping up, he took them from her. "Come. Let me help you dress before you catch your death in that wet chemise."

Brenna stood up, turning her back to him as she peeled off the wet chemise and let it drop to the floor with a *plop*. The shivers began anew, and this time, her rattling teeth had nothing to do with the cold. The air was as chilled as ever, but it was the warmth she felt radiating from her husband's body that caused those shivers that she could only describe as delicious.

She barely felt the warmth from her fresh chemise, knowing the linen had little to do with it. Anthony's hands fell away and she made haste to lace herself up and reach for those lacy breeches. Feeling quite foolish beneath his gaze, she stepped into them and pulled them up. They fastened by means of a long drawstring, so she pulled them tight and tied them firmly. The difference was immediate; the chill faded from her legs. "You were right, Anthony. I do feel warmer."

He nodded. "Glad to hear it. Now, let us finish, shall we? I should hate to see the rest of you freeze instead."

She allowed him to help her into the heavy velvet gown, her eyes closing as his fingertips brushed her skin. It sent a shudder up her spine, causing her to bite down on her bottom lip until his hands left her and she heard him step back.

"Would you care to go for a stroll now that you are properly attired?" he asked, his voice sounding strangely husky.

Turning back, it was to find him holding out his arm, and she didn't hesitate to accept. "Are you certain I'll not freeze topside?"

"Ah, yes..." He smiled, pulling away and reaching around her to tug open the right door of the wardrobe again. From its depths, he withdrew a heavy woolen cloak. "I would not let you freeze, lady."

He draped the cloak about her shoulders, then

reached in to extract a silver fox muff as well. It surprised her, seeing such feminine articles in a man's wardrobe, and couldn't help but bring the muff to her nose to nuzzle into the silky fur, murmuring, "Where did you get these?"

He grinned, as she rubbed her nose into the silver pelt once more. "I took the liberty in Dublin, as I said. I certainly did not wish you to freeze solid."

Unable to help herself, she rubbed her nose into the soft fur once more. His consideration touched her, made her feel a hint of a happiness she'd long since forgotten, and her heart rose with her lips. "I thank you."

He held out his arm again. "There is no need for thanks, lady. You are my wife. It's my duty to make certain you are provided for."

She waited for the glint of anger that usually clouded his eyes when he uttered the word *wife*, but was pleasantly surprised to find it never appeared. Instead, his smile remained in place and as she hesitated, he reached for her hand to draw it through the crook of his elbow.

A pleasant warmth spread through her as she gave his arm a slight squeeze. Even through his greatcoat, she could feel the solid, corded muscle in his forearm. "Shall we?"

He leaned over, surprising her by brushing her lips with a light kiss. "We shall."

Topside, Brenna shivered as a particularly frigid blast of wind rattled the *Pegasus*'s timbers. Anthony drew her arm close beneath his as they strolled out in the pale lemon sunshine.

She was agog at the sights around her. The black water frothed up into small whitecaps, but was otherwise calm, and the sky was almost crystal-blue in its clearness. But what caught her attention were the towering mountains of ice that rose up from the ocean like guardians of the deep. "Anthony, what are those?" she asked, pointing to a particularly large chunk off the starboard side of the ship.

He smiled, reaching up to shove his hair from his eyes as the wind blew it around his face. "That, my dear, is an iceberg."

Squinting against the wind, she glanced up at him.

"An iceberg?"

He nodded. "Trust me."

Her gaze returned to the ice titan, blue-white in the sunshine, its crest sparkling like a perfectly cut diamond in the rays. It towered over the *Pegasus* as they slowly cut through the ice-laden water, looming above them as if allowing them passage. In fact, they seemed close enough to reach out and touch.

"Anthony?"

He smiled down at her, all traces of impatience gone despite her questions, which she knew must seem silly to him. If he thought so, he made no mention of it, but merely smiled. "What is it, sweetheart?"

"What if the ice hits us?"

The wind stirred again, tugging a red-gold tendril free from her neat plait to blow across her forehead. Before she could reach for it, he smoothed it back. She shivered, but the cold had absolutely nothing to do with it.

"You need not worry, love," he told her, gently guiding her to stand before him, her back flat against his chest. He brought his arms up to cradle about her, pressing his cheek into her hair. "I've crossed these waters more times than I care to think about and we've yet to suffer any real damage."

Brenna felt the comforting warmth from his body seep through her cloak, through her dress and underclothes, to fill her. There was something so very reassuring about having him so close to her, something she could neither understand, nor explain. It simply was.

She couldn't help her soft sigh as she sank back against him. The solid feel of her husband's arms about her brought back all of her most treasured childhood memories. Her father had been a hugger, and he'd doted on his only child. Seamus was never too tired, too worn down, too busy to grab his daughter in a bone-crushing hug whenever she wished for one.

A wistful smile tugged at her lips. She'd so missed that feeling of being adored, but it all came back as Anthony held her so close.

As if sensing her content, Anthony gently squeezed her. "What is it, sweetheart?"

Her feelings seemed too silly to put into words, so she

merely shrugged. "Oh, nothing, really. I am merely thinking about my father."

"You never speak of him. Why is that?"

She glanced over her shoulder at him. His cobalt eyes were serious, but she could see not a whit of the frosty anger she normally saw. "It isn't a subject I should think anyone would be interested in."

"You ought but try me." He tightened his arms about her, as if trying to cradle her against him. She leaned back into him, quite comfortable in his embrace, and shrugged again. "Oh, it's silly, really. I cannot explain it, but these mountains of ice make me think of him."

"Who can explain the things which bring back memories?"

As he gently squeezed her again, she couldn't help but chuckle. "Certainly not me."

"What happened to him?" he asked, his hands skimming down over the length of her arms.

She sighed wistfully, gazing up at the iceberg as they said past it. "He died when I was in my twelfth year. A fall from his horse."

"I am sorry to hear that, love," he murmured.

"I begged him to take me riding that day," she went on with a sad laugh, allowing herself to sink into him and accept his proffered comfort. "Oh, I put up quite the fuss, you know. But he said nay, that he had much to do. Errands that could not wait. I suppose it was fortunate for me. Had I been with him, I might have suffered the same fate."

Anthony squeezed her again, then leaned close to nuzzle her, whispering, "It's most fortunate you were not."

His words were not those she expected to hear and she was at a loss for a reply. Another gust of wind whipped along the deck. She shivered as the icy teeth nipped at her face, and he tightened his arms about her even more.

"Would you care to return to the relative warmth of our cabin, my lady?"

His words were a whisper, his lips brushing her ear. It sent an even stronger shiver than the wind's down her back. She loved the sound of her husband's deep voice the low, reassuring rumble emanating from the pit of his chest offered as much comfort as his embrace did.

"Not quite yet," she replied, still gazing in wonder at the monstrous icebergs gliding by them. "They are most fascinating, these ice giants."

Anthony brushed her ear with another kiss. "Very well. If your nose begins to turn blue though, below you get."

She couldn't help but chuckle at the very image of her nose turning the same shade of blue as his eyes. "You'll not hear an argument from me, then. The last thing I wish is a blue nose."

Since they'd left Ireland, Brenna no longer feared Anthony quite as much as she had. Oh, she was still given to those bouts of timidity, which she knew annoyed him, but at least she no longer averted her eyes at his every gaze. It no longer troubled her to hold his looks and he seemed to encourage it, much like he encouraged her questions or her feelings on a particular subject. He'd done so ever since the night he first made love to her, over a week earlier. Since then, she no longer felt like an intruder, but a more welcomed presence. True, that night was the only time he'd sought her out, but then, she knew how busy he was, as he'd be gone when she awoke, and often hadn't returned to his cabin by the time she blew out the light.

It was wonderful, to not always feel so afraid. She'd forgotten how it felt to speak her mind or question something, and not have to worry about retribution in the form of fists. Despite any impatience Anthony might feel—and he was *not* shy about expressing his impatience with her at times—he never once raised an angry hand to her. For the first time in years, her body bore no black and blue marks and she could finally hope that it never would again.

Yes, should anyone ask, she would have to say that she felt a happiness that had been long absent from her life. No, it wasn't the same as loving her husband, or knowing he loved her in return, but it was far better than being married to a beast like Lord Halstead.

However, happiness did nothing to make the clime much more welcoming. After a few more minutes of iceberg gazing, the chill became too unbearable to ignore. "Anthony?"

"Yes?" he asked, his hands absently stroking up and down the length of her arms, as if trying to keep her warmer still.

"I do believe my nose is beginning to turn blue."

His laughter was warm against her nearly-frozen cheek. "Then I suppose we'd best get you below, shouldn't we?"

Reluctantly she turned from the beauty surrounding them. "Aye. I think it would be best."

"Come then. A warm stove and even warmer quilts await you."

As they strolled back towards the stairs, Jackson appeared from around the corner. "Ah, good day, Tony." His blue-gray eyes warmed considerably as they fell on Brenna. "And a good day to you, Madam Radcliffe."

"Please," she slipped one hand from the warmth of the fox muff to wave away his formality, "it's quite all right for you to address me as Brenna. After all, you are Anthony's dearest friend. That would almost make you family, would it not?"

Jackson's smile grew, then faded slightly as he looked from her to Anthony. "I suppose it would," he agreed slowly. "Although, your husband seems a bit troubled with the thought."

"Troubled?" Anthony replied calmly. "Of course not. Why should it trouble me?"

"Exactly. It isn't as though I stand a chance of winning the lady's hand now, is it?"

Brenna felt the sudden tension brewing between both men, but couldn't imagine what could be the cause of it. Still, Anthony practically shot daggers at him as they stood there, and there was no missing the tight, icy chill in his voice. Something troubled him, all right.

"No," Anthony replied, his arm tightening about her shoulders. "I don't believe you do, Jackson."

She glanced from Anthony to Jackson and back. The devilish sparkle seemed to fade from Jackson's eyes, and his shoulders stiffened a tad. The two men appeared locked in a silent battle of wits as they held each other's stares and she waited to see who would be the winner.

"Of course," Jackson said smoothly, clearing his

throat, "if one does not tread with care, one might find that decision taken from him."

"I would not concern myself with such matters if I were you, Jackson," Anthony said, his voice a low, warning growl. "Now if you will excuse us, my wife and I wish some time alone."

Brenna didn't miss the light flush creeping into Jackson's wind-burned cheeks. He cleared his throat again, saying, "Ah, aye. Of course. If you will excuse me, then."

He stepped around them to continue on his way, leaving Brenna to gaze up at Anthony with no little confusion. Why the sudden tension between the two men? Something was amiss between them.

"Anthony?"

At her whisper, Tony turned to her. "Shall we?"

His eyes still glittered dangerously and the habit she thought she'd left behind came roaring back as her gaze fell under the fury in his eyes. "Aye. Please."

Without another word, Anthony escorted her back to their cabin. His arm remained stiff with tension, but she didn't think she was the cause of that tension. Rather, she felt Jackson had somehow angered him, though she couldn't see how that was possible. Why on earth should Jackson's smiling at her create such sudden hostility in her husband? Fascinating, really, as she wondered if Anthony was, perhaps, feeling a hint of *jealousy*? Was that even possible?

A smile lifted her lips, only to fade just as quickly. Of course it wasn't possible. For it to be so, he would have to feel something for her and she knew he didn't. It was more likely that he simply did not want another man sniffing around what he considered his possession.

She sighed inwardly at that. Though she knew she shouldn't pin her hopes on Anthony's ever feeling anything remotely romantic towards her, she couldn't help but feel that pang of sadness.

But then again, it was entirely possible that he felt the *beginnings* of something for her. Wasn't it?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Brenna shivered, moving away from the window and rubbing her hands together. She constantly felt as if she could not get warm enough. Even that extra layer of underclothes beneath her skirts didn't help. Each day, she moved closer and closer to the stove, trying in vain to keep warm. And she grew weary of the frigidity surrounding her.

Only the nights weren't a problem. Anthony slid into bed beside her late each evening, and she immediately felt the difference. Heat wafted from his big body in such a manner that she could not resist snuggling up to him.

For the most part, he didn't seem to mind. True, he had not sought her out since that first night, but each time she inched close to him, he'd lift an arm to drape around her and pull her up against him.

Now, she wrapped the quilt around herself as she sank back into the chair. Since Anthony made love to her, she found herself looking at him in an entirely different way.

It was amazing to see that the man who commanded such respect, who wielded such authority, was the same man who shuddered in her arms when her fingernails grazed his skin. That he could be so gentle, could evoke such passion from her with his lips and hands, and yet hide that side with such aplomb once others were around.

Each time she saw him on deck, bundled up against the frigid elements, she couldn't help but see him naked before her, see the perfect sculpture of his body hidden beneath his clothes. She couldn't stop feeling the way he caressed her, the way he kissed her. Some of her nervousness fled with those first gentle touches against her skin, but she still did not know exactly what to make of their situation. He had awakened some powerful feelings within her and she was more than a little curious about what would happen the next time they made love.

If there was a next time.

With each passing day, her thoughts turned to their destination. She was filled with curiosity about America. Her mother had seemed so convinced that she would find great happiness there, and Brenna couldn't help but wonder how true that would be. Of course, she'd already found *some* happiness, seeing as how she escaped having to wed Viscount Halstead. But it wasn't exactly what she thought her mother meant by the word happiness.

She wondered what awaited her in America. What would happen once there was space and freedom beckoning to Anthony? Though he didn't seem quite so angry about her presence any longer, it certainly didn't mean his feelings about being forced into marrying her had changed. It was most likely acceptance and the need to make things as pleasant as possible, given their close quarters.

She sighed softly, closing the book she'd been reading and placed it in her lap. She couldn't concentrate on the words anyhow. Too many troubled thoughts swirled about her brain.

There were so many questions she wished she was brave enough to ask. Would Anthony return to his rakehell ways? She had no doubt he was just that. A man as handsome as he almost had no choice to be anything but a rake. She'd overheard mentions of a woman named Charlotte awaiting his return to America, but she wasn't entirely certain just who Charlotte was. Her instincts told her this Charlotte was a lover of sorts.

She frowned at the book's leather cover. She'd only gotten a taste of her husband's skills, but felt more than a mite possessive of them and she certainly had no desire to share him. Still it wasn't her decision to make. He hadn't married her out of love, but had pledged his troth to her under protest, to say the least. There was no reason for him to forsake all others before her.

"How will it be, once we are there?" she whispered, tracing a lazy finger over the gold lettering on the book's cover. "Will I be locked away in a rambling house whilst he seeks his pleasure elsewhere?"

A tight knot formed in the pit of her belly at the

thought of sharing him that way, at the thought of his lips and hands on another, at the thought of that other giving herself completely to him—the way she had. And she knew she had.

Another sigh as she rose from the chair and crossed to the bookshelf to return the tome. She knew he didn't love her. In fact, she was well aware that he was basically tolerating her out of need. What would become of her once there was more distance between them?

There was one thing she knew would sustain her, no matter how many beds her husband visited.

A child.

She smiled, returning to her chair to snuggle back into her quilt. "I would so love to be a mother," she murmured, tucking her feet up beneath her. "It would make the loneliness a great deal more bearable, should I have a child."

But how could she approach Anthony with such a request? How could she possibly confront him and ask him to assert his rights upon her? Her cheeks burned at the very thought and she buried her face in her hands. It'd be so much easier if his needs would simply rear their heads once more at the right time.

However, it did not seem as though that was going to happen any time soon. She was left with no other option but to approach her husband and ask him to do his duty by her.

She only hoped her courage would not fail her.

As if he knew he occupied her thoughts, the cabin door scraped open and Anthony stepped in. "Good afternoon." He gestured towards her quilts. "Napping, were you?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. Though, I must admit, it's not a bad idea." She watched him cross over to his desk, where he began riffling through a sheaf of papers. His hair was wild, windblown into ebony peaks that did nothing to distract from his handsomeness. She bit down on her bottom lip, her heart hammering against her ribs, as she thought about what she was about to ask of him.

He grinned, looking up from his papers. "Please, do not allow me to disturb you. Nap away as if I was not here." He glanced back down and must have found what he sought, for he straightened up almost immediately and moved back towards the door. "Sleep well, my lady. I apologize if I disturbed you."

Brenna fought down the fluttery nervousness that was almost making her dizzy. *It's best to simply blurt it out*, she thought, her eyes moving over him slowly. He certainly could not read her thoughts and though he seemed to have lost some of his anger, he had made no overture to bed her again, leaving her with no other choice but to swallow her embarrassment and ask.

He was reaching for the doorknob when he heard her soft, "Anthony?"

Slowly turning to face her, he said, "Yes?"

"Might I have a word with you?"

"Of course." Anthony turned to lean back against the door, his eyes meeting hers and causing her belly to splash and toss wildly.

"There is something I wish to discuss with you," she began in a hurried voice, trying to get the words out before her courage failed her. "That is, if you don't mind."

"What is it?" he asked, his voice mild, almost as if he was wary at what she might say.

"I realize ours is not a typical marriage. Not by any stretch of the imagination. But there is one thing I wished to know."

He folded his arms over his chest, his expression bland as he simply stared hard at her. "What might that be?"

"Do you..." Her voice cracked, scarlet fire burning in her cheeks. Clearing her throat, she tried again. "Do you wish to...that is...well..."

"What is it, my lady?"

"What I mean is—" She winced at the heat filling her face. For some reason, she hadn't thought this would be so difficult to say aloud. "What I mean to say is that I would like a child."

"Mine?" he asked softly.

"Well, seeing as you are my husband."

His sigh was heavy. "I suppose that would only be proper."

"So, I thought, mayhap..."

"You thought what, love?"

She didn't miss the endearment, nor did she miss the sarcastic note behind it. Swallowing hard, she forced herself to meet his gaze. "I thought we might...attempt..."

A slow smile pulled at his lips. Obviously, her discomfort amused him. "Attempt what, my lady?"

She glared at him. "You know what I mean."

He unfolded his arms, walking over to place his hands on the arms of her chair. "You mean, you wish to use me—use my body, that is—for stud purposes."

She shifted in her seat, almost squirming beneath his penetrating stare, unable to maintain eye contact. "I thought, mayhap, it would make things easier."

"Easier? How?" His voice was a low throaty growl as he leaned close enough that his lips brushed her ear. "Tell me how it would make things *easier*."

She caught her skirt between her thumb and forefinger, twisting the royal blue silk into a wrinkled ball. "If I should conceive before we reach America, then you no longer need to worry. You will be free to live your life as you see fit."

"So you expect that I will seek out my mistress on a regular basis, then?"

Brenna swallowed hard against the lump in her throat at the thought of losing him to another woman. "Ave."

"Seek her and not you?"

"Aye."

He growled with frustration. "You do realize, the woman awaiting me in America fully expects to wed me, don't you?"

"I was unaware of that." Now at least she knew who Charlotte was.

"Oh, yes, sweet. You've usurped the claim of another."

"I did no such thing." She met his blazing gaze without hesitation. Then she ducked down once more, her voice softening. "I did no such thing. It was out of my hands."

"Well, that is neither here nor there now," he said, shaking his head. "But tell me, what happens, once this babe is conceived? Do you turn me away then?"

Fighting down her rising embarrassment, she

whispered, "I free you to go to another. To one you've chosen. I do not expect you to continue this charade once we reach your home."

"So, just so I fully understand this, Brenna," his voice was low and icy as he held her gaze, "you wish to have access to my body, not for pleasure, not for intimacy, not for anything other than breeding purposes? Then, when you have conceived, I am free to visit as many other beds as I wish?"

"It sounds so terrible when you say it that way," she complained, glancing down at the twisted silk in her hands.

"It's the truth, my lady. Whether you wish it to be prettified or not. You care naught about feeling, only the means to achieve the end." His blunt reply sent another rush of heat streaking through her cheeks, but he didn't relent. "So, am I correct?"

"Aye. You will be free to live your life however you see fit."

"Very well. So pleasure, feeling, will play no role in our bedroom activities?"

Anger glinted in his blue eyes and she heard the hardness in his voice, but was a little confused as to what could be making him so angry. Wasn't she giving him what he *wanted*? She was, for all purposes, releasing him from the bonds of matrimony and giving him leave to frolic with whichever woman might catch his eye. What wife would offer such a bargain to her husband?

If only she didn't wish to have a child as badly as she did. It'd be so much easier to send him on his way without sharing that wonderful part of him which cut through her doubts and made her feel so cherished, so adored.

And what the devil did he mean about pleasure playing no role in begetting a child? How was that even possible?

Taking another deep breath, she said, "I thought the two went hand in hand."

He smiled then—a cold smile, converting the heat in her blood to icicles. "Oh, they would, were I not merely performing an act. If it was true lovemaking, my lady, you'd never know what it would be like without pleasure. But, since you only require one thing from me, that is all you shall receive."

She did not like the sound of that. It sounded so—so *cold* and remote to her. Still, he had yet to give her an answer. "Have we a bargain, then?"

Tony stared at her with hard blue eyes for a long, uncomfortable moment. "Very well, my lady," he said in a tight voice. "When shall we begin breeding?"

Brenna could no longer hold his eyes, they were filled with such fury. Dropping her gaze to her lap, she murmured, "I thought we might—that is, I hoped possibly this evening?"

"Ah, you are not wasting any time, I see. Very well. If you wish, we can do it now." He reached for the lacings at his throat. "Undress, my lady, and hope for the best."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

She froze as he tugged the dark gray silk from his shoulders. "I—I...that is, I thought—mayhap, later..."

"No. We shall do this when it is convenient for me, lady. Not the other way around." As he spoke, he drew near her chair, letting his shirt fall to the floor. "Rise and undress, my lady, and we shall see how capable I am of performing in so detached a manner. I have never done this for such a reason, so it should be an experience."

Brenna already regretted bringing it up. She was too confused by his reaction to move, and he was none too gentle as his fingers curled about her wrist to tug her up from the chair.

"If you wish, lady, you need not even undress." His voice dropped even lower as he spun her away from him. "You need only lift your skirts for a few moments."

A hot blush stung her face as shame flooded her body. Indignant outrage bubbled up and she snapped, "You would treat me as no more than a common strumpet?"

"Why shouldn't I?" he countered sharply, heat threaded through his words. "You see me as no more than a stud. I should say that makes us even, wouldn't you?"

She didn't know how to respond. He seemed so angry, so enraged despite his calm demeanor, that she was almost afraid to keep her back to him. If he was finally going to lash out, she'd much rather see it coming than be surprised. She'd had enough surprises from Charles to last her a lifetime.

"Please," her voice was a soft, barely audible, whisper as he held her firmly away from him, "do not hurt me."

His exhale was a mighty rush against her skin. "And still you fear me, my lady. Have I not yet proven to you that these senseless fears of yours are unfounded?"

He didn't wait for her to answer, but instead spun

her back to face him. "Very well. We can do this face to face, if you wish. But I think it only fair to warn you. Either way, you will most likely regret it."

With that, he unfastened his breeches, letting them hit the floor with a *whump*. Stepping out of them, he moved to the bed, where he sank down and rumbled, "Come here."

Brenna could only stare at him for a long moment. "Wh-what is it you wish me to do?"

"Come here."

She held back, staring at him from across the room. Anger almost radiated from him as he growled, "Do *not* make me fetch you, lady. If I am forced to chase you around to fulfill my end of the bargain, I *will* take you wherever I happen to nab you."

Her mouth went dry at that, her belly roiling painfully to give her the beginnings of a headache. She knew she was about to witness the unleashing of his fury, and she knew she had only her idiocy to blame. Still, her feet wouldn't obey and carry her towards him. "I am sorry."

"Stop apologizing and come here."

The cold fury in his voice brooked no argument. Finally, her legs did her bidding and slowly, she closed the gap between them. "What do you wish me to do?"

"Take off that gown."

His eyes remained hard and icy, his voice heavy with authority she didn't dare defy. "Aye, sir."

Her hands fairly shook as she tugged the silk from her shoulders and pushed it down over her hips. As she stood before him in only her chemise and the frilly underdrawers she wore to keep out the cold, his eyes darkened.

"And now the underclothes."

"Anthony, I—"

"The underclothes, Brenna."

Tears of shame pricked her eyes as she reluctantly tugged on the drawstring of her drawers. The heavy linen fell into a heap.

"And the chemise."

His eyes held hers the entire time as she slipped the ribbon free and her chemise parted.

"Take it off, Brenna."

Blinking back those tears, she eased off the chemise, her chin rising as she stood there before him. Her knees quaked, her hands shook, but she refused to cower before him.

She didn't miss his sharp intake of breath, nor did she miss the way his eyes darkened. In the candlelight, they glittered like black opals and suddenly, she was no longer afraid. That anger seemed to diminish, despite his deepening scowl. However, his eyes betrayed him, as she felt them creep over her, as if memorizing her every feature. It was a heady rush, to see those eyes grow hot and dark, to see him struggle to lift those eyes from her, to see his very obvious desire for her, to hear it in the husky growl of his voice. "Come here."

She bit down on her bottom lip. His voice was thick with a lust that was contagious, as her own desire rose sharply. Moving was so much easier now, and she did just that, shifting to stand between his knees.

"Turn around."

"Anthony-" She winced at the breathiness of her own voice.

He didn't seem to notice, gritting, "*Turn around*," through clenched teeth.

She gave him her back, almost sighing aloud as his hands, hot and demanding, curved against her hips and he roughly tugged her down onto his lap. She acquiesced, sitting stiffly, her knees folded over his, her calves pressed against his shins.

It wasn't easy, remaining so still when she felt him, felt his swollen desire pressing into her bottom. Heat swirled through her at that contact. Her blood churned wildly in her veins and every fiber in her body tensed.

She squeezed her eyes shut as he brought his hands up, over her legs to slip between her thighs. A dull ache took root as he stroked her sensitive inner curves before pressing outward. Sensual heat flooded her as he parted her legs further, draping each over his outer thighs. No anger remained. At least, none that she could feel. Instead, he caressed her, hands grazing her inner thighs until she thought she might burst into flames. The grazes became harder as he pressed into her flesh, urging them further apart as he growled, "Open your legs wider."

She couldn't contain her gasp as his fingertips brushed her sensitive flesh. Goose bumps tightened all over her body as his hands skimmed back up, over her belly, up along her ribs, to cup her breasts.

"Are you certain this is what you wish, lady?" His voice was a taut whisper as his fingers brushed over the sensitive crests. "No feeling, no passion. Just the act?"

Her head spun out of control as her nipples tightened beneath his skilled fingers. Even if she had been able to form the words, Brenna knew she'd never get them past her lips. No, it wasn't what she wished. She wished to feel his lips on hers, to feel his gentle, loving caresses instead of these cold, calculated strokes, but her head spun too badly and she couldn't protest..

At her silence, he took a deep breath. "Very well."

Her back arched as he settled one hand between her legs and parted her curls to insert a finger inside her. Desire rose in a thick fog to surround her as he teased her to life.

She couldn't stop from sucking in her breath as she was caught up in a maelstrom of incredible bliss. Those gentle caresses sent liquid fire burning through her, making her feel so deliciously relaxed, as if her limbs had become butter. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth as he caressed her feminine flesh as sensually and lovingly as a man could, as he'd touched her the first time they made love.

His right hand continued to knead her breast, to torment her already pebbled nipple. His left hand remained buried in her curls, that finger driving her mad with the need to touch him, to let her hands explore his hot, solid flesh from head to toe, to slip her fingers through his hair and pull him down for a hungry kiss. She waited breathlessly for him to gather her in his arms, pin her onto her back, and capture her lips in a fierce kiss.

But he did none of those things. He continued to torture her senses, to addle her mind, but made no move to trap her beneath him in any way. Instead, he brushed the side of her neck with an unexpected kiss and increased his strokes, muttering, "If a child is what you wish, my lady, you shall work for one." She let out a whimper as his finger suddenly disappeared and he grasped her hips to lift her. Then he let go and her breath rushed from her in a mighty gasp as he surged up inside her, filling her and sending a flash of fire shooting through her.

Brenna went still at that fullness so deep inside her. The tingles had begun already, firing through her at irregular intervals and growing stronger with each second until they threatened to consume her. She waited for Anthony to guide her, to bring her to that blessed peak she knew would carry her off on a glorious sea of bliss.

However he did nothing but hold her against him. "Go on, my lady."

"But..." The words were nearly impossible for her brain to scramble together. "I-I know not what to do."

"You certainly do, Brenna," he muttered, cradling both breasts now, capturing her nipples between thumb and forefinger. At once, they puckered as he rolled them with a tantalizing slowness.

"Tony..." She had a most difficult time catching her breath at the sensations now roaring through her. "Please..."

His voice was a guttural groan as he breathed, "Ride me, lady. You will find your rhythm."

With that, she shifted, hearing Tony's breathless *hiss* behind her as she did. Her subtle movement sent the most delicious burst of heat shuddering through her. That was all it took as pleasure swirled about her like a whirlpool, growing stronger and stronger, drawing her in as she found her rhythm, her slow, sensual pace.

It was wickedly delicious, knowing she was in control. She could decide how to move. It was entirely up to her if she would allow him to stroke her slowly and steadily, or to lift up and then slam against him. She savored each motion, savored his low growls as the fire tore through her.

Her arms came up, draping over his shoulders, her fingers scrabbling through his hair, trying in vain to pull him closer. It was the only part of him she could reach, and she was desperate, almost mindless, in her need to touch him. Arching her back, she offered herself to him, pressing her breasts deeper into his hands and moaning softly as he plucked at her already too-sensitive nipples.

"Oh, lady..." he groaned raggedly into her ear. "You will regret this..." He released her right breast, bringing that hand down to part her folds once more. She cried out as his fingers found a most sensitive spot and sent fire tearing through her.

"Oh..." The long, low moan was all she could muster as lightning flashed through her. That fullness inside her raked her most sensitive nerves, filled her with a delectable fire as his fingers teased her, sending sparks of white-hot electricity twisting her insides. That heat coiled into a tight spiral and then burst, a shower of scorching tingles exploding and filling her.

"Oh, God..." Tony groaned, wrapping his arms about her waist, surging up to meet her with a long, hard thrust. An inferno raged now, his thrusts swift and steady, his free arm wrapped about her to hold her against him as the fire roared through her.

"Tony!" The cry tore free from her lips, her fingernails digging into his shoulders as her climax exploded from that knot in the pit of her belly, spreading liquid heat smoking through her veins.

His voice rose sharply in a long, satisfied growl as he arched into her, joining her in that moment of absolute, white-hot bliss. As they reached that glorious summit together, she knew what it meant to become entirely one with another person in every way possible. She melted against him, tingles still sparking through her, leaving her deliciously sleepy. She didn't miss the soft caress of his lips over her shoulder. Nor did she miss his whispered, "Oh...oh, love..." as his arms folded around her once more, and both brought a gentle smile to her lips.

"Tony..." she murmured, feeling wonderfully sated as she sank into the solid warmth of his chest, waiting to feel his arms tighten about her.

He held her close for a long moment, and she savored the intense pleasure still ricocheting through her. He kissed the top of her head and she knew an apology was forthcoming. She smiled dreamily, waiting for the chance to apologize for her own idiocy as well.

But that moment never arrived. Instead, Tony lifted her from him and rose from the bed to dress, leaving her

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sitting there staring as if dumbstruck. Without even glanced at her, he growled, "We shall do this again tomorrow night. And every night until you get what you want."

Brenna reached for her chemise, desperate now to cover herself as an icy cold dread washed over her at the toneless sound of his voice. His eyes were flat and cold as they met hers and she nodded. "Very well, Anthony."

Gone were those wonderful feelings now, leaving behind a heavy ache in her heart. Tears filled her eyes as he turned his back on her and drew on his discarded shirt. Even as she slowly rose up to dress herself, she knew he was right.

She most definitely regretted her decision.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Brenna cried herself to sleep that night—the first time she'd done so since leaving Hillcrest.

After his cold words, Anthony finished dressing and stormed out of the cabin, slamming the door with such force that the walls seemed to actually rattle.

By the time she'd gone to bed, he still had not returned and she was grateful for his absence. She was terrified of what else he might do in his fury, humiliated at the ease with which he could prove himself so right. She was furious as herself for her stupidity.

She woke in the middle of the night to the moaning howl of raging wind and the sheeting of freezing rain driving against the window. The cabin lurched all around her, books toppling from shelves to hit the floor with repeated thuds, each one making her jump.

She sat upright and instinctively reached for Anthony, but her fingers caught only empty space.

He had yet to return.

Kicking back the covers, she reached for her pelisse as the first flutters of fear chilled her. Why she should be frightened she didn't know, but she couldn't deny that it was exactly how she felt. Only her fear was not for herself. For reasons she could not explain, she was terrified that something had happened to Anthony.

"Of course, it *would* serve him right," she muttered, fastening her pelisse and swinging her legs around to jam her feet into her slippers. No sooner had the words left her mouth than she felt the sting of shame. She hadn't meant them. Not a'tall.

She wanted to go in search of him, to find him and make certain he was all right. Without stopping to think, she threw open the cabin door and stepped out into the suffocating blackness of the corridor.

The lights that normally flickered behind the glass

globes had been extinguished, leaving nothing but pitch blackness pressing in on her from all sides. Still, she knew to turn right, knew the stairs were *somewhere* in front of her.

"Oh!" Her gasp was barely audible beneath the roar of the storm all around them, as was the crunching sound of her foot slamming into the bottommost step leading preceding that gasp.

Reaching down to rub her aching foot, she leaned against the banister, curling her fingers around it and hanging on tight as the ship gave a mighty lurch. A bolt of lightning split the blackness, lighting up the corridor as if the sun had risen for a brief second, before plunging her back into darkness.

Wind tore through the corridor, and Brenna's teeth rattled at the ice woven through it. The icebergs—could they be dashed up against one of those giant ice mountains? Fear mingled with her panic, and taking a deep breath, she forced herself to go topside, into the angry elements raging all around them.

The rain was like thousands of icy-hot nails piercing her skin. Her teeth set to chattering anew as, within mere seconds, she was soaked clear through to her skin. The rain froze in her hair, stung her skin, and temporarily blinded her as she emerged from the relative dryness of the staircase.

It was as if she'd stepped into a frozen hell. The wind was even more brutal topside, tossing her frost-laden hair about her face to slap and sting her like so many tiny whips. The ice in it speared through her with each breath and the rain teemed down so hard she could barely see. It was impossible to tell which roared louder—the thunder, the wind, or the angry ocean.

She forced herself to move away from the stairs and her heart skipped a beat as she saw a monstrous, whitecapped wave rise out of the blackness. It slammed up against the side of the ship, sending tongues of stark white foam licking across the deck, which was more than a little slick as the rain froze to its surface upon contact.

Brenna knew it was beyond stupid to be topside in such weather, but she had to know Anthony was all right. She had to see him for herself even as her feet slipped and skidded beneath her as she inched towards the guarterdeck.

"Anthony!" She could barely hear her shout over the cacophony all around, and through the driving rain she could see nothing but darkness upon darkness. It was almost impossible to tell what was ship and what was space.

Gathering a handful of her crunchy, icy hair, Brenna threw it away from her face, wincing as it stung her back like a lash. Cupping her hands about her mouth, she tried to shout above the wind again. "Anthony!"

Another lightning bolt streaked across the sky. The wind seemed to grow even stronger and she lost her footing as the ship gave a mighty lurch beneath her feet.

"Ah!" She hit the slick deck with a painful *crash* and lay there for a long moment as she fought to catch her breath. Another lurch and she shrieked as she slid across the icy surface with ease.

Right towards an opening in the railing.

She scrabbled to grab hold of something, *anything*, that might stop her, but there was nothing but ice and more ice. Each time she tried to stand, her feet slipped and slid across the surface, stinging her nearly to the bone. Another gasp ripped free as the ship lurched portside once more and another wave washed over the side. This time, the frigid foam fingers stung her legs, wrapping around them like death's icy grasp, dragging her closer to the edge. The ocean seemed determined to hold her, to pull her into its deadly embrace.

"Anthony!" Her fingers caught one of the railing supports and she latched onto it, wrapping both arms around it and clinging to it as the *Pegasus* tilted even more sharply towards the water.

Her arms were numb with cold, her pelisse and chemise offering no protection from the frozen raindrops spearing through her. It was harder to hang on now, especially when another wave slapped up over her, washing completely over her, and tried to pry her from the post. Her legs dangled over the side of the ship, into empty space, and she fought like mad to tighten her hold. If she let go, there would be nothing to catch her but the angry, icy sea. ****

Tony jerked hard against the wheel, shivering beneath his oilskin as the rain drove into his face. The wind stung his cheeks, his hands practically frozen into claws from holding onto the wheel.

The storm had come out of nowhere and he was grateful for the distraction. It was an outlet for the fury still burning through him—both at Brenna for her idiocy and himself for his own. It wasn't in his nature to be so cold towards a woman, not even when she deserved it, and he was disgusted with himself for allowing that to happen with her.

The wind roared around him again, but this time he was positive he heard something else within that howl. He shook his head. My imagination's toying with me, playing tricks on me.

But still he turned, convinced he heard his name being shouted out in a lilting Irish brogue. Then he saw her, the tiny slip of a fool he'd married. Rolling his eyes, he hissed, "Jesus. I *must* be dreaming."

But he wasn't dreaming and it wasn't his imagination. His eyes had adjusted well enough to see the white pelisse and dark braid. Fear bit into him as the *Pegasus* gave a gigantic lurch and he saw his wife go sprawling across the deck's surface.

Locking the wheel in place, he fought to free himself from the harness lashing him to it. He threw off the rough ropes and skidded down to the deck, losing his footing more than once in his desperation to reach Brenna. His blood ran colder than the rain driving into his face when the ship lurched again. As it did, Brenna slid effortlessly towards the side, scrabbling in vain against the slick wood in an attempt to slow herself.

"God damn it!" he hollered as a wave smashed up into them and she disappeared. "Brenna!" He tore across the ice as fast as he could, in time to see her grab hold of the railing and wrap her arms about it. In a flash, he was on his belly, sliding towards her as they tilted once more.

"Tony!"

He jerked his head to see Jackson racing towards him. Without waiting for instruction, he also flung himself prone, grabbing hold of Tony's right leg below the knee, shouting, "What the hell are you doing?" over the wailing wind.

Tony jerked his head towards the arms wrapped about the piling—the only part of Brenna still visible as she dangled above the water. "Take a guess!"

Jackson's eyes went wide. "Jesus, what the hell is she-"

Ignoring him, Tony propelled himself across the slick deck. "Brenna!"

"Anthony?"

His relief was short-lived at the faintness of her voice. Even with the wind, she sounded as though she was very close to losing consciousness, and a fear unlike any he'd ever felt sliced through him. He lunged then, bracing his shoulder against the support, and grabbed her upper arm with both hands as she began to slip.

"Easy, love!" he hollered, trying not to notice how ghostly pale she was, how the ice coated her hair, leaving it almost pure white. "I have you, sweetheart," he called down. "Let go."

"Nay...I cannot..." Her voice was so soft he could barely hear her.

"Jackson!" Tony shouted, squinting as he turned directly into the rain.

"Right here!"

"Get the stove lit in my cabin and have Mitchell to round up as many blankets as he can find! I don't give a damn if he has to steal them from the others. Get William to bring me an oilskin and alert Thomas that his services are going to be needed."

"At once."

Tony turned back to Brenna, still dangling precariously from the piling, legs flailing limply with each rock of the ship. "Brenna, you need let go now. Worry not, love, I have you. I swear to God, I have you."

"Anthony...?" She sounded confused, sluggish, and he tried to fight down his rising panic.

"It's me, sweetheart. You needs let go so I can pull you up."

Another frigid wave slammed up into them. He gasped, instinctively gripping her tighter as he felt her slip away. The resistance of the icy water fighting to claim her was incredible and the pounding rain drove into him like thousands of frozen spears.

"I am so sleepy..."

"No!" he shouted, squeezing her arm. "Brenna, keep your eyes open and listen to me! Let go. You'll not fall. There is no way in hell I will let you! Do you understand?"

"So...cold..."

The sleeve of her pelisse was frozen stiff, crackling as he rubbed her arm with one hand. Then, after a short, silent prayer, he forced her right arm back through the piling. She dangled by only her left arm, upon which he had a one-handed death grip. It became a two-handed grip and every muscle in his body screamed in protest when he yanked. Inch by agonizingly slow inch, he hauled her back up onto the deck.

Wrapping his arms about her, he skidded back until they were far enough from the edge for him to breathe easily. Jackson returned then, along with Thomas, the ship's surgeon, and William, who carried an armful of oilskins.

Tony shook William off as he tried to slip the skin over his head. "Give me that," he growled, snatching it from him to tug over Brenna.

Jackson caught him under the arm easily, helping him to his feet, hollering, "We needs get her below!" over the wind.

Tony gave him a sharp look, but didn't reply. He lifted Brenna in his arms, trying desperately to keep her warm against him as he slipped and slid over towards the stairs.

Thomas followed behind as Tony kicked open the door to his cabin and carried her inside. She was limp in his arms, her head lolling listlessly, her hands and feet bouncing with each step. No longer pale, she now had a frightening blue tint to her skin that sent an icicle of fear stabbing through him.

He set her on the bed, practically tearing her frozen garments from her and grabbed one of the blankets Jackson had left on the foot of the bed to wrap around her. She still didn't respond, but fell against the tick like a rag doll that had lost its stuffing.

"Open your eyes, lady," he growled, tugging off his

own oilskin and sinking back down beside her to scoop her into his arms. "Brenna, damn it, open your eyes."

Her lashes didn't so much as flutter. She lay unresponsive.

Thomas frowned, turning to Jackson, who hovered in the doorway. "Bring me Captain Radcliffe's tub and begin heating water. I want it warm, not scalding."

"Aye, Thomas," Jackson replied, turning to disappear into the darkness once more.

Tony continued cradling Brenna against his chest, rubbing her hands, her arms, anything and everything he could reach. Thomas brought over a linen towel, wrapping it about her streaming hair, which dripped onto the floor as the ice melted.

"Bring her over by the stove," Thomas said. "Sit there. That's the best place right now."

Tony didn't answer, but did as he was told. He settled into the chair closest to the stove, where the heat could seep into her.

Jackson and Mitchell returned a few minutes later with the hammered brass tub Tony used for bathing. Then, all three men left the cabin to see about heating the water, leaving Tony alone with Brenna and fighting down a terror more powerful than any he'd ever known.

"What the hell were you doing, you little fool?" he growled at the still woman in his arms. "When you thaw out, lady, I promise you I will take a switch to your backside for this idiocy."

He pulled her closer still, one hand curving against her cheek. "Open your eyes, sweetheart. You are safe now. Safe and warm, in my arms."

Still no response.

"Brenna, love," he murmured, his fingers still stroking her cold cheek. "Please, sweetheart, open those beautiful eyes for me, won't you?"

With that, she stirred. Her lashes fluttered faintly against her blue-tinged cheeks. Her pale lips quivered. She began shivering, and Anthony tightened his arms about her.

"Anthony?"

Her voice quavered and sounded so terribly weak, but brought a smile to his lips all the same. "Aye, love."

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"I am so cold..."

"I know, sweetheart. But you'll not be cold much longer. Water is being heated for a bath and a warm bed awaits you."

"Thank you."

"What were you doing out in this? Have you no sense?"

She didn't answer, but sighed softly, still shivering against him as she murmured, "Tony..."

He smiled at her use of the shortened form of his name. "Aye, Bren. I have you." His voice dropped to a whisper as he leaned close to brush her cold lips with his. "I have you and you are not getting away, love. I promise you that."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Tony sighed impatiently as he paced about the cabin. "Well?"

"Patience, Captain," Thomas scolded him for the tenth time that night. "You needs let her rest, let her warm up again. The poor girl was nearly frozen clear through."

"But has she suffered any permanent injury?" he demanded, trying to keep the heat from his voice.

"I'd say not, but we'll have to see. For now, simply keep her warm."

Tony growled with disgust, dropping down into his vacated chair and leaning forward, hands dangling between his knees and head bent. It was by far the longest night he could ever remember living through.

Three hours had passed since he'd pulled Brenna from the clutches of the North Atlantic. Three hours since he'd last heard the sound of her voice. She didn't stir when he and Thomas eased her into the warm water. Nor did she stir when Tony patted her dry with soft towels and bundled her in a thick velvet dressing gown of his. Now she was tucked into bed, still frighteningly pale, her lashes and brows striking contrasts with the whiteness of her skin.

Thomas passed through twice, and each time his answer was the same. Be patient and let her rest.

Jackson was at the helm as Tony rose to drag his chair over to the bed, where he dropped into it once more. The storm continued to rage all around them, but he barely paid it any heed as he watched over Brenna.

What on earth made her come out on deck in such violent weather?

He leaned over to smooth his hand over her hair, now partially dry. His fingers brushed over her cheek, now warm, and lingered for a long moment. The thought of how close he'd come to having her snatched away sent a chill knifing through him. With that, he moved to slip beneath the blankets beside her.

She stirred then, snuggling against him just as she did most nights. He smiled then, sliding an arm beneath her to draw her closer still. Her sigh was the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard.

"Ah, you are not getting away from me so easily as that," he whispered, brushing her lips with a gentle kiss. "You are *mine*, Brenna Radcliffe. Know you this? *Mine*."

As he said the words, he realized how true they were. This woman was his and he knew there would be no others. No mistresses, no divorces - nothing would keep him away from his wife. She was bound to him forever and for the first time since their marriage had taken place, that thought did not send anger flickering through him.

He pulled her closer still, his smile growing wider as she nuzzled against him in her sleep. It felt so right, the way she melted into him, curving perfectly against the planes of his body. It brought forth a feeling he couldn't explain, but one that he knew was most pleasant.

He kissed her forehead then, whispering, "Oh, sweet, I have some making up to do to you, have I not? And believe me, you will learn then you never need fear me because I am going to love you until you go mad from it."

Leaning close, he brushed her lips with a kiss. She let out a pathetic moan, pushing him away. The back of his hand against her forehead confirmed his fears. Fever struck, a flush moving into her pale skin as she grew increasingly restless, and for the second time that night, Tony went in search of Thomas.

"Please, Da. Take me with you, won't you. May I please go with you?"

Seamus smiled down at her as he patted her head. "I think not, love. Not this day. Da has much to do."

"Momma, what has happened?"

Dara's eyes were red-rimmed and swollen. "An accident, love. Da's had a terrible accident."

Brenna's throat closed, but the tears clogging it never rose to her eyes. She stared up at her mother. "Is he never coming home, then?"

"Nay, love."

"Drink this, sweetheart."

She jerked away from the hand scraping so painfully against her cheek, at the warm dampness wafting against her skin. It hurt far too much. "Nay...do not touch me..."

Faces whirled about her, sad and tear stained, though occasional laughter floated into the air.

"Da is gone?"

"Aye, love."

She was so cold. So very cold. Despite that warmth she felt against her skin, she felt chilled right through to her bones.

"But, Momma, he is *English*!"

"I know, love. But he will care for us."

"You worthless Irish whore. No man will ever have any use for you other than in his bed."

"Why do you say such terrible things to me? I am *not* a whore! And what mean you that a man could not want me other than in his bed?"

She never saw that first blow. Bells clanged inside her skull, which lit up as bright as a sunrise.

"Nay...please, do not hit me!" She tried to shove him away, fighting against the iron-like claws gripping her to shake her until her teeth rattled in her mouth.

Charles sneering down at her as he backhanded her. "Whore! I saw you with the Fitz Hugh boy! You let him take liberties, did you not?"

"Nay. I was but saying good morning."

She hurt now. The pain went clear through to her bones. The cold was gone, replaced by a heat so fiery that she thought she must be in Hell.

Yet the hand skimming her cheek was gentle and she couldn't hold back her tears. "Please..."

A gentle, deep voice accompanied the caress. "Please what, sweet?"

"I wish not to be afraid. He is so big...so strong...he will crush me...He could, if he wished..." She shook her head, her voice breaking as she whimpered, "And he hates me...the very sight of me makes him ill..."

"Make whom ill?"

"My-my husband...Tony..."

"Oh, no, sweet." A gentle hand stroked her hair back from her forehead. "You are mistaken. Terribly so."

She shook her head, frowning at the voice. "I make him angry...so very angry...It is but dumb luck what has saved me from his temper."

"Brenna, open your eyes, sweetheart, and see there is no anger to be found."

But she screwed her eves even more tightly shut. "Please...I am so hot..."

"That's the fever, sweetheart."

"I have finally found the man fool enough to take you off my hands."

"But I do not wish to live in England."

She stiffened as the hand clamped down over her jaw. "Nay! He is going to rape me and I am powerless to stop him."

Anthony stood before her, eves dark indigo as he gazed down at her. "I want vou. mv ladv."

"Take me."

No pain behind his touch. His lips are so soft, so gentle as they move over her. She cannot help but laugh at the tickling sensations bubbling through her. Oh, how she loves the way he makes her feel. She cannot stop thinking about him.

"He makes me feel cherished...beautiful...so safe..." Sleep beckoned again, and she had no choice but obey.

Tony leaned over her, bringing the damp cloth over her burning forehead once more. "Ah, love, come back to me, won't you? That I might prove to you that you are every bit as safe as you dream."

She went still then and he sank back into his chair. He was exhausted, having been up for nearly two days as he watched over his wife. Thomas was the only other body he would allow near her. Everyone else was most brusquely ordered from his cabin, including Jackson.

Brenna rambled on through the afternoon, and much of what Tony heard filled him with rage. Without knowing it, she was telling him each and every demon plaguing her. With each confession, he grew angrier.

She must have been reliving events from early in her life forward, for now he seemed to be the center of her reminiscing. It was an education for him, learning these things about his wife.

For the better part of the afternoon, she was quiet. She tossed occasionally, kicking off the covers, but she didn't say much. As the shadows grew long against the walls, and he dozed in the chair at her bedside, she let out another moan.

"I know not what to do."

He sat upright, recalling when she'd spoken those same words the afternoon she'd come to him with her bargain. Shame flooded through him as tears slipped down over her cheeks, into her hair.

"I do so wish to have a child," she murmured brokenly, her face then lighting up. "A boy...a little boy with black hair and blue eyes...strong and handsome, as his father is...but how do I broach the subject? How do I tell him I want *him*?"

Tony smiled at the wistful tone of her voice. Had her request for a child been a mere ruse in order to keep from having to ask what she considered a scandalous question? To keep from having to ask him to take her to bed?

His smile faded as she continued with, "And now I have ruined that as well...I have never seen him so angry...How do I make it go away? How—how do I make him care? How...?"

Groaning softly at the stiffness in his back, Tony rose to his feet and shifted, sinking down on the edge of the bed. Leaning over her, he brushed her lips with his, then her cheek, and then her temple, whispering, "I am not angry, love, and you've ruined nothing. I will take great delight in making it up to you, sweetheart. In showing you what you have become to me."

She sighed softly, snuggling into him. "So warm..."

He moved once more, stretching out beside her to gather her in his arms and hold her close. "Sleep now, love. I will keep you warm. I will always keep you safe and warm."

As the sun rose on the third day, her fever broke. She cried out, her body stiffening against his. Sweat broke out over her forehead.

"Bren?"

Her eyes fluttered opened at his soft voice and she found him gazing down at her with gentle blue eyes. "Anthony? What happened?"

Tony rose from the bed to bring over the ewer of water and linen towel. He dipped the cloth into the water, and proceeded to bathe her as gently as possible. "Ah, sweetheart, you've no idea how wonderful it is to hear you make sense," he said, wiping her forehead with the lightest of caresses. "How do you feel?"

"Sleepy," she murmured, gazing up at him. "What happened?"

"You nearly found your way into the North Atlantic, sweetheart. What the devil were you thinking, coming on deck in such horrendous weather?"

Brenna winced, remembering how she slipped and slid across the deck, how the rain stung her mercilessly. Heat climbed into her cheeks as she cast her gaze at the blanket, where her fingers twisted it into a tight ball. "I was worried."

He arched one brow at her dark mutter. "Worried? About what, love? That you might live to see America?"

Her eyes snapped up to hold his. "Nay. Worried about you, you fool!"

He didn't lower that brow, but she couldn't miss the smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. "You came out into that watery hell because you were *worried* about me?"

"I thought something had happened to you." It sounded so silly, so rash now and she couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so stupid. "I awoke to find you gone and thought—mayhap—"

He let out a soft laugh, his hand curving about her cheek. "I thought you'd prefer it if I did not return that night."

Heat filled her face again as she remembered what had led up to his storming from the cabin that afternoon. "That does not mean I wish to see tragedy befall you."

Tony surprised her then, his lips coming down onto hers for a long, lingering kiss. When he pulled away it was to murmur, "I am glad to hear that."

He held her gaze for a long moment and she couldn't help but smile. "Thank you for pulling me back." "Think you I'd put up with you this long, only to lose you to a rogue wave? You've much to learn about the man you married, sweet. Much indeed."

His teasing tone surprised her, as did his gentle caress of her cheek. Then, he lifted the blankets to slip into bed beside her. "Come closer," he murmured, lifting his right arm.

She did as she was told, snuggling up against him, and sighing as his arm came down to drape around her shoulders. Up close, he looked worn out. The beginnings of a beard darkened his jaw, his clothes were beyond wrinkled, and his eyes were heavy-lidded, with dark smudges beneath them. "You look a fright, Anthony."

"Love, you would look just as frightening, were you to remain awake for nearly three days."

"You've not slept?"

"I've been far too occupied to care about sleep," he replied thickly, his eyes slowly closing.

That brought a golden ray of hope into her heart. She couldn't resist a teasing smile as she let her hand come to rest against his belly. "You were worried for *me*, then?"

He sighed deeply as her fingers skimmed over his belly. "Ah, sweet, worried is not the word I'd use. Frantic is closer to the truth."

This was a surprise, but she said nothing. Instead, she lowered her head to his shoulder and lifted her right leg to drape over his. A smile lifted the corners of his mouth again and he responded by pulling her even closer. "Lady, much as I look forward to making things up to you in the coming days, I beseech you, allow me a few hours' sleep first."

"Making things up to me?"

"Aye," he mumbled through a yawn. "You are going to regret my pulling you back on board, lady. I plan on loving you until you are begging me for mercy."

"But you said—"

He cracked one eye as she faltered. "I said what, love?"

"That we would..." Her voice trailed off for a moment and she cleared her throat. "That we would...do things...at your convenience."

He gave her a squeeze. "Mayhap I spoke too quickly.

I rather like the idea of you coming to me as well."

His voice was barely a whisper, but sent the butterflies flapping wildly through her all the same. "You wish me to...to..."

"Seduce me?" he supplied with a tired grin. "Aye. It'd be quite the change, to know you want me as badly as I seem to always want you."

She shivered at his words, but this time, it was a pleasant shiver. A smile pulled at her lips and finally, she gave into it. "Tony, you ought not say such things."

"Ah, sweet, I do like the way my name sounds rolling over your lips. Come and kiss me, won't you? I have this need to feel your soft lips against mine."

"I thought you were so tired," she couldn't help but tease, lifting herself up onto one elbow.

He opened his eyes to hold hers for a long moment, smiling as he lifted a hand to curve about her cheek. "I can spare the strength needed for a kiss."

"Ah, but wouldn't that be you making the first move?"

"Do not make me regret prodding that spirit of yours to life, woman."

She couldn't hold back her chuckle as she leaned over him to brush his lips with hers. "Spirit?"

"Aye, love. That passion which only shows itself when I undress you. I'd much rather see it all the time." He pulled her back down, his lips skimming hers with each word. "And as soon as you are feeling up to it, feel free to pounce on me whenever the mood takes you."

A delicious shudder tore up her spine and brought an airy giggle to her lips. "Anthony..."

He shook his head with mock severity. "Nay, love. Tony. Do call me Tony."

"If you will let me sleep, and do the same yourself," she replied pertly, lowering herself back down to cuddle against him, "I shall call you anything you wish."

He laughed then, squeezing her close. "Sleep, love. I think we've both earned a rest."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Brenna caught her first glimpse of America's coastline on a gray, gloomy day hinting of rain. It was nearly winter in America, and the fresh air had a hint of crispness in it as she stood on deck and watched the shoreline grow larger with each passing moment.

Ten days passed since her fever broke and they were ten of the happiest days she could recall. Since that night, when she and Tony drifted off to sleep in each other's arms, their relationship underwent a subtle change. Night after night, he returned to the cabin for supper and did not leave until the next morning. Instead, he reached for her, tugging her down onto the bed to make love to her until she was just as breathless as he'd predicted she'd be.

Nothing more was said regarding what led up to her near-plunge into the ocean, and things had been far too peaceful for her to broach it. Still, she knew she'd have to face it once more. She wished to release him from their foolish bargain.

It was something she'd been thinking about since her fever, as Anthony forced her to remain in bed for nearly a week following. It weighed heavily on her mind, that blasted bargain, and shame filled her with each thought.

She sighed softly as she stood at the railing. Her monthly time was two weeks overdue. Anthony had fulfilled his end of the agreement. She was pregnant. She should have known that a man such as Anthony Radcliffe was as virile as he looked. Though she had no way of knowing for certain, she was fairly sure she'd conceived that first night in his arms.

She kept the news to herself, though. And that was simply out of selfishness, as she no longer wished to honor up *her* end of their agreement. She wanted to keep him to herself for a while longer.

"If only I had kept my mouth shut," she murmured,

Kimberly Nee

her eyes moving over the blur of reds, greens, and browns that were slowly taking shape as land. She could make out several ships in the distance, but she could not tell if they were departing or arriving at America's shore. "He was right in that I would regret that silly bargain and I do."

She rarely covered her head when she went topside, enjoying the feel of the wind in her hair. The wind stirred, lifting the loose tendrils that had blown free from her braid. She brushed them out of her eyes as around her, the crew hurried about to complete their duties before the rains came.

With a light sigh and a heavy heart, she turned away from the rail and made her way to the stairs, where she descended into the narrow corridor. They would arrive in Brunswick's harbor within the next few hours, she guessed. She had only a few hours left before Anthony would be free to live his life as he saw fit—with her blessing of course. Somehow, she had to find some way to take back those words and set things back to the way they were before she took it upon herself to negotiate her selfish bargain.

Selfish. Her actions were exactly that. Not once did she stop to consider how her request would go over with him. Never stopped to consider that Tony was a person, with feelings as well. To have her ask nothing more of him than what was necessary to conceive a child had to be a terrible blow to his pride. In essence, she was telling him that she did not want him, but merely his seed. Were their situations reversed, she had no doubt she'd have been furious as well. And though he'd been every bit the attentive husband since her mishap, he had to still carry at least a bit of his disgust.

"And now I must find some way to undo the damage I've done. Mayhap then we might be able to build a life together," she murmured, reaching down to rub her lower belly.

It was amazing to think she carried his child. Of course, she could not be entirely certain for another few weeks, but she just knew it was true. But, until she could say without a doubt, she would keep the news to herself.

"Admit it," she said, making her way back to the

cabin and pushing open the door. "You just do not wish to share him, do not want him seeking out this Charlotte. Or any women, for that matter."

The very thought filled her with a green fury she recognized instantly. Jealousy. The thought of *her* husband in the arms of another brought a bubbling boil in her belly that made her most uncomfortable. Anthony was *her* husband and, somehow, she had to try to find a way to make him hers as completely as possible.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The rains finally hit later that afternoon. Tucked away in their cabin, Brenna restlessly paced the floorboards, pondering about what she would say to Anthony when he returned. It was, no doubt, their last night aboard the *Pegasus*, and she was ready to cry quarter, admit defeat, and try to find some way out of their cursed bargain. As she awaited his arrival, she pondered what she would say, what she would do, to make him forget about their blasted agreement. She only hoped he was agreeable.

Butterflies churned in her stomach as the cabin door scraped open and he stepped into the room. He was soaked to the skin, his hair pasted to his head, and his boots squished with each step. He squelched over to the wardrobe, sinking into one of the chairs to tug off his right boot. It put up a fight though, refusing to come off.

Brenna watched him for a moment before rising from her chair to cross to him. "Allow me to help you."

Without waiting for his answer, she gathered her skirts between her knees and crouched to tug off his boot. It resisted at first. Frowning, she tugged harder. Without warning, it popped free. Tony lunged, catching her wrist before she could topple over backwards.

"Easy, lady. There is no need to possibly injure yourself," he said, smiling as he helped her back to her feet.

"I hadn't realized how stubborn it'd be," she replied, glancing up at him.

He smiled, as if waiting for her to say more. When she didn't, he held up his left foot. "Care to try again?"

She didn't especially, but simply shrugged. "If I must." She scowled at the boot, gripping it and tugging. Once more, it refused to obey. This time, she turned to let Tony brace his stockinged foot against her backside. He

gave a gentle push, and that boot also suddenly popped free from his leg.

However, he wasn't quick enough to keep her from sprawling across the floor. He chuckled, rising and leaning over to extend his hand. "Allow me, love."

She couldn't ignore the rush of warmth shooting up her arm as his long fingers curled about hers. When she looked up to meet his eyes, she wasn't surprised to find them soft, without any ice to be found in their cobalt depths. Those butterflies returned with a fury as she took a deep breath. "Anthony, there is something I wish to discuss with you."

"And what might that be?" he asked offhandedly, padding to the wardrobe to peel off his wet shirt.

The time had come and there was no backing out. Forcing her tongue from the roof of her mouth, she blurted, "About our bargain." At his puzzled look, she calmly added, "I think I might have spoken in haste, without fully considering the consequences."

"Do you now?"

Brenna nodded, her eyes fairly riveted on his broad back as he tugged the silk from it. "I do."

He grinned at her over one shoulder, eyes fairly sparkling with mischief. "Finding that you prefer the passion of the past week over the mechanics of our one afternoon?"

Heat filled her cheeks. "You ought not say such things," she muttered, casting her eyes downward.

"Oh, no lowered eyes now, sweetheart. I find this show of spirit so much more preferable." Tony moved to stand before her, sliding his arms about her waist. "Why oughtn't I say it, love? Lord knows, I find passion so much more exciting than going by mere rote."

She lifted her eyes to his. Feeling brave, and a mite daring, she brought her hands up to rest on his bare shoulders. Heat wafted up from him to sink into her. "Do you?"

"Don't you?"

As he spoke, his hands slid lower to curve over her backside, lifting her to press against him. She bit her bottom lip, murmuring, "I believe I do."

He laughed softly, leaning close to brush his lips over

her ear. "Does this mean you wish me to make love to you the way a man should to a woman? As I have been doing since you recovered from your near-death experience? No more of this breeding nonsense?"

The butterflies increased tenfold at his breathless whisper, at the way he eased her down, sliding her teasingly over the leg he slipped between hers. Steeling herself against the rush of embarrassment she knew would surge through her, she nodded. "I do. That is...I would still like a child, but I-I..."

"Would like *me* as well?"

She couldn't help her airy giggle at his whispered question. "Aye, Captain. I suppose I would."

His eyes met hers—and she could see how they'd darkened. It was a heady feeling, knowing how he desired her so, and she wondered if he knew how his sensual eyes betrayed him. His voice was equally traitorous, thick and husky as he murmured, "Very well. Shall we start now?"

Without waiting for her to answer, he spirited her to the bed. As he pressed her back into the tick, Brenna slid her arms about his neck. She didn't care how brazen it might seem to him, it felt more than natural to her.

His lips came down to capture hers in a deep kiss, rendering an answer impossible. And that was fine with her. She did not wish to speak, she merely wished to feel, and to feel all of the tenderness she'd found in Anthony Radcliffe.

The cabin was dark, the only light coming from the stump of a candle still burning on the desk. Brenna felt very much at peace, content, even happy as she watched the long shadows dancing on the walls, her head resting on Tony's chest, his fingers lightly skimming over her hair. It was perfect. It was where she was meant to be.

"My lady, if I ask you a question, will you answer me honestly?"

She lifted her head at his whisper. "I will do my best."

"Who gave you the marks you still bear the slightest traces of on your back?"

At last, she knew she had to tell him, knew that she could tell him. "My stepfather. He was not so fond of me."

His expression darkened, his features melting into a hard scowl. "And why did you refuse to name him when I asked prior to this?"

It was something she'd often wondered herself. Only after much careful thought, was she able to say, "I-I know not, Anthony. It makes me feel ashamed, that he thought nothing of taking his fists to me when the mood struck. That I was merely an outlet for his fury. That I did nothing to defend myself from his blows. So many things, and not one anything I am proud to say."

"You realize you no longer need fear that, love," he replied, smoothing her hair away from her face. "You never need fear a man laying a hand upon you. At least, not an angry hand, that is."

She smiled at his playful tone. Yes, she knew. Oh, how very well she knew. "So I am learning."

With that he rolled atop her, pinning her beneath him. "You may speak your mind, love. No matter how cross you think it will make me. If you think I am being an ass, please, feel free to bring it to my attention."

"Oh, I could never-"

"You *could*. I might yell back, but when all is said and done, I will be pulling you into my arms to make it up to you."

Her heart suddenly felt so much lighter as she eased her arms about his waist. Feeling a bit coquettish, she cocked her head to one side to ask, "Is that so?"

His lips skimmed hers. "Absolutely. You are quite the vixen when you wish to be. I rather like the way we make up, I must admit. It's a most pleasant end to any foolish spat, don't you think?"

Brenna gasped, feeling the flush climb into her cheeks. But it was delicious flush—one she did not mind so much. "A terrible thing to say, that."

"Ah, you might think so, love. Most men however, would be quite quick to disagree with you."

"They would?"

"Aye. There is nothing quite so like a warm woman who gives in to her sensual side, who sees making love as enjoyable rather than as a duty to be suffered through. And sweet, you *do* know how to give in to your sensual side. I am a fortunate man in that." The flush grew hotter as his voice dropped to a low growl, his eyes never leaving hers. A strange feeling fluttered through her as he caressed her cheek with tender fingertips. His eyes were soft as they held hers.

She pressed her lips together as she reflected on all that had happened since he and Jackson appeared in her chambers. Back then, she couldn't begin to imagine what her future held, how things would have ended. After all, hers was not the only life disrupted. "I am sorry," she finally whispered, unable to think of anything more proper.

"And for what do you apologize this time?"

"The entire situation."

He brought both hands up to smooth over her cheeks. "You have naught to apologize for, sweetheart," he whispered, his lips barely brushing hers. "It wasn't your doing."

"Still..."

He cut her off with a lingering kiss. "There is no *still*, love. True, I did not expect to return to America with a wife. But, even as my hand was forced the way it was, I find I mind it not so much now."

It was said so softly that she almost did not hear him, and before she could question him, he was kissing her once more, with a fervency that snatched all words from her lips.

He broke his kiss long enough to whisper, "And there will be no mistresses, Madam Radcliffe. I care not how strongly you insist upon it."

"I beg your pardon?"

"That foolishness you brought to me about keeping my mistress, of seeking her instead of you. Banish that thought from your mind, sweetheart."

"But, I thought you said a woman awaited your return?"

"She did. And she is going to be in for quite the surprise when I introduce her to my lovely new wife."

Brenna couldn't contain her silly smile. "Is that so?"

His lips brushed hers. "It is." His eyes caught hers and held them fast. "So, shall we continue with our quest to beget a family?"

"Is that what you wish?" Her voice was velvety-soft

as she held her breath, waiting for his answer.

"Certainly, sweet. I happen to be most fond of children, you know. I should certainly like to have a few of my own."

This was a surprise. "You would?"

"At least a dozen." He couldn't help laughing at her horrified expression. "I am but teasing you, sweetheart. Let's simply take it one at a time and see how that works, shall we?"

He didn't wait for her to answer before seizing her lips with his. Her heart soared with a joy she hadn't felt in years as she wrapped her arms about her husband and pulled him as close as she possibly could.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The sun shone brightly overhead the next morning as Anthony offered Brenna his arm. "Shall we, my lady?"

She swallowed her rising nervousness, her eyes scanning the crowds swelling along the docks of Brunswick's harbor. It was teeming with life, each slip occupied by a ship swarming with men and much to her surprise, quite a few women as well. The air was heavy with cold and held the hint of possible snow. The tang of the salt water filled her nose as she turned to him. "I suppose we should."

He gave her arm a squeeze. "Try not to look as though I am escorting you to your execution, sweetheart. This is your home now."

"I know this," she whispered, wincing at how weak her voice sounded. "I apologize-"

"There is no need, Brenna. I must try to remember this is as foreign to you as Ireland was to me." He patted her gloved hand, guiding her towards the gangplank. "I think you will be happy here, though. You need only give it time."

She nodded absently, her eyes flicking from one side of the harbor to the other. Across from the slip where the *Pegasus* was berthed, she could see a large, weathered gray building with a swan painted on its side. Gold letters in an arc above the swan read *Cygnet Shipping*.

It was more than a mite impressive, seeing the building housing her husband's business. Apparently Cygnet was quite successful, for the men immediately set to work unloading the cargo, while more men emerged from the warehouse.

A tall man with dark red hair came up to them. "Captain Radcliffe! Welcome home."

Tony smiled, nodding at him. "It's good to be home, Devlin. It seems ages have passed since I last saw you." Devlin's green eyes glittered merrily. "That it does. I trust everything went well?"

"It did. Jackson and Stamper are in the hold now, securing the crates to be brought up."

"Wonderful. I will see that they are routed to their proper ships as well, Captain." Devlin smiled, his eyes flicking to Brenna and his smile fading a tad as confusion wrinkled his forehead.

Her cheeks grew warm, but she held Devlin's puzzled look, waiting to see if Anthony would introduce her. After a long, uncomfortable moment, Anthony glanced down at her and cleared his throat. "Ah, yes, I suppose I ought to make introductions, oughtn't I?"

She lifted her eyes up to him. "It would be nice, Anthony."

He didn't miss the slight scolding tone to her voice, as indicated by the sheepish smile tugging at his lips. "Allow me to rectify that at once." He gave her a quick wink and turned to Devlin, he said, "Brenna, this is Devlin MacGregor. He oversees the office when Jackson and I are both at sea. Devlin, this is Brenna Radcliffe. My wife."

Devlin's sandy brows jumped almost into his hairline. "Your wife?"

"Aye."

"Then I suppose congratulations are in order," Devlin said, flashing Brenna a wide smile. "A pleasure to meet you, Madam Radcliffe. A pleasure indeed." He caught her fingers in his, lifting her hand to brush his lips over its back.

She gave Anthony a quick smile as she said, "A pleasure to make your acquaintance as well, Mr. MacGregor."

He straightened up, turning back to Anthony. "And congratulations to you, of course. She is a most winning creature."

Anthony's smile was quite tender as he glanced down at her. "Aye. That she is."

Brenna felt an urge to sigh with happiness. His eyes were a soft cerulean as they came to rest upon her, and she knew she wasn't imagining the tenderness she saw in their depths. It was a look she'd become quite accustomed to, for she saw that same look often since her fever broke. Especially since her confession that she missed him.

He gently squeezed her arm. "I suppose we ought to think about finding our way out to River Oaks, sweet. Maddie is going to go wild when I present you to her."

"Maddie?" This was an unfamiliar name.

"You will see." Anthony turned back to Devlin. "I expect to be back at my desk within a few days. I trust you can hold down the fort until then?"

Devlin nodded, his eyes still lingering on Brenna. "Of course."

Anthony scowled, almost pulling Brenna behind him as he suddenly shifted to put himself between them. "If you will excuse us, then. It was a long voyage and I suspect my wife is most exhausted from it."

That seemed to snap Devlin from his reverie. His back straightened as he nodded. "Ah, yes. Of course."

Without bidding him farewell, Anthony gave a slight tug on Brenna's arm. The tenderness was nowhere to be found as thunderclouds now brewed in his eyes, darkening them to indigo. Also noticeable was the tightness in his jaw, though she didn't understand what he could be angry about.

She had no choice but to follow as he strode through the crowds to the walkway along the wide main street. Shops lined either side, and was as crowded as the harbor. Despite the chilled, smoky November air, people hurried about. They ducked in and out of the shops, stopped to chat and catch up on gossip, leapt aside as horses and carriages clopped by. It was very much like Dublin, only on a smaller scale. So much in fact, that Brenna felt a pang of homesickness. Only the voices were different. These Americans, with their softly flowing speech, sounded so foreign to her ears that it brought her back to earth with a dull *thud*.

Anthony didn't seem to notice the sudden tears clouding her eyes as he led her down the walkway to hail a hack. Before she had time to dwell on her homesickness, he secured a hack to bring them out to River Oaks and bundled her into it.

The coach was spartan but comfortable, with just enough room for Anthony to stretch out his long legs. She was simply grateful to be out of the sharp, wintry air. Her hands, gloved and tucked into her fox muff, were toasty, but her cheeks and nose felt almost frozen.

He smiled down at her, reaching out to touch the tip of her nose. "You almost glow, sweet."

"I had no idea America would be so cold," she murmured, scrunching closer to him for warmth.

He laughed, sliding an arm about her shoulders to draw her nearer. "Come cuddle against me, then. I shall do my best to keep the chill off you."

As she melted up against him, she resisted the urge to sigh. It was something she could become most spoiled by, the feel of her husband's solid warmth against her. She rested her head against his arm, her eyes meeting his. "Anthony?"

"Yes, sweet?"

"Was something troubling you at the docks? It seemed as though you were upset about something."

He grinned. "I thought I hid it rather well, actually."

"Hid what?"

"My distaste for the way you seem to attract attention."

She wondered if she'd been mistaken then, in thinking his anger directed at Devlin MacGregor. Mayhap he was angry with *her*, instead, for drawing attention to herself.

Her fingers, buried in the muff, linked as she dropped her eyes to her lap. "I apologize then, for making a spectacle of myself."

"A what?"

"A spectacle."

"And how, pray tell, did you do that?" He caught her beneath the chin with his forefinger, turning her face to his. "My lady, it isn't something *you* did. I suppose it is something I needs become used to, the way other men might look at you. I suppose that's what happens when a man marries a beautiful woman. Other men tend to gaze upon her with less than pure thoughts in mind. And those thoughts are not always so easily hidden."

Hearing him call her beautiful sent a rush of pleasure streaking through her and she couldn't stop the grin pulling at her lips. "Think me beautiful, do you?" she asked playfully. He groaned, rolling his eyes. "And now I've created a monster," he sighed, his smile keeping her from mistaking that he was serious.

"Oh, you'll not get off the hook so easily, Mr. Radcliffe," she murmured, unable to resist a whit of teasing.

With that, he shifted on the seat, turning to face her and capturing her face in his hands. "My lady, you are truly one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen. Why is it you seem to have such trouble believing that?"

"Because no one has ever said such a thing to me ere this," she replied softly, holding his gaze steadily. "I've been called many things before. Beautiful was never one of them."

"It should top the list," he growled, his eyes darkening to indigo once more. "And when I return to Ireland, I will personally deal with the worm you called Father."

"Return to Ireland?" she whispered, trying to ignore the flutter at the seriousness of his voice. "You are returning, then?"

"One day, I expect to. But we will not speak of that now, lady. For now, I simply wish to kiss you."

Another flutter in her belly as he leaned into her, his lips coming down to caress hers. She loved the feel of his kisses, loved the gentle stroke of his lips against hers. In fact, his kiss did more to warm her than all of the fox muffs on the earth could ever.

Anthony tightened his arm around Brenna as she dozed against him for the remainder of the journey towards River Oaks. She'd drifted off to sleep against him, her head tucked beneath his chin, and he was unwilling to let her leave his embrace.

He absently smoothed a wayward auburn curl from her face, smiling as she sighed in her sleep and snuggled closer still. She felt so warm, so soft, against him, and he found it quite difficult to hold onto his anger. In fact, it was most difficult to even remember *why* he should be angry in the first place.

Oh, he remembered why he *ought* to be angry. How could he forget? Still, it no longer troubled him, the

thought of Brenna as his wife. That became apparent when she'd brought that foolish bargain to him. His pride took a blow, to be sure, and he knew he'd driven his point home, which caused him no little guilt. He'd let his temper get the best of him, and felt more than a hint of shame over the fact that he'd taken his anger out on her.

Now he wanted to make it up to her. She seemed to have finally overcome her fear of him, as he'd done all he could to make her feel as adored and cherished as she had spoken in her dream, and he found he much preferred the warm, willing woman he held in his arms now.

She sighed again and he gave her another squeeze. She had not again brought up that bargain, save for the night she'd come to him to ask that she be released from it. Now, she sought him out because she wanted him, not for what he could give her.

He smiled then. It was a nice feeling, to know a woman wanted nothing more from him than himself. Even Charlotte had ulterior motives. She eyed River Oaks as if it was already her domain, greed shining in those green depths as she surveyed the wealth surrounding her, of the many servants she would have at her disposal.

But Brenna cared naught for such things. It mattered not to her how many maids she had underfoot, hadn't she already told him as much? She'd been born into a loving home, but not one of great wealth. Her time spent at Hillcrest had been wealthy in material goods, but she'd lived in fear and pain. There would be none of that now. Now, she would be happy and comfortable. Tony knew he would do whatever necessary to see that to fruition. He wanted to make her forget she'd ever been so unhappy.

These thoughts surprised him to be sure, but they were his true intentions where Brenna was concerned. He'd had a great scare, thinking he might lose her, and he was damn certain he never wanted to feel *that* way again.

He turned to gaze out the window as they rocked up the long, arcing drive towards River Oaks' main house. In the distance, he could see the dark red brick emerging as they crested the hill.

He felt that familiar sense of pride as his eyes scanned the house his father had built so many years earlier. It was three stories high, with two separate wings. Elegant balls were held in the ballroom running along the back of the house, and Tony had the faintest memories of being a child and staring with no little awe at the glorious costumes of the men and women in attendance.

The ballroom was rarely used now as River Oaks was a bachelor's residence these days. A very elegant bachelor's residence, true, but one all the same. Although he had the feeling that was about to change. As the mistress of River Oaks, Brenna would no doubt, wish to entertain. Once she caught a glimpse of that ballroom, he knew she would be fairly itching to host a ball of some sorts.

She stirred then as the carriage creaked to a halt. Lifting heavy-lidded eyes to him, she murmured, "Have we arrived?"

"We have, sweet," he replied, sweeping the delicate lace curtain away from the coach window. "Welcome home, Madam Radcliffe."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Her eyes went wide as they fell upon her new home. It was by far the most beautiful house she'd ever seen, and a grin tugged at her lips as she thought about Hillcrest. Charles would be pea-green with envy at the very sight of this grand house. Pea-green, indeed.

Anthony alit from the coach, turning to help her down and saying, "Think you that you will find happiness here?"

Slipping her arm through his, she gave it a gentle squeeze. "I think it will suffice."

He smiled, reaching down to cover her hand with his. "I admit, it isn't as cozy as the one you left in Ireland, but at least no strange men will be attacking you in your bedchambers."

She gave him a sharp look before realizing his eyes glinted with mischief. Then, she chuckled, "I expect I shall have to leave a trail of breadcrumbs behind until I become accustomed to the layout. Tell me, have you lost many people inside?"

"Mayhap one, possibly two. I try not to dwell on it, figuring they will turn up eventually."

"Only one or two? I am impressed."

He gave a gentle tug on her arm. "Come then, and watch the looks of utter shock when I introduce my staff to my wife."

Her stomach gave a nervous flutter. What would these people think of her? How would they react to suddenly having a mistress when they'd never had one before?

Her mouth went dry. What if they despised her on first sight?

The portico was most impressive, flanked by massive white marble ionic columns—two in front and two behind them—leading to a mahogany front door. Anthony led her up the front steps. Her boot heels clacked loudly against the cold white marble as she reluctantly trailed behind him.

Butterflies flittered madly in her belly as he gave her a devilish smile over one shoulder and reached for the door handle. "Prepare yourself, my lady. You are about to be pounced upon."

She couldn't hold back her frown as he pushed open the door and stepped into the shadows of the entrance. Pounced upon? Did he have servants or savages toiling for him?

The first thing she noticed was the welcoming warmth. It was a wonderful change from the chilly air outside, and she eased her hands free of the muff as Anthony closed the door behind them. The thud echoed throughout the house and a moment later, a woman appeared, scurrying down a long narrow hallway in their direction.

"Mister Anthony! Lord, do my eyes deceive me or have you truly returned?"

Brenna barely heard his laughing response as she could only stare at the woman rushing towards them with outstretched arms.

She would guess the woman was only a few years older than Anthony, and very handsome with skin the color of creamy coffee, and eyes darker than any Brenna had ever seen before. She was tall and slender, almost willowy, and her hair was hidden beneath a frilly white mob cap.

Without hesitation, she grabbed Anthony in a warm embrace that left Brenna more than a bit confused. This woman was a *servant*? She had never seen a servant greet her employer with such obvious affection. For a brief moment, Brenna wondered if this was the Charlotte Anthony had told her about.

A knot kinked in her belly. Could it be possible that Anthony had taken his maid as his mistress? She would be shocked, to say the least, but she couldn't very well fault him, for the woman was a graceful, lovely creature.

Anthony gave the woman a hug and said, "Have I a surprise for you."

"Oh, Mister Anthony, I think I know without you

saying a word." The woman's dark eyes fell squarely on Brenna, her full lips lifting in a smile. "Please tell me this lovely child is here on your arm and not in your employ."

"Ah, Maddie, you've spoiled my surprise," Anthony chuckled, stepping back to ease an arm about Brenna's waist. Giving her a gentle squeeze, his eyes lingered on her for a moment before he continued, "Maddie, it is with the greatest of pleasure I introduce you to your new mistress, Brenna Radcliffe."

So *this* was Maddie. A feeling akin to relief flooded Brenna as Maddie gave her a warm, beaming smile.

"Oh, Lord, thank You!" Maddie exclaimed, throwing excited arms around Brenna. "You done see fit to make this boy come to his senses! Miss Brenna, it is a great pleasure to make your acquaintance. A great pleasure, indeed!"

Brenna stood stiffly in the maid's embrace. It wasn't altogether uncomfortable, as the scent of freshly baked bread clung to the housekeeper and hers was a warm, loving hug. It was simply that Brenna couldn't remember the last time she'd been almost smothered by another woman. Even Dara didn't hug her with such exuberance. And none of Hillcrest's maids would ever dare show affection for their employers. Needless to say, Brenna was at quite a loss as to how she should respond.

Buried in Maddie's hug, Brenna could only hear Anthony's muffled laughter, and his equally muffled, "And, as you have most likely guessed, Brenna, this is Maddie. She is the housekeeper and like a second mother. I probably should have warned that you would be suffocated with joy."

"Aye. A warning would have been appreciated." Brenna fought the urge to tug free from Maddie's embrace, as the housekeeper was almost crushing the air from her. Still she managed a hoarsely whispered, "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance as well, Maddie. Please, do not squeeze so tight. It's too hard to breathe."

Maddie immediately released her. Smoothing the wrinkles from her mistress's gown, she rambled on with, "Oh, I do apologize, Miss Brenna. Lord, but you are a tiny little thing, ain't you?" She cast teasing eyes and a toothsome grin at Anthony. "It's a wonder you've not yet smashed her flat, Mister Anthony."

The housekeeper's words shocked Brenna silent as heat filled her cheeks. Glancing up at Anthony, it was to find him still grinning, the devilish glint in his eyes brighter still. It was a grin that never failed to make her belly flutter and her breath that much more difficult to catch.

But instead of taking the housekeeper to task for her cheek, he only shook his head, saying, "I am well aware of my wife's delicate stature, Maddie. You've nothing to fear."

Maddie grinned madly, clicking her tongue against her teeth as she said, "I just do not believe it, Mister Anthony. You finally done and got married. Oh, I can hardly wait to tell the others. Ain't no one going to believe me until they see this lovely child for themselves."

Anthony gave Brenna another squeeze. "I do like to keep you on your toes."

"And that is something you do with utter success, Mister Anthony." Maddie moved away from them, crossing to the narrow flight of stairs directly across from the front door.

Brenna couldn't keep from wincing as the housekeeper bellowed, "Mary! Louise! Albert! Come down here at once!"

As the house echoed with Maddie's shout, Brenna turned to Anthony, murmuring, "Is she always quite as how shall I say it?—boisterous?"

He chuckled at that. "Ah, love, you grow accustomed to it after a while. Her maternal instinct is strong and each one of us becomes hers eventually." He gave his housekeeper a warm look. "And you will grow to love her as well."

"Has she been here long, then?"

He shook his head. "Not quite two years. It does not take her long to win over a body."

She nodded as three more people appeared at the top of the stairs. Like the housekeeper, each one had dark skin and even darker eyes. Unlike Maddie though, they were not nearly as informal as they silently filed down the steps and stood before Anthony.

"Welcome home, Mister Anthony," the lone man in

the cluster said, nodding his head. "Madam."

Maddie chortled as she shook her head. "You address her properly, Albert. This here's Miss Brenna. Mistress of River Oaks."

The girl to Albert's right was a tiny slip of a thing, her dark eyes luminous in her face as she smiled. "A new mistress?"

"That she is, Louise." Maddie turned her gleaming eyes to Brenna. "Miss Brenna, this here's Louise. She is to be your maid. Try not to let that skinny little thing fool you. She's quite skilled at being a lady's maid, even though we've had no call for one until now." She laughed and shook her head. "Oh, it's so wonderful to finally put her to use. So wonderful, indeed."

Louise smiled up at Brenna, her back straight and her eyes slightly downcast as she said, "An honor to meet you, Miss Brenna."

Louise's voice was soft and melodic and Brenna couldn't help but say, "Please, it's quite all right to meet my eyes, Miss Louise."

"Ain't no 'miss', Miss Brenna," Louise corrected. "Just Louise is fine."

Brenna felt the heat creep into her cheeks once more. Anthony cleared his throat, saying, "And this is Mary, as you've most likely surmised. She will also assist you as needed." Turning to Maddie, he said, "And where are the others?"

"Lord only knows, Mister Anthony," she replied with a wave of her hand. "George is most likely in the stables. As to the other boys? Well, that's anyone's guess."

"Please make certain to gather them that I might formally introduce them to my bride."

"Of course, Mister Anthony." Maddie's smile grew wider as her eyes fell on Brenna once more. "Oh, it is a happy day in this house! A happy day, indeed."

With that, Brenna felt her apprehension evaporate. She'd been terrified that the servants would resent her for her intrusion. But, seeing Maddie's joyous reaction put her mind at ease at once.

Maddie clapped her hands together sharply. "What're you standing there for, Albert?" she demanded, her eyes narrowing. "Go find Tommy and Jacob and get to work bringing in Mister Anthony's and Miss Brenna's things now."

Albert gave a quick nod. "Of course, Maddie." He ducked his head as he stepped around Brenna to go out through the front door.

Anthony sighed softly. "Now, if you will excuse us, I wish to show Miss Brenna to our chambers and get her settled in."

Maddie nodded. "Of course, Mister Anthony. Tell me, will Mister Jackson be joining you for supper?"

"Not this evening, Maddie," he said, shaking his head as he guided Brenna to the foot of the stairs.

"Very well, then." Maddie turned to the younger girls. "Get to work then, and make certain you show Miss Brenna where things are around here."

"That won't be necessary, Maddie," Anthony broke in. "I will show her around once we've had a chance to rest."

"If you say so, Mister Anthony."

"I do."

With that, he gave Brenna a gentle nudge. She let him guide her up the stairs to the second floor. From there, he steered her to the right, down the narrow corridor to the last chamber on the right, at the front of the house.

"This is our chamber, sweet," he said, leading her inside and closing the door behind them.

She smiled. It was a lovely room, if a bit masculine for her tastes. The furniture was heavy—big, dark pieces carved of fine oak—and standard. There was a wardrobe, two chests, washstand, shelves lined with books, a small table and chairs in the far corner, the table's surface littered with paper and discarded quills haphazardly lying atop one another.

Her eyes went to the bed, for it was the largest bed she'd ever seen, piled high with thick pillows and covered with a royal blue quilt that matched the hangings perfectly.

Beneath her feet, the carpet was an elegant Persian in a royal blue and gold pattern, with hints of silver threaded through it. The walls were also blue, but a much paler shade, and covered with fine silk. Various paintings and portraits dotted the walls—mostly seascapes, but one forest painting caught her attention. It was eerily beautiful, giving her a sense of foreboding as she gazed up at it.

The hearth was dark, the marble sparkling clean. Gathered on the mantle above the fireplace was a collection of miniature portraits of various people.

Slipping her arm free from his, she crossed to the fireplace to take a closer look. There were four miniatures, three of men and one of a woman. Without thinking, she reached for the one of the woman and brought it down.

She was striking, with deep sapphire blue eyes and golden-blonde hair drawn up into an elaborate coiffure. Her features were nearly perfect, sharply defined cheekbones, a slim, patrician nose, all bespoke of upper class breeding. Brenna ran her fingertips over the oak frame, glancing up at Anthony. "Who is she?"

He smiled. "My mother, Sarah."

"I thought as much," she murmured, looking back down to take in the woman's beautiful eyes. "You have her eyes."

"I know." He moved to stand beside her, taking the portrait from her. "I've been told that by all who knew her. I have only the faintest memory of her, as she died when I was a child." His words were soft, tinged with sadness as he placed the portrait back on the mantel and reached for one of the men's portraits. Holding it for her to see, he explained, "My father, Joseph."

Looking down at Joseph Radcliffe was almost the same as looking at Anthony, only Joseph's eyes were not nearly as deep a blue. Rather they were a pale, crystalline blue. But the features were most definitely the same.

"You have your mother's eyes, but you are most definitely your father's son."

"Aye. All three of us greatly resembled him."

"These your brothers, then?"

"They are." He pointed to the portrait farthest to the right. "My eldest brother, Richard. The one next to him is the middle son, Jason."

She smiled at the two handsome men in the small oak frames. Richard was blonde, but Jason could pass for Anthony's twin. "You are all quite striking." "I am the only one left."

She turned to see his eyes darken slightly. "What happened?" she murmured.

"Both died in the war. Richard at Monmouth and Jason at Charleston."

Her heart ached at the sadness she saw in his eyes as he gazed at the portraits. She had never had a brother, nor a sister, but could not imagine losing one if she had. "I am sorry, Anthony."

"Sorry? You had nothing to do with it, love. That's what happens when two armies try to blow one another to hell. I was fortunate. I came home."

"And you served in this war?"

He nodded slowly, knowing that she most likely had no idea what war he meant. "I did. I was a captain under General Washington when the war first broke out."

"Your king?"

He gave her a smile. "President, love. We have no king."

Feeling more than a little foolish, she cast her eyes to the floor. "Of course."

"Now, do not start. I do not expect you to be wellversed in our history, short though it may be."

"And you knew the man who is now your president?"

"In a manner of speaking. As I said, I served as a captain in the army."

"For how long?"

"Three years. I stayed when many opted to return home when their time was up."

"Why?"

"Why, indeed. Because I believed in the cause, I suppose. Mayhap because I was young and foolish. Mayhap it was because I had two older brothers I worshipped scattered around the country fighting for the same ideals. I cannot answer."

As he spoke, he moved to sink down onto the edge of the bed. "Many thought me mad for staying."

"I think it brave."

"Think so, do you?" he asked softly, lifting his eyes to hers. "There is nothing brave in death, lady."

"Mayhap not, lest it was something you believed in. If you were to ask me, I would say it's quite courageous to give one's life for what he believes." She approached him carefully, gathering her skirts as she crouched before him. "Whether you agree or not, I'll not change my mind any time soon."

He smiled then, reaching out to curve his hand against her cheek. "I suppose that's something."

"Tell me, why is it only now that I'm learning I am married to a soldier?"

"It was another life ago, love. I am no more a soldier than you are now. And as for why, it isn't something I care to think about, much less dwell upon. It isn't what writers and poets would have you believe, Brenna. It isn't romance and glory, but brutal, bloody, and as horrific as anything I can think of."

"Very well, I'll not make mention of it again."

He shook his head at the contrition she couldn't keep from her words. "Love, you may mention it whenever you wish. I just do not feel the need to regale, or bore, a body with tales of imagined heroics. We weren't trying to be heroic. We were trying to live to see the next sunrise, and the one after that."

As he spoke, a hardness crept into his eyes, one she'd never seen before. Her heart ached for him, for the terrible memories he must have carried, for the loss of his brothers, for a mother he couldn't remember, and a father who'd been gone less than two years. It seemed a lonely burden to her, to be the sole remaining member of a family.

She thought of the child she carried, and had to hold back her smile. There would be another Radcliffe in the world very soon and though she had yet to tell him of her condition, she had every feeling that her news would assuage some of that grief he carried within him.

She knew she had to tell him and soon, lest he figure it out on his own, but she was at a loss as to *how* to tell him. She didn't fear his reaction, for she quite believed him to be sincere when he assured her he adored children. But still, it seemed so monumental to simply blurt out.

Time would run out though. Though she suffered no ill effects of pregnancy, save for a mild queasiness that passed once she ate, she knew she'd begun to round off a bit. Her chemises seemed a mite snugger across the bosom and she'd noticed a new rounding of her belly. It wouldn't be long before Anthony became suspicious of the changes taking place and she wanted to tell him before that happened.

She opened her mouth to do just that when there came a tap at the door. "Mister Anthony?"

Anthony turned his attention to the door. "What is it, Maddie?"

Maddie sounded more than a little annoyed as she said, "You've a visitor."

"Who might that be?"

Maddie snorted, much to Brenna's surprise. Then, Brenna felt her blood run icy in her veins as the housekeeper answered with a derisive, "Miss Charlotte."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"Bloody hell..." Anthony groaned softly, dragging his fingers through his hair. He'd been dreading this moment, knowing Charlotte would make her appearance as soon as she learned he'd returned. He'd been hoping it'd take several days before word reached her ears.

Apparently he was wrong.

He didn't miss the way Brenna's back stiffened, or the way she set her jaw. Her eyes were blue now, touched with only the faintest hint of green, telling him she was none too happy to hear of Charlotte's arrival.

He almost smiled. Was it possible that his wife was jealous, though he'd promised her to give up his mistress? And it was a promise he fully intended to keep.

Somehow, Charlotte no longer fascinated him in the manner that she once had. The thought of her no longer fired his blood or sent illicit thoughts streaking through his head. Instead, he was filled with a sense of annoyance, as though she were a pesky fly that would not leave him alone.

Rising to his feet, he took Brenna by the hand, drawing her up as well. "I suppose I ought to go break the news to her, don't you think?"

"Break the news?"

"That I've married."

She bit down on her bottom lip. "So then you are going to give her up?"

He reached for the doorknob, peering at her over one shoulder as he said, "I told you I would, did I not? I fully intend to keep my word, sweet." He gave her a wicked grin. "Besides, you are far more fascinating to me."

He didn't miss her satisfied smile as she stepped up alongside him, slipping her arm through his. That smile quickly faded though, and he knew he wasn't imagining the new determination in her set jaw, or how serious her eyes had become. She was no longer that meek little miss, and he felt no little pride as they made their way below, where Charlotte and an inevitable confrontation awaited them.

Charlotte Madison glared at Maddie through slitted eyes. "And what is taking him so long?"

Maddie shrugged, giving her a smug smile. "I couldn't tell you, Miss Charlotte."

Charlotte dismissed the housekeeper with an impatient wave. "Begone with you, then. I'll simply wait."

Maddie left the room without a word and Charlotte began pacing the spacious parlor, smiling as she thought about the changes she would make when she became mistress of River Oaks.

"And one of the first things I will do is fire that awful housekeeper," she murmured, moving to the bookshelves lining the back wall. She hated Maddie, hated the way the woman seemed to think she was family instead of a servant, hated how fond Anthony seemed to be of her. It drove Charlotte mad, the way he treated Maddie. One of the first things she would have to do would be to teach him the proper way one treats servants.

The parlor was cozy, but most assuredly needed a feminine hand. There had been no lady of the house since Miss Sarah's death when Anthony was seven, and it showed. She would change all of that and take great pleasure in doing so.

It was a masculine room, as were most of the rooms in the house. She envisioned replacing the damask sofa with elegant brocaded pieces, of taking down the massive, positively ancient portrait of Joseph and Sarah Radcliffe to replace it with one of her and Anthony.

She greatly anticipated his proposal, having been patient for several years now. More than anything, she wished to bear the Radcliffe name, to be seen on the arm of one of Brunswick's most eligible bachelors, to be known as the woman able to tame him into marriage.

Anthony was considered a prime catch amongst the female population, and she practically giggled when she thought of how crushed all those females would be once their betrothal was announced. Sighing impatiently, she smoothed a faint wrinkle from the skirt of her emerald green gown. The silk gown was one of her favorites, as she thought it made her eyes seem greener still. She'd taken great pains with her appearance when she'd heard Anthony had finally returned home. Her maid, Sarah, had been in town when the *Pegasus* drew into port, and had wasted no time in hurrying home to inform her mistress.

She knew she looked her best, her hair artfully coiled about her head in an elaborate coiffure, dressed in her finest gown, and looking her most beautiful. She was fairly convinced it wouldn't be long before Anthony was sinking to his knees and asking her to be his wife.

With that, the doors to the parlor slid open and he stepped into the room. She felt her blood warm as her eyes fell on him. Goodness, she'd forgotten how handsome he was, how he carried himself with such authority, commanding respect from all those around him.

He looked even more handsome than he had the last time she'd seen him. His hair was longer, falling about his shoulders in windblown waves giving him a rakish air she found utterly irresistible. She could hardly wait for that slow smile of his which always accompanied an invitation to his bed.

Then her eyes fell to the tiny slip of a girl beside him, and she smothered a groan. *Another* servant? How many wenches did the man need to serve him? That was another change she would make upon assuming rule over the house. No more young, pretty maids. She most certainly would *not* compete with a *servant* in appearance.

"Welcome home, wanderer," she purred, gracing him with what she knew was her most winning smile.

Setting her reticule on the back of the sofa, she crossed over to him to slip her arms about his neck, pressing herself firmly against him.

"I've missed you, darling," she murmured, sliding her fingers into his hair and trying to pull him down for a kiss.

Brenna watched, stomach knotting painfully at the sight of another woman's arms about her husband's neck. And Charlotte was no ordinary woman by any means. She was stunningly beautiful, with gold-streaked dark hair and brilliant piercing green eyes. Brenna felt like a child standing there as Charlotte fairly towered over her, all lithe arms and legs, and long, elegant neck.

It was more than a mite unsettling, watching this woman press herself up against him, knowing that she knew Anthony and knew him intimately. That at one time he made love to Charlotte the same way he did her. A brackish taste rose in her mouth and her left hand dropped down to surreptitiously caress her belly.

However, Anthony wasted no time in peeling Charlotte from him. "I must admit, it's quite a surprise to see you here so quickly."

"Think you I could stay away? I've not seen you in ages, Tony." Those green eyes flicked to Brenna, narrowing as she sneered, "Do you mind, child? We would like a whit of privacy."

Without waiting for Brenna to answer, Charlotte turned back to Anthony. "Honestly, Tony, one would think she would have a mite more sense than to simply stare at us with those huge eyes. Tell me, have you brought an addled girl on board now?"

His mouth tightened at that. "Charlotte, there is no need for rudeness."

"I'm being rude? I think not." She turned back to Brenna, waving an imperious hand at her. "Scat now. Make yourself scarce!"

Anger did a slow burn through Brenna's veins. "I beg your pardon?" she asked slowly, hands coming to rest on her hips. "I'll do no such thing."

"Lovely, Tony. A perfectly obedient maid you've hired then. Very well, if you won't leave, Mister Anthony and I shall." She slipped her hand beneath his arm and gave a tug on it. "Come along then, darling, won't you? We've a bit of lost time to make up for."

Anthony didn't move, except to pull free. "Ah, I think not, my lady. You see, Brenna is not a servant."

"Not a servant?" Charlotte sniffed. "I find *that* a mite difficult to believe. She is a peasant girl, obviously. Where did you find her?"

He smiled, but Brenna saw the anger now glinting in his eyes as he held Charlotte's stare easily. "I did not *find*

You Belong to Me

her, Charlotte. I *met* her and I did so in Ireland. And, as I said, she is not a servant, but in fact, my wife."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The blood drained from Charlotte's face, leaving it even paler than it had already been. Her eyes went perfectly round as she whispered, "Your *what*?"

"You heard me correctly." Anthony's eyes fell upon Brenna, no longer holding a hint of anything other than tenderness as he smiled down at her. "She is my wife."

Charlotte turned on Brenna. "You little bitch!" she snarled, taking a step towards her. "You little peasant bitch!"

Brenna felt a flash of fear at the hatred she saw in those green eyes, and instinctively took a step closer to Anthony, as Charlotte stood at least a head taller than she. She had no doubt the woman could do her serious injury and at once sought her husband for protection. He caught her hand, gently drawing her around behind him.

"That's quite enough, Charlotte. I know this is a surprise to you, but you've no need to lash out at Brenna. If you wish, you may take your anger out on me, as I am the one at fault, but I'll not tolerate one more slur against my wife."

Charlotte glared at him, her chest fairly heaving with indignation. "How could you? *How could you do this to me?*" she screeched, her face twisting into a mask of utter fury.

Anthony gave Brenna's hand a gentle squeeze, his thumb stroking along hers. "It wasn't something I planned, Charlotte. It merely happened."

"Oh...merely *happened*, did it? Why do I find *that* even harder to swallow?"

Brenna held her breath as she waited for his answer. Her heart thudded a steady, heavy beat against her ribs, wondering what he would tell his mistress in regards to how he came to be married.

"Well, believe what you will, then. I know this is

difficult for you-"

"Difficult?" Charlotte snorted, tossing her head as her hands came up to rest on her hips. "Aye, it's more than *difficult*, Anthony! I gave you three years of my life! Three years, only to be simply tossed aside and *replaced* by a simpering *peasant*!"

Brenna had quite enough of being referred to as a peasant. Swallowing her fear, she said, "A peasant, am I? Am I the one creating a scene in another's home, then? If you ask me, *that* is the true measure of a lady and that of a peasant."

Charlotte's fair skin went crimson and she sputtered with indignation. "Is that a fact? I suppose we'll simply have to see who has the last laugh. I am most certain it won't be long before he has had his fill of you, child, and comes in search of a true woman once more."

Before Brenna could reply, he held up a hand. "Enough. Charlotte, I understand you are upset, as I said, but rest assured, I'll not be wandering from my marriage bed." He cast another tender smile down at Brenna as, much to her surprise, he added, "I find it a most comfortable place to rest my head at the end of the day."

Every bit of color drained from Charlotte's face as she stared at him, her expression suggesting that she couldn't believe he would be so blunt in telling her that he'd chosen Brenna over her.

Without warning, she swung, her palm cracking solidly against his cheek. "You bastard!" she sputtered, tears now shimmering in her eyes. "The devil take you and your saucer-eyed child-bride both!"

She snatched up her reticule and stormed to the parlor door. "And if you think this over, *Madam Radcliffe*, allow me to cure you of that notion at once! I'll *not* simply be replaced, and I'll most definitely *not* be replaced by a *harpy* such as you!"

Brenna felt the blood drain from her face as Charlotte spat out the last half of her sentence and stormed from the parlor. Beside her, Anthony sighed softly as he slid an arm about her shoulders. "That was most impressive, sweet, the way you stood up to her."

She turned to face him, her gaze going immediately to the reddened patch on his cheek. Reaching up, she curved her hand over the mark, muttering, "You ought to have hit her back, then."

"I suppose it was the least I deserved," he replied, his eyes still lingering on the now-empty doorway, even as he reached up to cover her hand with his. "It wasn't the best way the situation could be handled."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You are *defending* her?" she asked, lowering her hand and taking a step away from him.

"Not defending her, Brenna. Understanding her reaction. You need remember, she fully expected to be the mistress of River Oaks."

Her stomach twisted, the brackish taste rising in her mouth once more. "And am I to apologize then? I am the one who insisted you keep her, if you will kindly remember."

"I understand that, Brenna. And I've assured you, I've no intention of climbing into any bed that you are not already lying in."

Darkness crept into his eyes—a darkness, no doubt caused by the loss of his beloved mistress. She wanted so much to believe that he would be faithful to her, wanted to believe the possibility that he might one day regard her as his wife in every way imaginable.

Her thoughts went back to the babe she carried. What would happen, once she grew round and clumsy? Would he then seek out his slender, lithesome Charlotte? Somehow, Brenna did not think that she would hesitate to welcome him back into her bed, despite her theatrics a few moments earlier.

That hurt, the pain streaking through her with such force that she very nearly winced. She did not want to share Anthony. Nay, she wanted all of him—his body, his soul, and his heart. Despite her insistence that he keep his mistress, she knew she truly felt the opposite.

She wanted him all to herself.

"I've already told you it's a situation I would understand," she replied, choosing each word with the utmost of care. "After all, she is a lady you chose. I am not."

He muttered something beneath his breath as he faced her. Then, he added, "And I've assured *you* this is a

choice *I've* made. Think you I'd agree otherwise? Think you I could be forced to surrender her if I had no intention of doing just that?" He let out a mirthless chuckle, shaking his head. "You do not know me quite so well as you seem to think, Madam Radcliffe. There is still plenty you need learn about the man you married."

She was thoroughly confused now. Why did he grow so angry each time she offered to allow him to keep his mistress? It made no sense to her. Shouldn't he be leaping for joy at being given the best of both worlds?

But angry he was. Even if his words were not so tight, his voice not that low, menacing growl, she would know he was angry by that glint in his eyes. "I realize that, Anthony. I thought I was giving you what you wanted."

"You know nothing about what I want, lady," he growled, shaking his head as he stepped away from her and moved to the table behind the pale gray damask sofa. There, on a silver tray, stood a crystal decanter half-filled with amber liquid and a scattering of crystal glasses.

She watched him pour himself a drink before saying, "No, I don't suppose I do. Mayhap that's because I do not understand why you become so angry over things I think will please you?"

Anthony didn't answer, but instead took another sip of brandy. His fingers tightened about his glass and he hurriedly set it down, as if afraid he'd shatter it otherwise. "Do not try to please me, lady. Merely be yourself in my presence."

She didn't know how to respond, and his steady stare did nothing to ease her discomfort. As was her habit, she lowered her gaze to the floor and whispered, "I am sorry."

He swore again, still under his breath, but a bit louder this time, adding, "And cease with the damned apologies already! Christ, woman, you showed no such fear in Charlotte's presence and yet once it's only you and I, you still cower before me! And you wonder why it is I seem so unhappy!"

She winced as he bit off the last portion of his statement while storming out of the parlor. The front door slammed with a bang that sent her practically jumping from her boots.

Kimberly Nee

Sinking down onto the sofa, a heavy weariness crept over her and her shoulders slumped from the weight. Her husband was the most complicated man she'd ever met and each time she thought she might make progress, his temper reared up and sent her scurrying into the nearest corner.

"You are being a ninny," she muttered, fighting back the tears now flooding her eyes. "Keep this up and you will drive him right back to that awful woman. Then, you'll only have yourself to blame."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

She was still on the sofa when Maddie poked her head into the room. "Miss Brenna?"

Brenna lifted her head to see the housekeeper standing in the doorway. Swiping at the tears still trickling over her cheeks, she cleared her throat, "Yes?"

"Everything all right?" Maddie came into the room, wiping her hands on the snowy white apron covering the front of her simple light brown wool dress.

"Everything is fine."

Maddie's eves narrowed. "You certain. child? You look a mite upset."

"I am fine, thank you."

With that, the front door closed with a bang and a moment later, Anthony stepped up behind Maddie. "Excuse us, please, Maddie," he growled, his eyes glittering darkly. "I would like a minute of privacy with mv wife.'

"Of course, Mister Anthony." Maddie bobbed her head and, with a last concerned look in Brenna's direction, took herself from the parlor.

Brenna sniffed, lifting her eyes to his. "Anthony, I—" He spoke at the same time. "Brenna, I—"

She couldn't help her chuckle. With another sniff, she said, "Please, go on."

He crossed over to her, dropping to his knees before the sofa and slipping his arms around her. "I am sorry, love. There are times when I need learn to control my temper."

His were not the words she expected to hear. "I beg your pardon?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

He reached up to cup her chin in his hand. "I said, I am sorry. For biting your head off. I spoke in haste, and with misdirected anger."

"You've no need to apologize."

"Oh, but I have." His thumb stroked over her cheek. "I've become most accustomed to looking into your eyes, love. I should hate to see them cast towards the floor once more. It's taken me nigh two months to break that habit of yours and I know not if I've the patience to do it all over again." As she smiled, he did the same, his thumb now moving lightly along her jaw. "You have a most beautiful smile, lady. Know you this?"

She felt heat creep into her cheeks. "Do tell?"

"Aye." His voice dropped to a low, husky growl as his fingers slipped around to the back of her head. "That smile brings the lustiest of thoughts to my mind."

She remembered his declaration that she ought to try switching places with him, pursuing him instead, and a sudden sense of daring reared its head. Well, he *had* told her to feel free to pounce on him, hadn't he?

With that, she eased off the sofa, winding her arms about his neck. Curving herself against him, her lips sought and found his. He folded his arms about her, crushing her close as her tongue darted out to sweep over his bottom lip.

"My lady?" he murmured, his lips pressed to hers. "What are you doing?"

"Complaining, are you? It was *your* idea, that I should pounce on you."

"Aye, I suppose it was," he chuckled, pulling her closer still. "Very well then, sweet. Pounce away."

He gathered her close, as if unwilling to break that delicious contact with her, and slowly got to his feet. She reveled in his response to pull her closer still, savored the silken feel of his tongue as it entwined with her in a slow, erotic dance that sent fire streaking through her.

She broke the kiss, doing to him as he so often did to her, her lips brushing up his cheek, out towards his temple. Catching his earlobe between gentle teeth, she laughed at his soft groan, at the sudden pressure of his arms tightening about her.

"I think it'd be best to go above as quickly as possible," she whispered, delighted to hear another groan. "Lest I make a spectacle of myself here in the parlor by tugging the clothes off of you."

"God, love...You ought not say such things and tease

me so," he sighed, heeding her request and turning to carry her towards the stairs. "Have you any idea how difficult walking is for a man in my state?"

She pulled away to catch his gaze. His eyes were smoky cobalt, dark with desire. "And what state might that be?" she asked with a teasing smile.

He grinned, giving her a squeeze. "You will know soon enough, love. Trust me, I think you'll have no complaints."

"Aye. I think you most likely right." Linking her fingers behind his nape, she murmured, "It's nice to know I am doing something right, then."

He didn't answer her, but concentrated on getting her upstairs without dropping her. That accomplished, he kicked their bedroom door shut with one foot and spirited her directly to the bed.

She pulled him down atop her, clasping the back of his head to draw him in for another fiery kiss. He flattened against her and she reveled in the solid bulk of his body flat against her.

Catching her face in his hands, he stroked her cheeks as her mouth moved against his. It was a heady feeling, the way he kissed her, nibbling at her lips, stroking her bottom lip with the tip of his tongue, nipping it with gentle teeth. When he let her, she returned the favor, and kissed him back with just as much fire, wanting to stoke his desire the same way he ignited hers.

She didn't so much kiss him, as she caressed him, tasting him. Her lips curled up in a smile at his first whispered groan. He pressed his hips into hers as their kiss deepened and she had no doubt how much he desired her.

He pulled away to whisper hotly, "Oh, love, you've no idea how much I want you."

"Oh, but you are wrong, Anthony," she breathed back, feeling her own tickle of mischief. There was no embarrassed heat, only the flames of desire fanning to life. Feeling deliciously wicked, she said, "I am no longer wearing those silly underdrawers and I can assure you, there is no doubt in my mind as to what you are feeling at this moment."

He chuckled as she said this without a whit of

hesitation. "Is that so, madam?"

"Aye."

"Mayhap I should do something to render you so senseless that you feel nothing but the same overpowering lust for me, then?"

She reached up to curve her hand against his cheek, the way he so often did to her. "I already do."

"And there is that hint of color I've come to love so much," he said, a smile pulling at his lips as he turned his head to press a kiss into her palm.

Brenna felt that kiss to the center of her soul, felt her toes curl in her boots as he turned back to regard her with eyes of the darkest sapphire she'd ever seen. His were the most beautiful eyes in the world to her and she loved them almost as much as she loved him.

That was it, she realized with a start. That was the reason for her recent joy. It wasn't that he'd freed her from their bargain, not that she no longer had to worry about Lord Halstead. It was quite simple, really.

She had fallen in love with Anthony.

It snuck up on her so stealthily, so quietly, that she hadn't seen it coming, didn't know when it happened. But now she knew that was what she felt.

"What is it, love?" he asked softly, brushing her lips with his.

She hesitated, wanting to tell him her feelings but afraid to at the same time. True, he no longer seemed so angry over their marriage, but that didn't mean he felt anything even remotely close to love for her.

"Bren?"

She smiled. No one ever called her *Bren*. Only Tony and only since she was so ill, but she loved how it sounded. Loved that it was his own special name for her.

"It's nothing, Anthony," she murmured, meeting his eyes once more.

"Am I losing my touch, then?" he asked with a playful growl, bracing himself above her. "Am I boring you? Mayhap your mind is doing a bit of wandering?"

He asked this with a smile and she couldn't help but return it, reaching up to push his black frock coat over his shoulders. "Hardly."

Shrugging free from the coat, he pressed back

against her, leaning forward to nuzzle her. His hands slid beneath her and he rolled over, bringing her atop him. At her breathless laughter, he whispered, "Ah, lady, you are the most beautiful woman I have ever had the pleasure of knowing."

Those words tingled along her spine, making her head spin with giddy joy. It was something, to think he might feel that way about her. Lifting her head to catch his gaze, she whispered, "Am I?"

His hands slid into her hair, loosening the pins and sending them scattering about them. "Aye, Madam Radcliffe," he murmured, his eyes never leaving hers. "You are beautiful and soft and wildly sensuous." He punctuated each word with a kiss, growing progressively deeper as he growled, "And you have no idea how thankful I am that you are mine, Brenna."

Her toes fairly curled at that, at the way he gathered her hair in his hands to let it spill through his fingers, how his lips scorched a path along her neck and down over her shoulder.

His hair brushed against her cheek, so soft, so silky against her skin that she couldn't resist sliding her fingers up into the thickness. Her lips moved over his ear as she murmured, "As I am ever so thankful you are mine, Tony."

His mouth moved down over her breast and she gasped as his tongue slowly teased her nipple through her chemise. The wet fabric cooled quickly, only to be heated by his mouth, sending scorching, aching pleasure through her entire body. He nipped and kissed, licked and suckled, until she thought she'd go mad from the bliss searing her. Her breast ached, her entire body ached, with need and desire and she reached for him.

He pushed her hands away, lifting his head enough to smoke a path to her other breast. Her back arched as fire speared her, her already pebbled nipple entirely too sensitive now for his wonderful teasing. As she cried out, he moved, catching the edges of her chemise with his thumbs and drawing it away from her breasts to bare them completely.

Pulling away, he rose from the bed to strip off his clothes, and then settled back down beside her. Letting

her chemise and gown flutter to the floor, he moved down to the bottom of the bed. There, he slipped off her sturdy leather boots and rolled down her delicate silk stockings. Everything hit the floor as he leaned over to let his lips caress her slender ankle.

"Mmmm..." She couldn't hold back her sigh at the feathery sweep of his lips against her, each caress sending fresh shivers, renewed desire, burning through her.

He crept upwards with agonizing slowness, making certain not one fraction of skin was left ignored. She sucked in her breath as his tongue flicked up over her calf, up along the back of her knee, up her inner thigh each time followed by the warm velvety stroke of his lips.

Heat filled her with each step, swirling and twisting through her body, making her limbs pliant and leaden at the same time. She didn't want to move, content to lie there and simply feel. It wasn't like anything she'd ever felt before, those overpowering sensations he brought roaring to life. Raw and powerful, they swept her up in a gathering storm of increasing fury and mindless desire, igniting her like a flame set to dry kindling.

His tongue teased up along the sensitive crease where her hip and thigh met, along the curve of her belly, up between her breasts, where he settled his head and gazed up at her.

"So beautiful," he murmured in a husky voice, his right hand coming up to trace the inner curve of her left breast. "You were made to be loved, Brenna."

She shuddered at that, reaching down to thread her fingers into his hair and stroke it gently. "Only by you, love," she managed to reply. "Only by you."

He smiled then, leaning to kiss the curve he'd just traced. "That, sweetheart, goes without saying."

All words were forgotten at that point as his lips closed about her nipple again, only this time without the linen barrier. Her back bowed sharply, her fingers twisting in his hair as his tongue slowly worked an intricate pattern over the hard bead, caressing her until she trembled in his arms and her breathing was harsh.

Tony moved slowly again, smoking a trail from her left breast to her right. All the while, his free hand danced lightly over her belly, delving down to slip down between her legs, where she ached the worst.

"Ah, sweetheart," he breathed, easing a finger inside her to thrust against her. "You should only know what you do to me. You need only look at me and I melt on the inside."

She shivered again. His sentiments were not what she would have ever expected to hear him utter and to do so sent a flash of fire streaking through her. He said what she could not, what she felt, but could not put into words. And as his fingers worked their magic, she almost cried out at the delicious bliss of it all. The ache grew, mushrooming until she swore she'd go up in flames if he didn't end her sweet agony soon.

She had to touch him, needed to push him down onto his back and tease him the same way he did her. She wanted to taste him from head to toe, to learn what made him sigh and shiver with pleasure.

As she tried to push him over, he caught her wrists in his free hand, whispering, "I think not, lady. You are to lie back and just let me love you breathless."

"Tony, I-"

"Breathless, sweet. Be selfish, won't you? Simply run your fingers through my hair and call out my name in that sweet voice of yours."

She did just that as he eased his fingers free, crying out and shuddering against him. He kissed her lips, then moved, creeping back down to kiss her inner thigh once more. She could feel his warm breath on her heated skin, much like a caress in itself.

Then he moved.

Oh, good heavens! Brenna went stiff at his first silken caress. There was no time to protest, no time to feel embarrassed as a wicked fire filled her. Her hands came down to clutch at his hair, twisting and holding on as bright lights flashed before her eyes and an explosion tore though her in a burst so powerful, it actually brought tears to her eyes. She shivered and sighed, wanting the pleasure to last forever, to simply sweep her away on a wave of pure nirvana.

Tony teased her until she no longer arched up to meet him, but lay trembling beneath him instead. When she sank down with a breathless sigh, he moved back up to cover her, murmuring, "Beautiful vixen."

Her legs parted of their own and he filled her with a slow ease that made her cry out again at the sweetness of it. He went still for a long moment, his lips claiming hers in a long, lingering kiss rife with hunger and filled with desire. The fire was tame now, not yet the inferno it would become once he began thrusting, and she wanted to relish this sensual calm before the storm, when they were one body, one soul, one heartbeat.

Breaking the kiss, he swept another over her lips as he murmured, "This is, mayhap, my favorite part of making love to you, Brenna."

"Kissing me?" she asked breathlessly, still feeling the delightful aftershocks of her fiery climax.

"Nay, love. When I am first inside you, when I first feel you all around me and hear your breathless sigh." He thrust then, a short stroke that made her gasp. "And this is my second favorite part." He smiled down at her.

"You are a devil," she told him, though she knew her smile betrayed her.

He reached down, catching behind her right knee to ease her leg about his hips. "And we both know you do not mean that, love."

She bit down on her bottom lip as he guided her left leg about him and then thrust deep again, feeling the motion clear through to the center of her being. "No." Her voice was airy and light, a smile playing at her lips. "I don't suppose I do."

He slid a hand beneath her hips, lifting her easily. She gasped as he surged into her, setting off a fuse of burning tingles racing through her. It took only a moment before she found her rhythm, rising to meet him.

She pulled away, wanting to explore his skin the way he'd explored her earlier. Her lips moved over his smooth shoulders, down through the crisp black hair covering his chest, tickling her nose and bringing a soft giggle to her lips.

Feeling more brazen than ever, she flicked her tongue over his nipple. He groaned, thrusting harder into her. His nipples were obviously every bit as sensitive as hers and she found that her tongue against them made him thrust harder and faster into her. "Oh, love," he whispered, his eyes holding hers. "You have learned well how to please your husband."

Her lips skimmed his chest again. "Have I, then?"

"God, yes. My innocent virgin bride is a lusty, passionate vixen at heart, much to my delight."

Her reply died on her lips as he suddenly thrust deep, sending a tremor of unbelievable pleasure sparking through her. The knot tightened where their bodies joined, the sparks smoldering into a wildfire of blazing need and heated desire. She needed him to extinguish that passionate blaze before it consumed her.

Fighting to breathe, she pulled him to her, her lips claiming his left nipple now, teasing him into a mindless frenzy. Above her, Tony groaned, thrusting with even harder, swifter strokes now.

"Brenna!" He drove into her with blinding force as she teased and tasted and wrapped herself all around him. Then it happened. She felt the first ripple, felt him shudder against her, and knew paradise was theirs for the taking. They'd found it together.

Her head fell back, her cry more a scream as she sank her fingernails into his shoulders. The knot exploded into a fireball of pure, white-hot ecstasy, pouring into her. She wrapped herself all around him, clinging to him as he drove her along the length of the bed, until she finally had to throw a hand up against the head of it to keep from going through it.

He arched into her for that final mind-blowing thrust. Her muscles locked, her body shuddering under the force of the most delicious climax she'd ever felt. Tony's back tensed into stone, and then he moaned, arching sharply into her and shivering against her as he, too, peaked. She melted into him, warm and sweet, her voice a throaty purr. "Tony...oh, Tony..."

He sank into her, trembling as he fought for breath. "Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God," he sighed with each gasp, his face buried in her neck.

Brenna nuzzled him, tears pricking her eyes as she fought off a sated drowsiness. Her nerves still fired through her, sending smaller crackles and tingles along her skin.

Folding her arms about Tony, she held him tight,

kissing the top of his head as he rested against her breast. It was so peaceful, so wonderful, that she felt she could remain there forever and be most happy doing so.

Brushing his damp hair away from his forehead, she whispered, "Tony?"

"Aye, love."

"Just making certain you are still with me."

He lifted his head to gaze up at her. "Lady, I am not going anywhere. Possibly ever."

"Is that so?"

"That, sweetheart, is a promise." He dropped back down.

She laughed at the sleepy tone of his voice. "Are you going to sleep?"

"Aye, love."

"Wouldn't you be far more comfortable up here, on the pillows?"

"Of course not. I've no complaints about my head being cradled by your soft, perfect breasts, love." He lifted his head once more to smile at her. "However, since I've the feeling that was a polite way of telling me I am smashing you flat, mayhap it'd be best for me to do just that." He shifted, coming up to stretch out beside her and gather her in his arms. "And now, I have most definitely earned a nap. As have you, love."

"Me? But I did precious little to earn a nap."

"True as that may be, you still look worn out." He reached over to trail his fingers over her cheek. "Sleep now. Maddie will be pounding on that door soon enough to call us to supper, so let's enjoy the peace whilst we can."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

It was the first Christmas Brenna could remember looking forward to since she was a child. With Maddie's help, she spent many hours decorating the main house at River Oaks with festive mistletoe and holly boughs, gold ribbons, and flickering white candles in elegant gold candelabras. When it snowed the second week in December, she couldn't help but watch in wonder as the lush green lawns of River Oaks were transformed into a beautiful wonderland of pure snow.

She begged Anthony to take a walk in it with her. He finally gave in, smiling when she appeared all bundled up in a beautiful scarlet cloak trimmed with white ermine.

"Ah, sweet, you should only see the sight my eyes behold," he told her as they strolled the grounds behind the house. "The cold agrees with you and I have never seen a woman as lovely as you." As he spoke, he drew her close and kissed her breathless as the crystalline flakes fell silently around them.

When she pulled away, a hint of the devil seized her. Easing her hands from her silver fox muff, she scooped up a handful of soft, powdery snow and pelted him with it.

"You will regret that, madam," he growled playfully, returning fire.

Brenna shrieked as snow spattered beneath her cloak, but her smile never faded. Soon, snow flew in both directions and both were almost doubled over with laughter.

The battle ended when he charged, wrapped his arms around her, and knocked her into a drift. She threw her arms about his neck, smiling up into his eyes as she said, "This is most unfair. You have a much greater advantage in your size, you know."

He returned her smile, leaning in to brush her lips with his. "And I fully intend to use that advantage whenever and wherever I can, love."

"Oh, unfair, that." She reached up to brush the snow from his dark hair. "Not to mention, quite cold for the poor soul on the bottom."

He climbed off her then, clasping her hand to draw her to her feet. "Allow me to rectify that at once then, Bren."

She stood perfectly still, enjoying the fresh, smoky crispness of the air as he brushed the snow from her and then tugged her close again. "Shall we continue our walk, madam?"

Melting against him, she slid her arms around his waist. Her hands flat against his back, she pressed him close, murmuring, "I would much rather you kiss me instead."

He did just that, folding her into his embrace as his lips came down to claim hers. When they parted, she snuggled against him, her head tucked beneath his chin. "I think I am soaked to the skin, Tony. And I do believe I am starting to freeze over."

At once, he whisked off his greatcoat, then her cloak, and draped his coat about her shoulders. Letting her cloak fall over his arm, he murmured, "Let us get you home then, love. Dry clothes await you."

She gazed up at him, the silvery-cold wind ruffling his hair into glossy black peaks, sending that wayward lock tumbling over his forehead. "Are you not cold?"

He shook his head as they made their way back to the house. "There is no need for you to be concerned, Bren. I am fine and that coat stays around you for now."

She didn't press the issue, but snuggled further into the greatcoat, although she didn't think her sudden warmth had much to do with the garment. "If you are certain?"

He gave her a squeeze. "I am."

As they neared the house, she couldn't help but smile at the festive changes she'd made for the coming holiday. She'd made it her duty to make River Oaks as beautiful as she could and she'd accomplished that with the utmost ease. The end result filled her with pride whenever she looked at the house.

Tony had certainly indulged her, smiling as she hung

mistletoe from practically every cross beam in the house, and placed a large holly wreath on the front door. He didn't argue anything, didn't try to take over, but simply let her do as she pleased, reminding her that it was as much her home as it was his.

They'd been in Brunswick almost three weeks and Brenna settled in as if she'd been born and raised there. The staff openly adored her. Especially Maddie, who seemed to think of Brenna as her own child. Brenna had won her heart completely by the end of the first week by playing matchmaker, of all things.

Anthony chuckled as he sat at his desk in the library. George had been on staff for five years now, alternating between groom and driver, and yet Anthony never knew about the secret love affair between the groom and the housekeeper. Within the first week not only had Brenna discovered it, but she insisted upon a wedding, which would take place in the new year.

Even now, he could hear her, singing softly as she bustled about the parlor. Her voice was lilting and sweet, and he found it impossible to concentrate on the ledger before him. Closing the thick, leather-bound book, he rose from his chair to go in search of her.

Sure enough, she was in the parlor, singing an Irish ballad in her lyrical native tongue. He paused in the doorway, leaning up against the doorjamb, legs crossed at the ankles and arms folded over his chest as he watched her clean the windows. No matter how many times he argued with her, she would not hesitate to assist Maddie in any way she could. Even the housekeeper had given up trying to dissuade her.

She was beautiful in her simple gray muslin gown, an apron she'd pilfered from Maddie tied about her. Her hair was drawn up, hidden beneath a lacy white mob cap—also purloined from the housekeeper. Desire rose the moment his eyes fell upon her—a desire that never seemed to leave him alone.

Silently, he crossed to her, easing his arms about her waist. He bent to press his lips against her neck, laughing softly as she started in his arms.

"Anthony! You ought not sneak up on me in such a

manner."

"Ah, love, I cannot help it," he whispered, giving her a squeeze. "You are far too tempting to leave be."

She faced him, her smiled removing all seriousness from her scolding. Her eyes glittered jade and he couldn't help but wonder why. She certainly looked like a cat who'd just feasted on a cageful of canaries. "Actually, I am glad you are here, Anthony."

He arched one brow, unable to resist teasing her. "Are there times when you are not so glad, then?"

She didn't hold back her breathless laughter, winding her arms about his neck. "Of course not. I am always happy to see you, love."

His heart skipped a beat at that. Endearments seemed to rise to her lips with the greatest of ease these days, and each one made it hard for him to catch his breath. Giving her a squeeze, he said, "So why is this time different, then?"

"There is something I needs speak with you about."

"Why, love, you look so serious. Is something troubling you?" He didn't wait for her answer, but guided her over to the sofa, drawing her down beside him.

She reached out to cover his hand with hers. "Nay. Nothing is troubling me, Anthony."

"Then what is it?"

Lifting her eyes to his, she smiled. "Remember you, when I brought that awful bargain to you?"

"Aye. The night I made you regret ever meeting me?" he asked, only half-jesting.

"I have never regretted meeting you, Anthony. Though I must admit, I *did* regret that bit of foolishness."

"It's in the past now, love, and no longer matters. But, yes, I do remember."

She took a deep breath then, giving his hand a squeeze as she whispered, "You are going to be a papa, Anthony."

Her words were so soft, he barely heard them. Then, what she said sank into his brain. Joy filled him, a fool's grin curving his lips as he murmured, "What was that you said, love?"

"I said, you are going to be a father."

The grin bloomed into a smile. "You are certain?"

"Most certain." Her hand dropped down to skim over her belly. "I've known for some time now, but wanted to be certain before I told you."

His eyes followed her hand, as if he would see for himself. There was no outward indication that she carried his child. At least, not dressed. He suddenly had the maddest urge to pull her clothes from her body and look for himself, to search for any new roundness, any fullness that might have escaped him to this point.

"Are you happy?" she murmured, her eyes tinged more blue now.

He didn't respond, but slid his arms about her and tugged her across his lap. Drawing her close for a deep, lingering kiss, he whispered, "Aye, love. This is the most joyous news I've ever received. It's just a bit hard to believe, as you show nothing yet."

"It won't be long now," she murmured.

"How long will it be?"

She smiled as his hand crept lower to curve about her belly. "I believe the middle of June."

"So soon?"

Brenna chuckled as she caressed his cheek. "You, my dear, are a most virile man. I believe it occurred that first night."

He grinned down at her, feeling no little pride at that. "Think so, do you?"

"I've no way of knowing for certain, but that's what I think."

"It matters not. What matters now is that it's my turn to pamper you, love. And the first order of duty is to forbid you washing any more windows."

"Anthony!"

He gave her a gentle squeeze. "You carry my son, love. Think you I'll not fuss over you now?"

"Fussing is fine. Keeping me off my feet is entirely different. This is new for you, but *I've* been dealing with it for nearly four months now." She gave him a look. "And how know you it's a boy? It could be a girl, you know."

He laughed at her refreshing contrariness. "I am Radcliffe, love. Radcliffe men do not sire girls the first time around. Our firstborns have always been boys."

"Is that so?"

He nodded. "Aye."

"And you'll be disappointed, should I prove you wrong?"

His grin dissolved and he shook his head. "Absolutely not, love. I would welcome a daughter just as I would a son. Never worry about that."

"That's good to know."

He kissed her then, another slow, deep, lingering kiss he was certain took her completely by surprise in its intensity. "Ah, sweetheart, I am going to drive you mad with pampering. Prepare yourself. As a first-time father, it's my right."

She rolled her eyes. "You *are* going to drive me mad, won't you?"

"I'll do my best to restrain myself." He gave her another squeeze. "But you cannot hold me to it. As I said, this a first for me. But, I can promise you this—I won't become *too* overbearing."

Her sigh was wistful and hopeless at the same time. "Fair enough, I suppose."

"Now, as I said, no more washing windows for you. I think we needs find a better way for you to spend your time."

She let out a playful shriek as he pinned her beneath him and whispered, "And this feels just about perfect, love."

That night, as she readied for sleep, Anthony sat perched on the edge of the bed, watching as she undressed down to her chemise.

She caught him staring and knew her cheeks had to be crimson by how hot they felt. "Is something the matter?"

"Come here."

She swallowed at the gruffness of his voice, but did as she was told, moving to stand before him.

Without a word, he reached for the ribbon of her chemise, slipping the bow free and parting the fine linen by smoothing his hands outward over her skin. She sucked in her breath at the gentle caress. "What is it?"

His eyes moved carefully over her and she fought the urge to fidget beneath his intense stare. Then he reached

out to curve his hand against her lower belly, and murmured, "I see the changes now. You are a mite rounder."

"You thought I'd simply become plump, did you not?"

He smiled at the teasing note in her voice. "I am a blind male, love. You are beautiful to my eyes, no matter what your shape."

Her heart leaped at those words. His hand felt warm, pressed against her belly, and she reached down to thread her fingers through his hair. "You are happy, then?"

"Aye. *Happy* does not even begin to describe what I feel, sweetheart. Does not even skim the surface."

"Is that so?"

He didn't answer, but instead leaned close to press his lips to her belly. It was a soft, fluttery caress, like the wings of a butterfly against her flesh, but one that she felt clear through to the center of her being.

"Tony?" she whispered, still stroking his hair, watching how the flickering candlelight danced over the ebony strands.

Again he was silent, shifting to rest his forehead against her belly. Another kiss, and he lifted his eyes to hers once more. "Bren, there are no words to describe how I feel at the moment. None at all."

With that, he drew her down into his arms for a hungry kiss. It deepened at a slow, relaxed pace, and he lifted her easily to shift her, trapping her beneath him as he pressed her into the soft tick.

She sighed, losing herself in the wonderful feelings he brought to life within her. His skilled hands moved over her, his lips following in their path, and she gave herself up to the surrender as he made love to her more gently than he ever had before, leaving her breathless and sated in his arms.

Afterwards, she lay in his arms, fighting off that sleepiness that always seemed to follow. He held her tight, his fingers still wandering over her as he whispered, "Bren?"

She lifted her head. "Aye?"

"There is something else we need discuss."

She felt a flutter of fear wind through her belly. "What might that be?" "I will be leaving soon."

That flutter turned into a sharp icicle, slicing through her. "Leaving?"

"Aye."

She lifted her head to gaze down at him. His eyes were sapphire, glittering with a darkness that scared her further. "Why?"

"I needs return to Ireland. There is a score I must settle."

"Anthony, that's not necessary."

"Aye, but it is most necessary. I cannot forget what he did to you."

"I do not wish you to go," she whispered, sinking back down into him.

"Be that as it may, love. This is something I must do. Something I should have done ere leaving."

Brenna shook her head. "Nay. It's in the past and so should stay there." Tears pricked her eyes at the thought of his being gone for at least two, mayhap three months. "I do not wish to be left here alone."

"You are not alone, love. Maddie is here and I am certain she will take great delight in helping you make friends."

"I do not want her help." She bit her bottom lip, inching away from him. "And I do not wish to be alone when the babe comes."

"I will be back by then. Trust me, love, I'd not miss the birth of my first child for anything. I fully intend to be at your side."

"And if you aren't? What if there is a storm? Or something happens to you in Europe? What then?"

She knew he heard the panic inching into her voice. Her throat closed sharply and she blinked back tears as he tugged her to his chest. "Sweetheart, I *will* be back."

"It's silly, this need for vengeance," she told him, fighting to keep her voice even. "You going so far away to settle a score that is not even yours to begin with."

"Ah, but it is mine. It's something I should have done months ago."

"Avenging my honor, then, are you?"

She couldn't keep the bitterness from her voice and she knew he heard it as his lips twitched, almost as if he was fighting the urge to smile. That twitch stopped abruptly and his expression darkened. "Aye, love. No one harms my woman and lives to tell about it."

Her toes curled at his growled *my woman* but still, she shook her head. "It's folly, if you ask me."

"Then it's well and good that I'm not asking."

She heard the finality in his tone and knew arguing would do no good. Still, a pall settled over her as she whispered, "When are you leaving, then?"

"After the new year. And I *will* be back, sweetheart. Wild horses would not be able to keep me away, as I said."

She pressed her lips together. "Tony, please, do reconsider."

He rolled over to pin her beneath him. "I cannot, love. I was not there to keep you from harm then. But I am here now and I fully intend to make certain Charles McIntyre never forgets what happens when he dares raise a fist to my wife."

"But he'll never do so again."

"He did before and that's reason enough for me."

She rolled her eyes. "Stubborn, foolish man."

"Not quite, love," he told her with a smile. "Not quite. Now, we'll speak no more of it. My decision has been made and I leave in nine days. That leaves me eight nights to love you breathless and that is exactly what I shall do. It will seem a lifetime before I am in your arms again and I will need the memories of your warmth and sweetness to carry me through that time." He brushed her lips with the softest of kisses. "Now, do be quiet and let me love you breathless, Bren."

Anthony didn't wait for her answer, but instead seized her lips in a fierce kiss to smother any forthcoming protests.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Anthony's decision to sail for Ireland cast a shadow over Brenna's Christmas joy, though she tried to push it from her mind as Maddie chaperoned her on a trip into Brunswick. It was only her second venture into town and she was more than a little apprehensive. Maddie sat beside her in the carriage, all motherly concern as she patted Brenna's hand and said, "No need to look so scared, child. It's only a shopping trip."

Brenna shook her head. "Nay, it isn't that I'm afraid of town. That would be silly, don't you think?"

"Then what is it? You look powerful white, Miss Brenna."

She sighed, twisting her reticule's drawstring as she said, "I just do not wish to cross paths with Miss Madison."

Maddie snorted, squeezing her hand. "Ain't nothing for you to worry about, Miss Brenna. I'd not let that trollop anywhere near you and she'd have to go *through* me first."

Brenna was a mite surprised to hear the venom in the housekeeper's voice. "You do not care for her?"

"I never have, I never would, and I am only glad Mister Anthony come to his senses long afore he married that one." Maddie patted her hand again, her long fingers curling over Brenna's much paler ones. "You are good for Mister Anthony. For all her fancy ways, Miss Charlotte ain't nothing but trash."

"What makes you say that?"

"I've known Mister Anthony almost three years now, Miss Brenna. I know I seem loud and overbearing, but I can blend into my surroundings just as easily and make him forget I'm around. Which means I'm privy to things I most likely oughtn't be. There is joy in that house now, a joy that ain't been there in years. Mayhap not since he was a boy." Maddie turned to look at her through narrowed eyes. "He has told you about himself, ain't he?"

"Not really," Brenna said softly, sinking back against the fine midnight blue velvet-covered seat. "I only know that his two brothers died in your war, but that's all. He does not speak much of his life before meeting me."

"I know very little, but what I do know is that house was a very unhappy place for a very long time." Maddie clicked her tongue against her teeth. "Mind you, I only knew Mister Joseph the last year of his life, but he weren't a warm man. Not a kind one, neither. Mister Anthony worked himself ragged to please that man and it never seemed to do any good. Nothing pleased him. The harder Mister Anthony worked, the more grief Mister Joseph brought down onto him. Ask me, he almost sorry Mister Anthony come home from that war when his brothers didn't."

Maddie's words sent a pain streaking through Brenna's heart. She had no idea that Joseph Radcliffe was so cold a man where his only surviving son was concerned. Anthony never spoke of his father, never spoke of his childhood, or reminisced about his past and she wondered now if that was the reason why.

To think of Anthony working himself to the bone, and receiving only criticism and harping in return made her wince, made her heart ache for her husband. In the time since they'd arrived in Brunswick, she'd seen just how hard he worked. He was out of the house at dawn most mornings, and returned only after dark, and to think that his father had never shown one whit of appreciation infuriated her to no end.

"How could he not be grateful to have one son live?" she asked, shifting on the seat to face Maddie.

"From what I heard from the housekeeper before me, Mister Richard was his favorite, so much like his father, that Mister Joseph thought he could do no wrong. Mister Jason laughed off most of his papa's nagging, but Mister Anthony only tried harder and harder.

"Cygnet was struggling until Mister Anthony took over running it. In two years, he has done what his father could not and yet I doubt he was ever truly happy.

"Until you come into his life." Maddie smiled at her,

her eyes warm and gleaming. "I ain't never seen a man as happy as him since you come to live at River Oaks, Miss Brenna. Miss Charlotte would never make him happy. All she sees is what he can buy her, the wealth behind his name. She don't care about the man inside. Not a whit. She would harp and snip and drive him into an early grave."

"She certainly seemed quite certain she was going to be your mistress."

"She likely would, have fate not intervened. It would've been a mistake for Mister Anthony to marry her. And I expect God must've agreed, for He saw fit to make certain your path and Mister Anthony's crossed."

Brenna smiled at that. "I don't know about *that*."

But Maddie would hear none of it. "Of course He did. How do you explain what that boy was doing in Ireland, when he only ever been there once before?"

Brenna had no desire to argue with Maddie, so she nodded. "Very well, I admit. It was a twist of fate and a very fortunate one at that."

"Absolutely." Maddie gave a short, sharp nod of finality as the carriage rocked to a halt and she moved to throw open the door. "Now, where you needs go first, Miss Brenna?"

"Appleby's," she said, alighting and gesturing towards the jeweler on the corner of Beech Street and River Road. "I need to retrieve Anthony's gift. I do so hope he likes it."

Maddie shook her head as she followed Brenna down the walkway towards the jeweler's. "Miss Brenna, you could give that boy a boxful of dirt and he'd treasure it as though it was a gold bar. Don't you know that?"

Brenna chuckled. "Be that as it may, I still hope he does. You *will* give me an honest opinion, won't you?"

"Child, you been at River Oaks nigh a month now. Think you I *ever* keep an opinion to myself and think you they are never honest?"

Brenna was still laughing as she pulled open the door to Appleby's Fine Jewelry and a bell tied above her head tinkled merrily.

"Ah, Madam Radcliffe!" James Appleby hurried forth from a back room, all smiles as his dark gray eyes fell on them. "A pleasure to see you so early this morning."

"A good day to you, Mr. Appleby," she replied in a brisk voice as she stepped up to him. "I've come to pick up the piece I commissioned for my husband."

"Ah, of course. I've it right here. The goldsmith did a most lovely job, madam. Most lovely, indeed." Mr. Appleby turned around to rummage in a cupboard for a moment before coming up with a dark green velvet sack.

"Here it is, Miss Brenna." He unknotted the silk cord and turned the sack upside down to shake the piece loose.

Brenna couldn't help but smile as the medallion clinked out onto the counter. She reached out to lift it with gentle fingers. It was in the shape of a shield and on one side, bore the Radcliffe family crest, which she'd seen hanging over the fireplace in the library and sketched one night to bring to the jeweler. On the other was a detailed reproduction of the *Pegasus* and beneath it, she'd had engraved *September 1789* and an entwined A and B.

She held it by the delicate gold chain, turning to Maddie. "Think you he will like it?"

Maddie's eyes misted over as she nodded. "He will cherish it, Miss Brenna. Mark my words."

Smiling, Brenna turned back to Mr. Appleby. "This is beautiful, Mr. Appleby. Absolutely perfect."

"I thank you for your kind words, my lady," he said, bowing slightly as he took it from her to place back in its sack. "Is there anything else I might do for you today?"

"I think that will be all, sir," she replied, digging into her reticule for the gold coins she'd been holding onto since her mother pressed them into her hand outside the Valmont. She'd not wanted to use Anthony's money to buy his Christmas gift.

When they finished at the jeweler's, Brenna and Maddie spent the rest of the morning with last-minute shopping for tomorrow's Christmas supper. The blue sky had filled with heavy, pewter gray clouds and the crisp air held a hint of snow to it.

As they strolled back towards the waiting carriage, the snow began falling. Brenna gazed up at the delicate flakes, laughing gaily as they settled on her cheeks and caught in her lashes, and in the fringe of her hair poking out beneath her dark blue velvet bonnet. "Maddie, look," she said, her voice ringing with joy as she held out both hands palm up to catch snowflakes on her gloves. "A white Christmas, to be sure."

Maddie chuckled as she shook her head. "Yessir, Mister Anthony done good by marrying you, child. You a breath of fresh air."

"Well, well, isn't *this* simply *too* charming?"

All joy drained from Brenna as Charlotte Madison's sneer reached her ears. Blinking the snow from her lashes, she brought her head forward to find Charlotte blocking their path on the walkway.

She looked as beautiful as ever, in a most fashionable velvet cloak of bright, cheery red, with her hair tucked beneath a matching fur-trimmed bonnet. Her cheeks were pink from the cold, and her eyes were just cold as they met Brenna's. "Out spending your dear husband's money, child?" she asked, eyeing the parcel Brenna held, the one containing Anthony's medallion.

"You leave her be, Miss Charlotte," Maddie growled, her voice colder than Brenna had ever heard. "You got no business with Miss Brenna here and you know it."

"Hush your mouth, Maddie. It is still my right to speak to whomever I choose, is it not?" Charlotte narrowed her eyes as she turned back to Brenna. "How quaint this is. Tell me, have *you* asked for a doll, child?"

Brenna pressed her lips together. "As a matter of fact, I have," she replied, unwilling to let Charlotte intimidate her any further. "After all, a child should have toys to play with, don't you think?"

Charlotte's pink cheeks went crimson. "A child?"

Brenna couldn't contain her smug smile, even as Maddie gasped beneath her breath beside her. "Aye. Oh, have you not yet heard? Anthony and I are expecting."

Maddie turned away to hide her smile, but Brenna did not miss the way the housekeeper's face suddenly creased. Nor did she miss the way Charlotte's jaw hung slack, her eyes practically popping from her head.

"You mean to say...that is..."

Brenna nodded, reaching down to pat her midsection. "Aye. He is going to be a father and you should see for yourself how excited he is over the thought. Already driving me mad, you know, what with hovering about me and refusing to allow me to do *anything* for myself." She let out a silvery giggle and waved an airy hand. "Why, if Maddie hadn't smuggled me out, I expect *he'd* be shopping for his own gift, if you can imagine that!"

Charlotte opened and closed her mouth several times, as if wanting desperately to scorch her with some witty little remark, but unable to think of one suitable.

Brenna didn't give her time to think either, but smiled again as she slipped her arm through Maddie's and said, "Come along, Maddie. We really must be going. You know how Tony worries when I am on my feet for too long."

Maddie patted her hand, nodding. "Oh, yes. Yes, absolutely, Miss Brenna."

Charlotte stood there for a moment, staring after them. Then, she suddenly lurched forward, hurrying to block their path once more. "You lie. Tony would never...that is, he..."

Brenna gave her a long, level look. The power had shifted and she knew who had the upper hand now. "I can assure you, Miss Madison, he would and he did. If you believe me not, why not come out to River Oaks and ask him for yourself? You can see with your own eyes how happy he is, how he is looking so forward to the birth of his child."

Without waiting for a response, and without giving Charlotte the chance to block them once more, Brenna stepped around her to tug open the carriage door and climb in.

Maddie settled across from her this time, as their parcels took up a great deal of room. She shook her head at Brenna. "You do think quick on your feet, child."

"It wasn't a lie, Maddie," Brenna said softly, rubbing her nearly-frozen hands together. "Anthony and I *are* expecting a child."

Maddie's jaw hung slack. But not for long, as she was grinning broadly within seconds, clapping her hands together, much the way she did when Anthony first introduced her to his bride. "Oh, Miss Brenna, what a wonderful thing! A child! Hallelujah!"

Brenna smiled at her exuberance, but felt a slight pang as Maddie lurched across the carriage to throw her arms about her. She loved Maddie no doubt, but it was her mother's arms she wished were around her. Now more than ever, Brenna missed her mother. This was the time when she needed her the most and it pained her that Dara was half a world away.

Maddie returned to her seat, chatting like mad over Brenna's announcement and all that needed to be done to ready one of the rooms as a nursery, where they might find a wet nurse, and a nursemaid and on and on.

Brenna managed to drown out most of her chatter as they made their way back to River Oaks, where her sadness seemed to increase as she thought about the fact that in seven days, Anthony would be leaving.

She tried to shove the troubling thoughts from her mind as she alit from the carriage, with Maddie still chattering behind her, and made her way up the front portico. As she pushed open the door, Anthony's deep voice echoed down the hallway. He was in the library and she heard Jackson answering. They were discussing their upcoming voyage to Ireland and she couldn't help but listen, hanging back as Maddie bustled on towards the kitchen.

"Tony, you're being a fool. Why go look for trouble? You know not what McIntyre might do in return. I'll tell you this, though. You can be sure he'll not simply look the other way."

"Fool or not, my mind is made up."

"It was that mind what brought you into this mess in the first place, remember."

"You are about to tread upon most dangerous ground, Jackson. Much has changed since that night at Hillcrest."

Her stomach twisted at that, at the way Anthony's voice softened. A smile played at her lips as she crept over towards the doorway to the library.

Peering in, she could see Jackson sprawled on the gray damask sofa, while Anthony sat perched on the edge of his desk. She bit her thumb, wondering what Jackson would say to that.

"Much has changed, eh? Might that mean you have some words to eat?"

"Aye, it does."

Her heart gave a leap as Jackson laughed then. "Not

so miserable being a married man now, are you?"

Anthony chuckled along with him. "That's not the word I would use. Now do you see why this is something I must do?"

Jackson sighed. "I still think you mad. Your wife is here. Her stepfather is thousands of miles away. You belong here."

"I owe the man for what he has done to her."

"I agree, but why not wait until she's a mite more settled? You've been home barely a month."

"Because you are looking at a father-to-be and I have no desire to miss that blessed event."

"Well I'll be damned! Tony, are you pulling my leg?" "I'm not."

Jackson let out a whoop and Brenna smothered her laugh, watching him bound off the sofa like an oversized puppy to pounce on Anthony. "And how is our little mother to be feeling?"

"She is fine. You would never guess if I hadn't told you. She is most amazing." His voice held a hint of a sigh. "It will be most difficult, being away from her for so long."

Her eyes pricked with tears at his wistful tone, her laughter fading away as the dull ache filled her heart once more.

"Ah, so it's a far cry from misery, being leg-shackled to her."

"God, yes. You've no idea, my friend. That woman has invaded my thoughts, my dreams, my every fiber. I cannot imagine my life without her now. I do not wish to even think of it. That's the one thing which frightens me about the babe."

"She'll be fine, Tony. You have Maddie and she is more than capable of easing Brenna through her time."

"I'd rather not think of it at the moment. It's enough I'll have to in a few months. I wish to put off the ceaseless worry as long as I can. Now, about the voyage—"

Brenna moved away at that, but couldn't wipe the smile from her face. Anthony *did* care for her. True, hearing his words to Jackson weren't the same as hearing him say *I love you* to her, but most definitely a start.

Her spirits lifted then. Mayhap his upcoming voyage was not such a bad thing after all. Mayhap the time away

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from her was exactly what he would need to tell her his feelings when he returned.

That thought in mind, she hurried up to their bedroom, to tuck the medallion into the toe of her boot until the morrow, when she would present it to him in front of the fire in the library.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

On Christmas morning, Brenna woke at daybreak to see snow still whirling outside the windows. She rose from the bed, shivering as she went from the cozy warmth of thick blankets and Anthony's body to the chilled air of their bedroom.

Dragging on his warm midnight blue velvet dressing gown, she hurried to the window to find a blanket of snow covering as far as she could see. She stood there, gazing out over the front lawns, smiling at the pure beauty rolling out before her. The trees and shrubs wore mantles of purest white, everything blending softly together.

"Merry Christmas, sweetheart."

She jumped as Anthony eased his arms about her to tug her back against his chest. Wrapping his arms even tighter, he gave her a gentle squeeze, leaning close to sweep a kiss up along her neck. Smiling, she melted into him. "Merry Christmas, love," she murmured, gazing up at him over one shoulder.

Another squeeze, and then he pulled away. "I was going to wait until we went below to give you this. But I'm afraid I cannot wait any longer."

Rubbing her chilled hands together beneath the draping sleeves of the gown, she turned to see him move to his sea chest. Like his trunk, it was packed and waiting to be brought out to the coach within the next few days. Her heart fluttered against her ribs as he returned with a small silver box. He smiled down at her, pressing it towards her. "Merry Christmas, Madam Radcliffe."

She accepted, lifting the top of the box to peer in. Her eyes filled with tears at the delicate gold ring cradled on a bed of rich blue velvet. "Tony," she whispered, meeting his gaze once more. "It's lovely."

He cleared his throat as he lifted it from the box. "I know you are aware I was not in Ireland in search of a

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wife. I suppose your mother did her best, but a lady should have a gold ring on her finger. Not silver."

As he moved to slip the silver ring from her left hand, Brenna withdrew it. "Nay," she whispered, shaking her head. "I do not wish to remove it. It's been on my hand since the day you placed it there and I'll not take it off now."

"Bren, it's silver."

"I know this. And it's more precious to me now than all of the diamonds and all of the gold in the world. This is the ring I married you with, and it shall stay on my hand until eternity draws to a close."

He sighed softly and tried once more. "Brenna, love, had I been planning to ask for your hand, I would have placed a gold ring on it when the vows were taken."

She could hear the exasperation, the frustration, in his voice. Reaching up to cover her left hand with her right, she cradled both to her chest. "I understand that, Anthony. But can you not understand what this silly silver ring means to me? It's the one what was blessed, the one *you* placed on my finger before God. It's the one I cherish above all other possessions."

"A compromise, then," he said, catching her hand and pulling it away from her chest. "Wear both."

She hesitated for a moment. The delicate gold ring *was* pretty and she was touched by his thoughtfulness, by the fact that he was troubled that her wedding ring was not up to standards.

He cleared his throat. "Take a look at the inside."

Her eyes misted over once more as she read the inscription inside the band. There was but a single word—*Forever*.

"Tony," she murmured, looking up at him with through tear-filled eyes.

He gave her a crooked grin. "Keep going, love."

She spun the ring, reading the rest of the inscription—*Love*, *Tony 1789*. Her throat squeezed shut and she sniffed once.

Anthony caught her beneath the chin with a forefinger, lifting her face to his. "And I do mean forever, love."

She couldn't reply, but melted into him, tucking her

head beneath his chin as she whispered, "I thank you."

He kissed the top of her head, folding his arms about her and giving her a squeeze. As he nuzzled his cheek against her, he whispered, "You are most welcome, love."

After a long, wonderful moment, she pulled away and held out the ring. "Put it on me, won't you?"

He smiled then. "It would be my pleasure." Taking the ring from her, he eased it onto her fourth finger, snug against the silver ring she refused to give up.

She looked down at both rings and sniffed again. When she looked up again, it was to find him still gazing down at her. He reached out to curve his hand against her cheek.

"I will miss you, love. My cabin will seem quite lonely without your presence."

"So don't go," she whispered, slipping her arms about his waist to snuggle against him. "Please stay, Tony."

He bent forward to kiss the top of her head. "I cannot, Bren. This is something I *need* do."

"Why? Why do men always seek revenge? Why can you not simply be glad things are as they are?"

Catching her face in his hands, he lifted it to meet his eyes. "Because I cannot do that."

"You are being a fool, Anthony." Her voice broke as a single tear spilled over her lower lashes to slip down her cheek.

He brushed her lips with a light kiss. "It's Christmas, love. Let's not ruin it with a fight."

"I am sorry. Mayhap I am being a foolish wife, but I am terrified something will happen to you."

"Much like the night you thumbed your nose at death?"

"Aye, but this time I'll not be there to keep watch."

He chuckled, kissing her forehead as he drew her in for a warm embrace. "I shall be fine, love. I promise you that. I've much to live for and every reason to wander my way home once I've dealt with what I need."

She sighed, letting her remaining protests go unspoken. She knew she'd never convince him to change his mind and like Tony, she had no desire to spend their first Christmas together battling, either. His heart beat steadily beneath her ear and she found comfort in that for several minutes before whispering, "Promise me, then, you will be back."

"Love, nothing would keep me from here. Understand you this? *Nothing*. I have a beautiful wife, a child on the way. What think you could keep me from returning?"

Another sigh, and she pulled out of his arms. "I suppose I've spoilt the mood already, but I do have a gift for you as well."

He smiled, tracing his thumb lightly over her bottom lip. "You've spoiled nothing, love. I understand your fears. I wish I could simply say it's in the past, but I cannot."

She moved over to the wardrobe, shaking her head. "I still think you mad," she told him, yanking open the door and bending into the depths to grab her sturdy leather boots. It took her a moment to grip the sack's silk cord, but she did, and stood before him, holding out the green velvet sack. "Merry Christmas, Tony."

He untied the cord, turning the bag over to spill the gold medallion into his palm. A smile tugged at his lips as he gazed down at the family crest gleaming in the weak winter sunlight. Lifting his eyes to hers, he said, "It's beautiful, love. I thank you."

She moved to slip her arm through his. "Turn it over, then. You are not the only one with a penchant for inscription, I'll have you know."

He did just that, his eyes softening as he read the engraved words. Then, he leaned over to capture her lips in a soft kiss. Pulling away, he murmured, "A most memorable voyage, to be sure."

"Do you like it, then?"

He reached up to fasten the delicate chain about his neck. "Love, like the ring you wear on your hand, this shall never leave my sight."

She smiled, breathing a sigh of relief. "I was afraid you might not like jewelry."

"Ah, love, I would treasure any gift from you."

"If you don't like it, please-"

He silenced her protest with another kiss. "Nay, Brenna," he murmured, his lips brushing her ear. "As I said, I will never remove it." With that, he pulled away. "Shall we dress and go below? Maddie is likely to be pacing the floors, waiting for us to come down." "Oh, she's already received her gift," Brenna laughed, watching as he moved to the wardrobe to retrieve a winecolored silk shirt and black breeches and began to dress. "I told her about the babe yesterday, while we were in town."

He grinned, drawing on his shirt. "I am amazed I did not hear the screams of delight all the way out here."

"As am I."

Tugging on his breeches, he paused to say, "Is there something you are not telling me?"

"Well, not exactly, I suppose. I also told Charlotte Madison."

Tony lifted his eyes to hers. "You told Charlotte?"

She nodded. "Maddie and I bumped into her outside of Mr. Appleby's shop and she kept blocking the walkway. I had to make her move somehow."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "I can imagine her reaction."

"She didn't believe me," Brenna told him as he resumed dressing. "So I invited her to pay us a visit and ask you for herself."

"You did what?"

"She does not wish to think that you would ever be so low as to sire *my* child."

His head jerked up at that, eyes narrowing as he growled, "What was that you just said?"

Ignoring the heat in his voice, she crossed to the wardrobe to dress as well. "I said, she does not wish to think that you would ever be so low as to sire my child. In fact, she stopped just short of saying it that bluntly."

"I ought to blister your backside for saying such garbage to me, my lady," he growled in a tight voice.

His unexpected anger surprised her. Facing him, fresh chemise in her hand, she said, "You are angry with *me*?"

"Aye. Think you so little of yourself, do you? Think you that I have somehow married *beneath* myself and fathered the child of a woman not worth the dirt I tread upon?" He shook his head as he grabbed his left boot and yanked it on. "And yet you question why I need go to Ireland? See you what he has left you with? You let that bitch convince you that your deepest fears are the truth, haven't you?"

"I—that is..." She couldn't help her stammer. His vehemence, his referring to his former lover as a *bitch*, took her completely by surprise. She stared at him for a long moment, then wriggled out of his dressing gown. "I don't even know what to say to that."

"Aye, love, I should stay, shouldn't I?" He nodded, tugging on his right boot and standing. "Mayhap then I might convince you nothing could be further from the truth."

"I know not even what we are discussing any longer!" She was lacing the chemise, but threw her hands into the air as frustration seeped into her. "You speak so quickly and in such riddles at times that I cannot understand you. *Your* mistress approached me, would not leave me alone and would not let me pass, and you are angry with *me*?"

Tony crossed to her, gripping her by the upper arms. "I am angry with you because you believe that filth that your stepfather filled your head with, Brenna. You believe no man might have a use for you outside of bed. You believe you are worth less than nothing and I cannot figure out how to make you see otherwise."

"Ho-how know you this?" she whispered, horrified at his words.

"I know this because you told me when you were in the grips of that fever, love. I know all that happened, from the day your father died until the night you brought that silly bargain to me." His grip eased on her and his eyes softened as he reached past her to pull out a gown of crimson velvet. Helping her into the gown, he said, "I even know you wish to have a son, love. A black-haired, blueeyed boy. I have known all of this since that night, and my fury grows with each day. Mayhap this will put your fears to rest now."

"You know all?" she murmured, feeling heat pour into her face as he turned her away to button up the back of the gown. "What else did I say?"

His laughter was soft, husky. "I know you find me handsome. Which was a nice stroke to hear as well, I must admit."

"Oh, dear." She brought a hand to her mouth. "Oh, dear."

"Oh, come now. It was nice to hear, some of the complimentary things you said about me." He spun her back to face him and kissed her lightly. "And you need not fear, love. You are precious to me. Priceless, even. Think you the mother of *my* child would be anything less?" Catching her under the chin with his forefinger, he lifted her face to his. "And you will not have to worry, love. In a few short months, Charlotte will know the truth and when I return, I will take great delight in parading our son about town for all to see."

She blinked back fresh tears as she smiled up at him. "People will think you mad."

"Undoubtedly. And I care not. I am breathless with anticipation over this child, Bren. I can hardly wait to see if he has black hair or red hair, blue eyes or your expressively beautiful aqua eyes." Another kiss followed his words. "And we shall keep trying until you get that black-haired, blue-eyed boy."

"And if he is our first?"

"Then we try until we have a daughter with that same combination. And when we are successful there, we try for a fiery, aqua-eyed redhead, just like her mother."

"Tony!"

He let out a roar of laughter, gathering her in his arms and lifting her to meet his eyes. "Love, with as difficult as it is for me to keep my hands to myself, you might wish to plan on many, many children."

She rolled her eyes. "It's tiring simply to think of, you realize."

He nuzzled her, tightening his arms about her and kissing her temple lightly, murmuring, "We'd best go below, before Maddie breaks down the door to retrieve us."

CHAPTER THIRTY

Brenna blinked back tears as she walked Anthony to the front door. He had put his foot down, forbidding her to accompany him to the harbor. Though she was unhappy about that, she didn't argue with him. It would be difficult saying goodbye to him as it was. She had no desire to make a public spectacle of herself as well.

His sea chest and trunks had been brought to the harbor the previous afternoon, so all that remained was the one valise he carried now. He set it on the floor as he turned to his wife.

"No tears, Bren," he whispered, leaning forward to cover her lips with his. He kissed her gently, and then stepped back. "I will be home before you even realize I've left."

Tears clouded her vision as she threw herself into his arms, wrapping her arms about his neck and clinging tight. "I'll ask only one last time, Anthony," she whispered brokenly. "Please, please stay home."

He eased his arms about her waist, squeezing her gently. "Love, we've discussed this." His voice was soft, his lips pressed to her ear. "Everything will be fine. You will laugh at your foolishness when I return to find you all round and heavy with our child."

She squeezed his neck, reveling in the silken caress of his hair against her cheek. "Do be careful, won't you?"

"Of course."

She took a deep breath then, her lips skimming his ear as she whispered, "I love you."

His back stiffened briefly, then he relaxed and squeezed her tight. "I know, love. I know." He lowered her, his lips seeking hers for a deep, hungry kiss. He crushed her closer still, and then released her. Kissing her forehead, he whispered, "Be good, little girl. I'll be back before you know it." With that, he was gone, striding down the front steps and out to the waiting carriage. Brenna let her tears fall then, as he signaled the driver and the horses went clopping down the drive. She watched until the carriage disappeared around the bend. Then, closing the door, she leaned her head against it, sobbing as if her heart would break.

She thought it just might.

He had not told her he loved her back.

"Drink this, child. You look awful pale."

Brenna ignored the offered cup of tea, staring into the crackling fire. "Go away, Maddie. I wish to be left in peace."

Maddie shook her head as she set the saucer on the trestle table behind the sofa in the library. Coming around, she sank down next to her mistress, reaching out to take her hand. "He's been gone but two days, Miss Brenna. Are you going to be so miserable the entire time?"

"Go away." Brenna sniffed, dabbing at her eyes with a lacy handkerchief. "Allow me some time to wallow, won't you?"

"Oh, Miss Brenna, it's just about killing me, seeing you so sad. He will be back."

"How know you this? How could he know this? It's madness that he went in the first place, Maddie! Madness, indeed. And for what? To settle some wrong that was not even done to him in the first place." She jumped up to pace about the room, throwing her arms into the air in frustration.

"Why, it ain't madness, child. Ain't madness at all. That boy loves you. He wishes to right any wrong done to you, no matter how mad it might seem to you."

"Loves me? Bah!"

Maddie seemed surprised by her exclamation. "You think otherwise?"

Brenna nodded sharply. "Aye. I think *that* to be madness as well."

Maddie shook her head, clicking her tongue against her teeth. "You don't know Mister Anthony as well as you think you do, Miss Brenna."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Aye. It's just that," Maddie declared.

"I told him, Maddie. I told him how I felt and he said nothing in return. *Nothing*! Now how is *that* love?"

"There is plenty that boy says without opening his mouth." Maddie's voice was mild as she rose from the sofa to gather the numerous cups of tea that had already gone long cold on the table. "As I said, you do not know him as well as you think. I see it in the way he looks at you, the way he fusses over you, the way he gave up Miss Madison without a whit of hesitation. Think you he would simply do any of that without reason? I think not. His are the actions of a man in love, child."

She moved to the door. "And think about this, won't you? I know what he had inscribed in your ring, child. *Forever*. Sounds to me as if he just *might* be in love with you, don't you think? Forever a mighty long time, ain't it?"

Brenna's eyes stung again. Sinking down onto the sofa once more, she sniffed and dissolved into tears. Her shoulders shook under the force of her sobs. Her head swam from them. "I just wish he'd come home."

Maddie relented then, setting down her tray of dirty dishes, and moving to ease her arms about her mistress. "Oh, child, he *will* come home. You will see. In just a few weeks, he'll walk through that door and you will laugh over these tears."

Brenna rested her head against Maddie's breast, grateful for the warmth and comfort of the woman who was as a second mother to her. "Why could he not simply say it back?"

"I don't think he has *ever* said it before, Miss Brenna. Ask me, he's afraid to say it out loud. Like a dream."

Brenna lifted her tear-stained face. "I am not following."

"Have you ever dreamt a pleasant, sweet dream? One so magical you had no wish to wake from it?"

"Of course."

"And did you ever tell someone about it, only to find you never have it again?" As Brenna nodded, Maddie reached up a loving hand to brush the tears from her cheeks. "Try to think of it as such. Mayhap Mister Anthony is afraid that, he says it out loud, it'll go away."

"But that's silly."

"Aye, to us, it's most silly. But men as a whole make little sense at times, wouldn't you say?"

Brenna couldn't help but chuckle. "I suppose."

"Give him time, child. He knows you love him. He's known for a while now. That will bring him around and again, you will laugh over this silliness." Maddie cupped her chin and smiled. "He *does* love you, Miss Brenna. Believe me when I tell you this."

"I do, Maddie." She said it not because she believed Maddie, but because she so strongly *wished* to believe it. However, she knew she needed to hear it from Anthony before it became truth to her.

"Good girl." Maddie patted her cheek and then rose once more to pick up her tray. "Louise has turned down your bed, Miss Brenna. Why not go and curl up there with one of them books you love so?"

"I think I will do just that," she replied, sniffing and dabbing her eyes once more. "Good night, then, Maddie. And thank you."

Maddie smiled as she clattered down the hall. "You are most welcome, Miss Brenna."

Brenna sighed as she went upstairs. The nights were the worst, when she was even more painfully aware of Anthony's absence. The bed seemed immense to her immense and lonely—and she had trouble drifting off most nights. Her brain refused to let her sleep easily, whirling with constant images that were none too conducive to a restful night's sleep.

She undressed to her chemise and moved to the window, sinking down into the comfortable window seat to stare out over the snow-covered lawns. Everywhere she looked was a sea of pure white, broken only by the tracks of the deer, raccoons, and any other animal curious enough to emerge from the woods at the far end of the property.

It was snowing again—fat white flakes falling silently to the ground. She sighed, leaning her head up against the cool rippled glass. The fire crackled on the hearth, providing her with adequate warmth but she dragged the quilt from the bed all the same, wrapping it about herself as she snuggled into the corner of her seat.

It was so odd, to be there without Anthony, to know

that he was not within voice range, that she could not merely reach into the other side of the bed to feel his solid warmth there beside her. She missed the sound of his boots on the floor, of his voice wafting up from his office, of his laughter when she said something that amused him. She missed his arms around her, the way her leg would brush against his when they slept, the way he would wake her each morning with a string of gentle kisses from her wrist to her ear.

She drew her knees to her chest. The new year dawned, and in a little over five months, she would welcome her first child into the world. She could only hope Anthony returned in time for that event as well.

"Please," she whispered to the snow, to the night, to anyone who might be listening. "Please, just let him return safely. That's all I ask and please let it not be too much."

The house grew quieter as the servants all retired for the evening. The wind howled beyond the rippled window panes, a lonely wind that filled her with even more sadness. The house settled around her and as the fire died on the hearth, she rose from the window seat to pad over to the bed.

She lay on her side of the bed, gazing into the empty space where Anthony slept. The pillows were plump and perfect, the linens and blankets smooth. They would remain that way, for she stayed on her side, even when asleep.

Blowing out the candle, Brenna let the blackness surround her. It was much easier to forget Anthony was not there beside her, that the darkness made not seeing him not real. Still, she wasn't fooling herself. She'd become far too accustomed to the sounds of his deep, even breathing, the way he would mumble in his sleep on occasion, even the snoring he did when he slept on his back.

She smiled at that, wondering if anyone else knew he snored. And not quiet snores, either. There were evenings when she had to elbow him sharply in the ribs to quiet him. But now, she missed it terribly.

Her hand slid down to cradle her belly. "Mayhap it won't be so lonely when you begin to kick, little one," she You Belong to Me

whispered, a smile tugging at her lips. "I can hardly wait until you let me know you are there."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The air wafting in through the open windows was gentle, scented with the hint of the azaleas and forsythias blooming just below the front windows of River Oaks. It was so nice to open a window now, after the long, brutally cold winter that felt as though it would never end.

Brenna chuckled, struggling to get to her feet. "Feet," she murmured, glancing down where her feet once were, now hidden by her swollen belly. "I am not so certain I even still *have* feet."

It was April and all around her, the world came to life once more. Birds now chirped and sang in the trees just beyond her window, the air smelled sweetly of grass and clover, and the sun's rays actually warmed the earth enough to melt the snow.

Anthony had been gone nearly three months and she was counting the days until his return. As she paused to peer into her mirror, she chuckled once more at her very round shape. "I only hope he recognizes me."

A solid thumping caused her to press her hand to her belly. "Aye, I know, little one. You are hungry. Allow me to finish dressing, then, if you'd not mind."

The baby kicked back, almost as if in response. She laughed again as she plaited her hair and pulled open the bedroom door. Louise helped her dress most mornings, but Brenna still insisted on doing some things, such as her hair, on her own. As a result, it was the same coiffure each day—a simple plait that fell below her hips.

She waddled into the dining room, where Maddie looked up to greet her with a smile. "Why, Miss Brenna, I hope you don't mind my saying, but I think you are rounder than you were yesterday."

"Do not remind me," Brenna groaned, tugging out a chair and sinking into it. "I thought women did not show so until they were nearer the end?" "Ah, but you have seen the size of this babe's papa, have you not?" Maddie asked with a grin, bringing over the silver tea service to pour her mistress a cup. "A family of giants, you married into."

"Wonderful. No one warned me," Brenna sighed, rolling her eyes. "Might you do me a favor, then?"

Maddie smiled. "Anything, Miss Brenna."

"Would you take a peek and tell me if my slippers match? Yesterday, I was horrified to find I had on a black one and a blue one! If it weren't for Miss Rachel, I might never have known!"

"I see making friends has helped you then."

"Rachel and Caroline have been godsends. Especially as they both have children of their own and make certain to tell me all of the horror stories that come with them." She shifted as her burden kicked once more, making her back ache.

"They are sweet girls, just as you, Miss Brenna. You could not find better friends."

"I am not so certain. They are dragging me into town to shop today, mind you."

"As long as you keep off your feet as much as possible. Mister Anthony made me promise to nag you in his place."

Brenna smiled, but this time it was a wistful smile. "I do so wish he'd come home already. It's been so long, I cannot help but think *something* must have happened to him."

"You worry far too much, child. The good Lord'll not let anything happen to that boy. You've nothing to worry about."

Brenna shifted again, then reached for her tea. Taking a sip, she said, "And you've nothing to worry about where my feet are concerned, either. Rachel and Caroline nag at me almost as much as you do."

"Good. You are far too stubborn, insisting on doing everything yourself. It's time for you to be selfish and to rest as much as you can."

"Idleness makes me insane, Maddie. There is precious little for me to do here, as you run so tight a ship. And I need something to keep my mind occupied, lest I scare myself silly thinking about when my time comes." "You have nothing to fear, child," Maddie assured her, patting her shoulder gently. "I've had more than enough experience in delivering babies." Another grin. "All you got to do is catch."

"All *you* have to do, you mean. My part's a mite more difficult, wouldn't you say?"

"You will be fine. And when it's all over with, you'll have a beautiful baby to hold in your arms."

Brenna sighed, sitting back in her chair. Terrified as she was at the thought of childbirth, she was more than a little anxious to greet her child, anxious to see the beautiful new boy or girl she and Anthony created. She only hoped he arrived home in time. The thought of enduring her time alone filled her unspeakable terror. Somehow, she thought it wouldn't be so unbearable, if Anthony was there with her.

She'd hoped he'd be home by now, and tried not to let herself dwell on the terrible things that might have befallen him, either in Ireland or at sea. It was far too frightening to think about, so she vowed not to.

"Good morning!"

Brenna smiled at Caroline Bartholomew's sunny greeting floating in from the foyer. A moment later, she bounded into the dining room, dressed for the glorious spring weather in a delicate robin's egg blue muslin and matching bonnet.

"Good morning to you as well, Caro," Brenna said, setting her china cup back in its saucer. "Have you eaten?"

"I am fine, Brenna. Tell me, have you seen Rachel? She was supposed to pick me up in her coach and I've not seen a whit of her."

"I'm afraid I've not seen anyone as yet. I only came down but a short while ago."

"And how are we feeling today?" Caroline asked, her blue eyes dancing merrily as she bounced over to pat Brenna's belly.

"Tired. And as big as this house. Why could I not have been one of those tiny, delicate women who can hide their condition? People are going to be horrified to see me out in public."

"Pish," Caroline snorted, waving her hand. "Let them

gawk and let them gossip. They already do about you anyhow, you know. It's what happens when you sweep into town and marry the most eligible bachelor right out from all those catty noses."

"I did no such thing, Caro. Anthony and I were married in Ireland and you know that."

"I know that, but it's just as romantic *my* way, don't you think?"

"I think you are mad," a third voice chimed in.

Both Brenna and Caroline looked up as Rachel Harte stepped into the room, a vision of loveliness in her emerald muslin that matched her leafy-green eyes almost perfectly. "There is nothing more romantic that meeting in a faraway land and having him fall so madly in love with you that he marries you ere bringing you home." She sighed and rolled her eyes, patting her right hand over her chest as if her heart was leaping. "It's wildly romantic, that."

"Oh, hush," Caroline told her. "You have your version and I'll have mine. Either way, we both come up short, seeing as how Brenna's the one what managed to snare him to the altar in the first place."

Brenna chuckled as Rachel and Caroline continued their banter back and forth. They had become friendly shortly after Anthony's departure, when both women suddenly turned up at the front door one day, confessing that they'd heard rumors of her existence, but doubted it until laying eyes upon her for the first time.

"And where the devil were you this morning, Rach?" Caroline demanded, pushing her bonnet from her forehead. "I waited for you for nearly an hour."

"I apologize for that, Caro," Rachel said, though she did not look the least bit remorseful. "I am afraid I was tied up with the children. William's teething, mind you, and screaming like a banshee until I thought Edward would go mad from it."

"Well, it's of no consequence now, I suppose. We can take my carriage, as it's a mite roomier," Caroline stated, shaking her head. "Are you ready then, Brenna, to make the tongues wag in town?"

Brenna sighed as she struggled to her feet, laughing as both Rachel and Caroline hurried to help her from the chair. "I must admit, I will be most thankful when this is all behind me."

"Fear not, Brenna. You will always have at least one of us near to help you up," Rachel chuckled.

Brenna picked up her bonnet and gloves from the table. She tied the soft green velvet ribbon beneath her chin, drew on her gloves, and said, "Shall we?"

"Of course."

"I am going now, Maddie!" Brenna called towards the kitchen as she followed Rachel and Caroline towards the front door.

"Enjoy yourself, Miss Brenna!" Maddie called back, a hint of admonishment in her voice. "But be mindful of your feet!"

Brenna shook her head, stepping out into the warm spring air. It was a beautiful day, no doubt. The sun shone brightly in a cloudless sky, the air was soft and scented with the hint of blooming wildflowers. Yet, she still felt that subtle sadness that refused to leave her be.

The Bartholomew coach awaited them at the top of the drive and Simon, Caroline's driver, smiled down at them as he held open the door. "Good day, Madam Harte. Madam Radcliffe."

"A good day to you as well, Simon," Brenna replied as she hefted herself into the coach with his assistance. She settled across from Rachel and Caroline. "Am I so big then, that I take up most of the seat?"

Caroline's blue eyes danced with merriment. "Nay, not yet. In a few weeks, though, it'll be another story."

Brenna rolled her eyes. "Remind me to never let that man lay another hand upon me when he returns."

Rachel lifted a black and ivory fan from the pale blue damask seat, tapping it against Brenna's leg before flicking it open. "Oh, you mean that not and you know it. Why, I'd wager it won't be long after he returns before you have another joyous announcement."

"Bite your tongue," Brenna replied with a smiled. "I cannot wait until I can see my slippers again." She winced as they hit a particularly deep rut. "*Oof*!"

"Simon, a bit more care, if you'd not mind," Caroline called through the small grate separating them from the driver.

"My apologies, Madam Bartholomew."

Caroline turned back to Brenna. "It will be over before you know it, Brenna. Try not to dwell."

"I am trying, but it's most difficult."

"Aye, it's true," Rachel added, wafting her fan beneath her nose. "Oh, drat it all anyway. Caro, think you Simon'd mind if we stopped at my house quickly? I've forgotten my blasted reticule, if you can believe that."

"Rach, you'd forget your head if it weren't for the fact it's so firmly attached to your neck," Caroline sighed, flipping her own fan open. "But, no. I think he'll not mind." She leaned towards the grate once more. "Simon, we needs stop at Madam Harte's residence, please."

"Aye, Miss Caroline."

Brenna settled back into her seat as they rocked onward towards Brunswick. Rachel and her husband Edward lived near the center of town, in a cozy house on Maple Avenue. Hers was a noisy home, indeed, as she and Edward had four children, but it was a nice place to visit.

They rocked to a halt and Rachel popped open the door. "Won't you both come in, then? I've a feeling Brenna might need a break."

Brenna nodded as she struggled to her feet. "I must confess, I do."

"Confess not," Caroline said, patting her arm. "We've both been there, haven't we, Rach?"

"Indeed. Come along then, and try not to let a little heathen attach himself to your leg. Should that happen, I'm afraid we must keep you here indefinitely."

Brenna chuckled, following Rachel up the oak-lined front walk towards the front door. Rachel grinned at her over one shoulder. "Try not to mind the utter chaos, either. Angelina has the day off and Edward seems to have the greatest difficulty in seeing any mess, no matter how large."

"It won't bother me in the least," Brenna said, stepping into the shadowy interior of the house.

"Surprise!"

Brenna gasped at the cluster of women gathered in the parlor. "What is going on?" she asked, turning to Caroline and Rachel, both of whom were grinning madly.

"We knew you were feeling blue, what with

Anthony's absence and all, so Caro and I thought a little party might cheer you up a tad." Rachel threw her arms around Brenna to hug her. "We love you, even if we aren't the tall, dark, and handsome Captain Radcliffe."

Brenna blinked back tears, touched by their thoughtfulness. "Oh, I would indeed be lost without you."

Abigaile Sinclair was the first of the gathered women to approach her, pressing a cup of tea into her hand. "Fear not, for there is always one of us around."

Brenna accepted the cup and took a sip. "This is such a surprise."

"Well, come along and don't dawdle," Rachel declared, steering her through the house and out through the kitchen, to the gardens behind the house. There, a delightful tea had been set up, with servants hovering about.

Rachel helped her into a comfortable chair and gave her another hug. "Enjoy yourself, Brenna. It's all about you today."

Brenna smiled at everyone gathered around her. "And enjoy myself I shall. Thank you all so very much."

It was one of the loveliest afternoons Brenna had ever spent. There was much laughter and gossip, as well as plenty of sage advice given to her by the women who had children of their own. Brenna couldn't recall the last time she'd laughed with a gaggle of female friends, and wanted the day to last forever.

Her joy was ruined however, when a familiar voice floated over the whitewashed fence. "How quaint, this."

She looked in the direction of the voice, only to find Charlotte Madison sneering down her nose, twirling her pale pink parasol over one shoulder. At once, the happiness drained from her as she held Charlotte's stare easily. "What do you want?"

Caroline looked up, her blue eyes narrowing to slits. "Begone with you, wench." She fanned Charlotte away with both hands. "You are neither wanted nor welcomed."

"A great pity, that," Charlotte drawled, shaking her head. "You wound me, Caroline. Absolutely wound me, know you this?" She sniffed then. "Besides, I've not the time for a silly little gossip circle. I am meeting a new beau."

Brenna set down her teacup. "A new beau, you say?"

"Aye. A dashing gentleman, to be sure. And certainly not a *merchant* of any sort."

Brenna gritted her teeth at the slur. "Such as the one you wished to wed?" she replied calmly.

Caroline chuckled at that. "Very nicely done, Brenna."

Charlotte rolled her eyes. "Aye. The one what you *stole*, you mean. But that is neither here nor there now. I would have been a fool to bind myself to Tony Radcliffe. Not only is Jonathan a true gentleman, but he is also an English *lord*. A sea captain hardly compares to a lord now, does he?"

"I beg to differ," Brenna replied softly, thinking of the one lord with whom she'd had contact. "I find I prefer Anthony to any man. The King of England himself would not make me so happy."

Rachel snorted back a laugh. "She's learning well, Caro, wouldn't you say? I daresay we've been less than perfect models, wouldn't you?"

Caroline chuckled at that. "I agree. Miss Brenna has most definitely come into her own, she has."

Abigaile broke in with, "Take yourself from our sight, Charlotte, before you make me retch."

Charlotte gave a silvery laugh. "It would be my pleasure. By the by, Abbie dear, you might wish to keep a tighter rein on Franklin. I understand he's been seen in the company of Eleanor Whittleby."

"Of course he has, you lackwit," Abigaile retorted, her liquidy brown eyes narrowing. "She is his cousin."

Two spots of color appeared on Charlotte's high cheekbones. She cleared her throat. "Well, I'd best be off. As I said, I'm meeting Jonathan and I wish not to keep him waiting."

"Your sheets might actually be cold by then."

Charlotte did not bother to answer as she swept off down the lane, spinning her parasol and humming softly as she rounded the corner.

Caroline turned to Brenna. "You'll not let her upset you, will you, dear? It was hardly worth the effort to chase her away."

"No," Brenna said, though she did feel her sadness return. "But, I am afraid I am growing most tired. I think it's best that I return home."

Abigaile sighed, draping an arm about her shoulders. "Let her trouble you not, love. Jealous, that one is. She has had grandiose notions of becoming Madam Radcliffe since she was barely a score in age. Notions, I might add, that not a one of us believed would ever come to fruition."

Brenna nodded. "I realize that, but she does have a way of ruining even the most joyous occasion."

Caroline smiled at her. "True, but dwell not on it, then. Let us get you home, shall we?" She paused for a moment, then smiled. "Oh, lest I forget, we have a gift for you."

Brenna's eyes widened as they fell upon the gleaming silver cup and brush Caroline held. The silver shone brilliantly in the bright sunshine, the year—1790 engraved on the front of the cup.

"We thought the silversmith could add the baby's name once you and Anthony have chosen one," Caroline said.

Brenna smiled at her. "I thank you all so very much. It's absolutely lovely, and I shall treasure it always."

Rachel gave her a warm embrace. "Now, Caroline, what say you take this poor thing home, that she might be able to catch a whit of rest."

"Of course," Caroline said, smiling at Brenna. "You heard the ever-so-pushy Madam Harte. Shall we get you home then?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

May arrived and Brenna's heart felt heavier still. Anthony had been gone four months and she was even more terrified that something had happened to delay him.

She awoke to a beautiful, sunny day with a strange ache in her back. Trying to ignore it, she dressed in a light peach-colored muslin gown. It was her habit now to have Louise set out her slippers the night before, as she could not see so much as her toes now.

"Miss Brenna?"

She turned to see Louise in the doorway. "Do come in, then, Louise. I am afraid I need your assistance in getting my fat feet into my slippers."

Louise smiled as she entered the room. As she drew nearer, though, her smile faded. "Are you well, Miss Brenna? You look a mite pale this morning."

Another pain rumbled through her back, but Brenna managed to nod. "I am fine, Louise. Now, if you would?"

"Of course, Miss Brenna." Louise knelt to ease the slippers onto Brenna's feet. Rising, she said, "I came to see if you need help making your way below."

Brenna exhaled heavily, feeling a mist of perspiration beading her forehead. The room swam before her.

"Oh!" She couldn't hold back her groan as the pains that had been cramping her back suddenly shifted to the front. Clutching her belly, she doubled over, reaching for the bedpost to support herself.

"Miss Brenna?" Louise was at her side at once, easing an arm about her waist. "Let me help you to bed, Miss Brenna."

Brenna shook her head as the pain receded. "I am fine, Louise. Please, let us go below, shall we?"

Louise's brow furrowed, her dark chocolate eyes worried. "I think you ought be in bed, madam. Let me

fetch Maddie, won't you?"

"Nay," Brenna gritted as another pain squeezed her. "I am—oh!"

As she went to take a step, she was horrified to see the gush of water bursting forth from between her legs to flood across the floor. The dizziness was even worse now, so bad she gritted her teeth, forcing her eyes to at least try to focus.

It was no use. Another pain swept over her, with such force that her knees threatened to give way and she sagged against the bed.

Nodding, she breathed, "Aye. Please, please fetch her."

"After I see you to bed."

"Nay. I needs clean up the mess."

"Miss Brenna."

Hearing the same tone from Louise that she often heard when Maddie scolded her, Brenna offered no further argument, but allowed Louise to help her to bed. Terror seized her as she sank back into the pillows. The baby was not due for another month. It was too early. Far too early.

She lay there, panting heavily as Louise hurried in search of Maddie, trying to fight off her growing panic as the pain seemed to grow, to intensify.

A few minutes passed, but to Brenna they felt like years before Maddie hurried into the room.

"The babe?" she asked, dragging a chair over to the bed.

Brenna moistened her dry lips. "Aye, Maddie. But it's too soon!"

"Easy, child." Maddie soothed, stroking her hair. "Ain't no one can explain when babies make their arrivals. Ain't nothing to worry about now."

"But Anthony..." Brenna groaned at a fresh pain cramping her insides. "He is not here yet..."

"Oh, child, this babe ain't goin' to wait for him, I'm afraid."

Tears stung Brenna's eyes. Shaking her head, she whimpered, "It's too soon...I wish to wait..."

Maddie dipped a rag into the basin of warm water she'd brought with her. "That ain't goin' to happen now, child. You needs relax now and let nature take its course."

With that, Louise and Mary came into the room to mop up the puddle on the floor. Louise came over to the bed. "Maddie, you want I should fetch Doctor Terrance?"

"Nay, child. You and me will do just fine. Reckon I've a bit more experience with birthing babies that that child himself."

Brenna went stiff, fighting off another pain, but unable to hold back her moan. Maddie mopped her forehead with the damp rag, murmuring, "You don't worry about being brave, Miss Brenna. Holler all you want. Ain't no one going to hear you but me, Mary, and Louise." Turning to Mary, she barked, "Fetch clean linens, child. And more water."

Mary bobbed her head. "At once, Maddie."

Louise wrapped her hand about the post at the foot of the bed. "What can I do, Maddie?"

"You get Miss Brenna a clean shimmy and gown to wear, and clean sheets. I'll get her dressed and you can change the bed for her."

"Nay," Brenna groaned, shaking her head slowly. "I wish not to move."

"Moving will help, child," Maddie told her, stroking her damp hair from her forehead. "Come now. Up you get."

Brenna gritted her teeth, slowly swinging her legs over the edge of the bed. Another contraction and she sucked her breath through her teeth, hunching over and grabbing her belly. "Ooooh..."

Maddie rubbed her back. "I know, child. I know it hurts. Just pant through like you been doin' and you'll be fine."

Brenna clenched her teeth so hard her jaw ached, only relaxing as the pain ebbed away. Then, she was able to stand, using Maddie to hold her up. The housekeeper tugged the soiled peach gown and chemise from her mistress, easing her into fresh clothes before helping her back to bed.

"You rest now, child," she murmured, bathing Brenna's forehead once more. "This will take a good part of the night, as the first ones always move the slowest." Turning to Louise, she said, "Go down and prepare a meal for Miss Brenna. Broth'd be best."

"I am not hungry," Brenna grouched.

"I know, but you needs eat to keep up your strength. It's a most strenuous undertaking, child."

Having no strength to argue, Brenna simply nodded. "As you wish."

Maddie must have seen her tense again, for she clicked her tongue against her teeth. "Go ahead and scream down the rafters if you want, love," she repeated.

Brenna remained silent until the pain swept off into memory. Then, clutching Maddie's hand, she whispered, "I am frightened, Maddie. Absolutely, utterly terrified."

"It's all right to feel that way, love. But you are doing fine now. Just remember that. You will be fine and won't Mister Anthony be jus' tickled when he arrives home to meet his son?"

"I've changed my mind, Maddie. I wish not to have this baby."

Maddie laughed at that. "Oh, love, you've no choice now."

Brenna sighed, shaking her head. "It's going to be the longest of nights."

"Aye, that it is. But it won't last forever. You will see."

It *was* lasting forever, despite Maddie's assurances to the contrary. Brenna had never felt such searing pain as the contractions that came swifter and harder with each passing hour.

She tried not to dwell on the fact that the child was a month early, that Anthony had yet to return home, that she thought she might actually die from the pain coursing through her. Instead, she struggled to think pleasant thoughts. A most futile effort.

That lasted mayhap an hour, then she was screaming, just as Maddie suggested she do. Exhaustion sank into her and sweat covered her from head to toe, no matter how often Maddie bathed her with warm water.

As dawn broke over the horizon, Maddie smiled down at her. "Time to start pushing, Miss Brenna."

Brenna shook her head, which actually lolled from side to side more than anything. She was too drained, too

spent, to even contemplate pushing. "I cannot...cannot do this..."

"You can, child. You've done amazing this far. It will be over ere you know it."

"You've been saying that...since *yesterday*!" Brenna sputtered, glaring at the housekeeper. "And so far, it's *not* over!"

"Bren?"

Her heart skipped a beat as she thought she heard the deep reverberation of Anthony's voice echoing down the hall. Clutching Maddie's hand, she struggled to sit up. "Anthony! Is he home? Maddie, check, won't you? Mayhap he made it?"

Maddie shook her head. "Merely your imagination, love," she murmured, easing Brenna back against the pillows.

With that, the bedroom door flew open to slam into the wall and Brenna's imagination filled the doorway.

Relief flooded her as her eyes fell upon the husband she'd not seen in nearly five months. Dressed in black breeches and flowing white shirt, now sporting long hair and a full beard, Anthony dropped his frock coat on the floor in the doorway as he rushed to her.

Maddie stepped aside as he fell to his knees at Brenna's bedside and caught her hand in his. "I told you I'd not miss this," he murmured, reaching his free hand out to smooth her hair from her face.

Tears of joy mingled with those of pain as she pulled her hand free to throw her arms about his neck, a new energy bursting through her. "Thank the Lord," she whispered through her sobs. "Thank the Lord."

Tony eased an arm beneath her, cradling her close. "I would not break my promise to be here, love. You ought know this by now."

"But this wasn't supposed to happen for another month."

"Shh," he whispered, brushing his lips over her forehead. "Think not of it, love. All will be fine. This is my son, remember, and Radcliffes are of hearty stock."

She stiffened against him as another contraction crushed her, unable to keep her fingernails from sinking into his neck and cry from ringing in his ears. "Mister Anthony, might be best if you went below and poured yourself a big glass of that whiskey you so fond of. It's goin' to get ugly in here."

He ignored Maddie's suggestion. "I will remain right here."

She clicked her tongue against her teeth. "Ain't no place for a man, sir. With all due respect, you got no business bein' here."

He eased Brenna back, turning to glare at the housekeeper. "This is my child, Maddie. Therefore, that makes it my business."

Brenna screamed again and Tony turned back to her at once. Threading his fingers through hers, he gave her hand a squeeze. "What can I do, love?" he whispered.

She glared at him. "Never touch me again."

He chuckled, brushing her lips with a kiss. "I hope that's only the pain talking."

"At the moment, Anthony, I am *not* thinking nice thoughts about you and your blasted skills!"

Tony ignored Maddie's chortles behind him, giving Brenna a smile. "If you wish me to leave, you need only say so."

"Wish you to leave? Oh-ho, I think not. I wish you to suffer right along with me, that's what I wish."

Gradually the pain ebbed away and she sighed softly, sinking into him. Gazing up, she murmured, "I did not mean that."

He squeezed her hand. "Of course you did. And it's quite all right, love. Please, feel free to call me any name you wish. At the moment, there is nothing you could say to me that would hurt me any more than seeing you in this condition does."

"Oh!" Her scream echoed through the room and Anthony went stark white at the primal shriek of agony.

He managed through an hour before her screams finished him off. Turning to Maddie, he said, "Mayhap you were right."

"Told you. A man ain't got no business in this room right now."

Turning back to Brenna, he smoothed a hand over her forehead. "Love?"

"Aye?"

He bent to kiss her softly. "I will be back in but a moment."

"Tony?"

"Yes, love?"

"Stay down below until it's over, won't you? You look as though you might swoon any moment and I need Maddie right now."

"Bren, I belong here."

"Nay," she told him sternly. "You needs go below. Go find Jackson and get thoroughly drunk tonight. Please."

Kissing her once more, he whispered, "Are you certain?"

She smiled at him, reaching up to touch the black fur of his beard. "I am certain. But do shave first, won't you?"

"You don't like my new appearance? I thought it rather dashing, myself."

"You look like a pirate," she giggled, clasping his hand to bring it to her cheek. "Now, scat. As Maddie has been so fond of telling me, it'll be over ere you know it." At his arched brow, she nodded, "Aye. I believe her not either. But do go."

"I will be in the parlor should you need me, love. For anything."

"Scat."

He reluctantly released her hand then, and did as she asked. She breathed a sigh of relief that was cut short by a sharp, powerful contraction. Her sigh became a scream and she was glad Tony had left. Lord only knows what he'd do otherwise. That was her last coherent thought, though, as every muscle in her body seized and she focused her energy on the task ahead.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

It was indeed a long day. Jackson finally arrived after noon and Tony was well into his cups by then. Still, he managed to smile at the woman accompanying his friend. "Forgive me my lack of manners, my lady," he slurred, reaching for the wall to steady himself as the room suddenly tilted on him.

Jackson rolled his eyes. "You might wish to tell *the lady* where she might find her *daughter*, Tony."

Dara McIntyre gave Tony a sympathetic smile. "You need only point me in the right direction, Captain."

"Up the stairs and follow the screams," Tony groaned, now leaning on Jackson as he gestured towards the stairs. "You cannot possibly miss them." He frowned, reaching up to rub his eyes. "And then someone take me out behind the house and shoot me, won't you?"

Dara laughed as she brushed by him, patting his shoulder and then hurrying towards the stairs. Gathering her skirts, she took the steps two at a time, disappearing as Jackson grinned at Tony. "You realize, you will have made Brenna even happier now."

Tony shook his head. "That's the very least I could do. Listen to her. *I* did that to her. Damn it, I swear I'll not touch her again, should this day ever end."

Easing an arm about Tony's waist, Jackson guided him back into the library. "I think that's a bit hasty, that vow, Tony. You might just regret it, once this is all over."

"Christ," Tony growled, sprawling across the sofa once more. "I do not ever wish to go through this again."

"Think you that you could keep your hands to yourself, Tony?" Jackson asked as Albert came into the room with a fresh bottle. "Ah, perfect. I thank you, Albert."

"You're most welcome, Mister Jackson."

Tony shook his head. "I only wish it was possible

now."

Jackson settled into the chair across from the sofa. "And you did not even get to settle your score. Nature took care of it for you."

"Aye, do not remind me," Tony growled. "So much time away from here, away from Bren, and for what? To find the man dead of a broken neck from a fall down the stairs."

"Well, it's all well and good. Now you can concentrate on your wife."

Tony smiled at that—a bright, beaming smile. "My wife. Know you how I love the way that sounds?"

"Oh to have some way to actually make you eat those blasted words spoken so long ago."

"I was a fool, Jackson. A complete ass, you realize. I should be on my knees, thanking Dara McIntyre for her not-so-subtle insistence."

"You have a lifetime to thank her, Tony."

Another scream slit the air, this one louder, more agonized than any thus far. Tony jumped, lunging from the sofa to start towards the door.

Jackson was on his feet in a flash, grabbing his friend about the waist to drag him back into the library. "You go crashing up there now, you drunken fool, and your wife'll never forgive you."

"Let go of me," Tony rumbled, still trying to get to the doorway. "Don't make me hit you, Jackson."

"In your condition, Tony, I think you'd miss the broad side of a barn." Jackson let out a chuckle as he dragged him back once more. That chuckle became a groan as Tony continued to fight him. "Christ, is there *any* fat on you?"

"Release me at once or you *will* regret it."

Jackson heaved then, almost tossing Tony onto the sofa. Crossing his arms and fighting to catch his breath, he stood over his friend. "You pull that again, Tony, and *you* will regret it. And try to lose some of that muscle before you lunge again, won't you? Wrestling you is like trying to wrestle a stallion into submission. How is it you've not crushed your wife?"

Tony grinned, quite comfortable on his sofa. "Because I'd much rather love her than wrestle with her, fool. I am as soft and gentle as a man can be with her."

Jackson rolled his eyes, reaching for the bottle Albert left on the trestle table. Popping the cork, he lifted it to his lips, took a long pull, and then passed it to Tony.

They continued passing the bottle back and forth until Jackson finally said, "Mayhap if you actually pass out I can breathe more easily, knowing I won't have to wrestle you back in here."

"That will never happen," Tony declared, swallowing a mouthful of whiskey without so much as a flinch. In fact, he was beginning to feel far *too* sober. "I have always had the ability to drink you under the table, my friend. What think you this day will be any different?"

Before Jackson could answer, a door slammed and Maddie rushed down the stairs. She skidded to a stop in the library doorway, smoothing the wrinkles from her apron as she said, "Mister Anthony?" in a most respectful voice.

He sat up, his mouth going dry and his heart ceasing to beat as he said, "Aye?"

"You might want to come up now."

He leaped off the sofa once more, only this time Jackson made no move to stop him. "Is everything well, Maddie?"

Her face relaxed into a beaming grin spreading from ear to ear. "Aye, sir. Everything is fine. It's over and done, just as I told you."

The air seemed to rush from his body as he whispered, "And?"

"You've a son, Mister Anthony. A red, wrinkled boy screaming his fool head off for his momma."

Tony let out a whoop which echoed through the room. Grabbing Maddie about the waist, he swung her wildly about the room, laughing and crying at the same time.

"Mister Anthony!" Maddie screeched, also laughing wildly. "Put me down 'fore I am sick!"

Tony dropped her then, grabbing Jackson, who immediately threw up his hands and said, "Swing me and I will level you. And why are you wasting time with me for anyhow? Get upstairs, you bloody dolt. Lord knows you were ever so anxious to do just that an hour ago."

Tony grabbed him in a bear hug anyhow, making no

move to wipe the tears streaking his face as he said, "Holy hell...a son...She gave me a son..."

Maddie patted his shoulder lightly. "Go on up, Mister Anthony, 'fore Miss Brenna falls asleep. She is powerful tired, you realize."

Tony nodded, moving to the doorway. After one last glance at Maddie and Jackson, he all but threw himself up the stairs.

The door to Brenna's room was closed and he rapped lightly on it, smiling at her soft, "Come in."

Pushing open the door, his eyes went to her immediately. She was dressed in a fresh muslin gown of palest green, and her hair had been brushed out, tumbling over her shoulders in a fall of auburn silk.

In her arms, he could see the small blanketed bundle, and his stomach immediately jumbled into a tangle of knots. "Bren?"

Dara McIntyre smiled warmly at him, skirting the foot of the bed to approach him. "Do come in, Tony."

He stepped into the room, closing the door behind him to face his mother-in-law. She slid her arms about his waist, giving him a squeeze. "You'll not touch her, eh? I do believe that was what you said before marrying her, is it not, Papa?"

He smiled and shrugged. "Your daughter is most irresistible, Madam McIntyre. I could not help myself."

"She is right, you know. You are a devil," Dara teased, stepping back to move around him as she went to the door. "I will be back in a while. Go on now. Meet your son, won't you?"

Brenna smiled up at Tony as he came around to her side of the bed. "You've not yet shaved."

He rubbed his beard ruefully. "Give me time, love. I've been a mite preoccupied this day." He dropped to his knees beside the bed for the second time that day. "Let me see him, won't you, sweetheart?"

"Of course." She held the infant in one arm, lifting the blanket away from his face as she tilted him in Anthony's direction. "He looks like you, wouldn't you say?"

Once more, Tony's eyes filled with tears as they fell upon the red, wrinkled little face of his firstborn child. Already, the boy had a shock of black hair and when his eyes opened, it was to reveal their startling cobalt shade, exactly like his father's.

He tried to speak, but the words lodged in his throat. Clearing it, he rasped, "He is beautiful, love."

"Aye, that he is," she murmured, nodding and gazing down at the infant. "I still keep counting out ten little fingers and ten little toes. We work well together, I think."

Tony rose then, bending to capture her lips in a deep kiss. "Ah, love, *you* did the work. My part was but a few minutes of incredible pleasure. You deserve all the credit."

"I think not. Without those few minutes of incredible pleasure, this little boy would not be here." She winced as she shifted, but patted the bed beside her. "Sit and mayhap I'll even let you hold him."

Tony did as he was told, easing down beside her, trying hard not to jostle her too badly. "How do you feel, love?"

"I have never been so tired in my entire life," she admitted with a soft laugh, resting her head against his shoulder. "But I feel as though I could run to the ends of the earth and back again before dawn."

The infant whimpered. Brenna shifted him in her arms, glancing up at Tony and whispering, "Would you like to hold him, then?"

"Aye. I would."

She smiled at his almost breathless whisper. "Hold your arms as such." She waited for him to shift into position, then set the bundle in his arms.

Instinctively, Tony brought the boy close to his chest. Gazing down into his son's eyes, he felt a love so powerful, he thought it might actually knock him from the bed. "My son," he whispered in disbelief as the boy blinked his cobalt eyes up at him.

"Our son, love," she replied teasingly, slipping her arm through his. "Remember that, won't you?"

"Always," he whispered, turning tender eyes to her. "Have you a name for him?"

"Not yet. I thought there might be something special you wished to name him."

Tony smiled. "You will allow me to name him?"

She nodded. "I think it would be wonderful. If I approve, of course."

He chuckled as she elbowed him gently in the ribs, and then he murmured, "Jason, love. His name should be Jason."

"After your brother? Why not Richard, then?"

He gave her a sad smile. "Jason and I were much closer. He was not only a brother, love. He was my best friend as well."

She pressed her lips together at that, and slowly nodded. "Then Jason he shall be. If it won't pain you to think of him, that is."

"Nay, love. Instead it will bring me great happiness." He leaned over to kiss Jason's warm forehead. "And you need a middle name, little one."

He glanced up at her. "What was your father's name, Bren?"

She grimaced. "Seamus."

"Oh."

"I like it not either. I loved my father, but never cared for his name."

"Your stepfather was McIntyre, am I right?"

"Aye."

"What was your name before that?"

She smiled. "O'Neill."

"Jason O'Neill, then," Tony declared, smiling down at her. "Jason O'Neill Radcliffe. I rather like it."

"As do I. It's a good, strong name." She squeezed Tony's arm then, and gazed up at him. "I can hardly believe that you are truly here, Tony. I've missed you so."

He nuzzled her. "I have missed you even more, lady. Know you that?"

With that, Maddie bustled into the room. "I've a sugar tit all ready for this boy, least until his momma gets her milk in."

Brenna nodded as Maddie took the infant from Tony. "Will he be all right?"

"He's early, to be sure, but listen to those screams," Maddie chuckled as the baby howled lustily. "He'll be just fine, Miss Brenna. You rest now, you and Mister Anthony. It's time for you to be alone."

And she left then, closing the door firmly behind her.

Kimberly Nee

Tony turned to Brenna and drew her into his arms. "Ah, love, I promised you I'd not miss this."

"And you brought my mother here?"

"I did."

"Thank you."

"Do not thank me, Bren. That was also something I should have done from the first. And I might have, had I not wasted so much time being the fool I was." He tightened his arms about her, kissing the top of her head. "And I am not leaving again, Brenna. Not ever. You are going to grow most tired of falling over me, I am afraid."

"Never fear that," she murmured as he stretched out beside her. It felt so good to lie there with him, wrapped in his arms, once again. Her heart soared higher than the sun as he kissed her forehead. "And what mean you, you are not leaving?"

"Jackson is most capable at the helm and I far prefer dry land beneath my feet these days." He cradled her gingerly, afraid he might hurt her by moving her too much. "As it was, the first voyage to Ireland was going to be my last. It's simply the reason behind it that's changed."

She snuggled closer. "I'll not break, you know, if you hold me the way you used to."

"I did not wish to cause you further pain. Do I dare hope you've forgiven me for what I have already caused?"

She laughed then, a drowsy laugh, as she rested her head against his chest. "Aye, love. The foul names stopped the moment that boy was placed in my arms and the loving ones have since replaced them."

"That's good to know," he murmured, letting his fingers move absently over her hair. "Sleep, love. I think it's a rest you've well earned."

"I am not asleep, Tony. At least, not yet."

He smiled at the thickness in her voice. "I'd say it's not far off."

"I am a bit tired, I am afraid."

He kissed the top of her head. "Sleep, then. I promise you, I will be right here when you awake."

She lifted her head at that to give him a sleepy smile. "Promise you this?"

He nodded. "I promise you. Your days of sleeping

alone are over, lady. I'll not set foot on the *Pegasus* against, lest you and our son are with me."

"Hmm...it would be nice, mayhap, to share another adventure."

He chuckled, drawing her closer still. "Ah, love, no adventure could even come close to the one which brought you into my life."

She smiled at that and he sighed softly, feeling for the first time that he'd made the right decision. Home was where he belonged and where he fully intended to remain.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

When Brenna opened her eyes, it was morning and Anthony was sound asleep beside her. She smiled as she eased herself up onto one elbow to gaze down at him, unable to believe he was truly there beside her once more. His soft snores made her smile even more. She had so missed them.

With his dark hair now long and shaggy, he still reminded her of a dashing pirate. His beard was not as dark, however, and she was more than a little surprised to find streaks of red and gold hidden amongst the ebony strands.

She touched it with a curious finger, expecting it to be coarse, rough, and was pleasantly surprised to find it was neither. Instead, it was soft, almost silky, much like the hair on his head. It gave him an air of fierceness that brought a giggle to her lips when she recalled how tenderly he held his son the day before.

She shifted, wincing as she did so. A mite sore, she thought with a grimace. Still, she felt wonderful all the same.

The desire to see her child rose, so she sat up slowly to push back the covers. As the tick shifted, Anthony lifted his head to growl, "Where do you think you are going, my lady?"

She inched to the edge of the bed, wincing as she moved. "To fetch Jason. He must be hungry by now and I think I am ready to nurse him."

He opened his eyes completely, smiling as he rolled onto his side. "Rest, sweetheart. I will bring him to you. You need not be up walking about just yet."

"You are not going to fuss over me *now*, are you?"

"Love, I wasn't here to do any fussing before now. I've a bit of lost time to make up for, don't you think?" He sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. "Now, get you back against those pillows before I do it for you."

Swallowing a frustrated growl, she did as he ordered, sinking back into the mountain of pillows, watching as he stripped off his clothes from the previous day and moved to don fresh. This time, her sigh was wistful as she watched his bronzed skin appear from beneath the linen. His muscles bunched beneath his skin with each movement.

"Now, this is a sight I have missed terribly," she murmured, feeling no shyness as her eyes slowly moved over him. It was a visual feast and one she wished to indulge.

He grinned at her over one shoulder as he moved to the wardrobe. "Is that so, lady? I see no hint of a blush now."

"I am far too enamored of your beauty to blush."

"My beauty?"

She grinned at the surprise ringing in his voice. "I know not what else to call it, Tony. You are a fine-looking man."

He let his breeches fall to the floor before saying, "That sounds far more masculine than calling me beautiful," with a teasing tone laced through his words. "And *never* use that word when others are around."

"But you *are* beautiful, Anthony. Solid and sculpted." Thinking back to their days on board the *Pegasus*, she sighed, "I remember once thinking of you as Hercules, Achilles, and Adonis all rolled into one man."

It was his turn to laugh as he dressed in buff colored breeches and a fine white lawn shirt. "Is that so?" he asked, smoothing his shirt about his hips.

"Well, it was a while ago," she amended with a grin. "And you had not the beard."

He rubbed the lower half of his face. "Do you hate it so much?"

She shook her head. "Nay. Just the opposite. I think it makes you look fierce."

He chuckled again, moving to sit on her side of the bed. "Truth, Bren. If you hate it, tell me and I'll remove it."

"You would?"

"Aye. It itches something terrible."

As if to prove his point, he reached up to scratch his cheek. Brenna laughed, swatting his hand away as she said, "If it bothers you so, why keep it?"

"Why indeed?" he said ruefully. "I know not why." He leaned over to nuzzle her. "Does it scratch?"

"Hardly," she giggled as it tickled her neck. "It's quite soft, actually."

With that, there came a tap on the door. "Miss Brenna?"

Brenna sat up at the sounds of Jason's yowls. "Do come in, Maddie."

The door swung open and the housekeeper came in with a very red-faced baby boy. "I think he's looking for his momma."

Brenna felt the heat creep into her cheeks as Maddie came 'round to her side of the bed to place Jason in her arms. "Where is my mother, Maddie?"

"She is finishing breakfast and nagging Mary to fix you a tray," Maddie replied with a laugh. "Now I see where you get it from, Miss Brenna. She every bit the spitfire you turned out to be."

Brenna smiled at that, snuggling Jason closer. "Aye, I suppose I am, now," she said, casting a sidelong glance at Anthony.

He leaned over to tickle Jason's chin. "Go on, then, love. I mind not sharing you."

Maddie shook her head. "Mister Anthony, you are terrible!"

"What? It's not as though I've never seen her, Maddie. Do you think this was a virgin birth?"

Both Maddie and Brenna gasped at his bluntness, but he was unapologetic as he said, "If it bothers Bren, I'll leave." He turned his blue-eyed gaze to her. "Do you wish me to leave?"

Jason's howls grew louder and Brenna had no choice but to part her gown and lift her son to her breast. Maddie leaned over, clicking her tongue against her teeth as she showed Brenna the proper way to nurse.

She flinched as the baby clamped onto her, and then let out a soft sigh as she settled back against the pillows. "Nay, Tony. I do not mind if you stay."

Maddie shook her head at that. "Ain't fitting, if you

ask me."

Brenna gave the housekeeper a level look. "Thank you, Maddie."

Maddie muttered under her breath as she bustled from the room, but Brenna knew she hadn't imagined the housekeeper's smile as she left. Then, she turned her attention back to her son, busily kneading her breast with his tiny fists.

Glancing up at Anthony, she was more than a little surprised to see a flush creeping into *his* cheeks. "Tony? Is something the matter?"

He jumped as if she'd startled him, and gave her a sheepish grin. "Nay, love. It is just that this is something I've never seen and it's quite amazing. You have done an incredible thing, Brenna."

"I've done only what every other mother has since time began," she told him, smoothing a hand over Jason's head. "Please, Tony, do not try to glorify me. I do not wish to be anything other than your wife."

"Ah, but love, you are not simply my wife. You are the mother of my son. That raises you in my eyes."

"I don't wish to be raised aloft, like a saint or something equally silly. I am the same person I was when you left back in January."

He leaned over then, brushing her lips with his, before whispering, "Does this mean my vixen still lurks inside the serene mother?"

"Tony, you have no idea how much I have missed you."

He grinned, leaning close to nuzzle her. "Aye, I'll wager it's close to how much I've missed you, Madam Radcliffe. It's been far too long since I've felt you beneath me."

A shiver tore down her spine as his lips tickled her ear. She sighed softly, leaning against him. "I don't think that would be a wise idea just yet."

"I am not so selfish, love. I can wait until you've fully recovered. As I said once before, I will remain content just holding you in my arms."

Brenna chuckled, remembering the night he'd uttered those same words. "Aye, and if I recall, it wasn't ten minutes later that you were making love to me." "True. Very true. But I can assure you that'll not be the case now, love." He sighed as she shifted Jason to her right breast. "It's your call, when you feel up to being loved again, sweetheart. I care not how long it takes."

She sighed again. Another day was too long, as far as she was concerned. Still, she knew it wasn't a good idea, so soon. It would be at least several weeks before she would be up to it and she knew it. Still, that didn't mean she couldn't be a bit disappointed. Leaning into him, she whispered, "Well, I *do* care."

Tony threw back his head then and let out a roar of laughter that startled Jason, who promptly began wailing. Brenna shot her husband a look as she soothed the infant and guided him back.

"Sorry, love," Tony whispered, his fingers smoothing through her hair once more. "It's a relief to know my lusty bride has not left forever."

"Not left, Tony. Simply taking a little rest."

"A rest she well deserves," a third voice broke in.

They looked up to see Dara standing in the doorway, a smile playing at her lips. "I do hope I'm not interrupting."

Tony grinned, rising from the bed. "Of course not. I was just getting ready to head down to the harbor, actually. So I leave my precious bride in your very capable hands, Madam McIntyre."

Dara shook her head. "You are a terrible flirt, Tony Radcliffe. Your wife sits only feet away, nursing your son, and yet you bat your eyes at a woman my age."

Tony winked at Brenna over his shoulder. "Ah, it's because the mother is truly as lovely as the daughter."

He laughed then, ducking as Brenna hurled a pillow at him. "I am but teasing, love. Know you there is not a woman alive who compares with you." He moved around to kiss her lightly on the mouth. "I will be back later. You stay right here and rest, understand me?"

"Aye," Brenna said, giving him a brilliant smile. "Of course, my lord."

He grinned at her from the doorway. "Tony, love. It should always be Tony."

"Scat." Brenna grinned at her mother as she heard Tony chuckle his way down the corridor. "He is a scamp, you know."

"Aye. Why think you I chose him from the first? I knew back then he would be the wisest choice for you."

"Aye, and he would have, had he wished to marry me from the first."

"Oh, but that matters not now, love," Dara told her, reaching to pull her daughter's gown closed as Brenna lifted Jason to her shoulder. "And see you how right I was?"

"Oh, Momma, be not fooled."

Dara's brow furrowed. "I am afraid I do not understand."

"He still has not told me he loves me."

"But it is quite apparent that he does, love. Why would you think otherwise?"

Brenna smoothed a hand over Jason's back, and then patted him briskly. "I simply wish to hear it. I know it's silly, but it's the only way I might believe it."

"Oh, you put too much stock in words, Brenna. You always have," Dara scolded her gently, reaching out to brush a wayward tendril from her face. "Words are so very easy to say, but actions speak so much louder. And besides, when it comes to saying those three words, they are quite difficult when a body means them. Tony has shown me how greatly he cares for you and I've been here but a day."

"And how is it you *are* here?" Brenna asked, wincing as Jason spit up down her back.

Dara chuckled as she took the infant and reached for the rag on the table. Handing it to Brenna, she said, "Your husband, love. He and Jackson arrived at Hillcrest and would not take no for an answer. Not that I would have said no, but there was no chance for me to say anything. He simply turned up and whisked me from the house, much like he did you."

"And Charles was not troubled by this?" Brenna scrubbed at the damp spot on her back. Still, her mother's words were a surprise. She frowned up at Dara. "Is there something you are not telling me?"

"Aye, love. Charles is dead."

"What is this?"

Dara nodded. "It happened shortly after the new

year. He took a terrible tumble down the steps and broke his neck."

Brenna groaned, sinking back into her pillows. "So Tony never had his chance, did he?"

"His chance?"

She nodded. "That was the reason he was in Ireland to begin with, Momma. He said he had to settle the score."

Dara frowned. "The score?"

Brenna gazed down at Jason as she murmured, "Did Charles ever hit you?"

Dara seemed taken aback by the whispered question. Shaking her head, she said, "Nay, love. Not even when I told him you were on your way to America. He shouted down the rafters, and several lovely pieces of crystal suffered, but that was the extent of it." Her brow knit, deep lines creasing her forehead. "Why?"

Brenna pressed her lips together. Dara knew nothing of the abuse she had suffered at her stepfather's hands, did not know the reason why Tony felt he had such a score to settle, and she was unsure as to whether or not she ought to confess.

Dara made the decision for her, smoothing another tendril back and murmuring, "Did he hit you, darling?"

Blinking back sudden tears, Brenna nodded slowly. "Every chance he had, Momma. Why do you think Tony was so determined to seek revenge?"

Dara's eyes closed as she pulled her daughter into her arms. "Oh, precious," she murmured, kissing the top of her head. "I had no idea, love. Why did you not come to me? I would have put a stop to it at once."

Brenna heard the naked pain in her mother's voice and snuggled closer, her head resting against the warmth of her breast. "I was terrified of what he would do. I thought, mayhap, he might kill me."

"And Tony knows of this?"

She nodded. "He discovered it before we were married."

"He did?"

"That first morning, when he helped me dress. A bruise I could not cover. He pestered me about it until I finally told him."

Dara tightened her arms about her daughter. "That

bastard."

"Tony?"

"Nay, love. Charles. Had I but known, I would have taken us far, far away from there." Dara squeezed her closer. "I am so sorry I failed you."

"Oh, but you did nothing of the sort," Brenna interjected, pulling away from her mother and shaking her head. "If I had said something, had you taken us from Hillcrest, I'd have not met Tony."

"And has he ever raised a hand?" Dara's voice was taut.

"Not one in anger, nay. He has never touched me in any way that was not loving." Brenna smiled then, shaking her head. "He did everything he could to make certain I knew I'd never have to fear him. It was the perfect choice you made, marrying me to him."

"Well, he said not a whit of that to me. I was told he just wished to bring a smile to your face, that he knew how you missed me."

It touched her to hear that Tony had done such a wonderful thing for her without her even mentioning it. He certainly was full of surprises, her handsome American, she thought, shaking her head.

"And if *that* proves nothing, I am at quite the loss," Dara went on, rocking Jason, her voice dropping into a soothing lullaby.

Brenna smiled as she sang along with her mother. It was an Irish lullaby, one Dara used to sing to her when she was a child, and one Brenna remembered at once.

She felt a sense of utter peace settle over her as she sank back and watched her mother tenderly rock her grandson. Dara was right. It mattered not what words were spoken, but what actions were taken, and Brenna had to admit that Anthony had done everything in his actions to shout out what he felt for her.

Still, she did so long to hear him speak the words. Mayhap, one day he would. As long as she had that to hold on to, it wouldn't be so bad. Nothing would be.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Three weeks after Jason's birth, Brenna came into the parlor to find Anthony on the floor with his son. The baby lay on his back on a thick blanket, waving his arms and kicking his legs. Anthony lay on his belly beside him, looking completely enamored of him.

She paused in the doorway, leaning up against it the way she'd seen Anthony do so many times—arms folded over her chest, legs crossed at the ankles, a tender smile playing at her lips. It was such a wonderful thing to see and she wished she had some way to capture it forever.

Jason gurgled and Anthony chuckled, leaning over to whisper something into the boy's ear. Brenna stepped into the room then. "Sharing secrets, are you?"

Anthony grinned at her over one shoulder. "No secrets, love. Just telling the little imp how wild I am about him."

She smiled as she plunked down beside him, leaning over to run her fingers through the hair falling about his shoulders. "And how wild are you about him?"

Anthony's eyes held an unabashed look of love as he gazed from his son to his wife. "As wild as I am about his mother."

Her toes curled in her slippers at his low growl. "Is that so, Captain Radcliffe?"

"Aye, love. That is so."

He reached for her then, drawing her down flat beside him and leaning over to cover her lips with his. They were soft and gentle as they moved against hers, his tongue delving down to part them and caress hers in a long, silken stroke.

She wound her arms about his neck, pulling him closer still, her fingers threading through his hair. She couldn't help her sigh as he pulled away to trail soft kisses along her throat, down over her breastbone. Jason gurgled again and Anthony's chuckle was a warm rush on her skin. "Why does this feel so odd?" he whispered, pulling away to regard her tenderly.

"Mayhap because our son is only a foot away?"

He nodded. "I suppose I ought to restrain myself now, shouldn't I?"

"Love, he will hardly remember a kiss," she told him, reaching up to curve her hand against his cheek. It was smooth again, as he'd shaved the beard two weeks earlier.

He held her gaze for a long moment. "Bren, do you know how happy I am at this moment?"

"I might wager a guess."

He brushed a kiss over her forehead. "Remember you, what you said to me the day I left?"

As if she could ever forget. Still, she did not say this, but instead murmured, "I do."

"Do you still feel that way, love?"

"How could I not?"

Gathering her in his arms, he kissed her again, whispering, "My response was not what it should have been, sweetheart." Her heart soared as he caught her face in one hand. Finally, she would hear the words that would truly make him hers. "It was all wrong, in fact. What I should have said was—"

"Mister Anthony?"

Anthony and Brenna groaned at the same time as Maddie came into the parlor. Lifting his head to glare at the housekeeper, he asked, "What is it, Maddie?"

"You and Miss Brenna have a visitor."

Brenna knew by Maddie's tone that she would regret asking, but had no choice. "And who might that be?"

"Miss Charlotte."

Anthony swore beneath his breath as he pulled away. "Very well, Maddie. Show her in."

Maddie looked none too happy, but did as she was told. She left the parlor, only to return moments later with Charlotte Madison.

Charlotte gave them a smile as she stepped into the parlor. "I was on my way into town, when it occurred to me I've yet to see Anthony's son. An oversight I do so hope you'd both be willing to overlook."

Brenna gritted her teeth at that syrupy Anthony's

son, but let it pass as she forced a pleasant smile to her lips. "Of course, Miss Madison. Do come in, then."

Shifting Jason to her lap, Brenna sank into Anthony as he drew his arm her shoulder. Charlotte marched directly to them, gathering her skirts, and crouching down to put her face directly into Jason's.

The infant stared at Charlotte for a moment. He made his displeasure known by letting out a howl that would pierce even the strongest eardrums. Brenna gathered him close as he began to wail. "You startled him, Miss Madison. Please step back, won't you?"

Charlotte looked quite horrified, much to Brenna's amusement. "Of course," she replied, hurriedly backing up and plunking down on the edge of the blanket in a flutter of pale green muslin. "Might I hold him, then? If I promise not to scare him, that is."

Brenna bit her bottom lip. She knew it was silly, but the last thing she wanted to do was hand over her son to that harlot. It was unlikely Charlotte was about to grab the baby and dash off with him, but she was reluctant all the same. Still, determined to not let Charlotte rattle her, Brenna calmed Jason and then passed him over. "Do be careful. Remember to support his head."

"Of course," Charlotte replied, holding Jason somewhat stiffly, half on and half off her lap. "I would never do anything to jeopardize Anthony's son."

Anthony squeezed Brenna around the waist, winking at her as he said, "I never would have guessed you to be fond of children, Charlotte."

She gave them a taut smile. "Now why would you think that?" she asked, still holding Jason as if he was a sack of flour. "I adore children. Absolutely adore them."

Jason blinked wide eyes at her, staring at her as he lay there, looking rather uncomfortable. Brenna held her breath, waiting to see if he'd begin screaming again.

Charlotte gave Anthony a wicked grin. "I would know at once he is your son, Anthony. He looks so much like you."

"Aye, but he has his mother's temperament," he replied, giving Brenna another squeeze. "A bit of Irish temper in that boy."

"It could be worse," Charlotte remarked offhandedly.

"He could have been born with red hair." She settled Jason on her lap, tickling him under the chin. "But no, you have beautiful black hair like your papa, do you not?"

Anger flared through Brenna. How dare this woman come into *her* home and insult her in such a manner! Her hands curled into fists and she was about to reply in kind when Anthony broke in.

"Ah, I happen to adore redheads myself," he said, giving Brenna another tender glance. "They are every bit as fiery as legend would have you believe and I do prefer a bit of fire in my woman."

Now Charlotte glared at Brenna, who held her stare easily. Jason began to cry then and Charlotte looked as though she were about to panic.

"If I might," Brenna said, holding out her arms to take Jason back.

"Of course." Charlotte quickly passed the infant to her. Then, she smiled up at Anthony. "You should be proud of such a fine boy."

"Believe me, Charlotte, I am. And I am damned glad I made it back in time for his birth. I would not have wanted to miss that for the world."

Charlotte's smile faded at that and she got to her feet. "Aye, I suppose it was rather important. Well, I must be going now. I've a new beau, you see, and he is meeting me at Croft's. But I did have something for the little angel, if you'd not mind."

"Not at all," Brenna replied, eyes on Jason as she gently rocked him on her lap.

Charlotte held out a small china rattle. "It isn't much, but I do know babies like rattles."

Brenna smiled. "I thank you, Miss Madison."

"As if I'd not have something for Anthony's firstborn," Charlotte said with a silvery laugh. "Well, I must be going now. It was so nice to meet your son. He is a handsome boy, much like his father."

Anthony wasn't paying the slightest bit of attention now, as he took Jason from his wife. Without waiting to bid them farewell, Charlotte merely turned and stomped out of the room.

Brenna smiled as the front door slammed. "I almost feel sorry for her. She has yet to get over losing you, I

suppose."

"Waste not your time, love," Anthony told her, shaking his head. "That woman will bring happiness to no man and I am forever grateful for your mother's stubborn streak." As he spoke, he set Jason on the blanket between them once more. "Her stubbornness brought me the greatest gift I could ever receive, love."

Her heart skipped a beat at that. "Is that so?"

"Aye." He gave her a devilish smile. "My son."

"Anthony!"

He laughed then, pulling her in for a kiss. "Ah, love, you know I am but teasing."

"Well then, you may make it up to me this evening, after this rascal has gone to sleep for the night."

His belly tightened at her husky whisper. "Is that so?"

"Aye, Captain Radcliffe. It's been far too long since you've last pinned me beneath you."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

As she readied for bed that night, Brenna felt every bit the nervous virgin on her wedding night. It had been so many months since she and Anthony last made love, and she was more than a mite apprehensive about the way her body had changed since the last time he'd seen it. She was softer, curvier, now and she could only hope he was as entranced by that as he had been before her pregnancy.

She sat at her vanity, carefully brushing the knots from her hair. Her back stiffened though, when the door opened and she spied Anthony, reflected in the glass, as he closed the door and then leaned back against it. He looked so handsome, standing there in the inky black breeches and fine white lawn shirt, his eyes glittering in the light.

He said nothing, but merely watched her with those sensual blue eyes. A slow heat filled her, but she tried to ignore it as she continued brushing out her hair. It was hard to remain natural, as she felt the heat from his stare all but burning into her, but she managed.

She smiled then, setting the brush down and saying, "You could come closer, you know. I'll not throw anything at you."

He stood there a moment longer, then smiled as he approached. Halting behind her, he reached down, gathering her hair in his hands. "Ah, love. Know you how beautiful you are?" he whispered, letting her hair spill through his fingers. "I have anticipated this moment more than any other before now."

Her eyes closed at the rush of tingles coursing through her as he ran his fingers through her hair, massaging along her scalp. The nervousness was still there, that fear, but it was so easy to let that fall by the wayside as his fingers came down to caress her neck. She couldn't hold back her sigh, leaning back against him. Her head rested against the hard plane of his belly, his fingers now creeping lower, to the neckline of her chemise.

"As have I," she whispered, opening her eyes to gaze up at him.

He smiled down at her, his eyes gone indigo already, sending another shiver through her. His fingers were warm on her skin, inching beneath her chemise to stroke the very tops of her breasts. "Is that so?" he murmured, fingers stretching further beneath the linen.

"Oh, yes."

Leaning over, he swept a kiss along the curve of her neck. His husky sigh was warm and velvety on her skin and she couldn't help but tremble against him as he whispered, "A bit nervous, love?"

"A bit," she admitted, feeling foolishly shy.

He chuckled, easing his hands from her chemise to catch hers, drawing her to her feet. "Why?"

"Well, things have changed a bit..."

As she looked away, he caught her chin in one hand, lifting her face to his. "Changed how?"

"With me."

He shook his head, his thumb tracing over her jaw. "I expect that, love. You have been through much these past ten months."

"I mean not because of childbirth, Tony."

"I know exactly what you mean, sweetheart," he said, kissing her lightly on the lips. "And I can assure you, it matters not to me. Now, do let me undress you, love. It's been far too long since my eyes last beheld your beauty."

She clutched the throat of her pelisse, suddenly terrified at the thought of his seeing her undressed. "I..."

He caught her fingers, peeling them away. "Let me see you, love. Trust me."

Reluctantly, she allowed him to pull her hands free. They dangled at her sides as he reached for the pale lilac ribbon holding the chemise closed, and drew the bow free. She closed her eyes as he deftly parted the linen, pushing it down over her shoulders so it slipped over her arms and poured from her to land in crumpled heap at her feet.

His breath caught, loud enough for her to hear.

Leaning in, he pressed his lips to her neck, moving down over her collarbone, into that valley between her breasts. "So beautiful," he murmured, crouching down before her to rain kisses over her belly.

With sleepy eyes, she gazed down at him as he moved lower, over the rounded curve of her belly. The candlelight danced along the black sheen of his hair, and she couldn't resist reaching down to thread her fingers through it as he pressed a kiss into her.

"Oh, sweetheart, you have nothing to fear," he murmured between kisses, sighing softly as her fingers skimmed through his hair, along his scalp. "You are even more beautiful than you were before I left."

With the same excruciating slowness, he came back up, his arms sliding about her waist to pull her to his chest as his lips sought hers. He found them, seizing them in a fierce kiss that all but tore the breath from her lungs.

She welcomed the caress of his lips, the velvety heat of his tongue as it caught hers, drawing it back into his mouth as he gently suckled it. Her fingers tightened in his hair, clasping him to pull him even closer, wanting to wrap her entire body around his.

"You are beautiful, Bren," he whispered huskily, breaking away to brush his lips over her ear, up along her temple, and back down. "The most beautiful woman I have ever held in my arms."

She pulled away to gaze up at him, wanting so much to believe him, wanting so much to seduce him the very way he seduced her. A feeling of daring gripped her as she reached up to brush back the wayward lock of black hair that always tumbled over his forehead. "Thank you."

"Thanking me, are you? For what, love? Speaking the truth?" His voice was gruff, but not angry, as he shook his head. "You are a mite softer, mayhap. A mite rounder, of course. But you had a child, sweetheart. I cannot, of course, speak for all men, but for me, the fact that it was *my* child what caused these changes serves only to make you ever more beautiful in my eyes."

Her fear fled then, simply draining away as that daring feeling grew stronger. She smiled at him, pushing up on her tiptoes and pulling him down towards her to brush his lips with a light kiss. He groaned again as she teased him with her lips, skimming his ear, sweeping down his neck to spread heat through him. She tugged the fine lawn from his breeches, her hands slipping beneath it to fan out over his belly, up over his chest.

"Ah, love," he sighed, letting his eyes close as she caressed his hot skin with gentle, curious fingers. "I love the feel of your hands on me, the way you are still so timid with me."

She tugged at the lawn, wishing for the first time in her life that she was much taller, for she had a devil of a time removing the blasted shirt from his back. He obliged her by doing it for her, then groaned softly as her lips moved over him. She nuzzled through the crisp black hair on his chest as she spread kisses from nipple to nipple, moving down.

"Timid, am I?" she whispered, moving over his belly, down along the soft dark hair disappearing into the waist of his breeches.

Tony's sigh rent the air, heavy and husky, as she tugged open the placket and pushed both breeches and small clothes down over his hips. His hands plunged into her hair as her hands skimmed up over his buttocks, pressing into him to pull him closer still. His back arched, his body shuddering beneath the caresses of her lips on his most sensitive flesh.

Pulling in a ragged breath, he growled one lone word—

"Brenna..."

Her shyness forgotten, she fully explored the length of him, his satiny smoothness. Quickly, she discovered the strokes which made him growl and groan and move against her, his fingers twisting her hair into knots, tugging at her scalp. Then, the air *whooshed* from her lungs as he grabbed beneath the arms to snatch her up, into his embrace.

His lips were fervent, hungry, as they caught hers in a fierce kiss. He lowered her enough to tease her with his arousal and his voice was a rough growl as he swirled his tongue along the shell of her ear. "Ah, lady, you are about to have me behaving very much the inexperienced boy with those innocent caresses of yours." "Have I done something I shouldn't?" she whispered back, another sigh wafting out with her words as he brought her into contact with him once more.

"God, no, sweetheart. Never fear such a thing. But it's been months since I have felt your heat, your softness, and you are bringing me far too close to the edge."

As he spoke, he carried her over towards the bed. Pausing alongside it, he gave her a wicked grin and then lowered her until their bodies met. Her breathless cry fairly echoed about the room as he guided her against him, and she sheathed him in one long, heady caress. It was a surprise, but a welcome one, as he sent a spear of scandalously delightful fire slicing through her. She shivered at the sensations, managing to whisper, "Anthony?"

He kissed her again, laughing as he said, "Am I shocking you, love?"

Her thoughts were as sluggish as her words, taking an eternity to form. She didn't care, though, but rather enjoyed every last sparkle, every sensual tingle. Her head practically spinning from the pure intensity of feeling, she managed to stammer, "I—oh, that feels nice—I didn't know this to be possible."

He pulled her closer still, his words equally thick as he groaned, "Oh, yes, love. One of the many, many positions I intend to explore with you."

Thick bands of muscle bulged in his arms as he continued lifting and settling her back against him. Another shudder tore through her and she couldn't keep from trembling. The pleasure eddying through her was unlike anything she ever dreamed possible and as he raised, then lowered her once more, she couldn't hold back her soft, "Tony..."

With that, he groaned, bending over to press her into the tick. Her legs wrapped about his waist and that was all it took. She cried out as he increased his thrusts, arching into her with blinding force. She melted all around him, meeting each rise, each fall. He crushed her against him as his entire body tensed, thrusting deep and shuddering as he growled, "Oh, Bren...Brenna..."

His release brought on hers, her fingernails sinking into his shoulders as another wave of ecstasy washed over her, leaving her spent and trembling in his arms.

Of course, he was trembling as well, even as he sank down into her, even as his head came to rest against her breast, she felt the tremors radiating through him. His skin was blazing hot, covered in a fine film of sweat, and his breathing came in short, sharp gasps—much like her own, she thought with a smile.

"Mmm..." She couldn't contain her sigh of content as she stroked his sweaty hair away from his temple. "It's no wonder Charlotte was so crushed to lose you, Tony," she murmured as he shuddered against her once more.

Lifting his head, he whispered, "What was that?"

She laughed at the clouded confusion in his blue eyes. "Are you all right, love?"

"I am exhausted," he sighed, dropping back down against her. "Remind me, I am never going so long without you ever again."

He shivered as she traced her fingernails over his back, her laughter a silvery mist as she said, "It was your doing, you realize. I asked you to stay home."

He laughed, shifting to gather her in his arms. "Aye, love. I suppose you did. I've no one to fault but my own stubbornness, I suppose."

She snuggled up against him. "As Maddie would say, told you."

Tony chuckled again, tightening his arms about her. "Mayhap I ought to frighten some of that newfound sass from you."

"I think not. I rather like being thought of as sassy."

He caught her chin in his hand, lifting her face to his to kiss her gently on the lips. "Lady, I love you no matter what your demeanor."

Her heart skipped a beat at that. "What was that you said?"

He smiled. "You heard me."

With that, he tugged her atop him so she draped halfway over his chest, cradling her against him as he whispered, "I love you, Brenna. *That* is what I should have said back in January and I have been kicking myself but good for *not* saying it. In fact, I probably ought to have said it about thirty seconds after you became my wife, but I was too busy being a bullheaded male. So convinced I did not want something then that I cannot live without now."

She pressed her lips together to hold back the fool's grin tugging at them. Her heart beat so fast that it left her feeling giddy. She couldn't even remember the last time she felt giddy, but there it was. Hoping her smile wasn't as silly as it felt, she said, "Say it again, Tony, won't you?"

His smile was tender. "Sweetheart, I will say it until I am blue in the face. I love you, I love you, I love you."

She burst out laughing, throwing her arms about his neck and squeezed him tight. She couldn't believe how happy hearing those words made her feel, how much power they held, and she could barely keep the tears from her voice as she whispered, "And I love you."

"I know. I've known for months, Bren. Even before you actually said it out loud."

"Did I say it when I ran that fever?"

Shaking his head, he said, "Nay. But your eyes give far too much away, my love. They are blue when you're angry or upset, and green when you are happy and at peace. They have been green far longer than they were blue." He caressed her cheek with his fingertips, his voice dropping to a whisper. "And I wanted to tell you long ere now."

"So why didn't you, then?"

He gave her a sheepish grin. "I've never said it to a woman, love. You've no idea how difficult it is, making those words come out when you've never done it before."

Her heart swelled further. It was nice to know she was a first where *something* was concerned. Then, she gave him a wicked smile, shifting to bring herself completely atop him.

"What are you doing?" he whispered, a grin tugging at his lips, his hands skimming up over her backside.

She bent over to flick her tongue over his right nipple, a breathless laugh escaping as his fingers bit into her. "I thoroughly enjoyed that time you let me take the lead, Tony. I wish to do so again."

"You mean, you *enjoyed* that afternoon, when I made you take charge?"

"Oh, yes. Did you ever doubt it?"

He laughed, tugging her down for a kiss. "I thought I was a beast that afternoon, I was so angry with you because you didn't want *me*. Quite like a spoiled child, I was."

"Aye, you *were* a beast, but it was a most enjoyable encounter, I don't mind admitting. And of course I wanted you, you silly man. I just didn't think *you* wanted *me*."

He groaned as her fingers crept lower to seek him out. "Oh, lady, had I but known back in September what a lusty, sensual woman you are. I would never have put up such a fuss over marrying you in the first place."

"Had I known the same, you would not have stood a chance. I would have seduced you until you could not walk."

Tony laughed at that, reaching up to catch her face in both hands and pull her down for a deep kiss. "I love you, vixen. Do not ever change on me."

"I have no intention of doing that, Tony. Not ever. I far enjoy having all of you too much to do that."

He groaned again, sweeping her lips with another kiss. "No more words now, Bren. I just want to love you now."

"No, Tony," she corrected, nibbling at his bottom lip with gentle teeth. "It's *my* turn to love *you*."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Anthony slipped from bed before Brenna woke and moved quietly about the room as he dressed to go into town. The *Hyperion* was due into port within the next few days, bringing up a shipment of rum from Puerto Rico, and there was paperwork awaiting him on his desk at Cygnet.

As he shrugged into a midnight blue frock coat, Brenna sighed in her sleep, rolling over and taking the quilt with her. He smiled down at her, moving around to stand over her for a long moment. Asleep, she reminded him of a child, the way she snuggled into her pillows, one hand folded beneath her cheek. The love he felt for her was the greatest thing he'd ever known, the most powerful emotion he'd ever felt, and as he leaned over to brush his lips over her cheek, he whispered, "You should only know how deeply I love you, wife."

"Tony..." she sighed in her sleep, a smile playing at her lips.

"Shh...go back to sleep, sweetheart."

"Hmm…"

He chuckled softly, circling the bed once more to pull open the door and close it silently behind him.

Maddie was in the kitchen, bustling about as she brewed coffee and cracked eggs into a skillet for him. "Good morning, Maddie."

"Morning yourself, Mister Anthony. Breakfast will be but a few moments."

"Ah, trouble yourself not. Coffee is fine." He sank down at the table as she brought over the coffee urn and a mug. "Is Jason up yet?"

She nodded. "I heard Alice go in to soothe him a few moments ago."

He sipped the rich, black brew. "I will take him with me this day."

"You certain that's a good idea?"

"Aye. Bren could make do with a bit of rest and I have but papers waiting my signature on my desk. He'll be fine in the office with me."

Maddie nodded. "That poor child is going to run herself ill. I do wish you could convince her to let me hire a wet nurse."

Anthony shared her sentiments. At two months old, Jason still had yet to sleep through the night, crying for his mother every two hours on schedule. Until now, Brenna had resisted the idea of an outsider nursing him and as a result, she had yet to enjoy a full night's sleep. The fatigue made itself apparent in the dark bruise-like smudges marring the porcelain skin beneath her eyes and her shorter temper. She seemed to cry much more easily these days, the slightest thing bringing tears to her eyes.

He was at a loss as to how to convince her to take some time for herself. Each time he broached the subject, she would shake her head and snap that, as *her* child, it was *her* responsibility to nurse him, not someone else's.

"I've been trying, Maddie. Believe me, I have been." He drained the cup and rose to his feet. "So, since I cannot, I will give her the day free whether she wishes it or not. And whatever you do, do *not* allow her to leave this house, lest it's to take in some air. Under no circumstances is she to venture into town. Is that understood?"

Maddie shot him a look. "Aye, Mister Anthony."

As he made his way to the door, he heard her mutter, "Miss Brenna not the only one what could do with a rest. Certain other bodies are more than a mite testy these days as well."

It was on the tip of his tongue to scold her, but instead he shook his head, going back above to find Brenna in the rocker in their room. Jason was in her arms, and her head nodded as she dozed.

Jason had finished breakfast and was waving his hands before his face, cooing all the while. Anthony sighed as he lifted the baby from his wife and returned him to the nursery.

Then, he went back, lifting Brenna this time. She

hardly stirred as he carried her back to the bed and tucked her beneath the blankets.

"I am taking Jason with me today, love," he murmured as her eyes fluttered open. "And there will be no argument. You rest, understand?"

"Aye..." Her reply was thick, her eyes closing and her breathing deep and even.

He kissed her forehead, then left the room once more. After getting Jason dressed and down below to bundle in his wicker basket, Anthony brought him out to the waiting carriage and climbed in.

Jason gurgled and giggled as he studied the colorful woodcuts dangling from the basket's canopy. Anthony smiled down at his son, shaking his head as he turned back to the papers scattered about the desk in front of him. Jackson and Devlin were on board the *Calliope* out on Raritan Bay, and he was taking advantage of the rare peace and quiet in the office.

"Anthony?"

He groaned at the melodic tones of Charlotte Madison's voice and the sharp click of her boot heels against the pine floorboards. Setting down his quill, he looked up to see her standing in the doorway.

"Why are you here?" he asked, not bothering to keep the chill from his voice.

"I needs speak with you."

"What about?"

"May I come in, then?"

He sighed with annoyance. "I've much to do, so do be brief about it."

Charlotte sauntered into the room, her pale blue muslin gown swirling about her feet as she settled into the chair across from him. Easing her gloves from her hands, she said, "Home losing a bit of its appeal these days? I can imagine it's quite noisy with the baby now."

"It's noisy, but not in an annoying manner," he growled, folding his hands to set them atop his desk.

She smiled, shaking her head. "I still find it so hard to believe, Tony, that you are a father now."

"Believe it, Charlotte, for it's most definitely the truth."

"Well, of course it's the truth," she simpered, giving him her most winning smile. "I mean, he looks so much like you, it'd be impossible to think otherwise. I suppose it's a relief for *you*, then, that he so greatly resembles you, is it not?"

He glared at her, fairly itching to grab her by the scruff of her neck and toss her bodily down the stairs. How could he have ever thought he felt anything for her? How could he have wasted so much time with her without realizing she was spoiled and selfish, and utterly annoying as well?

"What mean you by that?" he growled, eyes narrowing as he held hers.

"Well, nothing, of course. That is to say, it isn't *my* place of course, but you know nothing about his mother, do you?"

"I can assure you, Charlotte, I know my wife well enough."

Jason began whimpering then and Anthony didn't hesitate to push his chair back and bend over the basket. Lifting Jason from it, he cradled his son, rocking him until he quieted.

Looking up, he saw Charlotte's expression had become wistful, and he could only just hear her as she murmured, "He should be ours."

He slowed his rocking, narrowing his eyes at her. "I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, Tony, you know it as well as I do. We *belong* together, you and I. That's always been so. And we can still be together, you know. I'd not mind caring for your son. I would make a fine mother to him. And I'd not love him any less than any other children we would have, either. Despite his lineage."

Fury burned through him and Jason let out another whimper, making Tony realize how tightly he held him. Fighting to relax his arms, he growled, "Hear this now, Charlotte, and hear it well, for I'll not say it again. There is no *we*. There was *never* a *we*. And if I hear one more slur against my wife, I will take great delight in removing your head from your shoulders.

"You stay away from Brenna and you stay away from our son, understand me? And you stay away from me as well, for my temper is not always something I might control.

"As for *belonging* together, allow me to cure you of that foolish notion as well. I am with the woman I belong with, my wife. She is not merely the mother of my son, Charlotte, but she is the love of my life. She is the air I breathe, and I'll *not* walk away from that for anything in the world."

Charlotte's jaw actually went slack. Clearly this was not how she'd envisioned this scene. To his disbelief, he knew she thought he'd actually agree, that he would whisk her into his arms and pledge his undying love for her, to ask for her hand. A laughable notion, really, but he knew that was what she thought. After all, she'd never been shy about prodding him towards marriage.

Charlotte pressed her lips together. "I see. You fancy yourself in love with that wench, do you?" she asked, her words clipped and icy.

"There is no fancy, my lady. I *am* in love with her. Madly, passionately in love with her. This child should prove that to you, if nothing else. And I daresay there will be many more, in case you ever get your foolish hopes up again. As long as Brenna Radcliffe walks this earth, I will be at her side. Now, take yourself from my office and do not trouble yourself with coming back. You are not welcome here, you are not welcome in my home and I will take great delight in turning you out if you fail to heed what I say."

Charlotte fairly trembled as she got to her feet. "Very well, Anthony. If that's what you wish, so be it." Her shrug was hardly convincing, nor was her breezy, "Not that it matters, for I have a new love as well."

"Good. Then you have no cause to bother me any longer." He turned his attention back to Jason, clearly dismissing her. Still, he felt her eyes on him, and could imagine the look of fury probably etched into her delicate features. It was a look he knew well and one he despised, as it was a cross between a petulant child and scorned woman.

Jason began crying and Tony ignored the retreating clatter of her footfalls, his attentions focused solely on his son. As the echo of her boots died into silence, Tony

Kimberly Nee

swallowed a rising oath as he began rocking the baby once more, cursing the fact that he'd ever wasted a moment of his time on Charlotte Madison.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

"Miss Brenna?"

Brenna sat up with a start, jolted from her doze on the sofa by Maddie's call. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she cleared her throat and said, "Yes?"

Maddie appeared in the parlor doorway, dressed to go out. "Miss Dara and I are going into town. Do you need anything whilst I am there?"

"I thank you, but no." She swung her legs over the edge of the sofa and stretched. "But, might I come with you? I would so love to get out for a while."

Maddie shook her head. "Sorry, Miss Brenna, but Mister Anthony was most adamant that I not let you anywhere near a carriage today."

Brenna frowned at her husband's high-handedness. "Maddie—"

The housekeeper came into the room to sit beside her mistress, patting Brenna's hand. "Do not be angry with him, child. He worried sick about you. You needs rest and this is the only way to make you get some."

Brenna sighed then, her irritation draining away. "I have been a beast, haven't I?"

"You run down, Miss Brenna. You ought but see the circles under your eyes. Mister Anthony only concerned for you, that's all."

"I know this. Mayhap we *should* think of bringing a wet nurse in," she said mused, rubbing her eyes with one hand. "I would be ever so grateful for one full night of sleep."

Maddie smiled at her, reaching out to gently push her down on the sofa. "Rest, then, child. Mister Jason is with his papa so you know he is in good hands. Take a little time for you, love."

Brenna nodded, sitting upright once more. "I think I will go above and finish my nap, then."

"You do that, Miss Brenna. Get some sleep. Lord knows you need it, and Lord knows you've earned it. I'll be back in but a few hours. Louise also going with us, but Mary and Albert are here, should you need anything."

"I will be fine. Go on and enjoy your shopping."

Maddie nodded as she rose to her feet. "You rest now."

"I will."

Maddie bustled from the room then and Brenna smiled as she heard the front door slam. She knew she'd been out of sorts for some time now, more tired than she ever thought possible, and was grateful for the patience of those around her.

She rose from the sofa, padding towards the stairs. The house seemed so quiet without Maddie's monologues coming from the kitchen. Quiet and peaceful. Perfect.

The knock at the door made her grumble, as she was halfway up the stairs when it reached her ears. Gathering her skirts, she turned and thumped back down to pull open the front door.

Her heart ceased to beat and bile rose in her throat at the man standing on the far side of the threshold.

"Well, good day, love. Dare I hope you remember me?" Jonathan Dunsworth, Viscount Halstead's lips curled up into an evil sneer.

Anthony settled back against the carriage's smooth leather seat, Jason in his basket at his feet. He still felt a hint of anger over Charlotte's visit, but he tried to shove it from his mind as he tapped on the roof to signal to George that he was ready to begin moving.

The soothing rocking lulled Jason to sleep almost at once, and Tony smothered a yawn of his own as they clattered over the rutted road. He smiled down at his sleeping son, tucked firmly in his basket. Only one of the so many wonderful changes in his life. Wonderful in ways he'd never thought possible.

Still, he looked forward to things returning to normal. He looked forward to Jason's finally sleeping through the night, to Brenna returning to her usual cheerful self. He missed his playful vixen, missed how easily she used to laugh. Once she was able to rest a bit more, he was sure that little minx would return.

"Patience," he muttered, brushing aside the curtain to gaze out the window. "You needs be patient, old man."

It wasn't easy, but then he did not have to wake up every two hours during the night to nurse Jason. If it was possible, he would do just that, anything to lift the burden from Brenna's shoulders, but that was neither here nor there. The best he could do was try to pamper her as much as he could, as long as she would let him.

That was the most difficult part, convincing Brenna to take the time to coddle herself and to allow him to do the same for her. Her independent streak seemed to come into full bloom and now, he almost wished he could go back to the days when she'd do his bidding without hesitation. Mayhap then, she'd get some rest.

No, that wasn't true. He never again wanted to see her cower in fear before him. Never wanted her to be anything other than the strong, fiery woman she'd blossomed into. He loved her madly and would not change a thing about her.

He groaned then, as they rocked past Charlotte's house and she came whipping out the front door. She raced down the walk towards them, waving her arms madly and shrieking like a mad woman.

"Anthony! Anthony! Halt! Wait!"

He was about to ignore her, but there was something in her voice that struck a nerve. Panic. He was positive he heard panic in her voice.

"George, halt!" he called, rising from his seat before they even stopped moving.

As he emerged from the carriage, Charlotte flung herself at him. "Thank God! Oh, thank God you listened!"

He untangled himself at once, growling, "You'd best have a damn good reason, Charlotte."

"You needs get home at once, Tony. At once!"

He took a step back, a flutter of fear uncurling deep in the pit of his gut at the urgency in her voice, at the terror in her eyes. "Charlotte? What goes on?"

"Jonathan! Jonathan is going to River Oaks."

"Who is Jonathan? And what business does he have at my home?"

Charlotte's eyes filled with tears. "I was so angry

when I left you and I told him...oh, dear God...what have I done?"

"Enough with *you*, Charlotte. Tell me now what you're about!"

She buried her face in her hands. "Jonathan...my new beau...Lord Halstead...he-he claims he knows your wife..."

He froze at the name *Halstead*. "How did he know *where* to find her?"

She mumbled a reply through her hands. Unable to understand a word she said, he tore her hands from her mouth, growling, "Damn it, Charlotte. *How?*"

"I did it," she whispered pitifully. "I told him."

Anthony threw her away from him. "Jesus Christ, woman!" he thundered, debating for a moment whether or not to strangle her right then and there. "Know you what you have done?"

"Tony, I-"

He turned heel then, and hurried back to the carriage. "Home, George, and as quickly as possible. This is of utmost urgency."

"Aye, Mister Anthony. I heard," George hollered back, cracking the whip over the horses' heads and setting them to their pace at once.

Anthony lifted Jason from his basket as they tore down the road, holding him close to absorb the shocks jostling the carriage all over the road. He tried to fight down his rising panic, that feeling of abject terror as he cursed himself out for choosing to go into Brunswick today, rather than stay home.

He urged the horses to run faster, knowing it was crucial they return to River Oaks as quickly as possible.

The Devil himself was on his way to their door.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Brenna lunged to slam the door shut but was not quick enough. Halstead shoved his foot between the door and the jamb, his heavy leather boot absorbing the blow.

"I think not, wench," he growled, throwing his shoulder into it, sending her reeling back across the polished floor.

She slammed into the maple floor with a solid *thud*, letting out a squeak of pain, every one of her bones rattling as she skidded across the waxed surface. "Why are you here?" she whispered, unable to get her voice any higher.

"I've come for what is rightfully mine. Luckily, a woman scorned is a tremendous well of information. Charlotte Madison could not tell me quick enough where to find you."

She damned Charlotte once more for her venom, scooting back even further to put more distance between Halstead and herself. "I'll have you know, my husband is right upstairs even as we speak." She forced a steady calm into her voice, determined not to let him know just how frightened she was. Actually, *frightened* wasn't right. *Terrified*. By far more accurate. Still, she'd never allow Halstead to see that, would not give him that power over her again. He'd almost succeeded in Ireland. She'd be damned if he was so lucky this time. As she spoke, she scanned the hall in search of something she might use as a weapon. This time, she *would* fight back.

"You lie, wench." His voice was smooth, oily even, as he stepped further into the room and slammed the door behind him. "I happen to know Miss Madison had him firmly ensconced in his office earlier. I'd wager that's where he is now."

"You bastard," she growled, shaking her head. "You are pure evil, know you this? You just leave me be, now. Take yourself from my home at once."

He laughed, a freezing bark that sent a wave of chills racing down her spine. "Oh, I will, wench. Once I've had what was rightfully mine to begin with. What the American bastard stole from me."

"I was never *yours*. I did not want that match. It was arranged for me. I wished to never lay eyes upon you again after what you attempted."

"Ah, so the mealy-mouth is gone, I see." Another step. "Well, I do like a bit of fire in my women."

"Take you another step, and you will see exactly what fire I have."

Albert emerged from the kitchen then, a fireplace poker in his hand. "Miss Brenna? What goes on here?"

"Albert, run down into the hollow—fetch Jackson, please!" Brenna called, her eyes never leaving Halstead. "Go! Now!"

"Miss Brenna—"

"Go!"

The poker clattered to the floor as he let go and darted back through the kitchen.

Turning back to Jonathan, she said, "You *will* regret coming here."

Another evil leer lifted his lips. "I think not, sweet."

She backed towards the poker. Her eyes remained on him, her heart hammering against her ribs as he took another step towards her.

Crouching long enough to wrap her hands about the poker, she brandished it before her. "Leave me be," she snarled, all courage and fury, even as she fought to keep her hands from shaking.

"Oh, you fought me before, wench, and it did little good. Think you I fear you now?"

"You had best fear me, for I am not afraid of you. I am not that same simpering, cowering, meek little girl you tried to rape last September. Not by half."

"Then I shall take great pleasure in breaking your spirit as well." He closed the gap with a sudden lunge. She screamed, swinging with all her might. The poker caught him solidly in the ribs and he let out an earpiercing howl of pain as the air rushed from his body.

"You bitch," he sputtered, stumbling and grabbing

his side.

"I warn you only once more," she told him, holding the poker out for another swing. "The next will be upside your foul, evil head."

He dove at her, catching her about the waist, and crushing her beneath him. Her hand opened as it slammed against the floor, and the poker skittered out of reach.

Grabbing her by the throat with one hand, he raised the other in a fist. "You little whore. Your stepfather was right, you know. This is the only use you serve."

He brought his raised hand down, wrapping both about her throat, squeezing the air from her body. Her head swam, spots dancing before her eyes as she struggled to throw him off, fought to drag in even a hint of air. She could hear her blood pounding in her head, threatening to burst every vein in her body, could hear her awful gurgles as he slowly squeezed the life from her body.

The carriage hadn't come to a full halt before Anthony tucked Jason back into his basket and then leaped from the compartment. "Stay here, George."

"Of course, Mister Anthony."

Tony tore up the drive, nearly colliding with Jackson as he came racing up from the hollow, pistols in his hands and Albert at his heels.

"Halstead is inside!" Jackson shouted.

"Aye, I know!" Anthony didn't halt his pace, taking the steps two at a time.

They hit the door at the same time, crashing through it to spill into the front hallway. Halstead jerked his head up at the sound and Anthony threw himself headlong at the man choking Brenna to death.

Halstead let out a low, pathetic groan as Tony crushed him beneath him. He had no chance to fight back, as Tony unleashed his fury at once with blow after blow. Blood spattered around them, spilling across the floor and splattering the walls and furnishings. Teeth scattered across the maple floorboards and Tony continued pounding away, even after the Englishman sank into unconsciousness. Jackson dropped the pistols and fell to his knees besides Brenna, who was barely conscious as she continued her struggle to breathe. Gathering her up, he turned to Albert. "Run and fetch Doctor Terrance at once!"

"Aye, sir."

Brenna coughed, wincing as she rasped, "Tony? Where is Tony?"

"He's here, sweetheart," Jackson whispered, cradling her against his chest and smoothing her hair away from her face. "Making damn certain that piece of...filth never touches you again." He lifted Brenna to bring her into the parlor, clearing his throat to call over to Tony, "I think you've pummeled him quite thoroughly enough."

His words penetrated through the red haze enveloping Tony's brain and his fists slowed. The man on the floor beneath him was barely recognizable now, so pulped by Tony's rage. As he got to his feet, Tony was barely out of breath but simply looked down in disgust at the unconscious man on the floor and turned away, saying, "Jackson, get him out of here before I kill him."

Jackson emerged from the parlor, shaking his head. "I am not so certain you didn't kill him, old man."

"Then give me five more minutes."

Jackson caught him by the shoulders. "I think there is one who needs you a mite more at the moment, old man."

He turned to see Brenna lying on the sofa. The purplish bruises on her throat were visible even at that distance, and a new rage burned through him. Tamping it down, he moved to her side and dropped to his knees by the sofa, catching her hand in his. "Bren?"

She opened her eyes and turned to smile at him. "Tony...thank God."

He slid his arms about her, gathering her close. "You need fear no more, love. I've dispatched him but good."

Her laugh was weak, as if it hurt to do so. "I am glad. Give me one of those pistols and allow me to finish him, won't you?"

"And have you arrested for murder? I think not." Relief at hearing her laugh flooded through him and he kissed her forehead softly. "I thought I told you to rest this day?" She gave him a tired smile. "Do not make me laugh right now, love. My throat's a mite sore. And besides, I *tried* to rest. God is making it most difficult, my getting *any* rest." She pulled away from him. "Where is Jason?"

"Easy, love. George is playing nursemaid at the moment. He is perfectly safe."

"Good." She felt silent for a moment, then murmured, "Tony?"

"Aye, love?"

"Now are you satisfied your score has been settled?"

He pressed her into his chest, his laughter a deep rumble in her ear as he said, "Aye. Now I might concentrate on you and our son alone. All ghosts have been laid to rest."

"Thank God. That vengeful streak is going to get you into trouble one of these days."

He held her away, smoothing a hand over her cheek. "What vengeful streak? It's called protecting the woman you love, sweetheart. And that won't ever die away."

She didn't reply, but slipped her arms around his neck and clasped the back of his head to pull him down for a long, lingering kiss.

CHAPTER FORTY

"Tony?"

He looked up at her and her belly leaped at his smile. She stood in the parlor doorway, dressed for bed with her hair brushed out and falling about her shoulders. Pushing it back, she stepped into the room, returning his smile as she closed the space between them. He looked even more handsome in the soft, buttery-gold glow of the flickering candle and her blood grew warmer as she drew nearer.

"Aye, love?"

"What are you doing?" she asked, moving around to stand behind him and peering over his shoulder at the jumble of papers littering his desk.

"A few things I'd not had the time to take care of when I was at the harbor." He released his quill, letting it clatter against the blotter and leaned into her as she slid her arms about his neck. When she leaned close to skim her lips over his neck, he growled, "What are you about, Madam Radcliffe?"

She nuzzled him, savoring the rough scrape of his skin against hers. "Well, I was getting ready to get into bed when something occurred to me."

Catching her by the upper arms, he drew her around to settle in his lap. "And what might that have been, sweetheart?" he asked, this time nuzzling *her*.

"Well, I thought—oh, that tickles a mite—I thought— Tony!" She giggled as his tongue dipped into her ear, bracing her hands against his chest to push away far enough to break their contact.

He refused to let any space come between them, tightening his arms about her and sweeping his lips upwards, murmuring, "What?" in an angelic whisper as his tongue moved along the shell of her ear.

"You make it most difficult for me to form a sentence, you know." She shivered as he brushed a sensitive patch of skin, her gasp quickly becoming a heavy sigh. It felt so wonderful, his caresses, and her eyes already began to feel heavy.

"I know. It's a gift."

"But you don't even know what I'm going to say."

With that, he pulled away. "Go on, then, love. What did you wish to discuss?"

"As I said, I was getting ready to get into bed -"

"You already said that," he scolded as she trailed her fingers down over his chest. "Do go on."

"Hush and let me finish, then, won't you?" She worked open the throat of his black silk shirt. "And it occurred to me."

"What's that, love?" he asked, his eyes closing as her fingertips brushed over the portion of chest she'd bared.

"I was alone."

He opened his eyes at that. "I see."

"And I've no wish to be alone. So, I thought, mayhap, I could steal you away from your work for a while?"

He grinned, arching an eyebrow at her. "Pouncing on me again, are you, vixen?"

"Well, I *did* nap after you and Jackson... well, afterwards. So I am not sleepy at all. But, I think there might be something *else* I could do instead of trying to sleep."

"Say no more, you lusty wench." He leaned into her for a slow kiss and then got to his feet, lifting her easily. "I will take great pleasure in tiring you out so that you might sleep tonight."

She smiled, linking her fingers behind his neck as he spirited her up the stairs to their room. Jackson had carted what was left of Halstead from the hallway earlier, and she cared not what happened to him. As far as she was concerned, it was over and done. He would trouble her no longer. Now she just wished to be trapped beneath her husband once more. Even the marks on her throat had faded into memory.

Tony set her on the bed, stretching out to cover her. He kissed her long and leisurely, chuckling as she tugged the shirt from his back.

"Ah, you are the fiery, tempting vixen, my love," he breathed as her tongue traced the line of his ear, causing him to shiver against her. "I do so love you, Bren."

"This is good to know, seeing as how I love you as well," came her breathless reply as he parted her chemise to draw it from her. "Now, I no longer wish to speak. Kiss me, won't you? I believe I've a bit of making up to you, now."

He obliged her, covering her lips with his as he tugged her chemise off and let it fall to the floor. Pulling away, he whispered, "Making up to me?"

"Aye. I've neglected you terribly, Tony," she whispered, tracing her fingertip over his bottom lip. "And, I do believe you mentioned something about there being many, many positions you wished to explore?"

His laughter echoed off the walls around them. "Ah, love, there are and each one will leave you breathless and sated in my arms."

"Oh, I don't doubt that for a moment. However, I wish to leave *you* breathless and sated in *my* arms for a change. Which would work best for that?"

He lifted his head to gaze at her through soft indigo eyes, laughing and pulling her in for another soulful kiss as he murmured, "All of them, love. All of them." I've been in love with romance novels since the first time I read *The Flame and the Flower* when I was sixteen. Not long after finishing it, I sat down to write my first historical romance and I've been writing them ever since.

Born and raised in New Jersey, I live there today with my husband, our two kids, the dog, and the cat. When I'm not busy at the computer, I do crossword and Sudoku puzzles, break up wrestling matches between the kids, and read when I get the chance. I also love baseball, football, and hockey, and much to my husband's relief, we root for the same teams (Yankees, Giants, and Rangers respectively.) I'm also a huge fan of Bruce Springsteen, Billy Joel, Elton John, and the Rolling Stones.

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