



**A Pirate's Mercy**

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### **Blurb**

Lady Mercy James takes adventure to new heights when she sets out to prove to her bitter grandmother a man can want her. However, her passionate one-night encounter with a handsome sea captain leaves her aching for love, and pregnant.

English lord Ashton Sinclair masquerades as rogue pirate, Captain Sin—a man who only wants a woman to warm his bed, not his heart. Yet after meeting Mercy, his emotions begin to melt the hardness of his resolve. While her beauty stimulates his lust, her generous spirit arouses long buried sentiments of love, which he abandons by returning to the sea.

Nevertheless, fate brings them together again. Threatened by the return of his

overwhelming fear of commitment, he denies himself the joy of the lady's affections and doesn't appreciate how much he can miss a woman, until he makes a grave error in judgment by trading the love of his life for an island paradise.

## Chapter One

Lord Ashton Sinclair had never seen a woman as stunning and desirable as the one standing in demure obscurity behind the Duchess of Hempstead. Nor had he seen any exquisite lady so ripe for the picking.

On close observance of the other men in the room, Ash wondered if they were blind. Why had not one clamored around the beauty, vying for her attention? He dissected all the reasons he shouldn't approach her. By far not a shy man, his feeling of unworthiness kept him at a distance.

In a room teeming with people at the Hempstead's ball, the hours quickly rolled by. His attention never wandered far from the young woman. He witnessed her quiet, polite boredom as she hovered in the shadows of the Duchess.

Occasionally, he changed his position in the room to have a better view. Whenever the Duchess flicked her hand, the woman advanced from the eclipse of the massive column to do her bidding. Her grace and poise had all the earmarks of nobility. The way she held her chin up with confidence pushed him to think of royalty. When she bowed without a curtsy in the subservient manner to some request the Duchess made, he surmised her position to be no more than that of a lady's companion—a dressed up servant girl.

Nonetheless, he stood in awe. His attentive gaze mesmerized by her every move. Then she backed out of sight behind the column. Disappointment pushed him to go after her. He walked around the cluster of people in front of him and began skirting the room. When the girl reappeared, he stopped. She handed the Duchess a crystal glass and lingered with a helpful offering of a lace-edged handkerchief.

A smile tugged the corner of his mouth. Something about the girl made him happy inside—tingly with goose bumps. It became clear why no one approached her. Yet, her being a servant wasn't reason enough to stop him.

Ash refrained from rubbing the taut ache pushing at his trousers. Not even his mistress stirred his blood the way this girl managed. Marguerite was more an outlet for his frustrations. He used her without the slightest qualm for her feelings. However, her motives for being with him were not so much emotional as they were financial, so it made their situation tolerable.

Ash debated his next move. Naturally, no one would take much notice if he walked up and spoke to the girl. But what would he say?

"My darling man, you have been brooding far too long in these dark alcoves." Lady Marguerite Buckram slipped into place alongside him with a heavy sigh.

He, too, took a deep breath. Marguerite possessively looped her arm around his. She restrained his compulsive quest to meet the girl.

"I don't like parties," he answered. "I told you that before you insisted I come."

Marguerite had been sexually accommodating over the years. Even though he saw her rarely, she had stepped up her agenda. She no longer wanted to be a kept woman. Her goal was to marry and have a real title. Only the title his father left was provisional upon which of the Sinclair brothers married first. Instead of which was the eldest. As one of the twin sons of the deceased Earl of Brighton, neither of them could have the title until one

of them met with that condition. Until such time, the title remained in abeyance.

"Will you not have one dance with me?"

He glanced at her coiled against him. "Not interested." He wrested his limb free of her grip.

"I have danced with nearly everyone here. My friends will think I came unescorted if you don't spend some time with me." She pouted.

"I told you I would attend. I never said I would participate or socialize." Ash had tired of Marguerite, her possessiveness had been wearing on his every nerve from the moment he stepped foot back in England.

"You never said you wouldn't, either," she hissed under her breath.

A fine spray of saliva misted him, and he wiped a hand over his face, smoothing down his moustache. He continued watching the girl across the room. Twice he thought he made eye contact with her. Both times he decided he was wrong when she turned her head and showed him she merely surveyed the full ballroom.

"Who are you staring at, darling?" Marguerite nudged him from his daydreams.

"No one." He exhaled the breath he held, and took a drink from the almost empty glass in his hand. "I'm tired and unimpressed by the activity of this pompous crowd."

"They're not so bad, my darling. If you weren't away all the time on that silly ship, you'd get to know them better. Come mingle with me and I'll introduce you to the most interesting people."

Out of boredom, he almost nodded. Then the girl across the room, while talking to another young woman, smiled. The radiant glow, the bright twinkling of pleasure in her eyes, made Ash's heart flutter excitedly. He had to meet her.

"Did you hear the news of Lady Meadows and Lord Carlton?" Marguerite squeezed his arm, jarring him from his reveries. "They're to be married, and they've only been together half the length of time we have."

Ash felt the room close in on him. An awful vision entered his head—his name and Marguerite's, written in blood, on a holy parchment, binding his soul to hers for all eternity. He shivered at the alarming notion chilling his veins. For an instant, he thought he felt a hand on his face, caressing warmth back into his skin. He looked around, but Marguerite was the only one close. Then he thought of his dead sister, Emma. Any time he suffered an attack of anxiety, he thought of her. She was with him in spirit, and he was never more grateful than now.

It became clear—Ash needed to be free of Marguerite. He had to sever their relationship permanently. There needed to be a very public, extremely scandalous event, so there would be no going back to her.

"Did you hear me, Ashton? I said Lady..."

"I heard you." He ran his hand over his head, trying to think of how best to get away from her. "So the fool is not smart enough to avoid matrimony." He chuckled, initiating an imminent quarrel.

"Why do you do that?" Marguerite expelled an exasperated breath.

"Do what?" He goaded her with his indifference, drinking the remains of his wine.

"Make marriage sound so horrible. Other than a piece of paper, and a ring on my finger, we are just like married people, you know." She let go of his arm, and it made him feel one step closer to freedom.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but there is only one reason you're in my bed."

He looked for a servant to get another drink.

"Because you love me?" Marguerite's words struck a nerve.

He laughed at the outrageous thought. "Fucking you is a testament of my physical requirements, not emotional ones."

"You're so crude, sometimes. I don't know why I stay with you." She grunted with disapproval and disappointment.

Ash saw Marguerite's dilemma. He did sympathize. She was an untitled woman without means, and she desperately sought a man of substance and station. He, on the other hand, had no title, but he had money, and he strived only to have her in his bed as a matter of convenience.

"Please consider what I suggest. If you are dead set against marriage, I may have to look elsewhere," she threatened.

"Marguerite, I am not only dead set against getting married, I abhor the fact any man chains himself to one woman when he can have the pleasure of dozens," he said callously, hoping to fuel the argument.

"A scandalous rake, you are." Her lips pursed in aggravation. "Just remember my warning, Ashton Sinclair."

"I accept the compliment and your courteous finish to our liaison." He gave her a bow of his head, and motioned the nearby servant he spotted with a tray of filled glasses to come forward.

He switched his empty glass for a full one.

"Ashton, darling, you know very well I have no wish to end our affair." She purred a different tune. "You know I adore you ever so much, it will be a long while before I give you up."

She stroked the lapel of his jacket as if she were petting a dog. Little did she understand the seriousness of his wish to be rid of her.

"But you desire marriage, a title, and the prestige of your husband's name." He patted her hand and pulled it from his chest. "I can't give you any of that."

"You can give it all to me, Ashton. You just refuse to see that. Once we're married, you will inherit your father's title."

"I don't want the title. My brother does, and I've told him it's his whenever he finds the right woman to marry." He gulped down the glass of wine and set the stemware on the table behind him. It seemed impossible to drown out Marguerite's voice by the glassful and he looked around for the nearest exit.

"Darling, while just as handsome as you, your brother Weldon does not impress upon me to be the type interested in the ladies. Maybe he's... Well, could it be possible he has a proclivity toward..." She leaned closer and whispered, "A different gender?"

"Don't start any rumors, Marguerite. I'm warning you. If I hear one sliver of anything you're suggesting, your little secret might escape my safe keeping."

Ash flexed his fingers to relax from the tense way Marguerite upset him. He and his brother were close. When they were younger, he fought Weldon's battles, protecting his shy twin from anything hurtful. Even in adulthood, he always felt a need to defend him. Ash knew for a fact Weldon wasn't sexually interested in men. He was just conservative, and gentlemanly to faultless extremes. His affairs were discreet, and always with once married ladies looking to keep their private lives from public view. It was why Ash felt his brother deserved their father's title.

As much as Ash did have a good time portraying a rascal, he didn't have it in him to dismiss the willing Marguerite from his easy clutches. He knew he had to make it more her wish than his—just to give her a reputable satisfaction for her friends. He didn't love her, but he did owe her to that extent.

His gaze caught the young girl's across the room again. This time there wasn't a doubt in his mind she was staring directly at him, her attraction as steadfast as her gaze bore into him. He felt more than ready to meet her. Then a wicked, yet wonderful plan reared in his inebriated mind. He'd rid himself of Marguerite, while at the same time indulging in the intimate charms of the servant girl.

The twofold result would be for him to ravish the young lady with his lust, and conveniently have Marguerite catch him doing so. She'd be mortified, of course, and vindictive. With her pride in shambles, she'd have to tell everyone of his inexcusable behavior. However, their affair would be over.

The real victim would be the girl. Although, given her poor future as a servant, he'd make amends with some very lavish gifts, giving her reason to forget the soon to be indecent event.

The ballroom stayed abuzz with chattering females and boisterous men. They had to be loud in order to hear themselves over the music. When Ash saw his brother approach, he saw his opportunity to at least, temporarily, free himself from Marguerite's clutches. He suspected his brother enjoyed Marguerite's attention.

"Lady Buckram." Weldon presented himself in a low bow to Marguerite. "May I have the pleasure of a dance?"

Ash took Marguerite's fingers instantly from his arm and put them in Weldon's hand. "She's all yours," he exclaimed, without waiting for Marguerite to say yea or nay on her own.

His opportunity had come. Weldon would keep Marguerite occupied for the dance just long enough for him to meet the lovely angel. Then, with perfect timing, when Marguerite sought him out, he would have the servant girl in a compromising position.

Ash navigated the room, walked around the column of marble, and found the girl gone. He searched the sea of young ladies in disbelief. How had he lost sight of her in such a short span of time?

"Looking for me?" a soft voice whispered from behind him.

At first, he thought of Emma. Plagued by her death, he often imagined seeing his sister in a ghostly form. Surprisingly, it comforted instead of concerned him. He missed her immensely, and appreciated how his mind handled his grief in a constructive manner. Emma always consoled and directed his life in the most suitable way.

Ash rotated slowly. He dismissed the idea the servant girl would seek him out. Instead, his mind conjured up the image of an unmarried lady on the hunt for a prospective husband. He readied himself for the sight of her with her oversized mother hovering behind.

The appearance of the girl took his breath away. His heart beat rapidly, unusually excited. Very real and extremely close, the girl's beauty transcended his initial appraisal. No amount of face paint could cover the details of her features. Her slim and perfect nose, the heart shaped lips, the delicate slope of her jaw. He managed to keep his mouth shut, even though his jaw dropped. After all his observances, he thought he was prepared to talk to her. Yet, there he stood, speechless, gazing down into her magnificent blue

eyes.

## Chapter Two

Mercy James bit the inside of her bottom lip as an embarrassing blush heated her cheeks. "Maybe not," she said, the silence suggesting she had been wrong to think the extremely dashing man was interested in her.

She turned away, berating herself for taking too many sips of wine. Her actions were too impulsive—too forward. She shouldn't have listened to the voice in her head telling her he was the answer to her prayers.

"Wait." His hand snatched the fabric of her gown near her elbow. "I *was* looking for you, as a matter of fact."

Mercy glanced over her shoulder. She had waited all evening for him to approach. A dozen reasons why he wouldn't trample her wishes to meet him. Her grandmother had told her often that men would find her background distasteful. It angered and upset her to believe she might be right.

*I told you*, the voice in her head whispered.

She turned her head slightly to the coolness brushing her cheek. No one stood near enough, and yet, it felt strangely like someone had nudged her gently forward.

"Did you have a reason, or am I a distraction from your friend?" Mercy looked toward the woman dancing with another man.

"I need no divergence from that lady." His gaze remained intensely on her. "She's of no importance to me whatsoever."

"She watches you like a hawk. Is she your wife?" she asked, afraid her plans might run aground if he were a respectable and morally righteous man.

"Heavens no!"

*Heavens no!* A feminine voice echoed that same declaration.

Mercy resisted the urge to look behind her. All evening, she felt as if someone hovered around her, even when she stood alone behind the column, taking quick sips of wine from a decanter she had stashed there. She blamed her father for her bad habit. He claimed it a lesson in tolerance to the drink. His approval of imbibing rum when she was with him trapped her into drinking anything to dull her unhappiness. Now, when she wanted to deaden her senses, the mild liquor wasn't working quickly enough.

"Why, there you are." The shrill tone of her cousin, Louise, turned her from the handsome stranger. "The Duchess has been asking for you."

"What does she want now?" Mercy asked, annoyed by the timing.

"How should I know? She doesn't confide in me all her little directives for you." Louise's gaze flitted from her to the man Mercy wanted to get to know more intimately.

"I will be along in a moment," she said, wishing her away.

Louise lingered for a second, looking from her to the man, and then left in a huff, her disappointment in not getting an introduction to him obvious. An impossible feat, since Mercy didn't know him either.

Without waiting to learn his name, Mercy boldly took his arm. "I think I need a breath of fresh air. Do you mind escorting me?"

Not waiting for his answer, she led him toward the tall glass doors leading to the balcony. Seduction needed solitude. Sex required privacy. Very new to both art forms,

she labored over the idea of how to make the next move. Her grandmother said no man would want her. She disagreed. While her mind said, *show the Duchess men are interested*, Mercy's heart leaned toward wanting more with the man she picked from the crowd.

"The Duchess will not be upset by your departure?" he asked, obviously surprised by her forwardness when he stumbled alongside her.

She slowed her pace, trying to remember she wasn't onboard her father's ship. Gentlemen of polite society were less boisterous, more refined, slower gaited.

"My cousin Louise will tell her I received the message. She will be in a very heated snit when I don't come along right away, but then someone will distract her. In which case, she will forget about me for a while. Surely, you've noticed the Duchess is very self-centered?"

"It comes with her position, I presume." He opened the door and bowed to let her pass before him.

His breath caressed her cheek. She felt the twinge of nervousness in her lower belly. The sudden spasms created a familiar ache in her feminine region. Sensations only she alone had brought on in the past, dampened her pantalets.

She breathed harder, catching the scent of him, feeling the gentle touch of his hand on her back. A special kind of warmth shrouded her in joy. She didn't know the stranger, yet she liked him.

"It is *your* position that concerns me more," he commented. "Are you not afraid you'll lose your place in her house? Such grand luxury is not always easy to come by for a servant."

"I'm not a servant," she snapped, insulted, yet not.

She hated how the Duchess made her sensitive about her station. She didn't care, and apparently, neither did the gentleman. She shouldn't have believed he was insinuating the same ungratefulness her grandmother always had.

"I apologize. I meant no offense." He took her hand and rubbed the back of her knuckles with his thumb, making the skin tingle from the warmth he stirred. "You prefer the term *lady's maid* or *companion*, then?"

His tender caressing and remorseful expression defused her anger.

While her grandmother, the Duchess of Hempstead, treated her like a servant, she hadn't realized other people perceived her as such. She looked at the advantage. By her dashing escort not knowing who she was, he'd not think twice of sullyng her reputation.

"I assure you, my place in her house is extremely secure."

"Maybe you should have a shawl against the night air." He unbuttoned his linen jacket.

"I'm quite warm actually." She touched his lapel, sliding her fingers up, wondering if his torso was as tanned as his face. "If you're looking for an excuse to take this off, I can help."

She had seen men struggle before to remove their jackets.

"Then what are you waiting for?" His smile lit a fire in her belly.

She hurried to touch him. Sliding her fingers up his chest, over his thick shoulders, she pushed the garment back and down his arms. The jacket dropped to the portico's stone floor.

"You're not an idle man, are you?" She marveled at the way his clothes fit him. All

night she had watched him as he stood in the ballroom. His wide stance, with his hands clasped behind his back, strained the seams of his garments, and reminded her of a man of the sea.

He remained inflexible to her wandering fingertips. His build, the heat of the curves, the beat of his heart against her palm, mesmerized her. He watched with an amused twinkle in his green eyes.

She laughed. "You find me too forward?" She studied his features—the cut to his square jaw, the slope of his nose, the dimples in his cheeks.

"I find you breathtaking."

He had yet to lift a finger to her, and she felt she needed his participation for a more personal pleasure, instead of a strategic reason.

"You can touch me," she told him, daring to push the limits of decency.

"And just how much do you want to be touched?" His hands fit to her hips, squeezing lightly before slipping up to her ribcage. There, he pushed onward so his thumbs caught beneath her bosom. They pressed firm against the bodice's fabric. Her breasts swelled above the rim of ivory lace at the top.

Mercy breathed heavier. Euphoria swept her into a foreign world she had no experience with, and yet she had every sensation of lust forcing her to proceed. Her arms appeared too thin when lying on his strong ones. She felt as weak as a newborn kitten in his hold. Then his thumbs made circling moves at the underside of her breasts. Each rotation traveled higher, closer to her spiked nipples.

"Is this how you expected me to touch you?" He firmly rubbed the back of his knuckle over the jutting point of her bodice.

She nodded, and then shook her head, never knowing what she had expected of the man. Did he understand her answer? She needed a scalawag with no scruples, a rogue with no morals, a man to accommodate her plot for self-destruction. She pushed her chest toward him, seeking a longer massage to dispel the ache.

"You want more?" He grinned, amused for whatever reason.

She nodded, too afraid to hear her own voice. The dizzy sway of her inebriated body shoved her totally into his embrace. His arms swept up her back, squeezing her tight, lifting her onto her toes.

"I'm happy to oblige, me beauty."

She giggled at his phrasing and became silent the moment his mouth fit over hers. His firmness had a gentle softness in one place, his lips. They were a sensual destruction of her remaining senses. His arms changed their hold and soon sinewy biceps turned, twisted, and flexed against her fingers.

Mercy clawed at his shirtsleeves, adoring how safe he made her feel. The sensation made her laugh. No one had the ability to keep her out of harm's way, except herself. It stopped her inappropriate desperation to prove anything to her grandmother. She turned her head away. Only, her potential lover followed.

"You taste delicious," he murmured, pecking kisses along the side of her face, his moustache tickling her skin.

His irresistible charm drew her back into the game.

"Mmmm, must be the brandy." She hummed against his firmer, greedier pursuit of her breath.

"I am beyond that, sweetness. All that is left is the flavor of you." His hand slid to

her neck, over her shoulder, down to her breast.

For her first kiss, she didn't think anyone could have done a better job. He made her feel as if she knew what to do. She stretched up to have another taste of his mouth on hers. He sucked at her lips, pulling them between his teeth, licking them with his tongue.

Mercy's skin tingled from the osculation sweeping to the corner of her mouth, over her jaw and down her neck. He created unrelenting tremors throughout her body. His embrace tightened, pulling her against every hard contour of his powerful torso—so close, so very secure—that she felt adored.

The music wafting from out of the ballroom should have added to the ambiance of the seduction. Instead, it disturbed her euphoric splendor. It drew her from his sensual kisses to the reality of her life. She pulled free of the tender restraint of his arms.

"Wait, where are you going?" he called when she managed to slip from his grasp.

"Bring champagne to the gazebo along the pond," she called back.

Mercy hurried down the stone steps into a garden. The night air had a fragrance so utterly pleasing she stopped to sniff the roses. If he truly wanted her, he would come. She looked back with an awful dread. What if he came to his senses and decided against risking his reputation for a tawdry rendezvous?

She shook her head, willing away her own reservation. He just had to come, if for nothing more than to make her feel alive again with another barrage of kisses.

### Chapter Three

Ash wiped his mouth and picked up his jacket. The temptress had already consumed a good bit of brandy from her tasteful kiss. He didn't think it required more to bolster her uninhibited forwardness. However, if she needed another sip to convince her to disrobe, he'd fetch ten bottles of any liquor she requested.

The challenge of liberating himself of a mistress changed course. He didn't care to deal with Marguerite at all the rest of the evening. His mind set sail to engage in a night of rare passion. He felt emotionally connected to the girl. The idea of sweeping her into his arms and absconding with her for longer than one evening excited him more.

Donning his jacket for propriety, Ash slipped inside the ballroom and hunted out a servant. "You there—I need a bottle of champagne and two glasses," he ordered from the first one available to do his bidding.

"Shall I serve you here or on the portico, milord?"

"No service needed. Just bring the bottle and glasses. I'll handle the rest." He tapped his hand on the side of his leg to dispel his impatience.

"Ashton?" Marguerite's voice took him by surprise.

He glanced her way. She had become a millstone around his neck. The very idea of *marrying her* made him more repulsed than the idea of marriage itself. Her immediate presence threatened to waylay him from his adventure.

"Wherever have you been?" She touched his face with the tip of her pointed finger.

He pushed her hand away and wiped his mouth, glimpsing the red of the girl's lip paint on her finger.

"You've been naughty," she continued. "When a woman comes escorted by a man to one of these affairs, she assumes she will not be discarded for another, especially a pretty servant."

"It was nothing." He took her arm and looked for the easiest way to abandon her for his new pursuit. "You know I cannot stop them from flinging themselves at me."

"And just where did this moppet scurry off to after she kissed you?" Marguerite straightened his collar, brushed at his jacket sleeves, and wiped his mouth again.

He didn't answer.

"You should cut your hair, it's gotten rather long." She fingered the loose strands that came free of the ribbon tying it back.

"My hair is fine as it is," he grumbled, taking her hand away from his head.

"So she meant nothing to you?"

"Honestly, Marguerite, I have no interest in any girl," he lied. Everything about the bold lady had his undivided attention.

"So where did she go?"

"How should I know?" Ash kissed her cheek and led her further into the room.

It never ceased to amaze him how much tolerance Marguerite had of his divergences from her. Then, of course, for a woman looking to title herself through marriage, she didn't have the pleasure of berating him too adamantly.

"Lady Buckram." Lady Robards glided up to them. "What a lovely gown."

"Why thank you." Marguerite bubbled with excitement. "I spent two weeks at the

dressmaker's having it fitted and..."

Ash stopped listening. Marguerite loved when people called her *Lady* Buckram. He had accidentally addressed her as such when they first met. Ever since, she insisted he introduce her that way. No one would think to question the dubious title. What would they say if they knew she was a commoner?

While Marguerite spilled out every detail of her wardrobe acquirement, Ash slipped away. He spied the servant with his requests and met him halfway to the door.

"Thank you, my good man." Ash took hold of the items and dashed out the door.

He hopped down the steps, off the portico, heading blindly in search of a pond. All he cared about was whether the gazebo housed his conquest. The gravel path he followed led him right to the large, white-latticed framework. In a silhouette against the moonlit pond, the girl leaned on the railing.

"I didn't expect you to be here." Ash stepped up onto the painted floorboards.

"And here I thought I had been extremely direct, milord." She floated toward him like an angel, taking one of the glasses from his hand.

Indeed, she had been very straightforward. A quality he deemed essential in any relationship. Even in the early stages of their liaison, he appreciated Marguerite's directness with him. Yet, something about the girl's boldness conveyed her natural curiosity, as opposed to ruthless ambition.

"I really shouldn't indulge." She giggled. "My head is already swimming from my intemperance."

Another bout of fluttering twinges in his stomach stopped him from moving. It had been a long time since he experienced the effects of nervous infatuation. He paused to enjoy the sensation.

"Alas, I'm still conscious," she continued saying. "So, a little more can't hurt. Besides, I see no need to be sober right now, do you?"

Ash shook his head. They thought alike. He liked that fact. Pouring her glass to the brim, and then his own, he watched her drink down the fiery liquor like a thirsty sailor. He set the bottle and his glass on the railing.

"Come here." He pulled her to him.

She flung her arm out to the side, tossing her glass away. The tinkle of expensive crystal smashing on the stone walk brought another giggle from her. Then she placed a hand over her mouth to stop the vivacious sound.

"Your laugh is delightful." He clasped her fingers, pulling them away to hear more of her enchanting voice.

"I think I've had too much to drink, Lord..."

"No more talk." He kissed her fingers one by one. "No names, no titles, and no words. Of course, those that you wish to whisper in the throes of rapture are excluded."

She unbuttoned his jacket. "Did I not already have this off you?"

Her lilting, provocative voice drew him down to her sweet breath. "I put it back on to go inside to get your champagne."

She continued to amaze him with her straightforward seduction. "Mmm, I love how you feel against my fingers."

She flicked buttons open on his shirt. The heat of her stroke swirled beneath the fabric and circled his beating heart.

Ash pushed the long curl of her auburn hair back from her shoulder. He leaned down

and kissed her neck. She stretched, giving him more access. Behind her ear he found her skin void of face paint. If they didn't have to return to the ballroom filled with people, he would have washed her face to know what lay beneath the layer of vanity.

"Can we get you out of some of this?" He tugged at her sleeves.

She looked up at him and nodded. He searched for the best attack on her clothes. Maneuvering behind her, he began the arduous work of fitting his fingers into the tight spaces between the hooks of her dress.

"That tickles," she laughed.

He kissed the back of her neck again.

"I plan on tickling you all over, sweetness." He trailed kisses down her spine, until the chemise stopped him from touching her skin.

Her giggles infused him with the kind of madness he hadn't experienced since the first time he bedded a girl. He'd forgotten the excitement, the thrill of youth, the enthusiasm an attraction contained. Fascination with any woman had been missing from his life for a long time.

"I think I shall like that." She laughed an invigorating velvety tone that made him want to hurry.

The powdered skin ended at the rim of her bosom. He had the dress open, exposing the shimmer of milky pink outlining the corset's white ruffle of lace. Her well-shaped breasts rode high along the fringe.

"I'd like to see you out of all of this." He swept his finger beneath the rim. "But I suppose the impracticality of our location should keep this brief."

"The party is in the house." She unbuttoned his shirt further and fanned her hands over his chest. "No one would come this far from the ball."

"We did." He cupped her cheek and brushed at the white dust on her jaw.

"Yes, we did, didn't we?" She opened her mouth and sucked his finger between her lips.

"I said no names, but I would like to rescind that and know yours." With his thumb and her saliva, he rubbed the remains of ruby red paint off her lips.

"Hmmm." She pondered the question as if it were a secret.

Much of what he thought about in the house seemed to take on a life of its own. He'd get rid of Marguerite and make the delightful nymph his new mistress. He'd do more for her than he had ever done for his other dalliances. He'd house her in fine accommodations and bestow upon her the treasures of his wealth.

"Miss James," she finally answered.

"Very formal for the informality of our endeavor, don't you think?" He touched the tip of her wet tongue through her parted lips then stroked his finger into her suckling mouth.

She grasped his wrist and pulled his hand away. "We should not forgo etiquette altogether. The Duchess would think me lax in my lessons if I were to allow you to address me any other way, milord." She turned his hand and kissed his palm.

"Two can play your game, Miss James. Call me Captain Sin."

"Sin is very, very appropriate, milord." She sighed.

He yanked his clothing off faster than she could push it. The shirt landed on the railing. As he worked on his trousers, the lovely Miss James watched. The dilated pupils in her blue eyes expressed the extent of her drinking. She seemed in a trance until her

fingers reached out and wrapped around his shaft.

Little warning bells muddled his mind for a moment. Two disturbing questions pushed forward. *How many men had she been with before him*, followed by *why did he care?* Ash shook his head, forcing away the waywardness of his thoughts. He drew open Miss James' chemise, and stared at her perfect breasts. Round and fuller than he expected, he fingered one rosy nipple.

"So, Captain." A sultry splash of her breath bathed his face as she stepped closer. "What sinful commands do you have for me?"

Her head tipped down, and his gaze followed. He looked at her delicate hand stroking his shaft. His cock grew under her gentle ministrations. Her fingers whispered like silk over the throbbing smooth-veined shaft. She squeezed the head as if it amused her to test the plumpness. Her moves seemed mindless, like she was petting an animal. He grasped her right breast and kneaded it in his palm.

"I would never force a lady to bended knee, but one desire is to feel your lips caress that which your fingers do."

Her fingers stopped gliding up and down his shaft. Had he asked too much?

## Chapter Four

Mercy knew exactly what he wanted. She had spied such a thing before onboard a ship with lusty sailors and their whores. Her curiosity over such an enterprise, piqued by the luxurious swill she had consumed, lowered her to her knees. Unaccustomed to the happenings between lovers, she still felt ready to lose her virginity. Captain Sin had a way about him that gave her a sense of safety. She trusted him to be gentle and kind.

She wrapped her lips over the head of his cock. His moan vibrated the stiff flesh between her lips. When she flicked her tongue under the rim of soft flesh, he jerked as if lightning struck. His hands locked onto the sides of her head, she thought for support. Then she touched the sensitive indent again. She almost gagged on the intrusion of his erection lunging into her throat. He withdrew quickly.

"That felt good." His tone offered an apology with his reason for almost choking her.

"Then let me make you feel even more wonderful." She pushed his thick cock back into her mouth.

While she had spied upon men with their doxies when in port, she knew only the basics. Everything else, she had to learn by experience. One thing she had noticed—gagging came with the territory. So at least she didn't suffer the feeling of incompetence by the reflex of her throat muscles.

From Captain Sin's deep moans, she assumed she was going in the right direction. Every little kiss and lick she placed along his erection brought shivers and jerks from him. His delight became hers.

Her confidence grew. She cupped his scrotum, nuzzling her nose into the flesh, sucking fervently on the heavy sac. His sensitivity there gave way to a surprised gasp. Yet, not everything was to his benefit as she began trembling inside.

"Suck on them, sweetness. Take them into your beautiful mouth." His fingers gripped the sides of her head firmer, steering her into position.

Too large to take all at once, she twisted sideways and captured one-half of the firm-skinned sac. She followed his instructions and sucked on one, and then the other. Then she pulled away and studied his cock. It had an attractiveness she didn't understand. With the faintest touch, she cradled a hand beneath and brought it to her tongue. Fully wetting her lips, and producing an exorbitant amount of saliva, she put the fleshy crown into her mouth.

"Perfect," his groan sputtered.

Mercy took more in than she thought she could handle. The slick shaft, wet with her spit, glided beyond the bounds of all limits. She let her throat muscles relax, and the O of her mouth conditioned to the girth.

Captain Sin's fingers folded behind her head, steadying her as he thrust it in and out several times. Mercy held his legs for support. Beneath her fingers, she felt the muscles tense on the back of his thighs. She rubbed them soothingly, pulling him tighter, swallowing his long, hard cock.

"God, you are a heaven sent angel, Miss James," he groaned, drawing back from her, completely coming free of her mouth.

His hand swept under her chin and lifted her face up. He leaned over and pressed his

mouth to hers. She shook with the thrill of his aggressive kiss sucking at her lips. By the help of his hands under her arms, she rose to her feet. She snaked her arms around his neck, letting him lift her to her toes. Her aching breasts pressed against his torso, where she found new sensations to experience as her nipples tingled against the smooth short hair on his chest. Her lips quivered to his awakening tongue curling around hers.

"As much as I want to kiss you, I cannot wait to plunge my cock inside the warmth of your sweet body."

He placed his forehead against hers. She looked into his watery gaze and nodded her consent—her total agreement. His ragged breath blended with hers. Somewhere in her mind, there had been a different reason for doing what she was this night. She couldn't remember what it was. She didn't want to recall anything before Captain Sin took her into his strong arms.

He lowered her down onto the wood-planked floor. Bending down over her, he kissed her and made a preliminary appraisal of her breast, fondling her nipple with little twists. A flush of heat swept over her as her belly tightened inside and a throbbing ache pulsed within her sex.

The captain's hand skimmed over the chemise bunched at her waist. He slid his fingers beneath and caressed her skin. The small twitches in her vagina increased. Her skin dampened, wetting her thighs. She let out a short, constrained whimper expressing her pleasure. His mouth stopped moving against her.

"I love the resonance of your voice, sweetness. The little hums and whimpers are a pleasing sound. It makes me hot to rush, but slow to proceed, for I don't want to miss a single gasp from you." He pulled his hand away from her quivering belly and pushed it over the fabric of her clothing, pressing his fingers against the juncture of her legs.

He rose up on his knees, his cock jutting out like a yardarm from his body. He shoved her gown up, sliding his fingers along her thighs. His deft skills had the garment out of the way quickly. His sweaty hot palms stuck to her cool skin as he stroked her bare legs. She shivered.

Her senses suddenly cleared. "Wait." She pushed her gown down slightly to stop his second ascent.

Handsome, self-assured, attentive—the captain's qualities didn't seem appropriate for a public debauchery.

"Regrets, my sweet?" His fingers folded around her calves and swirled gently behind her knees.

"I ... no, but maybe we should—"

He was too nice to use for her selfishness. The man had needs, but what if she had been wrong about his reasons? Were they simple male urges? What if afterward, he wanted to see her again?

"Maybe we should, what?" He leaned forward to cup her face.

She saw his green eyes grow cautious yet tender, and concerned. She couldn't forgive herself, nor could she back away from something proving to be much sweeter in action, than in thought.

"Maybe we should wait?" she said nervously.

"If that is your wish."

It was—and it wasn't. Sex with any man wasn't going to prove anything to her grandmother—other than that she was as immoral as the woman claimed her parents

were. Sex with this particular man could only be special. She'd want nothing less for herself.

Mercy flung her arms around the captain's neck. "No, it's not my wish to wait."

He kissed her with sensuous demands that churned emotions in her hardened heart. His amorous considerations traveled her face. From cheek to brow, he murmured inaudible endearments expressing passion, encouraging her ardor. The friction of his hands roaming her back and bottom made flames of desire kindle into an inferno. When he left her mouth, moving down to her breasts, she didn't dare look to see if they were crimson from his devotion.

Mercy trembled in anticipation and trepidation. She'd take his lust as adoration and steal the happiness for herself.

"I cannot wait to dip my cock into the warmth of you." His tongue gently bathed her nipple.

"Captain Sin—" She had to tell him the truth.

"Shhh, no talking, no words. Remember?" His mouth locked over hers and his lustful probe reawakened the ache in her like a mystery needing solved.

With her lips dampened by his kiss, she pressed her sigh into his. Driven beyond excitement, she clung to him. He was good at thoroughly pushing away her slight inebriation, so her immediate thought was to drink more.

"Too many clothes," he mumbled, pushing her skirting up, making contact with her nether regions.

She drew in a stuttering deep breath of surprise. The light massage of her mound and the fingering of the sensitive area riveted her to every move the captain made. Breathless, quiet, and immobile, Mercy tried to expel the air caught in her throat. Captain Sin fished between the wet folds of flesh and brushed her clit.

"Oh God," she whimpered, not sure she'd withstand his caresses.

Then a slight pressure gave way for her to exhale a short breath.

"Oh Lord, please" she cried out, suddenly understanding the plunge of his thumb entering her.

"You're very tight, and tense," he whispered, stroking her vaginal channel. "I'm going to enjoy bringing you pleasure."

His breath felt rather cool against her flushed face. She turned her head away, relishing the way his lips inched along her ear, his tongue gliding around the rim.

"I don't think there can be anyone more perfect than you," he murmured, taking her earlobe between his teeth.

"I'm not perfect, Captain Sin."

"You are, and it makes me anxious to know your thoughts." He kissed down her neck and back up to her ear. "For now, I want to learn what arouses you the most."

Mercy's heart stopped. The shallow teasing thrusts of his finger moved faster and deeper. She felt as if she'd die from such sinful joy.

"Please, stop." She pushed at his shoulders.

He obeyed. His finger slipped out of her, giving her a pang of regret.

"I need a drink," she blurted out, desperate to have her brain numbed again. "Yes, I need something to whet me."

"Me too." He gave her a very wicked grin, and then he scooted down and lowered his head somewhere out of her line of sight.

"Oh!" she gasped, brought aware of his location.

His lips fit over the mouth of her sex, creating a firestorm of unearthly twinges she couldn't control. She felt faint, shuddering each time he touched her receptive clit with his tongue.

He stopped for one second, and looked up at her. She shook her head, hoping he understood she'd not ask him to stop again. Dropping back down between her trembling thighs, he pressed his tongue hard under the hood of her clit, rocking the nub of nerves that made her tremble. Her hips followed his kiss each time he began drawing back. She felt so vulnerable, so wanton for enjoying the way he licked and probed her nether regions.

"Please, no more," she groaned, unable to take another moment of the tremors making her writhe on the floor. "Please ... stop."

"Not yet, I want to drink all of you." His face smashed against her ache.

Mercy bucked up against his magnificent attack on her senses. His tongue spiraled deep, tortured her with an exhaustive reproach, then withdrew.

"You intoxicate me." He sipped at the trickle of juices starting to flow from her.

The unbelievable feeling aroused her to new extremes.

"Ah, sweetness." He gasped, coming up for air, then pressed his face tighter, so a swirl of air from his heated nostrils entered her.

She thrust her fingers into his hair, holding him there as if that pressure might dispel the jittery rise of her climax. Nothing short of pushing him away would stop the vibrating moans he churned into her. She jerked and quaked, thrown into a tizzy by his steamy hums of greediness.

"Oh God, please," she begged, needing him to stop, wanting him to continue.

His hand left her knees and scooped under her bottom. He lifted her, still sucking with a rapacious thirst. A pulse in his mouth met her throbbing center. She twisted locks of his hair around her fingers. Emotions swelled. Her vaginal muscles never relaxed as he brought on an orgasm so intense, she was barely able to breathe.

A strangled sound emitted from her throat as she cried out in ecstasy. Not until her gasps eased and her body began relaxing, did the captain break from her with one last kiss to her nether lips.

"You have a beautiful, delicious flavor, Miss James. I could sip the nectar of your delightful charms all night."

An embarrassing squeak burped from her lips. So unladylike for the romantic fantasy the captain drew her into. Although he didn't seem to mind her drunken hiccups as he delved into repeating his performance.

He stroked the inside of her thigh, kissed the corded muscle stretched taut, and licked a circle around her clit. His rutting drove her toward insanity.

"Please, do something," she beseeched, eager to feel the euphoria again.

He rose with a smile, smoldering lust in his eyes. The feral expression kept her spellbound as he crawled over her. His wide chest shadowed her narrow frame from the moonlight. She rubbed her hands across the muscled expanse.

He stared at her for a long time, his gaze caressing hers with an affectionate imparting of his soul.

"Tell me your real name." He cupped her cheek and brushed a finger at her nose.

She shook her head, afraid to want more than that moment.

"I'll tell you mine. I want to see you again."

From over his shoulder, a halo of angelic mist hovered, distracting her. Blinking to dispel the illusion, she looked at the bright moon. A shower of light bathed the night in a soft white. She watched the outline of a person form, and then the image evaporated.

"You have a faraway look in your eyes, me beauty. What are you thinking?"

The image of a gentleman pirate captured her heart and dragged it farther into the fantasy her mind spun in her head. In reality, she couldn't allow anyone into her life. She had set a course well beyond society's conventions. Loving the rogue bringing her such delight had no place in her plans. By morning he'd be thankful not to know her.

Mercy reached up and touched her lover's face. The feathered lines at the corner of his green eyes intrigued her. The small ones at the corner of his lips suggested he didn't smile much. Nevertheless, he was smiling now in a way that made her think he didn't usually grin with the silly tilt to his mouth. She found the feature adorable and endearing.

"You've been to the sea?" she asked, needing to expand her knowledge of him.

"Aye."

"I love the sea." She sighed, having missed the salty breeze on her face. "The tall ships with their great sails are so majestic."

He kissed her fingertips while she played with his lips and moustache. The proud set of his jaw, the lovely way his dimples formed when he smiled again had no comparison to her drab life. She reached to his neck and touched his queue, tugging off the ribbon to see his hair loose. His long dark brown locks swung to his shoulders and framed his sun-bronzed face. She was sorry to have turned the wavy mane loose as it shadowed the very features she studied.

She put her hand to the side of his face. Every time she stroked his cheek, her finger touched upon a nerve in his jaw, twitching and jittery as if he were nervous.

"You are beautiful," he said, as if he sensed she needed hearing it.

Yet lying on the old gazebo floor, her clothes askew, she wasn't sure he was right. With the way Captain Sin looked at her, she felt like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon. He aroused something feminine and fragile in her. She always believed she'd be strong to endure her life alone. He gave her reason to wonder, *what if things were different?*

"Captain Sin, will you make love to me?" She boldly put her hand between them and touched his cock.

He lowered his head and pressed kisses against her neck. "Yes, sweetness—" his raspy voice croaked "—with the greatest of pleasure."

She caressed his erection. Her gentle, unhurried exam shifted to his groin. She slid her fingers around him and rubbed the muscled cheek of his ass. His cock kissed her legs as she massaged the downy cheeks of his bottom. She found the softness appealing. It sent a wave of enticing thrills through her limbs.

"After tonight—" His words scared her again.

She pressed her mouth to his, kissing him hard, stopping whatever misplaced sentiments he was about to proffer up. While she felt as if she belonged with him, they were strangers. They didn't know each other and they never would.

The captain ate up her aggression with a little of his own, sucking at her lips. She stroked his chest, fingering his small taut nipples as he rose over her. He drew back from her kiss, breathing hard.

"I can't get enough of your mouth, sweetness."

Once more, she felt that chill of air sweeping around her. The vaporous white fog swirled close to her face, obscuring the captain's features. When it dissipated, she looked deep into her lover's eyes and saw the reflection of herself. The sight was disheartening. Time slowed, moments stood still, and she stared at him. Her eyes watered. For a second, she wanted to be somewhere else. If it weren't for his persistent thumb brushing soothingly over her cheek, she might have bolted like a jackrabbit. His smile hypnotized and engaged her heart.

"From across a crowded room I desired you." He started a slow poking and probing of his erection against the opening of her vagina.

The teasing had her squirming under his weight. She scratched at him like some street harlot begging him not to stop. He pushed and his thick cock plowed into her. Mercy clenched her jaw tighter. She'd not plead for his halt. He drew back and rammed again, plunging deeper. A stab of pain tensed every muscle in her body. She dug her nails into his flesh and waited out the ebbing sting. His slight move created a harsher pain and she cried out.

"Ah, sweetness, I am so sorry," he whispered, his feather-light kisses dotted her face.

His body went still on hers. She clutched at his shoulders, mostly so he couldn't move away and see the tears on her face. A depraved part of her awakened under the barrage of his kisses and murmurs, though they weren't exactly words, but more like emotions that spilled in low whispers. Threads of tenderness cross-stitched over her broken heart. Each breath became a magical bind that inclined her to respond.

"Don't stop." She pressed a kiss to his jaw. "I wanted this."

He marked her hairline by kisses.

"I wanted this with you," she moaned, feeling his hips move and his body rock easily against her.

She liked the way they mouthed each other's lips and tongues, his hot breath warming her face as he speckled her with light kisses. He rocked on her as a ship rides the billowy sea. She clung to him, digging her fingers into his shoulders and then clawing the back of his head lightly. The inside of her thighs rubbed the outside of his. The sting and soreness in her vagina numbed. She lifted her hips, following his rise. The rhythmic movement soon had her pumping up as he was thrusting down. She found a warming friction she enjoyed and let the sensations guide her.

"That's it, sweetness." He hummed an approval to the slow grind of her hips against him.

He buried his face against her neck and sucked on her skin until she felt bruised by the passionate suckling.

A spasm caught her unaware with sharp internal constrictions. The captain groaned and thrust faster, too roughly for her uncomfortable position on the planked floor. Only she couldn't complain. His grinding agitation dispelled the twitching ache in her. She drew her legs up and flung them across his back, bucking against the remarkable vibrations. His ardor escalated. He rose up on his hands and continued to lunge forcefully.

Mercy fought to catch her breath. Her voice whined betwixt the gasps she took for air. Then she shook and trembled hard. The captain pinned her with all his weight. Buried to the hilt, his cock throbbed inside her. A sudden warm wetness bathed her sore interior.

He let out a strained guttural cry, and discharged more of the heated substance that began dripping from her rubbed raw vagina.

Exhaustion left her panting.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked, kissing her between satisfied sounding gasps.

Mercy shook her head, unable to reward the uplifting moment of her deflowering with the truth. She rubbed over his lips, lifting up her head and kissing him.

"Are you sure? If I had known you were a virgin I would have..."

"Not bedded me?" She questioned his honesty.

"I'll not lie to you, sweetness. I would not have let that stop me. Though had I known beforehand, I could have been gentler in the beginning." He wiped damp strands of hair off her forehead.

"I thought you were very considerate, milord. Thank you."

"Thank you?" He chuckled and rose up off her. "I don't think I've ever had a woman say that with such sincerity. You make me feel a cad for my actions."

She took the hand he offered and tried to suppress her giggle. His stature had the magnificence of a stallion, proud of his achievement. His cock hung large, yet more limp, as if it had gone to sleep. She felt the duly serviced mare and could only imagine what a sight they made as they stood in the remnants of their garments.

Captain Sin had a much easier time straightening his clothes, while she had layers of twisted fabric to sort through. It didn't help speed her along as he silently watched from the corner of his eye.

"I'll never understand a woman's need for all this." He stooped down and dusted her skirting with quick brushes of his hand.

"Neither shall I." She took the ribbon to her chemise from his hand.

Captain Sin rose up and helped her with the fastening and tying, and hooking of her undergarment. He stopped once, swirling the back of his hand over the rise of her breast above the fabric.

"Sorry." He sheepishly grinned, when he saw she watched him. "You're just so soft."

Mercy laughed and put her arm in the sleeve of her gown. He grabbed it and helped get it to her shoulder as she worked on the other.

"Ashton!" A voice shot at them from the dark.

Mercy spun around, crossing her arms over her chest to hold the bodice in place.

Captain Sin had a name. *Ashton*. It fit him, she thought.

Daring a look, she watched the woman the captain had been with earlier come parading toward them. She brought others, including her cousin Louise. When she left word where'd she be with the first person she came upon on her way to the gazebo, she never considered her cousin would bring witnesses.

The captain stepped partially in front of her. Still, she saw the woman, a man resembling Ashton, and Louise staring at them, wide-eyed in shock of their discovery.

Mercy's gaze dropped to avoid eye contact. Ashton brought his arm back, coaxing her to hide behind him and conceal her half-dressed state. She couldn't have loved anyone more for thinking of her in the most embarrassing of situations. Unfortunately there was no room for an emotional appreciation. This was where they parted ways.

## Chapter Five

Ash rubbed a hand over his face. He had set himself up for this scene. He'd asked for it, and got it with unexpected results. He didn't anticipate Marguerite bringing his brother, and the young lady that had spoken to Miss James in the ballroom.

"Weldon, it's not what you think. Well, maybe it is sort of, but she's only a servant, no one of consequence."

Miss James didn't make a sound to the humiliating severity in which he placed her. She shuffled back from his protective hand.

"Everyone, we should leave at once," Weldon ordered the spectators.

"I'm very disappointed in your behavior," Marguerite said quietly when she stood alone. "I have been overly discreet, and here you not only lower yourself to spending time with this little whore, you do it so openly as if to disgrace your family."

"You knew I had come out here. Instead of confronting me alone, you brought an entourage of witnesses." He found it hard to hold back his anger.

"You will not be the only one to be an outcast. Your little fling with the girl will no doubt be a great upset to her family as well."

"I don't know who her family is, Marguerite. I brought her out here to prove a point to you. However, I fully intend to—" What had he planned to do? Marry Miss James? *No*. Humiliate her further with the offer of money? The idea sounded callous to him now.

He combed back his hair with his fingers and wheeled around to the crunch of gravel made by running feet. Miss James raced out of the garden and across the lawn. He lost sight of her in the interlacing shadows of trees.

"I think we can fix everything just fine, darling. If you marry me, those others would never think to spread a rumor I would deny." She stepped toward him.

"I'm not going to marry you, Marguerite. If I had to marry anyone to save what is left of my scurrilous reputation, it would be to marry the young lady I just wronged."

"I want to have some security, Ash. If you will not marry me, I will find another that will. I think Weldon would, if I nurture his infatuations. You do know he is interested?"

Ash laughed and buttoned his shirt. "Marguerite, I don't care one iota for whom you think you can marry." Ash tucked in his shirt and straightened his sleeves. "If Weldon wants you, I'll not stand in his way."

Her little huff as she walked away gave him the satisfaction of making his point about marriage very clear and he hoped final.

Ash brushed over his clothes and looked out the framework of the gazebo. His morals had fallen to a new low. Marguerite had been right. Shame had a way of creeping in on his triumphs to make him less a victor and more a bastard.

He stepped down onto the graveled walk and headed the route Miss James had gone. Halfway to the rear door leading to the kitchen area, he stopped. Her boldness came from too much wine, while her humiliation had been all his doing. How was he to apologize?

*She's very pretty*, a familiar voice said from behind him.

Ash turned slowly to look at the foggy apparition of his sister. Every time he thought he'd gotten through the worst of his delusions, she showed up to make him feel insanity had a firmer hold.

"Marguerite?" He questioned Emma's choice.

*No, silly. Miss James.*

"She is beautiful." He turned from the ghostly image and rubbed his temples, feeling the wave of a headache. "What are you doing here?"

*She is the one, Emma declared. She will make you a good wife.*

"I need no wife."

*You need her, Ash. All you have to do is let her into your heart.*

"I don't want to talk about this."

*Oh? Then why am I here? She floated a circle around him. Only when you feel so lonely, so heartbroken, do you truly wish me here. This is the first time it's because of a woman, you know.*

"I wish you here everyday, Em."

*No. You think of me when you feel you can sink no lower in the despair of depression. There is a difference.*

"I have done a horrible thing tonight. I needlessly hurt a lady, and Marguerite..."

*Do not concern yourself with Miss Marguerite. I never did like her selfish vanity. As for Miss James, she has a hearty spirit. It just needs a little nurturing from someone that appreciates her.*

The fog thickened until he felt as if he could reach out and touch Emma. Her hands clasped his and she looked up at him with a smile. It never changed, and he could remember before she died, what a happy young lady she was.

Ash squeezed his eyes shut. He tried to wish her away. Her arms went around his middle and she held him.

*Even if you never see me, remember I am always with you, dear brother.*

A chill of air swirled a funneling shiver up his spine and his eyes snapped open. He looked at the house. What would Miss James say if he whisked her away from her duties and married her? He laughed at the absurdity of insulting the lady with asking her to be his mistress. Leaving well enough alone seemed best, no matter what Emma thought.

## Chapter Six

Mercy opened the door to the kitchen and slipped inside. She kept her head down and weaved her way around the servants. Confused by the sentiments she had allowed to filter into her soused brain, she tried remembering the reason for her outrageous actions. While she didn't fear her grandmother, there remained an underlying trepidation toward being part of another one of the Duchess' tirades.

Then she thought of Captain Sin. The poor man let his lust get the better of him, and now he'd have his own set of troubles. In the short time they were together, they had bonded. At least it was the way she saw their coupling.

Taking a step back, Mercy turned around. She had run off without apologizing for the mess she had made of his evening. The idea of going back to the scene however, frightened her. She had to leave well enough alone and take pride in accomplishing her scandalous act. With threats of legal action against her father, the Duchess forced her into living there, and the house had become her prison. Now her grandmother would have to let her leave.

"You horrible child!" Her grandmother's hand clamped on her arm and wrenched her around. "How dare you embarrass this family!"

A stinging slap across the face brought Mercy an array of white pinpoints of light twinkling in her vision.

"Not only do you prove to be a disgrace to me, but that poor gentlemen will never live down his dishonorable actions," her grandmother continued.

Mercy put a hand over the heated imprint radiating from her cheek. She waited for another attack with a daring stare. It hadn't been the first time the shrew hit her, but she was determined it would be the last.

"You are just like your mother," the duchess accused.

"I thank you for the compliment," Mercy retorted, lowering her hand from her cheek. "Nothing gives me greater pride, Your Grace, than to be like my mother in every way."

"You willful little whore. Was he the first man you opened your legs for tonight? Or have you been servicing the lecherous bastards every time you snuck off?"

Mercy took a deep breath, reining in her anger.

"I should have never brought you back into my home, but now that I have, and everyone knows of you, I must make the best of the situation. Therefore, in two months' time, the Duke will return to his position as Governor of Jamaica. You will go with him. He has arranged a marriage for you to Lord Henry Cree. I will see that no one speaks of this incident, and I should not have to warn you that I will see to your father hanging if you should cause another appalling offense to occur beforehand."

"The only inexcusable insult I made this evening was not thanking the gentleman enough for his proficient lovemaking skills."

Instantly, the Duchess seized a fistful of Mercy's hair. "I'm warning you, Mercy. Don't let me hear of another incident involving you with a man. I guarantee you, I'll make your father pay for ever putting his filthy hands on my daughter and producing you. And I'll make you watch him choke on the end of a noose."

Mercy wished she'd pushed the bounds of her grandmother's tolerance so far. It was

the first time her grandmother expressed complete loathing for her, instead of just her father.

Towed up the stairs and down the hallway, the Duchess thrust Mercy inside her bedroom. "In the morning you will be sent to stay with Lady Louise, until you are on a ship,"

"I'm sure Louise will be thrilled," Mercy replied sarcastically.

"She does as she's told, and she has been instructed to keep a close eye on you. Just bide your time by behaving, and before the end of the year, you'll be a married woman, and free to let your husband fuck you." The Duchess pulled the door shut so hard the room vibrated.

Mercy's eyes went wide at her grandmother's vulgarity. She walked to the bed, wondering how the woman had two children since she apparently had no love for sex. It made her think maybe the Duke had forced his bride. Louise's father was their first child. Only he died in a war. Mercy's mother was their second child, and it had been apparent all her life, that the Duke must have loved her mother, in spite of the Duchess' dislike like of her daughter.

The very idea of having that safe warm feeling brought Mercy to think of her father. It had been her idea to leave him and return to the Duchess' household. While not entirely wrong in wanting to be educated like her mother, she should have found another way.

She flopped back on the bed and closed her eyes. Then, putting a hand to her chest, she rubbed over the bodice of her gown, feeling her sore nipples press the cloth. She felt wonderful, not wicked. Captain Sin really excelled in the art of pleasuring a woman. She considered her grandmother's plans of marriage. Did she want to get married? Would the husband her grandfather chose make love to her? Mercy couldn't picture anyone taking the special place Captain Sin had in her heart.

The standing framed mirror in the corner of the room caught her eye. She turned her head and stared at herself, seeing the same person, and yet, one event left her different. She sat up and lowered the unfastened gown from her shoulders. An unusual happiness made her smile. She stood up and pushed the garment to the floor. Hurriedly, she removed her chemise, and examined her naked reflection in the mirror.

Other than the small bruises dappling each side of her neck, the captain had left no extra signs he had touched her. She put her hand to the dampness between her legs. A creamy substance leaked from the tender center of her vagina. She stroked two fingers through the essence and brought it to her lips, tasting the captain's semen.

She backed to the bed, lay down, and closed her eyes, recalling the way his cock fit in her mouth, the soft thickness thrusting into her throat. The decadent thrill compared to nothing she had ever experienced in her life. She slid her fingers into her slick sex and stroked the way the Captain had. Tremors started slow, building against the steady pumping of her fingers. She writhed on the bed, imagining herself not alone.

"Captain Sin," she moaned, her climax peaking.

Her thighs trembled as she cupped her mound and lay shivering from the mild orgasm. She rolled to her side and buried her face in the pillow. The overwhelming events exhausted her to tears. The fact she'd never see the captain again upset her more than she had expected. She dragged a blanket over herself and cried herself to sleep.

\*

The months following the ball, Mercy thought about Captain Sin often. While she

knew she'd not see him again, she still wished for it. After all, he had left her the most unusual calling card—a babe in her belly. Much to her cousin Louise's chagrin, the Duchess didn't disown her because of it either. More importantly, the Duchess didn't have her carted off to Jamaica to marry a man she didn't know.

Her pregnancy became a blessed and joyful reprieve. Most women in her position lived in fear of disgrace. She looked upon the baby as a comforting gift from a night of reckless but breathtaking passion. While her grandmother insisted the man be informed, and take responsibility, Mercy refused. She'd no more ruin his life than she'd abort her baby, as the Duchess once suggested. It surprised her that her grandmother never broached the subject of notifying the father again. She feared what the next course of action might be.

The day Mercy stood in the gazebo in her eighth month of pregnancy she watched a strange morning mist rise from the pond. The foggy vapors took on an ethereal shape of a girl and she thought of the apparition from the night of the ball.

"If you're an angel, please look after her and her father." Mercy took a deep breath, rubbing the twinge of pain in belly.

It had been the first time she had thought of the baby as a girl. She smiled, knowing she was right. An arm of white mist extended and fingers caressed her cheek, stirring the tears from her eyes. It seemed impossible to be in love with a man she had known for no more than an hour. Yet, she had nothing else to describe the flutter in her heart every time she thought of Captain Sin.

As the apparition vanished, she doubled over from a stronger spasm. Unbalanced by the surprise of her premature labor, she clutched her unborn child and fell to her knees on the gazebo floor.

"Lady Hempstead." A gardener rushed to her.

"Go get help," she cried, fearing the worst for her baby.

She looked at the rolling fog on the water surface. "Please, don't take her from me," she begged, hoping it hadn't been an angel of death that visited her.

The pain came again, sharper, like a knife stabbing her middle. She tried to remain calm, but the next contraction drew a scream out of her. Then everything faded, a coolness swept around her face. In the seconds that she resisted the encroaching blackness taking her sight, she felt the soothing strokes on her arm and a gentle swirl over her belly.

\* \* \* \*

When she opened her eyes, time had slipped away. She looked around. Someone had brought her to her room. She lay on the bed, dressed in a nightgown, and tucked under covers. She touched her stomach and her protruding belly had flattened. A headache blurred her vision. She looked for someone to explain what happened, to tell her it had not been a dream.

"Milady is awake." Her lady's maid, Jane, picked up her hand. "How do you feel?"

"Like I was trampled by horses." She gave the servant a faint smile. "My baby?"

"She's fine. Wait just a minute and I'll get her." Jane left the side of the bed.

Mercy struggled to scoot upright. She pushed with legs and hands to manage a slouched position on the pillows. Weak and dizzy, she hadn't the strength to do better.

"Here's the little angel." Jane leaned down holding the baby out. "She is the tiniest

thing I've ever seen, and she has your hair, milady."

Mercy stared at the infant so small, so fragile, so utterly perfect. Too overwhelmed by love, she covered her face and cried.

"Everything will be all right, milady." Jane's consoling actually helped. "She may have come early, but she's strong and healthy."

Mercy nodded and wiped away her tears. She wasn't going to let the horrible way her grandmother treated her affect her daughter. As soon as she was able, she and her child would leave. Maybe not back to her father, but somewhere.

She reached up to take her baby.

"Give me that child," the Duchess demanded, entering the room.

Before Mercy had the bundled infant, Jane turned away and handed her baby to the Duchess. It only took a nod from her grandmother to send Jane scurrying out of the room. The sudden disruption made the baby cry. Mercy pushed herself up on her hands. The feebleness she felt, overpowered her resolve to show strength, and she fell back on the pillows.

"Please, can I hold her?" Mercy held her arms out.

"You're too weak." The Duchess turned away.

The baby continued to wail.

"She needs me to feed her." Mercy pleaded, afraid if she didn't have the baby in her arms something awful was going to happen.

"We have someone to take care of the infant." She stopped at the door. "You haven't enough milk."

Mercy put a hand to her chest. Her nightgown was soaked where her nipples leaked.

"It's not enough," her grandmother conveyed, shaking her head.

Mercy had to trust that others knew more about a baby's needs than she did. It didn't hurt any less to have her grandmother walk out of the room with her child before she had the chance to hold her.

Hours passed. Mercy slept and woke. Each time she inquired about the baby, excuses were given accordingly—the baby napped, the baby was being fed. The reasons looped from one thing to another and before Mercy knew it, a full day had gone by.

The morning light spilled through the window onto her bed. A strange chill swept through her, even though the sun felt warm. She sat up and pushed the covers aside, feeling stronger, yet feeling empty without her baby. Determined to see and hold her child, she swung her legs off the mattress and stood. If they would not bring her child to her, then she would go and find her.

The room next door was the nursery. She went inside. The cradle sat empty, and the whole room appeared unused—untouched, just as the day before when she checked on it to make sure every item was in the proper place.

Mercy walked slowly down the hall. She hardly had the energy to be out of bed. But a panic inside her trembling limbs pushed her to search the house. She felt a growing alarm in her heart, when she stopped at the railing to the staircase. She looked down at the cold marble-floor foyer. No one seemed to be around.

She looked below again and felt dizzy. Did she attempt to master the descent?

"Where are you going dressed like that?" the Duchess barked from behind her.

Mercy stood in her nightgown, and while she didn't want to embarrass her grandmother with her attire, she had to find her baby. "Where is she?"

"Your baby?" she remarked, crisply. "She's dead."

The cold unemotional statement startled Mercy.

"No. I saw her. You said I would see her soon." Mercy glanced down the stairs. Dizziness swayed her stance and she gripped the railing tighter. "Why are you keeping her from me?" she asked making her first step down. "Why do you hate me so much that..."

Mercy's foot slipped off the second tread, and she fell. Her scream echoed around her as she thumped down the marble steps. She came to a dead stop at the bottom.

If her baby was dead, then she prayed she'd die too.

## Chapter Seven

Ash looked over the rim of his ale. A man he only knew in passing advanced on him rather swiftly.

"Lord Sinclair?" Lord Henry Cree queried with uncertainty.

Ash sat his tankard down. He glanced at the men around him and then stood. "It's Captain Sin in these parts, Cree. The only thing I lord over is my ship."

"Captain, then." Lord Cree motioned to a chair for permission to sit.

"I wouldn't want to bother my friends." Ash pushed back the chair he'd risen from and glanced at the men about him. "Drink up, me hearties, and I shall return."

"Aye, Cap'n, but don't expect us to wait." A man lifted his arm and poured the rum into his mouth from a distance, letting the liquid slosh down his shirt.

"That's the spirit, Mr. Pettybones." Ash clamped a hand on his shoulder. "Bathe in the swill, and let yer flesh taste of the decadence."

"Aye, Cap'n, and then I'll let the lass there lick me clean." He swung an arm to indicate the woman Ash had been fixing an intent gaze upon for some time.

"You can give full report on that later." Ash walked around to Henry Cree. "Let us take a place over in the corner, and we shall get loaded to the gunwales, while you tell me what brings you to this spot of paradise in Jamaica." He waved for the wench at the bar to fetch another pint of ale for himself and Lord Cree.

"I don't care to drink, Captain." Cree held a hand up to stop the woman from setting the pint in front of him.

"Well I do, do I not, me beauty?" Ash pulled the woman down on his lap. He gripped her jaw and kissed her hard.

For hours, he debated loosening his money pouch and taking the buxom wench to the back room.

"This is important, Sinclair," Cree said with adamancy.

Ash looked at the man. He considered booting him out of the tavern for disrupting his day. It wasn't often he had a moment's time of leisure to brood about his sad life.

"Be off with you, me pretty." He lifted the wench to her feet and swatted her bottom. "The gentleman has business to discuss, and I see it must be serious. But don't go far. I shall be requiring some private time with you."

Ash rubbed his hand at the crotch of his trousers, adjusting his stiff cock into a less constricted place.

"Do not wait too long, Cap'n Sin," the woman purred, stroking his jaw. "I've got me some other mighty fine offers. One even proposed marriage, and a girl has got to look out for her future you know."

He chuckled and followed the nod of her head toward some of his crew. "Ten of them could not satisfy you as I can, me lovely."

"Maybe if you were offering something long term..."

"Forget that nonsense." He cut the conversation short. "I've no wish to take a bride and put an anchor around me neck."

She had hit a touchy subject he'd not even joke about. Marguerite's persistence until he left England had him soured on the idea. The one moment of happiness he

remembered was at a ball, and that seemed more like a dream than a memory.

Ash turned his attention to Cree, ignoring the girl still standing next to him. "What brings you in this place?"

"I came because I would like to enlist your help."

Ash looked up at the wench leaving them. "My help? What could I possibly do to help you?"

"I'm to marry the granddaughter of the Governor of Jamaica."

"The pompous Lord Hempstead has a granddaughter?" Ash lifted a brow. He knew of a son, but never a son's wife or children. "This lady is here on the island?"

"No, she was to arrive last week on the ship the *Quester*. We've just gotten word that the *Quester* was attacked by pirates, and the Lady Hempstead taken prisoner." He took a deep breath. "I've heard the rumors in England you were ... are... Well, that you have a ship and do things somewhat in the same fashion as the pirates. I would like to... Or rather the governor would like to commission you to get his granddaughter back."

"What rumors?" Ash asked, ignoring the fact that there was a girl in trouble.

"Milord?"

"It's Captain, remember, and the rumors about me, what are they?" He leaned back in his chair, ready to hear the worst of what he should have already known.

His voice went low. "There is word you are really a pirate."

"Who'd you hear this rumor from?" Ash took a huge drink of rum.

"Your brother's wife."

"His wife?" Ash sputtered, wiping liquor from his chin and moustache.

"You've not heard then? Your brother wed Lady Marguerite Buckram a little over a year and a half ago?"

Marguerite had warned him she'd marry his brother if he would not wed her.

"No, I hadn't heard. I've not been back to England in nearly that amount of time."

"If you'll agree to go after my betrothed, I wish to join your crew."

Ash's short burst of laughter made no disturbance on the loud and rowdy patrons.

"You can't be serious."

"Oh, but I am. I think it might give her a better impression of me, since our marriage was arranged by contract instead of emotion," he said seriously.

"A girl?" Ash rubbed his jaw and fingered the growth to the beard he had started sporting. "Tell me more, how does this plan of yours aim to impress the lady?"

"I was thinking if I were the one to rescue her, maybe she'd not see me as such a fop."

Ash rested his elbows on the table. He laughed low, amused by the man.

"The high sea ain't a social, Lord Cree."

"Sin!" A voice boomed across the room.

Ash stood at the resonant threat. No one would mistake the raspy harsh tones of Captain Cutter James. Nor would they miss his wiry red beard and head full of hair of the same color. As Scottish as the bones of his thousand ancestors, he clomped across the room in his kilt and high tasseled boots.

"James." Ash nodded a greeting. "What brings you ashore? I just heard news you have taken over the *Quester*." Ash widened his stance and rested a hand on his hip near his pistol.

While the Grub and Grog Tavern was a neutral hangout for pirates, it never stopped

some from fighting. At least once a week some poor soul was killed.

"What have you done with my bride, you filthy pirate," Lord Cree jumped to his feet ready to rush the man.

Ash grabbed him by his coattails and held him back.

"And who might this lass be, ye landlubber?" James folded his arms over his broad chest.

"The Lady Hempstead, granddaughter to Duke Hempstead," Cree answered.

"Ah, ye are talking of me bonny wee lass, ye are. A beauty to be sure, and a rare prize for any man." He lowered his hand to the handle of his pistol in his sash. "But ye cannot have her. She is mine to keep for as long as I see fit. Besides, what would the lass want with the likes of your skinny hide? If she has the eye for any man, then t'would be to her likin' to look over Cap'n Sin here, before she would give you the time o' day."

"We have a marriage contract." Lord Cree challenged. "She belongs to me."

"James, you can't hold the girl against her will," Ash said, trying to reason with the man. He and James were rivals, never enemies.

"The lass stays because she wants to and nothing more." He grinned.

"She wants to?" Ash raised a brow, doubting his statement.

"Aye, she does. If you knew her, you'd learn the girl has a mind of her own. Do you honestly think I'd keep a lass aboard me ship that didn't want to be there? Females are the devil's doing to wear on a man's nerves."

"Captain Sin, he's lying." Cree charged. "What young, refined woman would want that crusty old pirate?"

Ash laughed and put a hand on Cree's shoulder to stop him from doing anything foolish. "You'd be surprise at the number of ladies eager for the attention."

"Gents, I think me best choice is to take me grog to the far side of the room." James bowed to them and walked away.

"He's kidnapped the Lady Hempstead. As a nobleman it's your duty to rescue her, Lord Sinclair."

Ash turned and grabbed Cree by his ruffled shirt. "I told you, this is not the place to be spouting out who I am. Now get out of here before I let me men have sport with your hide."

"You might want to see this before I go." Cree pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to him.

Ash looked over the decree from the governor. "I get ownership of the Isle of the Indigo Winds Plantation?" He glanced up from the document.

"A reward, Captain, the Governor knows how you've worked trading to raise the money for that island. He means to give you the place in its entirety in return for his granddaughter."

Ash folded the paper and put it in his pocket. "I'll take this as proof of the offer, if you don't mind."

"Then you'll get her back?"

"For this," Ash tapped his pocket, "I'd bring the devil to the gallows."

"You'll attack his ship?"

"It's best you don't know details of my plans, Lord Cree. However, you heard James; he's not giving her up without a fight."

"I still want to go with you."

Ash thought of the girl; the Governor's daughter might be very grateful herself to be rescued. If she did have some infatuation with pirates, he thought himself much better looking.

"No. My way doesn't include you. If it comes down to a battle, my men will back me. I can't ensure your safety. This is where we part company, Lord Cree. I'll get word to you as soon as I have the girl safely in my custody."

Ash nodded to his men as he walked past them.

Single file, they followed him out of the tavern. Nary a one grumbled at the interruption to their shore leave, as he never asked much of them.

"Mr. Pettybones, ready the *Indigo Wind* to set sail. Make sure it has a full store of gunpowder and cannonballs."

"We on a mission, Cap'n?"

"Me Matey, we're going to steal a girl."

"A girl?"

"Seems Cutter James has taken the governor's granddaughter and I've been commissioned to get her back."

Ash went with the men. He waited as they boarded the ship first. "Mr. Pettybones, that looks like the *Red Raven* to you, doesn't it?"

"Aye, Cap'n, but James' sister ship the *Black Raven* is out there too."

"Hmm, we cannot fight them both. We'll have to wait for James to leave and find a way to separate them."

"We can disable the *Black Raven*," Mr. Pettybones said.

"How?" Ash rubbed his jaw, staring at the ship as he waited for some input from his first mate. "Well?"

"I dunno, Cap'n." Mr. Pettybones rubbed his jaw too, frowning so that his bushy gray eyebrows came together. "We could... Nah, that wouldn't work. Maybe we could..."

"There." Ash pointed at the flat barge coming ashore. "Does that not look like some of James' men from the *Black Raven*?"

"Aye, Cap'n, they are his men."

"And those are fresh water barrels."

"If you be thinking we steal their barrels..."

"No, James will just get new ones," Ash interrupted. "I have something else in mind. Take a few men, follow those men, and do whatever it takes to keep them from filling and sealing those barrels until I get there."

"Aye-aye, Cap'n."

Ash hurried down the street, looking for the one establishment that could help him. If he couldn't get what he needed or his plan didn't work, they'd be in a lot of trouble. But his options were limited and the prize a worthy cause.

## Chapter Eight

The cannons thundered around the ship the *Red Raven*. Mercy stayed clear of the deck as ordered and took herself to the hold to secure cargo. If not for the danger to the men that wished to protect her she might have argued more to stay and help them.

She spun around at the explosive burst of a cannonball slamming into the port side of the ship and stopped tying the knot on a load of crates. Water poured in, the ship rocked on the turbulent seas. Above the surface of the sea, each tilt halted the flow, but then they'd roll again, and more water gushed through the opening.

Mercy picked up several planks of remnant repair lumber and rushed forward to patch the hole. Her staggering stance danced her back and forth until she braced herself against the hull.

"Oh!" She squealed as cool water splashed through the gap and hit her in the face.

She wiped her hand across her eyes and glanced out the hole at the ship firing upon them. They flew a black flag with skull and crossbones similar to their own.

"Another pirate," she gasped, worried for the crew, and yet, because of her, they didn't have the protection of a second ship.

Her father said her grandfather was looking to get her back and they had to leave Jamaica quickly. The *Black Raven*, however, seemed to have fallen afoul, because they hadn't kept up and her father refused to wait.

Leaving the boards by the gaping wound in the vessel, she hurried to the wood box of tools and fetched a hammer and steel cut nails. She tossed them to the damaged area and then searched for a barrel of pine tar. A common practice for patching ravaged areas of the ship, the makeshift bandage need only last as long as it took them to win the battle and get to port for proper repairs.

The ship jerked with a loud crash, and she heard the shouts of men above. Experience taught her to ignore them and tend to the task at hand. She tripped on the debris and fell forward. Splinters stabbed her hands as she clutched the hole. Then the rumble of the battle stopped suddenly, and the smoke outside from the cannon fire parted, showing her a clear view of the ship moving alongside hers. She looked up and took a deep breath as she watched the outline of a man at the rail. An odd white mist whisked the air clean for a perfect view of him.

"Captain Sin?" She gasped to claim a breath she seemed unable to take.

Even though she had fantasized him as a gentleman pirate, she thought he was a merchant when he said he was a seafaring man.

"Abandon ship!" someone yelled from atop.

She hesitated, taking one last look at Captain Sin before he moved away. Then she turned and scrambled toward the ladder. Her foot caught beneath one of the planks she planned to use for repairs. The enemy ship banged into hers as they docked against it. The sudden jolt threw her to the floor. Her head hit a support beam and she fell into the build up of water on the floor.

"Mercy, are ye down there, girl?" her father yelled through the hatch.

She lifted her head to answer, but another jolt caused the cargo to shift, and as she watched it crashing down toward her, she rolled up against the hull.

"Yes, Father!" she shouted back at the sound of a thump.

No answer came.

She pushed aside some crates and worked her way to the hatch. When she had come down, sunlight had streamed into the hold. Now the darkness gave her an ominous feeling. She scurried up the ladder and discovered someone had shut the door. Pushing upward, she couldn't budge it. Not even a rattle of the door, suggested someone had bolted it, or something sat on it.

"Father!" She pounded on the wood. "Father, I'm down here."

"I hear someone, Cap'n," a man above the door said.

Mercy backed down the ladder. His voice, not one she recognized, worried her. She moved into the obscurity of the shadows. Wet and apprehensive, she shivered. Had they killed her father, made him walk the plank, or sliced him with a cutlass? She hated her father's pirating profession, but she loved him.

She watched the sunlight return to the hold as the men above removed what barricaded it. One came down halfway and hopped from the ladder. She inhaled sharply. The noise echoed loudly in the confined area.

"Come out from there," he ordered.

She crawled out of her dark corner and stood up. A long ago feeling returned as she stared at Captain Sin in his leathers and scarves. A gold one banded his waist where a pistol and a cutlass hung. A red one banded his forehead, binding his hair into place. A little bit dirty and a tad scruffy, he was still the handsomest man she had ever laid eyes on.

"Keep your hands where I can see them and come forward." He held a pistol aimed in her direction.

While she wanted him to recognize her, she new from the dim lighting and her attire, it would be near impossible, especially with the large floppy hat covering her bright auburn hair.

Mercy moved toward him. An explosion of gunpowder thrust her forward. She squealed as she fell into the precarious array of crates. The remaining cargo toppled onto her. She couldn't breathe from the weight of them pinning her down.

The captain rushed to her and pulled them off. He lifted her to her feet.

"Lady Hempstead?"

"Yes," she answered, grasping his arm to hold her up as a pain in her ankle shot up her leg.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "I was hired to find you by your fiance, Lord Cree, and your grandfather."

His information explained a lot. Still, she looked up at him, searching his gaze for a glimmer of surprise to see her.

*Nothing.*

"Yes." Disheartened he had forgotten her, she hobbled toward the ladder.

He'd probably been with a hundred women in the two years since they were last together. His sweet words and tender loving could never have been unique to her. If he were like the men with her father, Captain Sin's charismatic charm was as much a weapon to woo women as his cutlass was a weapon to kill men.

"Here, let me help." His hands were at her waist as soon as she put a foot on the fist rung. "Your grandfather will be happy to see you in one piece." He climbed behind her,

following close, keeping a secure hold of her. "Up you go, milady."

"Mercy," she gasped, as he elevated her with a well-placed hand on her bottom.

"You need not beg for your safety, milady." He climbed out of the hold after her.

"No." She stared in shock upon seeing the deck of her father's ship beyond repair, littered with dead men. "My name is Mercy."

"Cap'n!" one of his crew yelled. "Cap'n, is you all right?"

"Aye, Bucko, what of the others?"

"They're back aboard the *Indigo Winds*, Cap'n Sin." The man huffed and puffed, out of breath. "We thought you wanted the cargo to go sink into the sea, so we lit the powder fuse in the galley."

"Then we need to get off this ship." The captain grabbed Mercy's arm and dragged her around the obstacles on deck.

"We only have the ropes to get us across, Cap'n. What of the lady?"

"Go," he ordered, making his way toward the remaining tethers of his ship.

"You've destroyed the *Red Raven*." Mercy pushed herself from Captain Sin's grasp. "Where are Captain James and his crew?"

"Those that are left from the fight are in a couple boats headed for their other ship."

She looked in the direction he pointed. "Why didn't they engage in the fight?"

"I poisoned their water with a strong sleeping powder from the local apothecary." He grinned with a satisfied amusement. "They're probably too tired and disoriented to give or take orders. However, that won't last forever."

An ingenious plan from a pirate didn't exactly fit. Mercy took a minute to weigh her options. A strong impulse pushed her toward jumping overboard and swimming to the *Black Raven*. The desire to stay close to Captain Sin restrained her.

Mercy hopped up on the rail and grabbed a rope.

"Wait," the Captain yelled as she swung away. "That's not—as easy—as it—looks."

She heard the surprise in his voice. Naturally, he thought of her as Lady Hempstead, a refined woman with a delicate demeanor. He'd never suspect she was more at home on a ship than in fancy gowns.

"Grab her," Captain Sin yelled as she landed on the rail of his ship.

One of his crew rushed forward and pulled her on deck. She looked back toward the *Black Raven*, praying her father was alive, and hoping he'd understand her need to stay with Captain Sin.

"Well do that not make ye bilged on your own anchor," the man with the captain said as he swung across alongside the captain. "She's been raised on the sea, Cap'n."

"Or in the jungles like a monkey." He grinned at her, dropping next to her on his ship's deck.

Mercy tingled all over seeing his smile. Her mind filtered through the hazy past to the night she'd seen such handsome features up close.

"Come with me, milady." The captain took her elbow, guiding her to the passageway. "Mr. Pettybones, I leave the care of my ship in your hands for the moment. Set our course back to Jamaica, and keep a lookout for the *Black Raven* to follow. James will not like losing his ship or this lady, nor will he be happy about the trick we played on his men."

The captain led her into his cabin and closed the door. "What's your name?"

"I told you. It's Mercy."

She walked around and touched objects that were nothing more than sailor's instruments. The small oval mirror caught her eye. She stopped before it to look at the disarray of her attire. Sooty smudges on her face made her see why the captain didn't know her. She wasn't the pale white-powdered girl he had met at the ball. She didn't appear at all feminine and nowhere as pretty as he had claimed the night he made love to her under the stars.

"I'm Captain Sin."

"Did you kill the captain of the *Red Raven*?" She turned her eyes from the reflection of herself to him.

For a second he had a strange look in his eye. "No," he answered, pulling the red scarf off his head and combing back his hair with his fingers. "The blaggart jumped ship with his men, and he either swam, or took a longboat to the ship that followed."

She watched him lean on the edge of the table. Blood stained the legging of his trousers.

"Have no worry, milady. The foul smelling Captain James will not be bothering you no more."

"He doesn't smell. Well, not always," she added, recalling times when he was sodden with grog and hadn't bathed in a week.

"The old man turned your head, did he? Well, if that's not a new twist on things. I was paid right handsomely to rescue you, and I detect a note of ungratefulness in that sassy tone of yours."

"It must have been a substantial sum to make you go up against another of your kind." She turned away and looked out the windows over the bunk, nervous from his constant stare.

"It hasn't been the first time, nor shall it be the last time that Cutter James and I will tangle swords." He pulled a parchment from a small wood casket on the table. "As for my reward, I will get the prized Isle of the Indigo Winds." He tapped the scrolled up decree in his palm.

"So you get a piece of land in return for me. My worth really is impressive," She sighed and looked in a bucket on the floor. "I wish to wash up, do you mind leaving me alone?"

The Duchess hated her. The Duke hardly took notice. She found it hard to understand why they felt it necessary to interfere in her life. She lifted her chin and looked at the captain. As handsome as the day she first saw him, he made her heart tug a little with a sentiment of his gentleness. Then her head pounded as it conjured up the death of their child. He never knew, he would never grieve, and she felt like crying because he had missed so much.

"I have matters to attend to up on deck anyway." He bowed slightly and left her.

Mercy had thought of him often during her time carrying his child. Fantasies abounded in her dreams with him finding her and knowing the truth. She picked up a clean rag to wash her face and looked in the mirror again, trying to decide if maybe he didn't recognize her because he didn't even remember the night of the ball.

"Am I so forgettable?" She brushed at the smudge of black on her cheek.

*He hasn't forgotten you,* a voice said.

Mercy turned around, facing the empty room. She looked in all the corners of the small cabin.

*He has never forgotten you, Mercy James.*

"Who's in here?" She twirled about.

A knock at the door startled her and she opened it to a man bringing her fresh water.

"Thank you."

He nodded and left quickly.

Mercy finished up and decided maybe the face powder had concealed too much of her that night of the gala. The red rouge would distract even the soberest of men. She pulled off the hat, unbound her hair, and combed the long waves with her fingers. Then she spied the ivory comb on the table. She picked it up and raked roughly through the twisted mess of her hair.

The tap at the door stepped her back to the window.

"It's Captain Sin," he announced.

"Come in." Mercy held her breath.

Reckoning had come. She had listened to the voice in her head and believed. The captain had to remember her. If he didn't, she'd surely cry.

## Chapter Nine

Ash opened the door and stepped inside his cabin. "If you'd like something to eat—" Spellbound by the lady in men's garb and a mop of gorgeous coppery locks of hair, he stared at her, having not seen anyone so beautiful since—"

"Miss James?" He felt shaky all over. Used to almost real visions of his dead sister Emma, he didn't think he could handle illusions of a woman he'd met once and yearned for since.

"Mercy James, Captain Sin."

"You said you were the Duchess' companion." He staggered back, leaning for support against his door.

"You assumed I was her servant. However, it was not far from the truth. I had many roles in the Duchess of Hempstead's household."

Her gaze dropped below his waist. His cock twitched, anxious and ready.

"You've not had anyone look at your wound yet?" she asked with a great hint of concern.

"No." He studied her delicate features. She had a cute little nose scattered with the tiniest freckles and the almond-shaped sapphire blue eyes. How could he have not recognized her right off?

Ash took several quick strides to her. He grasped her upper arms, holding her as if she'd vanish in the same way his sister's ghost always did.

"Mercy James." The beautiful creature was real, she had a name, and her face glowed with radiance, instead of the sickly ashen shading of powder caking her skin. Her neck had a pastel pearly lightness like a polished conch shell, and the same brightness of pink tones dusted her complexion.

His eyes watered, thinking of the hundreds of dreams he had of her. The thousands of times he had heard her in his sleep, asking him to make love to her. Her upturned face, the parted lips, she was more beautiful than the faded image locked in his head.

He framed her face in his hands. "I can't believe you're here."

"I'm a bit surprised to see you again, as well, Captain."

"Mercy." He said her name again, accustoming himself to the sound of it.

"It's all right if you kiss me." She informed him in much the same way she had the night she told him it was all right to touch her.

He leaned forward, kissed her lightly, and hesitated. Her lips trembled and he worried that he frightened her.

"We're not drunk, Mercy. We're not acting impetuously for the reasons we did before."

"Just kiss me," she whispered, rising on her toes.

Ash put everything of himself into satisfying her request. Her mouth met his with eagerness. He drew back and licked her lips, encouraging them to part. She surprised him, swirling her tongue into his mouth first. Back and forth they played, licking and panting. Shutoff emotions surfaced from the depths of his heart. A choked whimper, almost like a sob from Mercy, stopped him. He held her face and rubbed his finger mindlessly over her lips while looking into her watery eyes.

"Again," she commanded, her lashes dropping and her lips puckering.

A lustful moan escaped him. He gathered Mercy in his arms and pulled her close. A hand at her bottom and one at the back of her head, he kissed her harder, eating up every delightful sound she made. He hungrily probed her mouth for even more amazing sounds of desire and excitement.

When he allowed them both to take a breath, he brushed her soft lips, feeling an overwhelming gratitude for having her in his arms, safe from the pirates that abducted her. Except a disturbing part of their conversation drew his thoughts away from enjoying Mercy's generous affection. Something she said—something he now recalled from the night of their scandalous introduction.

"James..." he muttered, leaning his forehead against hers. "Cutter James is—" He couldn't believe he'd missed the real meaning in James' words when he said the girl was his.

"He's my father." She rubbed her hand lightly over his cheek.

Ash righted himself and looked deep into Mercy's eyes. "I swear, sweetness, he was alive the last time I saw him. I didn't kill him, I promise."

"I believe you." She smiled, dragging him toward the bunk. "Even if you had killed him, I don't know that I could stop what I'm about to do."

She grasped the front of his shirt and pulled him down on his bunk with her.

Ash held her head and kissed over her freckled nose and her silky cheek, bare of face paint, clean of soot.

"I've never forgotten that night." He held her face again, staring into her blue eyes.

"Me either, even if we did have too much to drink."

"Regrets?" He started to push up from her and she tugged the front of his shirt.

"I wanted you then, Captain Sin, just as strongly as I want you now." Her head raised and her mouth crashed against his.

"Ouch." He cringed and rolled over to remove his sore leg from bumping hers.

"Let's take care of that before it gets infected and they have to saw your leg off to a nub. I know a man that said it wasn't a very pleasant operation." She climbed over him, and fetched the water and a rag. "Do you have a knife?"

He reached in his boot and pulled out a thin sharp blade.

She took it and cut open his pant leg. She wet the cloth and soaked the dried blood to loosen the legging. "This looks very bad, Captain." She tore the fabric, getting a better look at the gash and his muscled thigh.

"Ash." He took her hand. "Call me Ash."

"I recall a woman calling you Ashton."

"Come here." He crooked his finger at her.

She climbed up next to him.

"In you, milady, I hold a great deal of trust. My real name is Lord Ashton Sinclair. Onboard my ship however, I can only be known as Captain Sin, or in your case, Ash."

"Then Captain, I should tell you in this cabin I am Mercy James, the daughter of the pirate Cutter James. Anywhere else I'm Lady Mercy Hempstead."

"Your secret is safe with me." He lifted his head and kissed her beautiful smiling lips. "So you really are the granddaughter of the Duke and Duchess."

"Uh-huh," she moaned without her mouth moving from his.

"You should have told me."

"I had my reasons." Her hair dripped to his shoulders like spiraled flames.

"We are much alike with our second identities." He rubbed a hand over the dirty white billowy shirt she wore and cupped her breast. He folded his other hand behind her head and pulled her down.

She put a hand on his chest and their kiss deepened. His heart pounded and his lungs tightened on his breath. He felt alive again, and he gave Emma credit for understanding something he did not—there was a reason to open his heart to love. He had carried the darkness of her death inside himself for years, and Mercy brought light into his soul.

Ash slipped his tongue between Mercy's parted lips. She tasted wonderful, sweet like apple. He caressed the length of her lying on him. He buried his fingers into her coppery curls and twisted her head to meet up with his kiss. Lost in his insatiable lust, he moved his kisses over her face and nibbled her delicate earlobe. He sucked on the warm pulse in her neck until he left his mark. Playfully, he bit her bottom lip between his teeth.

Then he attempted to roll to the side with her and stopped at the contact of her leg on his wound. "Damn!" he groaned.

Mercy moved out of his arms and looked at the cut. She picked up the bowl of water and the rag again.

"This is going to hurt more, so hold still." She wiped carefully around the edges of the laceration.

"How did this happen?" She dried the cut and looked about. "Needle and thread?"

"Your father is a might bit faster with his cutlass than I am on my feet." He chuckled. "Your father. I can't believe what a strange bit of circumstance that is."

"Where I will find your medical supplies," she asked.

"Mr. Pettybones has the greater supply, but I think there's a leather packet in that trunk that has some basics." He pointed across the small cabin.

Mercy rummaged through his personal belongings, and stopped to look at a pencil sketch of Emma.

"My sister," he informed her, eager to have her know everything about his life.

"She's very pretty." She put the picture back and came away with the leather packet containing thread and needles.

"I drew that picture just before she died," he told her.

With an apparent sensitivity to death, Mercy cringed.

"Are you all right?" He sat up straighter on the bunk.

"Fine." She moved to the table and lit a candle. "Was it recent?"

"A few years ago. She was ill for a long time."

Mercy threaded the needle, heated the tip in the candle flame to sterilize the steel, and then walked over to him. "This will be simpler if you remove your britches."

Ash stood and began untying the sash at his waist. He noted the blush to Mercy's cheeks before she turned to wet the rag again with one hand and squeeze out the water.

"I'm ready," he informed her.

A glimmer of appreciation flashed in her gaze, when she saw he had the decency to cover his genitals with his balled up trousers. He wasn't always insensitive to a lady's delicacy. It still bothered him that he had despoiled her chastity from a clumsy rush of lust.

"You are all right doing this, aren't you?" He covered her hand when she sat on the bunk.

"I've done it before if that's what you want to know. My father taught me to stitch a man when I was thirteen." She leaned over with a hand on his thigh.

Her fingers took a detour, inspecting the hairs she petted on his leg.

"If you are looking to stroke something, I can give you a better location."

A deeper blush tinted her adorable cheeks. His heart would not still from the thunderous hammering within. She smiled, looked down, and jabbed the needle in his leg.

"Easy, me beauty, I'll be needin' that limb."

"How long before we get to Jamaica?"

"Winds are good. Less than a day, I reckon." He watched her carefully sew his flesh as if she were working on needlepoint. "You knew that, so why ask?"

"I was wondering if you could make the trip longer."

"If I trusted the Duke, I'd take my time. However, by getting you to your grandfather, I get my plantation, remember?"

"It means a lot to you, doesn't it?"

"I've been working toward that goal for quite a few years. Only the more money I make, the higher the price goes. I need to take what I can get as soon as I can."

"There, all done." She put the medical stuff aside.

"Good." He watched her wash her hands. "Mercy?"

"We haven't much time." She tugged off her boots and socks. "I should like to spend the night with you."

Ash unbuttoned his shirt and tugged it over his head. "I'll not chase you away." He threw his shirt across the room, anxious, eager, and nervous. It seemed dreams did come true, and yet how did he forget she was about to wed the man that hired him to rescue her?

## Chapter Ten

Mercy slipped off her shirt, showing Ash how brazen she was by not wearing an undergarment such as a chemise. She liked his smile and the animalistic hunger in his stare. While she'd relish him pouncing on her, she also had a craving to tease him a little. She saw she was right as soon as she fingered her sensitive nipples.

Ash took a deep breath. His rapt attention remained fixated, entranced by her actions.

She caressed her breasts, and closed her eyes against the painful memory of when they ached for another reason. Her grandmother said she didn't have enough milk to feed her baby, and yet, for a month after the birth, her breasts were tender, engorged with a pressure she learned to ease by squeezing the milk from them.

Too painful to think about, she forced herself to set aside the tragic death of her baby. She pictured Ash as the one that made her breasts feel heavy from his handling. He had made them ache in the past. She envisioned him suckling her skin, nibbling her swollen nipples, kissing her heated flesh.

She opened her eyes when she heard him move. Ash had risen from the bunk, still clutching the trousers over his groin.

"No." She put her hand out to stop him, not ready for his participation.

Two years of dreaming up ways to seduce him gave her time to practice as she relived her night of splendor. While she had touched herself intimately before he came along, afterward she had a basis for knowing why her body responded in certain areas.

"I just wanted to help." He breathed heavier.

Mercy slowly unfastened her belt and lowered her trousers. There she did have a covering of under-drawers—the fabric acting a shield against the roughness of her other clothing. She rose up and kicked the garment away from her feet.

She slid her hand over her belly, circling her navel, and sweeping up, under one breast. Then she traveled back down and reached between her legs.

Ash's mouth dropped open as he took a sharp breath of air. He lost his grip on his bunched trousers and they fell on the floor.

Mercy watched his cock spring out, partly hidden by Ash's shirt hanging low enough to drape his shaft. She rubbed her mound and parted her labia with two fingers as if taunting his erection.

The Adam's apple in Ash's throat jostled with each of his gulps. He let out a low moan when she raked her middle finger into the folds of her sex. The satiny wetness coated her fingers and she lifted her hand, holding it out to Ash.

Mesmerized, he moved forward, his mouth opening to suck the creamy substance off. She laughed and stuck her finger in her own mouth. Ash grabbed his cock. A drop of liquid glistened on the crown. He rubbed a finger over it, lifting it on the tip of his middle finger and held it to her to lick it away.

She sucked his finger into her mouth, rolling her tongue around. Then she backed up and moved her hand to her sex, caressing her mound and stroking her clit. A few feet away, the solidness of the cabin door looked to be a good support. She walked there, still stroking, and moaning over the rising tide of sensations running through her. She leaned on the wood. Her body convulsed and she broke the connection.

"Let me," Ash begged to help.

"Not yet," she purred, pushing her finger into her twitching vagina.

She pumped faster, trembling hard against the door, until a warm gush rolled down the inside of her thigh.

Ash came forward, dropped to his knees and licked her leg. His tongue tickled, traveling up one side and dipping into her. She shuddered. His moan blended with hers as he lapped up the essence of her orgasm. He rose in front of her, grasped her wrists and pushed her back to the door.

"Now my turn to tease you." He licked her cheek, her jaw and her neck.

She wiggled against him, rubbing her nipples and hips against his body. The stimulation drove her crazy. She fought Ash's restraint of her arms, wishing to hold him. But he took the red scarf he had once worn around his head and tied her wrists together. He stretched her up and tied the scarf to a coat peg.

With both hands free, he caressed her body.

"Ash, please, let me go." She squirmed, feeling the coarseness of his palms rub her hips and belly.

"It tickles." She laughed.

His strong hands slipped behind her thighs, and he picked her up, positioning her to sit on his shoulders. The heat of his breath funneled into her vagina. Then his mouth was upon her, sucking her clit between his lips, rolling the tip of his tongue against the cluster of over-sensitized nerves.

Her body tensed and flexed in spasms. The powerful sensation forced her to thrust forward into Ash's mouth and slam back on the door. In a steadfast clenching grip, he kneaded her buttocks. Then he withdrew. His fingers stretched underneath and spread a generous amount of her discharge up the crack of her butt. She jerked at the fingering around the rim of her anus. He took another swipe through her drenched sex and smeared the substance in the same area, this time pushing it into her.

Mercy let out the suppressed groan. It relaxed her anus and Ash's fingers penetrated. He resumed sucking her core and flicking his tongue at her clit. As she involuntarily thrust against his mouth, she felt an orgasm escalating with severe intensity. The discomfiting pressure in her bottom merged with the arousing stimulation of her vagina, and her body shuddered uncontrollably in waves of erotic ecstasy.

She threw her head back, banging it against the door, and let out a guttural cry from the overwhelming force of her rapture.

The sexual bondage didn't end there. As she hung by her arms against the door, Ash lowered her legs one at a time so she was standing again. He got the bucket of water and washed his hands. From a drawer in a cabinet, he took a clean rag, wet it, and bathed her thighs and her reactive sex.

She whimpered, tensing at the contraction of her insides. Only when he had her clean did he untie her wrists. In her weakness, she let her limbs drop onto his shoulders. He pushed her up against the door and kissed her with every measure of his unbridled lust.

"Make love to me," she gasped between the pecks of his lips to hers. "Make love to me like you did that night so long ago."

Ash scooped her up into his arms and carried her to the bunk. She hugged him tight, fighting the tears and her apparent vulnerability to his open display of affection. The trap of falling in love with a dream was one thing. To actually crash headlong into emotional

turmoil of wanting a man so desperately it upset her was an entirely different dilemma.

## Chapter Eleven

Ash embraced Mercy with a blend of affection and desire. Intimate, personal involvement was a serious, dangerous, and foreign course for him. The word commitment had tagged to it responsibility.

"I intend on making love to you all night," he promised.

"I'd like that very much." She put a finger on his bottom lip. Her blue eyes turned slightly sad.

Then he remembered Cree. She was to be another man's wife. It left him confused as to what to do about that. He didn't want to think about the outcome of their lives. He always lived for the moment, and with Mercy in his bed, he didn't want to waste a minute of it on thought. He kissed her fingers as she tried playing with his short whiskers.

"I don't much like this," she said. "It irritates my skin."

"Do you want me to shave now?"

"No." She smiled, laughing softly. "I just want what I've got right now, you taking me in your bed in every way possible."

"I'm going to start by taking my time in devouring every succulent inch of you, sweetness."

"By all means, do." She fingered his hair hanging forward.

He kissed her softly.

"I want to slowly reacquaint myself with your luscious body, especially from where I was before." He lowered his head and breathed a rush of warm air into the slit of her sex to watch it contract.

"Beautiful," he murmured, kissing a knee and staring up at her.

He moved swiftly to her nether lips, parting them, and massaging the wetness still spilling from her.

"Spread your legs wider," he commanded.

Propped up against the headboard of his cabin's bunk, she breathed heavier. He swiped a finger through the parted flesh and licked the creaminess of her aroused body. It excited him to have her watch him devouring her sweet juices."

He opened her further. Her hot sex twitched in protest to the coolness of the surrounding air. Her swollen clit hung ready to be stimulated again. Mercy squirmed with a stifled moan when he flicked his tongue against her.

She panted hard, her gaze set on him. He pressed his lips to the wet center.

"Yes," she wheezed.

His extensive play with the sensitive area drew her ragged breath out unsteadily. Fervently, he sucked and tongued the essence spilling. Her hips pumped her body, grinding her sex against his mouth.

He slid his hand up, caressing the curves of her body, feeling his way to her breasts. The ship rocked them gently as he stimulated her with the aggressive twisting of her nipples.

"Ash," she whimpered.

His heart hammered his ribs so hard his chest hurt. When the second shudder of her body came gently, Ash lifted over her and prodded the contracting entrance with his

cock.

"Scoot down, sweetness. I wouldn't want you banging your head."

She wiggled below him. The length of his heavily aroused erection slid along the inside of her leg. A nervous sort of laugh hiccupped out of her and he smiled at the twinkle in her eyes.

He pressed against her entrance, feeling the passageway retained a rigid tightness. There was little hope that since their last time together, she hadn't been with another man, but there were many signs it couldn't have been too often.

"Pull your legs up," he suggested.

She slid one soft limb up along his hip, giving him the space to sink into her.

He drew back with each thrust, careful to let her insides adjust. She stretched and accommodated him by the third stroke. With her legs curved around him, he fit better. Her heels dug into the muscles of his ass.

He moved his head, accepting the way her kisses spotted his face with the warmth of her lips. She arched under him and dropped away, riding against his rhythmic lunges. Then she cried out, grasping his shoulders with the tips of her fingers. She hung there as her whole body shook. Her insides clamped down on his shaft, contracting around his cock, embracing the throbbing length as his orgasm built. At the flex of her vaginal muscles, Ash drove himself deeper, pounding through the clenching channel. Mercy gasped a stuttering series of whimpered approvals.

As she climaxed her moans increased. The intense cry came with tears. He felt them on his lips, tasted them with his tongue. Then he shuddered hard. His body felt on fire. He jerked his hips up, pulling his cock out of her, and spilling his seed on the bedding.

"Move over this way." He shifted to the right, dragging her clinging body with him.

He bunched up the soiled blanket and pushed it to the bottom corner of the bunk. Then he eased his hold of Mercy. They repositioned, yet remained wrapped in each other's arms, both of them panting with the titillating exhaustion of sex.

Ash pushed his hand up the side of Mercy's face and into the luxuriant auburn curls. He leaned on his elbow, watching the sparkle in her eyes. The blue, more radiant than sapphires, compared to no other jewel in the world.

He quietly studied her, memorizing details of her face. Conversation remained non-existent. While hearing of every aspect of her life did appeal to him, he didn't want reminders of how short their time together really was.

"Turn over," he said, lifting, and easing away.

First, her back was to him, and then her side as she nestled into his bedding. He ran his hand over her velvety skin and circled her smooth bottom. He glided his finger between the cheeks of her ass.

"You said in every way possible," he reminded her.

"Yes," she moaned, her voice muffled by the pillow.

He stroked her skin, feeling it quiver in anticipation. Despite the stir of the night's cool air, sweat beaded on his face and neck.

Mercy lay naked and beautiful, a rare treasure if ever there was one for a pirate. Strangely, he had missed her, but he couldn't see how he'd make her life better by keeping her. He kissed the back of her shoulder. The slow journey from there took in Mercy's sexual needs. He licked her sweet body until he reached the rounded cheeks of her ass.

"Tuck your knees under you," he directed, lifting her at the hips as she folded her legs up. "That's it."

He rubbed her bottom and then smacked the satin-textured surface. She squeaked with surprise and looked back at him. He dispelled her concern with a dozen wet kisses on the reddened area. Reaching beneath her, he rubbed her mound and fondled her clit. Her orgasm came fast. He stood up and cupped the wetness, dragging it up into the fissure of her bottom. Just like before, he massaged the rim of her anus, lubricating her for more than his fingers.

"If you want to stop, tell me." He leaned down, pressing his lips to her spine.

She reached back. He took her hand in his and pulled it under her, rubbing her body, guiding—teaching her the moves that would give her pleasure. Her moans deepened as he squeezed his fingers around her breast. He let go and shifted behind her. For a moment, he listened to her quickening breath as he stroked between her legs, making her wet. Then he wiped his hand over his cock, coating the head and shaft with her creamy essence. He lifted his stiff erection dripping with her juices and rubbed the wetness over the puckered hole. Using his finger, he smeared the lubricant into the gap.

Mercy's stuttering whimper turned into ragged pants. He continued stroking, pushing two and then three fingers into her tight bottom. Then he gripped her at the crease of her leg and hip and held her steady. He pushed against the unyielding aperture.

"Relax," he swept his hand over her ass cheek in soothing circles.

When she exhaled, he lunged forward, breaching the entrance. A small gasp cut into the pattern of Mercy's moans. Ash drew back and thrust again. Each retreat he paused, understanding how uncomfortable she'd feel—virginal in that area—he prided himself in guessing. Tighter than he expected, he continued working into her, caressing her bottom, taking time to give her the chance to enjoy the sensation.

When she began pushing back, grunting and groaning in long breaths, he picked up his pace. He watched her anus stretch, accepting more of his shaft. She rocked harder, slamming her soft bottom into his groin. He winced at the involuntary spasms of her ring squeezing to expel him.

She stiffened. A guttural sound of ecstasy accompanied the rapid twitching of her insides. Her climax triggered his. He felt his erection pulse within the chasm of her sweet ass. Semen expelled in bursts, filling her, oozing out with each jolt of his body.

Ash kissed his way up Mercy's body as he turned her and brought her down on the bunk with him. She buried her face into the crook of his neck.

"Are you all right?" He reached over the side of the bunk, grabbing the wet rag to clean them.

She shuddered at the touch of the cool cloth on her bottom. He hugged her closer, wiping away the traces of his discharge on her, and then on himself. Once he finished, he tossed the rag across the room.

"Yes," she answered, snuggling against him.

She sounded tired, but content. Then a sob sputtered from her. Whatever happiness he thought he heard, he deemed a figment of his imagination.

## Chapter Twelve

Mercy lifted her face from the hiding place under Ash's jaw. He had his fingers under her chin, coaxing her to look at him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing." The loss of her baby still weighed heavily on her heart, and sadly, because she couldn't share that with him, she felt a deeper sorrow.

"These tears aren't for nothing." Ash turned to his side, sliding his hand over the curve of her hip. "You're upset with me?"

"No, of course not." She placed her hand on his chest and massaged the moisture of his glistening sweat into his skin.

"Regrets, because of Cree?"

"No regrets." She traced the grooved muscles down to his stomach.

"Then what?" He held her chin again and wiped the tears from her face with the swish of his thumb.

"I was thinking how like my mother I must be." She looked up from where she watched her hand roaming his hard body.

Ash captured her fingers and kissed the tips. "What is she like?"

"I don't know, not really. She's dead."

"I'm sorry. Was it recently?"

"She was taken to the gallows the day I was born."

"The gallows," his voice croaked with surprise.

"They hung my mother for piracy."

He released her hand to put his caress to her arm as she spoke.

"I was told she begged the court for mercy. Not for herself, but for me." She ran her finger beneath her eye to wipe away the tears. "They kept her in prison until I was born, and then I was given over to my grandmother."

"It's hard to believe your grandmother named you Mercy?"

"She didn't. I heard my grandfather insisted. I like to think it was because he wanted to do something to remember her." She turned her head to look up at him. "A servant said her very words, when my grandfather asked her to beg for mercy were, 'My child is my redemption, my mercy.'"

"How was it you learned your father was Cutter James?"

"To start with, stories and rumors. Then one day I was sitting in church, and this man came up behind me. He asked if I was the granddaughter of Duke Hempstead, and he proceeded from there about his relationship with my mother." She took a deep breath.

"After that, I searched trunks in the attic and found her journal. It confirmed everything. She ran away from home and met my father when searching for a ship to take her to the colonies. Over the course of several years, I met with him, and then one day he told me he'd never be able to return to England again. He said it was dangerous for pirates to put foot ashore because the hempen halter waited for each and everyone."

"He feared the hangman's noose?"

"No, he confessed later that he told me that to trick me to go with him," she sighed.

"He loved my mother very much, and bitterness seemed to rule his senses. He wanted

vengeance for her death. I could not fault him, but he learned he need only have asked and I would have gone regardless. The Duchess never cared for me."

"How is it you ended up back at her house?"

"I felt I might be missing something. I lived aboard the *Red Raven* with him and his crew for five years. I grew from a child to a woman on a ship with men. Very decent men when you get to know them. Then I told him I wanted an education like my mother. He set me ashore with friends that delivered me to the Duchess."

"And the night of the ball?"

Mercy didn't want sadness to overrule the happiness she felt. Even the sliver of time she spent with Ash could never be enough to overshadow everything of the night that reminded her of her dead child.

Without giving him an answer, she trailed the path of dark brown hair on his chest down to his cock. It jumped to her caresses and she slid a leg over his lap. Before she could ask him to be inside her, he stood and lifted her up. His cock impaled her sore channel, yet she hummed with the pleasure of him filling her.

She folded her arms behind his head and wrapped her legs around his waist. The cabin door gave him the only place to press her against something solid, and there he held her. His hips performed the dual role of anchoring her to the flat surface, and grinding her insides with the length of his erection. He penetrated deep, even though every muscle in her constricted to hold him back from her womb.

"Am I hurting you?" He slowed, holding her face to stare into her eyes.

"You can never hurt me." She kissed him hard, succumbing to his tenderness.

Her clit quivered on top of his shaft and the sphincter of her anus tweaked in uncontrollable spasms. Her orgasm came hard. Ash didn't climax with her and she felt incompetent as he held her racking body. Her nipples tingled from scraping his hair-covered chest.

"Hold on." He carried her to the table.

In one sweep of his arm, he sent everything to the floor. He stood her on the floor and turned her away.

"Lean over the table, sweetness. I want to do this from the back."

She obeyed his command and lay on the worn smooth table—her bottom up, her legs parted. He dipped his fingers into her wetness. For a minute, she didn't feel him and then he rubbed the creamy substance up the crack of her ass and into her anus with one finger.

"Oh!" she gasped with the awareness of where he meant to put his cock again.

Her fingers curled over the edge of the table. He dipped inside her and stretched the hole. He rubbed and fingered her until she relaxed. He poked the head of his cock in, making her jump.

"Easy, sweetness." He thrust in slow, short strokes.

Her desire to please him outweighed the discomfort. His large hands fastened to the fold in her hips. He moaned a strained release and she shivered from the hot fluids spurting to fill every crevice his cock hadn't occupied.

She lay still on the table, staring at the cabin, wondering if she shouldn't have done something to participate. He pulled her up and scooped an arm under her legs, picking her up and sitting her on the table.

With her head leaning against his, she took the splash of intoxicating kisses as the answers she needed. His happiness rained on her like a wonderful summer shower.

"How about some sleep?" He wet a cloth and washed between her legs.

She nodded, but when he picked her up and put her in the bunk, he didn't join her.

"Aren't you coming too?"

"In a minute. Close your pretty eyes and get some rest."

Mercy closed her eyes. The day had been long, the night stretched far into early morn. Drifting off to sleep sounded good, yet not as good as staying awake with Ash. She looked over at him, washing his body. Then he soaped his face to shave. In the reflection of the mirror hanging on the wall, their eyes met.

He smiled and turned. "Get some sleep."

Ash had grown more handsome than her mind allowed. In all her fantasies of loving him, this image was the closest to feeling real. She had a lot she wanted to tell him about the past months. However, she wouldn't, even though it all seemed something he had a right to know.

"I can't sleep. There are too many things to think about." She sat up and dangled her legs over the side of the bunk.

"It has been a busy day." He quickly scraped his whiskers off and cleaned his jaw free of stubble, leaving just the moustache that he trimmed.

"And night." She paraded over to him, leaning against his back.

The warmth of her naked body melded with his. He twisted around and grabbed her waist. A few steps and his clever maneuver took her to the bunk. He brought her onto his lap, straddling his thighs. She carefully avoided his wound. He pulled her forward, bringing their faces closer together. His strong hands rubbed her hips and squeezed her waist.

"You, Miss James, are wearing me out." He kissed her nose.

"Oh, you poor exhausted pirate. I feel so bad, forcing you to make love to me these endless hours." She laughed at the face he made.

"You cannot force me to do anything I'm not one hundred percent in favor of doing." His breath rushed between her lips as he caught her mouth.

She squirmed forward, pressing against him, feeling his expanding cock nestle the wet region of her sex. His hands slid under her bottom, lifting her up, lowering her onto his erection. She sank slowly, allowing her tight vagina time to absorb the size of his cock.

His kiss turned feverish over her face. Lips, cheeks, chin, and back to lips. He nibbled, patiently waiting for her to do the moving. She started to rock, pushing up from the floor on her toes, dropping down and forcing his cock deeper into her. Each rise came with a quicker descent.

"Harder," she mumbled, wanting him to take part.

"I don't want to hurt you."

Mercy sucked on his mouth and heaved her body forward, knocking Ash back on the bunk. She tucked her legs up along side him and pushed herself to a sitting position.

"You can't hurt me, Ash." She rolled her hips, like a ship on a wave, undulating and riding him.

He tilted his head back, releasing a satisfied moan. His fingers dug into her hips. He pumped his groin, plunging his cock deep into her. The rhythmic pace increased, and then slowed.

"Don't stop," she whimpered, so near a climax it frightened her to think she'd not feel

the euphoria.

Then he slapped her bottom. Her insides constricted. Once started, she had no control. The wracking jolt of her shudders threw her down on him. Kissing him hard on the mouth, Mercy hungered for his affection. She drank in the sounds of his pleasure as he quaked beneath her with a strangled groan, sounding almost regretful. He jerked her up several times, grinding himself deep. She slumped against him, panting with exhaustion.

"That was wonderful." She nestled her face under his jaw, kissing his sweaty neck, smelling clean from the soap.

"Yes," he agreed, hugging her, squeezing tighter when she trembled.

She closed her eyes, enjoying the comfort of him holding her. Now she was tired. She felt herself succumbing. Ash's soft whispers telling her to sleep were the last thing she heard.

## Chapter Thirteen

Ash quietly walked the length of the ship with his mind heavily weighted by his emotions. He climbed the steps to the quarterdeck and stared at their destination on the horizon. That last intimate act with Mercy worried him. What if she got pregnant? He'd been so careful with her, all but for their last time, and that time at the ball. There he'd been lucky.

"I've sent a man with the message for the Governor," Mr. Pettybones informed him.

He nodded, watching the island of Jamaica, hoping it would disappear. It didn't work. It remained, lying there in the ocean in the predawn Caribbean fog.

"Will we be going to shore soon?" Mr. Pettybones asked.

"Lady Hempstead is still asleep. I think we can give her a little more time." He had taken clothes of hers from the trunk the men took from the *Red Raven* and he left them in his cabin for her.

*"Aye, Cap'n." His first mate left him to handle other chores needing done while anchored.*

*Don't let her leave, Ashton.* Emma whispered. *She needs you.*

The sun had begun to rise behind them. It cast a glow on the white-capped dancing waters. The air had the warmth he enjoyed and the chill of his conscience hovered at his back. He turned his head and looked at the ghostly image his mind conjured up of his sister. Her pretty face void of any substance he could touch.

"She's betrothed to Lord Henry Cree."

*She could be yours. She has already given you her body, her affection, and her heart. What more do you want from her?*

"I want her to be happy, and I cannot see her wanting to live on my ship, or on the Isle of the Indigo Winds. She has come to marry Cree."

*Piff-poff, she doesn't even know him.*

"She wants marriage. I can't give her that. I can't give her the life she deserves in England. It's not what I want." He slapped his hand on the rail looking at the dock coming into view.

"Mr. Pettybones!" he yelled.

"Aye, Cap'n?"

"Go to my cabin and inform Lady Hempstead we will leave upon the quarter hour."

"Aye, Cap'n."

*Coward, Emma hissed angrily. Never did I think I would see the day you were afraid to face someone.*

"This is where the Lady and I part company. I am doing her a service in not having to face me with her embarrassment for a night of indiscretion."

*Poppcock! You are the one that cannot face the love that sparkles from her eyes like precious jewels. She's yours for the asking.*

Ash ignored her. He busied himself with the normal chores onboard his ship until Mercy emerged. He had one of the longboats already waiting for them.

"Lady Hempstead." He motioned her to the side they'd climb down.

Although he trusted her accomplished abilities on a ship, he went first and helped her

down. He sat her at the rear of the boat and took a place a safe distance from her in the front. A hundred thoughts ran through his head. Emma's words struck a nerve whether he wanted them to or not.

The boat eased to the old dock, and he watched his men help Mercy out first. He climbed out and went ahead, scanning the area for her father. Cutter James wasn't going to be a happy man. It surprised him how quickly the *Black Raven* had still made it to them after he had poisoned their water supply with the sleeping powders. He mistakenly assumed they'd drink enough to make them all disoriented. Apparently, just enough of the crew had been incapacitated to slow them down in joining James' fight aboard the *Red Raven*.

"Cap'n Sin, Cap'n Sin, over here!" Lord Cree shouted, waving an arm above the heads of others on the dock.

Ash looked back at Mercy. The morning sun glinted off her copper curls nested atop her head. He looked away, afraid she'd see how painful it was for him to let her go. All night, as he made love to her, he felt her withdraw from him emotionally. Her tears spoke a thousand words instead. He had to believe she worried he would say something to her fiancée.

"I'm nervous," she said, taking hold of his arm.

He felt her anxiety as if it were his own. "Lord Henry Cree, may I introduce Lady Mercy Hempstead." Ash released her.

"It's an honor, milord." She curtsied, giving her hand to Cree.

"Your trip has been an awful one, I know. However, it's all behind you and you're safe. You'll have a full day to rest up before the party tonight. We have so much to talk about."

Ash saw her weary smile. He should have let her sleep more, instead of indulging in every pleasure of her body.

"Lord Sinclair, thank you for bringing my granddaughter safely back to us." The Governor came forward and grasped his hand. "I'd like to extend an invitation to you to join us for a celebration tonight."

"I'm sorry, I can't. I have business to take care of on my ship."

Suddenly, Ash felt a jab in his back, almost throwing him forward into the Duke.

*You must go.* Emma's voice rattled in his head. *It may be the last chance you get to see her. If you're going to hold steadfast to your stubbornness, at least you can see that she really is safe.*

"Your brother just arrived a few days ago from England," the Duke continued. "He's staying with us. Please, come and stay as well."

"Weldon is here?"

"Yes, he, his wife Marguerite, and their infant daughter."

Ash kept the surprise of the news to himself. Marguerite had been very busy getting married and having a baby.

*You have to see them.* Emma insisted. *How can you not greet our brother, and meet the newest addition to our family?*

"Also, with you at the house, we can finalize the transfer of the deed to the Indigo Winds," the Duke added.

"I have things to take care of here first, so if you don't mind, I'll join you later." He looked at Mercy and her lashes fluttered to her cheeks.

"We will see you tonight then?"

"I'll be there, Your Grace."

"Good. Very good." The Duke put a hand to Cree. "Come along and let us get Lady Hempstead home so she can clean up and nap before tonight."

Mercy looked back at Ash. His chest tightened with regret. He nodded a goodbye to her, and then she turned her attention to Cree. He stood in a trance and imagined her running back to him. If she begged him just a little, he'd forget the plantation and take her back to the sea.

Emma's voice rattled in his head. *You are a foolish man, Ashton Sinclair.*

He was unable to argue that statement.

\* \* \* \*

That evening, Ash wondered what feelings he'd have seeing his brother with Marguerite. He had told himself it didn't matter, but then he had said the same about the girl in the gazebo. Yet, for almost two years, she haunted him. Like his sister, Mercy was there in his dreams. Sometimes, with his sister in the background, urging him to do something, as if to appease a guilty conscience.

"Ashton, darling." Marguerite's voice broke him out of his deep thoughts.

He watched her approach as he took off his hat in the foyer of the Duke of Hempstead's house.

"Marguerite." He took her hand and gave an airy kiss to her knuckles. "Or maybe you'd prefer I call you Lady Brighton?"

"Nonsense. You're my brother-in-law now. It's only right we maintain a close relationship." She smiled.

He took offense to the underlying tone of her comment. However, his brother now had the chore of keeping up with whatever games Marguerite played.

"Oh, here comes Weldon. You two chat and I'll go get the nursemaid to bring my baby down from the bedroom. I want you meet her. She looks so much like you."

"Weldon does too." He handed his hat to a servant.

"Oh yes, of course. You know what I mean. She takes after your side of the family." She hurried away, patting Weldon's arm in the passing.

"Ashton." Weldon nodded a greeting. "I didn't interrupt anything between you two, did I?"

"Absolutely not." Ash hurried to ease his brother's mind. "She's off to get your daughter."

"Oh." Weldon acted nervous, and Ash didn't like how they'd parted ways. "I seem to be at a loss for words, or just not sure where to start. It's been awhile since we last talked."

"Almost two years," Ash replied, stuck for words also.

"You should have come home."

"You asked I leave and not come back," he said, using it as an excuse.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to be forever." He took a deep breath. "One trip away would have been sufficient to let the scandal die down. God, a couple weeks after you were gone, all the talk was about the elopement of Lord Halifax's daughter, and then a couple months later, it was the illegitimate pregnancy of another nobleman's granddaughter."

"Lord Brighton." The nursemaid interrupted, handing him the baby. "Lady Brighton thought you might want to show off your daughter to Lord Sinclair."

"I certainly do." Weldon took the child and held her in the crook of his arm. "Ashton, may I present your niece, Lady Emma Sinclair."

"Emma?" Ash looked up from the face in the tiny bundle of a white blanket.

"It was Marguerite's idea." He held the baby out to him.

Ash carefully cradled her with both arms, adjusting her to one. From inside the ruffled bonnet framing her delicate little face, Emma's namesake grinned as if she were happy to see him. He fingered her soft cheek and watched her mouth pucker. "She's beautiful, Weldon."

*Isn't she.* His sister's voice echoed in his head. *I so wish I could hold her.*

The sadness of his sister never knowing little Emma made his chest tighten and his hands shake. Ash handed the baby back to his brother. "Here, I'm not used to holding something so delicate."

"She doesn't sound so delicate when she's hungry." Weldon laughed. "Her squalling can be heard all through Brighton Manor." He stared at his daughter in his arms.

Ash had a longing to hold someone too. "How have you been?" He glanced around the room, hoping to spot Mercy.

"I'm good. After you left, Marguerite was devastated. She said the two of you had ended your liaison just prior to that scene at the gazebo."

"We had," he agreed, leaving Marguerite's lies alone. It came with no benefit to tell his brother of her scheming. "She makes you happy?"

"I know it seems I acted quickly, but I have admired Marguerite for some time. Maybe it's the familiarity with her since she spent a lot of time at the estate. Maybe it's something else. Nevertheless, she's given me a beautiful baby girl."

"I have to say, it was a shock to learn of your marriage."

"Not too big of one, I hope. I mean, I don't want you to think there was anything going on before you and she dissolved your relationship."

"It's all right, Weldon. I wasn't in love with her. I'm glad for you. Now you have Father's title, just as we planned."

"Yes, and I made it legal with a petition to the court. I have just recently received the documents declaring me the legitimate and legally named, Earl of Brighton."

"Father would be proud of you." Ash felt teary-eyed and leaned forward, hugging his brother. "I'm proud of you. Congratulations on your marriage and the birth of your daughter."

"Speaking of little Emma." Weldon patted him on the back and then their embrace ended. "The baby came early, only seven months after my wedding Marguerite, and I was wondering if by chance..."

"The baby's not mine, Weldon. I assure you, I was very careful in that respect."

A seemingly heavy worry lifted and changed Weldon's expression. "So, when we leave Jamaica, will you come home with us?"

"Can't. I've finally acquired that island I told you about."

"The one with the indigo?"

"That's the one. With the return of the Duke's granddaughter from her perilous abduction by pirates, I get the reward of the island and the indigo plantation. Now we can be partners."

"I came to mend the riff between us, Ashton, not to form a business partnership."

"And I'm saying you can go home with both. My love and my trade goods." He held his hand out to his brother. "Deal?"

"Absolutely." Weldon pulled him close and hugged him. "It's good to clear the air. Now what say you to sneaking upstairs with me and taking another look at my daughter?"

"All right, proud papa." Ash followed him across the room. He looked up upon hearing Mercy's voice. He watched her at the railing cooing over the baby, her face aglow with happiness. It pained him to take her joy as hard as a knife in the gut.

Marguerite appeared from her room. "What are you doing with my baby?" she demanded.

Ash as well as Weldon took the steps two at a time to her voiced anger.

"I was just looking at her," Mercy explained.

Ash watched Marguerite wrinkle her brow when Mercy offered her the baby. The nursemaid took the infant instead.

"She's very pretty," Mercy spoke quietly. "You must be extremely happy."

"What were you doing with my baby?" Marguerite asked in a loud, accusatory tone.

"What are you shouting about?" Weldon grabbed Marguerite by the arm. "I apologize for my wife's ill manners, Lady Hempstead."

Ash looked at Mercy's nervousness. Her fingers clenched the front folds of her dress. She appeared to be trembling. Marguerite could be obnoxiously rude, but he never would have thought Mercy couldn't handle it.

"Why is our baby being paraded about for all to drool over, Weldon? Your daughter should not be some spectacle for amusement."

Weldon pulled her to go. "I brought her out to show Ashton."

"Then why was *she* holding the baby?"

"I'm sorry to have upset you, Your Grace." Mercy's glance went to Ash and then down. "Pardon me, please, I've forgotten my handkerchief."

Ash looked angrily at Marguerite. He saw nothing about her he liked anymore. She appeared hideously out of place with her heavily caked face in rouge and powder. In Jamaica, women wore no more than necessary.

"You better take your wife to fix—" Ash flicked his hand at his face to indicate a reference to Marguerite's. "The humidity makes one sweat more in the Caribbean."

Weldon took a hissing Marguerite away and Ash hurried down the hall to Mercy's room. He tapped on the door.

"Come in," she answered.

"Lady Hempstead?" He looked around the room to see if they were alone.

"Lord Sinclair." She waggled her hand with the small bit of lace-trimmed cloth before tucking it up her sleeve. "I found my errant handkerchief lying on the floor."

"I thought I might escort you downstairs?"

"No, I think I shall rest for a little longer."

"Mercy?" Staring at the tears in her eyes, he took her arm, "What's wrong? Marguerite has always been loud and ill mannered, but don't take it to heart."

"It's not that."

"Then what has upset you?"

Her face tipped up and her wet gaze held secrets of which he'd not know unless she spoke them. He went to put an arm around her shoulders and she backed away. It hurt not

to be able to give her comfort. He wished there was something to say to get her to open up to him. But he understood one of her worries—the facts of their affair getting out.

"Come, they are waiting for you downstairs." He lifted his arm to her. "We'll walk slowly."

"Thank you," she whispered.

Ash squeezed her fingers as they folded into the crook of his arm. He didn't say anything more about why Marguerite upset her, or Mercy's unshed tears.

"Will you return to England to see her more?" Mercy asked, as he guided her to the staircase.

"Marguerite? Hardly. She's my brother's wife. He and I are closer than any woman between us." He blurted out without careful thought. "You know about her and me?"

"Yes." She smiled. "The ball, remember? However, I wasn't talking about Lady Brighton. I meant the baby."

"Well, aren't I the buffoon at the moment." He laughed, inhaling a deep whiff of Mercy's perfume. "Nay, milady, on both accounts. If you remember, I'm due a reward for bringing you safely to your grandfather. I plan on living on the Isle of the Indigo Winds with its plantation befitting a king."

"Will you maybe marry ... someday?"

"I would rather drown with an anchor around me throat than to go the slow route with a nagging female ordering me about," he answered as he had a hundred times before. This time the emotions behind his claim weren't as steadfast.

"So, you'll live alone, no longer pirating. It sounds a boring life." She held tighter to his arm as they made their way down the stairs.

"Ah, my dear Lady, I have had the good fortune to be part of both worlds and tasted the bounties from each with equal splendor. However, lazing about the day has many benefits that appeal to me."

"Oh, such as what?" She stopped and looked up at him.

If given the chance, he'd talk endlessly about the beauty of the Isle of the Indigo Winds. He'd tell her of the magnificent sunrises on the beach in the morning and the peaceful moonlit strolls at night. Then there was the large and comfortable house with its wide porch for afternoon relaxing and the tropical sweetness of fresh fruits year-round. Those just hit the tip of his love for the island. They almost overshadowed the plantation's lucrative harvest of blue dye from indigo.

Ash bowed and kissed Mercy's knuckles. "Your groom makes his way to claim you. This must be our parting." He didn't want it to come so soon, yet her reputation depended on his discretion.

"Ash?" Her gaze dropped quickly from his when Lord Cree came too close.

"Lord Sinclair, it was good of you to fetch my bride from her room." Cree took her elbow. "Come, my dear, I have people to introduce you to. Excuse us, Lord Sinclair."

Ash waited until Mercy had disappeared into the crowd. Then he took quick strides toward her grandfather. The Duke had the deed to the land he wanted. All it would take was a simple signature on a piece of parchment and the transfer would be complete.

"Governor." Ash bowed.

"Sinclair, about the plantation, I think it best if we conclude things tomorrow. I have my granddaughter's wedding in the morning, and then we can sail to the island and make the final transfer."

"That sounds like a superb idea," Lord Cree exclaimed, approaching with Mercy. "You would not mind if Lady Hempstead and I were to make it a wedding trip, would you, Sinclair?"

"I would be honored to have such guests."

Ash looked to see if Mercy displayed any hint as to regrets about the wedding. He needed something from her besides unspoken feelings if she wanted him to intervene.

*I say again, you are a fool, Ashton Sinclair,* Emma's harsh whisper chilled his ear. *An utter fool to let her marry that pretty, puffed up toad.*

He ignored her words. He'd be more the fool to have Mercy spurn any declaration of heartfelt sentiments he might make.

## Chapter Fourteen

The next morning, for the benefit of others, Mercy grinned like a porcelain doll—a fake, unmoving smile without emotion. She often wondered during those days, while mourning the loss of her baby, if Ash would have changed his view of marriage knowing he had a child.

During the short wedding ceremony, she secretly wished for him to sweep her out of the room. If she had been braver, she might have begged him to take her away. Unfortunately, she had grown to care about him. He wanted a piece of land, not a wife. Even her father said it was dangerous to have her on the ship. It was only because of him, she agreed to the marriage. Jamaica was notorious for having many pirates. Her grandfather would never look away from one particular one if she hadn't gone along with his plan.

Later that morning, they all set sail on Ash's ship, the *Indigo Winds*, to the Isle of the Indigo Winds. The very name of his ship told her how much he prized acquiring the island. She and Henry had use of the captain's cabin, and the moment she entered, she felt trapped. The familiarity of everything gave her no comfort.

"I have waited all day for this moment." Henry put his hands on her shoulders and smoothed over the lace shawl. "You know, at the wedding I stood thinking of what it would be like to see you naked."

Mercy had thought she could handle this moment. Now she wasn't so sure. She closed her eyes as Henry's liquored breath came close to her face.

"I was surprised at how beautiful you were." One of his arms surrounded her.

His other hand slid over her bodice and cupped her breast.

She whimpered when he squeezed too hard. The noise distracted him and his fingers came up to her mouth. He stretched it to the side, felt over her teeth, and shoved his thumb inside to massage her tongue. He curled her lip up and down with a curious exam she didn't understand.

"This is how I pick out a slave girl," he commented with a low chuckle.

Mercy held her breath. Bought and paid for, she had no easy recourse. His finger finally stopped its torture of her mouth, and while he left it sore, her eyes snapped open to his sudden grip on the front of her gown.

"The little dark girls always struggle, and you know I sort of like it when they fight back."

His sinister grin alarmed her. She didn't understand. The man she met at the dock had slowly turned evil, as if possessed. He yanked her bodice open. The sound of pearl buttons danced on the floor.

"What are you doing?" she shrieked in a low tone, not wanting to bring anyone to the cabin, especially Ash.

Henry swung her around and threw her on the bunk without answering.

Mercy scrambled to sit up as he came at her.

He tore open his shirt and leaned over her, pinning her down with the weight of his body. She squirmed, she twisted, and she prayed.

"Let go of me," she demanded.

He dragged her arms over her head and locked her wrists in one hand. His strength surprised her. He rubbed the front of her chemise, clawing the fabric, and then with a violent jerk, he tore the material open. Nothing remained of decency. She squeezed her eyes shut tight, not wanting to see the salacious look of lust in his expression. Blinded to his stare was the same as avoiding his presence. Unlike Ash, Henry had never done anything to resemble work, let alone lift a hand to a chore to make his skin bark rough. So it felt strange to have a man's hand as smooth as her own, caress her breast.

She struggled to get free. His touch repulsed her, and thoughts of him inside her, turned her stomach.

"Very nice," he commented, swirling his palm over her flesh, making her nipples harden from the stimulation.

She didn't want to invite trouble, but a fear welled up inside that made her shriek. Henry rose up, letting go, and slapped her hard. He grasped the garments at her shoulder, and yanked the sleeves partly down her arms. The taut stretch of the fabric acted as a manacle to her limbs.

Five years living with pirates and no one had ever tried to rape her. She screamed again, while freeing her arms from the sleeves. It left her torso bare.

"Lord Cree, is everything all right?" Ash demanded, a minute later outside the cabin door.

Mercy heard the bolted handle jiggle. She wanted him to help her, yet embarrassment kept her quiet. Henry had marital rights, and she had no wish for Ash to be a witness to her husband's abuse of her.

"Lady Cree?" Ash asked again.

Henry got off the bed and pulled her up. She tried to gather her clothing over her nakedness, but his fingers dug into her flesh.

"Tell him everything is fine." He squeezed her arm, his fingers digging deep into her flesh, making her wince. "Tell him you fell out of the bunk."

Mercy bit her bottom lip.

*Cry out for Ashton's help, a voice echoed in her head. He'll dispatch your husband to a watery grave right quick, he will.*

"Everything is fine, Lord Sinclair." Mercy trembled, afraid to put Ash in danger. "I fell out of the bunk. I'm sorry to be a bother and I'll try to be more careful."

He didn't question her excuse.

Henry paced the room. Mercy lifted her clothing, holding it up over her breasts. She watched him open his trunk. Then he turned and aimed a pistol at her.

"Did he bed you?" he demanded to know.

Mercy shook her head so fast with the lie it made her dizzy. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"When I contracted for you as a wife, it was on the understanding I would be getting a young virgin with a proper upbringing."

Mercy swallowed to ease the dryness in her throat.

"I find it easier to train a woman to do as I like that way. No bad habits, you see." He stripped his shirt off and flung it to a chair. "You are nothing more than a whore, and it was God's punishment that you didn't get to keep your baby." He stepped forward and backhanded her in the face.

Mercy staggered into a cabinet. She put a hand up to her split lip.

"I probably shouldn't have married you, what with your tarnished reputation, but a deal is a deal. Besides, the challenge of breaking you does intrigue me."

Henry grabbed her by the upper arms and pulled her to him. She let go of her clothing to fight back as he forced a kiss upon her. His thin, taut lips pressed hard, making her teeth cut into her flesh. He drew back and cocked his head. His gaze narrowed on her neck. He rubbed her skin where she had heavily powdered it to conceal Ash's mark on her.

"Who've you been with?" His fingers wrapped her throat and tightened.

"No one." She wheezed, struggling to breathe. Her vocal cords quavered with the rise to a new scream.

"You lying bitch." He let go of her neck and used that hand to slap her. "Tell me!"

Mercy refused and Henry hit her again with a stinging slap that wrenched her head to the side. He pulled her from the door, twisted her around and threw her toward the bunk. She tried moving away before he was on her.

"You make any sounds to bring someone to our door again and I'll kill them." He warned, pulling the pistol from his waistband and laying it on top his trunk next to the bunk.

Henry shoved her back and slurped kisses over her collarbone. His lips surrounded her nipple and tugged. He slobbered over both her breasts even though she continued struggling to escape. She had no right to refuse him, and still, she swung her fists, hitting him about the head and shoulders.

"You are a fiery one." He laughed, grasping a handful of her hair to control her head.

His mouth hit hers. He sucked and slurped, making kissing an ugly act. Then relief came. Henry got off her. He stood up and backed a few feet away.

"Maybe I will enjoy that you've had experience." He grinned, unfastening his trousers.

Mercy sat up and slid back against the bulkhead of the bunk. Henry removed only what he thought was necessary, leaving him a poor sight in his stockings and big buckle shoes. Nothing on him came remotely close to being as manly as Ash. When he came at her with a hairless body, appearing frail and feminine, she wanted to laugh—to mock him for having such a small cock. His erection hung partially limp.

"You can't do this," she cried, kicking at his hand trying to grab her leg. Her shoe flew off her foot.

"I can, and I'm going to enjoy every minute of it." His fingers latched onto her ankle.

He hauled her toward him, dragging her to the edge of the mattress. Then he crawled onto her, pushing her to her back.

"Henry, please," she begged, struggling to get away.

The smack of his hand swept from her cheekbone to her nose. Dazed, she dropped her head back to the mattress. Henry glared at her. Drool dripped from his partially opened mouth. She felt it land with a splat on her chest and roll between her breasts.

Overcoming the dizziness making her head pound, she twisted under his weight to her side. She saw the pistol and reached for it. Henry grabbed her by the hair and pulled her from reaching the weapon. He stood again at the side of the bunk and dragged her over face up.

Mercy drew back her leg and kicked a foot out, catching him in the groin. While he howled curses in hushed tones, she tried to reach for the pistol again to no avail. He

picked her up from the bed and slung her to the floor. His big buckle shoe made a jarring impact on her side when he kicked her.

Then he bent over, and clamped a hand around her neck. "You want to play rough?"

He hauled her up from the floor by one hand under her jaw. His fingers tightened on her throat and gave her little room to get air to her lungs. He thrust her back and the impact of her head shattered the mirror on the wall that she and Ash both had used.

Again, Henry swung her around. She crashed into the table and collapsed to the floor.

Minutes or hours later, Mercy opened her eyes. Sprawled out on the cabin floor, she hurt from head to toe. Every muscle, every joint in her body throbbed with pain.

Grunts, whines, and a squeaky sound claimed her attention. She turned her head toward the bunk. Hanging over the edge, a brown-skinned arm dangled. She stared at the thin fingers and the scar by the thumb. Henry's servant girl, Lani moaned with pleasure. She moved her gaze higher, up to the movement of someone. She saw Henry, naked, vigorously humping his body over the girl. It wasn't hard to imagine what she didn't see.

Mercy closed her eyes, working toward gaining strength. In a far off distance, she heard someone shout. "Land ho!"

When next she lifted her head, time had passed again. She was alone in the room. Still on the floor, she struggled to get up. Her body protested, so it took nearly five minutes for her to stand. Too weak to hang on to her gown and chemise, she let the clothing fall down her legs.

She stumbled through the mess of her clothes and fell against the table. With the awful thought of Henry raping her unconscious body, she touched her belly, and slowly slid her fingers between her legs. Relief made her breathe easier. Not dripping with his semen or feeling the least bit sore as she had with Ash, she had to believe that Henry had not defiled her while she lay lifeless on the cabin floor.

What did hurt was her face. She found a piece of broken mirror on the floor and picked it up. The shard of glass dropped from her fingers when she saw her battered reflection.

## Chapter Fifteen

Ash gave the duties of dropping anchor to his first mate. The Duke and Lord Cree were busy with a discussion, and he saw it as his opportunity to check on Mercy. She hadn't come up on deck the entire trip two and a half hour trip. The ruckus that she claimed was her falling out of the bunk didn't sit well with him.

"Lady Cree." He tapped on his cabin door. "We've reached the Isle of the Indigo Winds."

"I'm going to stay onboard," she answered. "I don't feel well ... I think I have a bout of seasickness."

Ash opened his mouth to say she had not been sick before on his ship. She had spoken too fondly of her five years onboard the *Red Raven* with her father. He couldn't believe she had ever suffered from the malady.

"Mercy, can I come in?" He touched the handle and waited. "Everyone is on deck watching the men drop anchor."

"I told you I'm not well."

*Go in, Ash.* Emma nudged his conscience. *She needs you, desperately.*

He opened the door and caught Mercy by surprise.

"Mercy?" his voice croaked.

She rose up clutching the tatters of her gown in front of her.

"What did he do to you?" He shut and bolted the door.

"I fell out of the bed." Her gaze remained downcast, her head bowed.

Ash gripped her chin and lifted her face to see past the dishevelment of her long coppery hair. "I'll kill the bastard." His heart beat hard with an intense rage.

Mercy pushed his hand away. "I beg you, Ash, please don't get involved. He's my husband and he has rights."

"He's lower than any animal on this earth. I'll make fish food of him when I get my sword against his gullet." He grabbed the latch on the door.

"Ash, please!" she cried, tugging at every fiber of sympathy in him. "Please, don't."

"He has no right to abuse you." He stood with his back to her, afraid she'd get him to change his mind.

"If you care about me at all, you'll do as I ask."

"The man doesn't deserve to live." He rubbed his face, trying to find a reason not to run the man through with his cutlass.

*She needs you to hold her,* Emma whispered. *She doesn't need you to upset to her more.*

He turned to Mercy. "Have you seen what he's done to your face?" He walked around her and looked at the bruises on her arms, her back, and her shoulders.

"It's over, Ash. I angered him and I shouldn't have. Please leave Henry to me. I'll make sure he never does this again."

"How?" He tugged the gown from her grasp and wrapped a blanket around her

"Trust me?"

"God, Mercy." He gathered her close and hugged her. "When we get to the plantation, I want Mr. Pettybones to look you over, he's our physician."

"I can't leave the cabin. What will people say? My grandfather, your family, please, Ash." She pressed her face to his chest and let out a quiet, heart-wrenching sob.

"If you don't leave here with me, then I can't promise I won't kill your husband." He tried stroking her back, only she flinched, and he contended himself with just keeping her close."

"Can we not just forget about this? It's over." She sniffled.

"The hell it is!" He felt her jerk at his tone. "I'm sorry. You can't begin to know how angry I am right now."

"I know." She stroked his arm, trying to soothe him, when he was supposed to be giving her comfort.

He grasped her face in both his hands and stared at the bruise on her right cheek and the swelling around her left eye. He bent toward her to kiss her mouth, stopping when she shied away.

He let go and clenched his fists, hating himself for letting Mercy marry Lord Cree. "You tell them the same lie you told me. You fell. Elaborate if you must. I don't care if you say you bounced off the bunk and hit the table, the trunk, and the floor two or three times. You'll go to shore if I have to hoist you over my shoulder and carry you the whole way."

"I've married him of my own free will and you can't..."

"I'll damn well do as I please on my ship. Hours from now, I'll do what I want on my island. You must have veils or powders to conceal your bruises."

Mercy nodded. Her dull blue eyes looked void of hope.

"Then do it. I'll see you on deck within a quarter hour."

Ash left her to fix herself the best she could.

On deck, Mr. Pettybones approached. "Cap'n, we have lowered the long boats and are ready to go ashore."

"Thank you." He took a deep breath, glaring at Cree with the servant girl. "Governor, you'll go in the first boat with Lord Brighton and his family. I'll follow with Lord Cree, his wife and his servant."

"My wife is not feeling well." Cree turned to him. "I was just telling Lani to stay with her until we return from the Island."

Ash glanced across the deck. "She must be feeling better." He nodded toward Mercy coming out of the passageway.

She moved slowly, dressed in a light blue dress and matching hat. An almost sheer veil of lace-edged white hung over her eyes. The cut on her lip was unnoticeable. His jaw tightened, regardless. The idea of killing Cree hung on his every thought, especially when he closed his eyes and envisioned her smooth complexion marred permanently by the bastard.

## Chapter Sixteen

Mercy lifted a hand to shield her face from the bright sun. The veil wasn't heavy enough to stop the light from burning her eyes. Ash stayed at the rail, impatient and irritated by the look on his face. Henry approached her. For Ash's sake, she willed herself to remain calm and passive to keep him from killing her husband.

"I told you to stay in the cabin." Henry grabbed her arm, his fingers pinching her skin. "Go back there, now."

"I'm going ashore, milord. Now remove your hand." She jerked free. "Touch me again and I assure you, if I don't kill you, I know men that will do it for me."

"You think your lover will travel this far to protect you?" He laughed and glanced at Ash over by the railing waiting for them. "You think Sinclair will help you?"

"Someone should have told you before now, Lord Cree, I wasn't on the *Red Raven* by force." Before coming up on deck, she decided the only defense she had against Henry's abuse would be threats of her father's wrath.

"So you whored yourself out with the pirate and his crew, did you? And now you think those men give a hoot for your well-being." He chuckled. "Pirates only want what amuses them for a short time. I'm sure they've moved on to other women eager to spread their legs for them."

"I can promise you, Captain James cares a great deal about my welfare."

He grabbed her wrist. "You're my wife, and you'll remember your place. That pirate will never get what's mine."

"Do you know how Cutter James got his name?"

"What do I care how a bloody pirate was named?"

"He was born William James in a small town in Scotland. When he was twelve, a man kidnapped him from his seaside village and forced him to work on a ship. That man was a pirate and he taught the boy everything he knew, including how to fight to win by slicing a man's throat."

"As I said, my dear, no pirate is going to give a second thought to a whore like you."

"Maybe not, except you're missing one fact, milord. I'm not Cutter James' mistress, I'm his daughter."

"You're lying." Fear flashed in Henry's eyes.

"Ask my grandfather. Better yet, ask Lord Sinclair. He told me you and he had a confrontation with my father at the Grub and Grog Tavern."

Mercy felt a renewing of her inner strength when Henry's jaw clenched with tension.

She called to Ash. "Lord Sinclair, would you tell my husband who my father is, I am afraid he was misinformed about my parentage."

"Milady?" Ash gave her a perplexed look.

"Please." She urged him again. "I wish to have no secrets about my identity with my husband."

Ash gave her an agreeing nod and answered. "The Lady's father is the pirate, Cutter James. You met him in Jamaica."

Henry released her with a thrust of his arm. "Let's get this trip over with," he grumbled, climbing over the side of the ship to get down into the longboat.

Ash took Lani's arm and helped her over the side next.

Mercy stood back from the edge, and waited for Ash to come to her.

"Why did you want him to know about James?" He cupped her hand in his. "That information can't be good for you."

"It was the perfect fact to rub in Henry's face. He'll think twice before touching me again."

Mercy slid her hand out of Ash's and went to the railing. Each time he looked at her, she saw the hurt in his eyes. She felt his affection too deeply, and this once she'd agree with her husband, they needed to get the trip over with and the sooner the better.

"Please don't look at me with such concern."

"I can't promise you that." He held his hand to help her over the side.

She accepted the gesture and climbed down the ladder into the longboat. He sat at the back next to her, giving her no choice. Henry sat toward the front. As one of the crew rowed them toward the beach of the island, she watched Ash look at the island he wanted so desperately. His voice had expressed his love of the place. Now she witnessed that happiness in his gaze. She'd never do anything to spoil his dream.

Once they reached the shore, she surrendered to his need to look after her. She took his arm and let him lead her across the sandy beach to the house.

"It's beautiful," she whispered.

The muscles in his arm tensed. He kept his stern expression, and it saddened her to be the one that had taken the joy out of his day.

"I'm ever so happy for you, Lord Sinclair. I wish you all the best with your plantation." She let go of him and joined Lani near the steps leading up to the porch.

She took the girl's arm and climbed the stairs. At the base, her father handed over the deed to the island to Ash. She wanted so much to wrap her arms around Ash and congratulate him as everyone else did. But she was afraid if she did, she'd never let go.

*He should be happy on this day.* That nagging voice of guilt in her head told her. *His family is all here.*

"And I've ruined it," Mercy muttered, walking away from Lani. "I should have stayed hidden on the *Red Raven*."

*Remember, it's because of you Ash has this island as well as the money he'd been saving to buy it.*

"Yes," Mercy smiled. "I did have a part in helping him obtain his dream."

*He has other dreams, Mercy James. His heart cries to have you as his own. Let him...*

"No," Mercy rushed away from her mind's cruel game.

Everyone made their way into the house, and she followed. She looked around for the nursemaid and the baby. From the talk of the others, she learned the woman had taken the baby to a bedroom to be changed and fed. She looked toward Ash still containing his excitement. His gaze moved to her. Afraid others would notice their exchange, she left the room. The baby crying from another part of the house drew her down a hallway.

Mercy found the room and watched from the doorframe. The nursemaid paced the room, patting the baby on the back. She hummed and cajoled the upset infant, but nothing worked.

"Good evening, Milady, would you like to hold her?"

Mercy could not say no. She swept across the room and took the child in her arms

without another thought. She held the squalling infant to her aching bosom. She had missed-out on nursing a child.

"I will watch her for a while," Mercy offered.

The woman appeared delighted by the break. She left the room without hesitation.

Hugging the tiny bundle, she walked about the room, and talked. She spoke of silly things, fun events, and childish memories she remembered. Then she sat in a rocking chair close to the window and looked out at the majestic view of the sea. "It really is as grand as Ash said it was." She looked at the baby.

Silence so serene befell the room and Mercy watched in amazement as the infant slept.

*You've got your babe back in your arms, milady. Never let her go, the feminine voice swirled around her head. Never let Ashton's child out of your sight again.*

"My baby died."

*Your baby lives and you must reclaim her, the voice of the girl charged.*

Mercy released the ribbon on the baby's chin and she pushed back the white cap.

"No, it can't be." She felt her chest tighten with a burning scream. Her hand brushed over the tiny copper curls and the image she had in her mind laid a reality in her arms.

*See, your baby is not dead, the voice whispered.*

"No!" She fought the delusion. "It's not possible."

*Don't you feel the contentment of your baby, her little mind at rest?*

"No, my baby is dead... She's dead," she repeated trying to make herself believe something she never had.

*It's the child you and Ashton conceived out of love.*

"Please, don't do this to me. It was an accident; a foolish moment between strangers."

*Yet, here you are, two years later, more in love with your Captain Sin than you can bear to admit to.*

The baby woke, crying suddenly. Mercy stroked little Emma's head. Her mind drifted, as she caressed her soft cheek. She held the precious infant tighter in her arms and cried. She had thought the worst of times was over, until her marriage took her on a downhill plunge. Like a heavy foot on her chest, the weight of despair became unbearable. She had lost a baby, married a man that loathed her, and she had given up her only love. There was nothing left in life for her.

## Chapter Seventeen

Ash went looking for Mercy, prepared to beg her to stay with him. He debated it far too long.

"Mercy?" he whispered, finding her in the bedroom with his niece.

Not seeing the nursemaid around, he entered.

"Mercy, what's wrong?" He stooped down next to her when she didn't answer.

She stared out the window. Glazed blue eyes had an eerie emptiness to them. He tried to take the baby, but she had a firm hold.

"Sweetness, talk to me?"

"Lord Sinclair?" the nursemaid announced her presence.

"Come get the baby," he told the woman. "Lady Cree isn't feeling well." Ash pried Mercy's fingers away from the bundle and carefully lifted his niece to the nursemaid.

"One of the servants has found a cradle for Emma's use. Take her there."

"Yes, milord. Should I fetch Lord Cree?"

"No." Ash looked up. "The lady just needs a little time to herself."

"Yes, milord."

Ash listened at the woman's departure. Then he took Mercy's hands in his. Her cool fingers lay in his palm without movement. He lifted her veil and got a closer look into her unwavering stare.

"Sweetness, what's happened?" He rubbed warmth into her knuckles. "You're safe with me."

The catatonic state frightened him. Had Cree hit her so hard that she suffered a head trauma? Carefully, Ash picked her up from the rocking chair and carried her to the bed.

"Mercy, try to talk to me." He leaned and touched her cool lips with a kiss.

"Sinclair! Where is my wife?" Lord Cree's shout moved Ash from the bed and to the hallway.

"I was just coming to get you," Ash informed the man. "She's taken ill."

"See, I knew she should have stayed onboard your ship." Cree went into the room.

Ash resisted blaming Cree for Mercy's condition. She needed him to be strong and protective. Nothing, like an argument or a fight, would benefit her. Mercy asked him not to kill the man, and he'd do this one thing only because she had asked.

Ash found Lani and sent her to the room to be with Mercy. He then returned to the drawing room.

"Is something wrong?" Weldon asked.

"Mercy... I mean Lady Cree has taken ill."

"Should we wait for her?"

"No. I know your wife is anxious to get back to England," Ash said with an equal restlessness to get back to Mercy.

Weldon hugged him. "You send the shipment of spices and indigo and I'll put the money in your accounts as we had discussed. Now come say goodbye to your niece."

On top of the dining room table, the nursemaid dressed the baby.

"I don't believe I've seen Emma without her cap." Ash picked the baby up and looked at her head full of beautiful copper curls. The tiniest ringlets circled his fingers.

"Milord, you might want to watch as she..." the nursemaid's warning came too late.

Ash held Emma away and laughed. "Weldon, your daughter has marked her territory." He cradled the baby and took the towel to wipe her belly and legs. He looked at the heart shaped birthmark on her chest.

"Are you not ready to go yet?" Marguerite entered the room in her usual nasty tone.

Ash couldn't wait for her to be gone.

"Ashton was just christened by Emma," Weldon said with pride.

"How disgusting," Marguerite replied, not amused. "Get clothes on that baby before she catches her death in this drafty room."

"Marguerite, it's near a hundred degrees today. Emma could not catch a cold if she lazed about naked all day wiggling her ten pretty fingers and toes."

"Whatever." She waved a hand at him. "I'll wait on the veranda, where I might get half a breeze to find me."

Ash said nothing as the woman took quick long strides out of the room.

"Marguerite is nervous around the baby," Weldon explained. "She's afraid she'll drop her or something."

Ash kissed Emma's forehead. "Back to your papa, sweetness."

Then he went to the foyer and paced, waiting for those going back to Jamaica to ready themselves. When Lord Cree joined them, he made no comment as to Mercy's condition.

It took almost two hours to get everyone back onboard the ship. He officially relinquished the captain duties to Mr. Pettybones without ceremony and returned to his new home.

Lord Cree sat on the veranda sipping a fruity drink as if all were right with the world. Ash forced himself to ignore the man as he jogged up the steps to the porch, even though heated anger continued churning inside him.

He opened the door, peeked around the edge and looked at Mercy lying in his newly acquired bed, asleep, and alone.

*She has the wrong husband, Emma's voice whispered. If you had listened to me, you both could have been happy.*

"Hindsight does me no good now." He sat on the bed and lifted Mercy's hand into his. "She's married. Because I can't see her seeking an annulment or divorce, she'll leave with Cree, unless I kill him.

*You love her.*

Ash swallowed the lump in his throat. His eyes watered from the heart wrenching pain in his chest. "I suppose I do."

*Things will right themselves.* Emma's hands covered his. *She belongs with you, and I'll see that your destinies don't go astray again.*

He wished it were possible, but how did he hold stock in illusions his subconscious conjured?

\*

Ash spent the remainder of the day with Mercy. He gave Lani the chore of periodically informing Cree there was no change. Several times, he left the servant girl with Mercy while he met the locals that worked on the plantation. He knew many of them from his visits to the island.

At a late evening meal, Ash attempted a normal conversation with Cree at the dining

table. "Will you and Lady Cree stay in Jamaica or return to England?"

"England, as soon as I conclude business in Jamaica." He slammed his fork down on the wooden table. "And I could finish that a lot quicker if I were in Jamaica."

"My physician thinks Lady Cree needs a few days. Apparently, when she fell out of the bunk on the ship, she must have hit her head very hard. She's in an unresponsive state, as you saw."

"And just how long is that going to continue?"

Ash shrugged. "I could always send her on to Jamaica later if you need to leave."

"No, I'll wait. It wouldn't look good of me to leave my bride, now would it?" He grinned, lifting his cup. "Maybe in that time, I can learn of your operation and consider investing."

Ash watched the man drink the wine until the cup was empty. He motioned for the servant waiting nearby to serve more.

"Then you'll want to talk to the foreman. He knows the place much better than I. In the meantime, I'll have the servants fix you up a separate room from Lady Cree's so she can get the needed rest to recover."

After they completed their meal, Ash showed Cree a room far from his with Mercy. He took special note that Cree took Lani with him. If she looked at all unwilling, he would have thought of something to keep her out of the man's clutches. Only she appeared resigned to her duties. With her occupying Cree, Ash had the opportunity to stay with Mercy all night.

Ash didn't sleep well that night or the next. Mercy's crying and restlessness rattled him.

"It's all right, sweetness," he murmured, kissing the side of her head. "I'm here. Nothing bad can happen to you."

The next day Ash gave his foreman specific instructions to keep Cree busy, on the third day the same. Mercy's trance continued; sometimes her eyes opened, sometimes they stayed shut. He watched her ugly purplish bruises fade into sickly yellow blemishes on her fair skin. The swelling of her face disappeared and still she didn't get better.

Several times a day, he spooned water or soup into her mouth to keep her strength up. The daunting task left stains on the bedding from his unsteady hand.

"You have got to wake up." He wiped his sleeve over her mouth. "Please, sweetness."

"I'm sorry about the baby," she mumbled, her lashes lowering.

"Mercy, look at me." He patted her cheek. "Come on, open your eyes and let me see those beautiful blue sapphires."

Her lashes fluttered again, tears leaked to her cheeks. He leaned and kissed her until she responded with sobs.

"Where's my baby?" she cried.

"Mercy, the baby was Marguerite's and they've left. Everyone has left. Well, except your husband."

"I need to hold my baby." She looked around at the large room. "Can I hold my baby now, please?"

"Mercy, you have no baby. When I found you, you were holding Emma." He smoothed back the coppery auburn curls from her forehead. He could see how one might think the baby belonged to her. More surprisingly was the fact she talked as if she'd had a

baby. Something she had never mentioned.

The fingers that had stroked him with love and adoration glided into his palm. He turned her hand to plant a kiss on the delicately transparent wrist.

"Mercy, tell me what happened." He cupped her pale face.

Her alarmed gaze flitted to the doorway and back to him.

He let her hand slip out of his as he backed away, sensing someone had entered. "If there's anything I can do for you Lady Cree, just ask."

"So you've woken. Good, now we can get off this Godforsaken island of heat. I don't think I have felt one breeze around here," Cree exclaimed.

For a second, Ash imagined the man making a good match for Marguerite.

"Generally, there are afternoon storms that cool things considerably." Ash said, making no move to leave the room. If Cree wanted him out, he'd have to say so.

"I suppose we can't leave today. Tomorrow morning, then."

Mercy remained silent. Cree left them. Ash pulled a chair up to the side of the bed.

He pushed back Mercy's hair and helped her to sit propped up against pillows.

"Hungry?" he asked, looking at the bowl of soup on the table. "I'll go get something fresh for you."

She grabbed his hand and held it for a minute. Then, moving for the first time on her own, she rolled away from him. He left to get her something more substantial to eat than the soup, but she was asleep when he returned.

Ash took a break from her to clean up. He stepped out on the veranda and watched the wisps of white clouds tumbling in the blue sky. There was a lot on his mind, and it troubled him that he couldn't decide what to do in this circumstance.

He jumped at the touch of a hand on his back.

"I'm sorry," Mercy said as he spun around.

By all appearances, she hadn't really slept. Dressed in clean clothing, she stood before him. The marks on her face were still visible, but that's not what continued to attract him. Her true beauty radiated from her heart.

"I will be leaving tomorrow, Lord Sinclair." She glanced toward her husband on the end of the porch smoking a cigar. "I want to thank you for your hospitality and I am sorry I was such a bother." Her head bowed with a subservient calmness.

Ash lifted a finger to touch her face and then put his hand behind his back to clasp it in the other. "You are always welcome, Lady Cree. It was my pleasure to have you here and I am sorry I didn't get the chance to show you more of the place other than the house. Maybe your next visit?"

"I can see why you wanted to live here, milord. It's a paradise, and has renewed something in me I was afraid I had lost."

"Yes, I felt that way once, when I told someone about the white sands and the crystal waters. I'm not so sure I can feel as such when—" He looked over her at Cree. "Maybe I will take a stroll today and see what I've missed."

"Be happy, Ash," she whispered to him.

He swallowed hard. Emotions claimed his voice. Tears burned behind his eyelids. Without anything more than stolen moments to remember her by, he knew he was going to miss her terribly.

Mercy hurried away from him and went down the steps.

"Let go, dammit. Just let go," Ash muttered to himself, wishing away the sentiments

driving him crazy.

He wanted to curse the day he'd ever met the woman, yet then how would he have ever known her love?

"Lord Cree, I am going for a walk along the beach," Mercy told her husband.

Cree made no move to go with her as he drank his liquor and smoked his cigar. Mercy lifted her skirts and began her trek away from the house. Ash walked along the porch, ignoring everything around him except for the direction she went.

## Chapter Eighteen

Mercy left a trail in the sand anyone could follow. Thankfully, she'd guessed right about Ash coming for her. They were far from the plantation without a chance of Henry seeing them.

Ash ran across the sand. He stopped several yards from her. A hesitant expression in his features displayed his dilemma. They didn't know each other well enough to know exactly what the other was thinking.

"I thought here would be better to say our real goodbyes." She made the first move and lifted her hand.

A few long strides and he swept her off her feet into his arms. "Like minds always have the best of plans."

His mouth locked to hers so fast it took her breath away. She wove her fingers in his hair and held herself to his kiss. These minutes they shared had to last her forever. Inasmuch as she wanted Ash, the dashing buccaneer, the charming and seductive rogue, the lord of the Indigo Winds plantation, she knew he had no room in his life for her. 'Men of the sea bore easily on land,' her father always told her. Ash's claim he'd live contentedly on the island was just a dream he had. Soon, he'd take to his ship to enjoy the adventures he'd eventually miss.

Ash trudged across the beach carrying her. He walked into the dense vegetation of big leafy ferns. "How does this look?" He turned around in the lush tropical grasses swaying in the breeze.

"I don't care where." She placed her hand on his cheek, not realizing she had sand on her fingers. She smiled and brushed his skin. She kissed his bristly jaw and delighted in how her lips tingled. "I cannot even think about anything other than you."

"I'll try not to distract you then." Ash put her on her feet and fingered the edge of her collar.

"Are you sure you're feeling all right?" He rubbed her neck. "If you want to stay, I mean, until you are one hundred percent, you know you can."

She placed her fingers on his lips. "No words, no regrets."

"I can kill him for you," he whispered, leaning to kiss her.

"Can you really?" she asked, concerned he'd do it, appreciative of his kindhearted gesture. "You could murder someone so easily?"

He hesitated and then shook his head.

Mercy smiled, loving him even more for attempting to protect her from the truth. "Thank you for trying to lie."

"He doesn't deserve to breathe the same air as you. I could kill him with only one qualm, how it would distress you."

The air around her suddenly felt cool. Goosebumps dotted her arms. She shivered and turned her head. The feeling they weren't alone, made her look around in fear that Henry spied on them.

*Do not question your love for him, the voice whispered to her. Tell him how you feel, and how you will always feel.*

Mercy stumbled forward as if someone gave her a push. The momentum sent her

into Ash's arms and he hugged her so tight, she thought she'd burst. His kisses rained down on her face. So sweet, so desirable, she felt hot under the intensity of his loving hold.

"Every curve," he whispered, "makes me ache to have you naked." His hands glided over her back and bottom.

"Then undress me, Captain Sin."

His fingers flew down the row of buttons against her spine. Kisses dashed over her shoulder. The dress dropped easily since she had purposely left off her undergarments.

"What, pray tell, have you been up to in your pretty head?" He pulled her dress past her elbows. "You have plotted this moment to the very detail."

His head lowered and his lips swept across her collarbone. He caressed her neck with kisses, and those murmurs of love she'd heard so long ago returned.

"You are so beautiful, sweetness. My heart races with excitement," he declared, and then claimed her mouth with his.

Mercy managed to hold back her tears. She wanted to enjoy everything wonderful about Ash. His gentle loving touch blended deftly with his firm hold and powerful kiss. For the longest time, that was all they did. They examined and undressed each other at a leisurely pace, keeping their mouths locked together.

"If ever you need me, Mercy, I don't care how small the reason, you can be sure I'll come to you." He held her face. "Any reason at all, do you understand?"

She nodded and closed her eyes to the sweetest kisses, the softest touch, and the outpouring of his heart as he whispered over her body.

Mercy turned in Ash's arms. She dropped her head back to his muscled shoulder. Everywhere his caress touched, she felt flames licking at her skin. When his hands covered her breasts, squeezing and kneading the supple flesh, she moaned.

"Such ripeness deserves extreme consideration," he whispered, flicking one nipple with his thumb.

A fervent tremor shuddered through her body. He lowered her to the ground. She felt the warmth of sand on her back. Ash's breath scorched her with the heat of his growing lust. He squeezed her right breast and held it up, capping the top with his mouth. His teeth nipped and his lips nibbled her flesh.

His fingers kneaded continuously, as he swirled his tongue around her enflamed nipple.

"Mmmmm," he moaned, his hot palm sliding down her belly into her nether region. "What splendid beauty." A teasing breath rushed over her breast.

The finger strumming her clit was a torture far worse than his kisses on her aching nipples. He made no waste of time bringing on her orgasm, nor did he allow her an adjustment before jabbing his long fingers into her clenching center. To the hilt of his palm he plunged.

"Oh God," she whimpered, rocking to his rhythmic thrusts.

His kisses slurped wetly over her entire breast. She writhed on the ground, sand rough on her skin as she thrashed her head from side to side.

"The taste of your skin, the smell of your hair, everything about you makes me hunger for you." He kissed each word down her belly.

His lips circled her navel, he tongued the dip, and then he was at the apex. His mouth claimed her nether lips. He sucked and licked at the twinges inside her, making them

stronger instead of soothing them away. His loose hair fanned her belly, and she stroked the soft mane while he worked his magic upon every fiber of her being.

He came up over her like a great wave and crashed. Their bodies melded perfectly. He flexed his hips and thrust his cock into her. He rode her like a rising tide, mastering the tempest of their lovemaking as expertly as he commanded his ship. The slap of his skin on hers awoke every nerve. His kisses came aggressive and as needy. There could be no intimate talk, no cuddling in the end, and it made every touch so important. She felt his strong back, his sweaty neck, and down his narrow hips undulating with hers. She would never forget him or their times together. She'd love him forever.

Their climax erupted hot and turbulent. Ash shook, and she clung to him with her tears rolling, mixing with the dampness on his shoulder. He held her a long time. When he let go and got up, it seemed more like only a second had passed.

Mercy dressed, planted a kiss with sweet remembrances on his lips, and backed away.

"Goodbye, Ash," she whispered and hurried, running toward the plantation house.

That night she stayed in her room, avoiding him. The next morning, when she and Henry climbed into the longboat to go to the ship, Ash remained behind, standing on the beach. She gave him a thankful look for not making their parting harder than need be.

\* \* \* \*

Hours later, Mercy was back in her grandfather's house in Jamaica. She sat on the balcony outside her room on the second floor and watched the people bustling along the dusty streets.

The sudden, loud and angry shouting from Henry downstairs made her cringe. He had not attempted to touch her again since her threat.

She snuck down the stairs to hear the argument between Henry and her grandfather.

"Hempstead, you lied about your granddaughter's father," Henry charged. "I heard baron, money, lands, and most importantly you said there would be an unseemly sizable dowry."

"I may have misspoken on the account of the dowry, but I assure you the man is a baron."

"Mercy's father is a pirate. I'll be a laughingstock in England. This, coupled with that bastard child she had, will be the end of me."

"Oh, I assure you, my wife took care in giving away that baby before anyone knew of it."

Mercy took a deep breath. "Emma." She gasped.

*I told you.* An apparition of a young girl dropped in front of her.

"Are you real?"

*I'm a spirit staying in this world until Ashton has more happiness than sadness. You are the cure for his loneliness and his heartache.*

"Who are you?"

*Silly me, I'm Lady Emma Sinclair.* She curtsied. *It is so very nice to meet you formally, Lady Mercy James. I'm sorry I could not help you the night of the ball, but...*

Mercy thought of the picture Ash had of his sister. It was she.

"You were in the gazebo." Mercy thought back over all the times she'd heard the girl's voice.

*I assure you, I did not peek. I just wanted ... I needed to see you to be sure.*

"Sure of what?"

*Sure that your eyes reflected the love my brother Ashton poured from his soul. He really could not help it. He has never loved anyone except his family. Our mother's death as well as mine took away the only females he had ever been close to, so he has always been afraid to grow attached to another lady, that is, until you caught his eye. Now you must get your baby back and you must let Ashton help you.*

"He doesn't believe me." Mercy trotted up the stairs and shivered at the contact of her body passing through the ghost. "He thinks I'm crazy. Besides, he doesn't want a baby."

*My brother will live up to the honor of his name and the respect you have shown him, if you would only trust him.*

"I can't tell him. It would ruin all his plans."

*It's so unfair of you not to trust his love for you.*

"He doesn't love me," she paused with the thought. "No, I know he doesn't love me. Not the way I love him."

*Does he not?* she said sadly. *Maybe it is you, who does not love him enough to give him a chance.*

"That's not true. It breaks my heart to be so helplessly in love with him."

*Then you know what you should do to test his deepest feelings for you. Did he not say himself, if you should ever need him, he would come to you?*

"Yes, but he was being kind." Mercy didn't have time to question her sanity. The ghost, whether real or imagined, supported her quest and gave her the confidence she needed. She went to the balcony. The lack of stairs would not hinder her departure. Lifting her gown to put a leg over the side, she looked down at the horse-drawn cart ten feet below.

Her gaze swiveled around to the door creaking open in her room, and she jumped at the sight of Henry.

"Mercy!" he yelled.

She landed perfectly in the center of the cart.

"Mercy, I order you to come back!" Henry shouted at her from the balcony.

"I'm going to get my baby." She climbed down from the conveyance. "Marguerite has my daughter and I have to get to her before they return to England."

Mercy ran toward the docks to find a boat that would take her to the pirate ship the *Black Raven*. If she didn't get her baby before she reached England, she'd never make anyone believe the child was hers.

## Chapter Nineteen

Ash looked up from his exam of the plantation's ledger. "I did not expect you back so soon, Mr. Pettybones." He took the folded letter from him. "What's this?"

"We no sooner weighed anchor, than a boy rowed out to us with this message for you. I hope you don't mind, but I took the liberty of reading the note. The boy said it was real important and it was from Lady Cree."

Ash nodded, reading the short missive. "She still thinks my brother's child is hers." He looked at Mr. Pettybones. "And she's going to enlist the help of her father to get the baby."

"Your ship awaits your orders, Cap'n."

"We have to get to the ship my brother is on before Cutter James gets to it."

"Should be no problem, Cap'n Sin. Heard tell the *Fairfax* did not set sail until just before we arrived there with Lord and Lady Cree. Both ships will have a full store that will weigh them down. Our hold is as empty as a whore's head."

Ash picked up his jacket. "Then let us hope we can have full sails within the hour and a good wind at our backs."

He ran with Mr. Pettybones down to the beach. He helped row the longboat out to the ship, anxious to find Mercy unharmed.

"Get underway, Mr. Pettybones, and set a course to put us ahead of the *Fairfax*." He gripped a rope and looked at the empty sea.

*She's a pretty, little girl*, Emma said from behind him.

"Yes, she is, but what will happen to her when pirates board the ship and fight to take her? Mercy's delusions are going to get someone killed."

*Or get your daughter back.*

"She's not my daughter."

*The baby is yours. You thought of Mercy the moment you saw the child's hair. What of the birthmark? Does it not look familiar?*

"The heart on her chest." He had noticed, but he hadn't understood the reason it seemed special until now. "You've known all along about the baby?"

*Aye, me brother.* She giggled.

He turned to face her. "Em, I've indulged myself for years believing you were a figment of my imagination, just to keep you close. But you're real, aren't you?"

She smiled, dimples denting her cheeks. Her laugh floated over him, and then she disappeared.

*I am as real as you let me be*, her voice carried on the rising current of air.

He looked up at the sudden whoosh of the sails taking a full head of wind.

"Thank you, Em," he whispered.

With his gaze fixated on the horizon, it wasn't long before he spotted the *Fairfax*. With it was another ship flying the Jolly Roger. He hadn't beat Cutter James, but his arrival looked to be equally timed.

Cutter's men held the crew at bay on the *Fairfax*.

Ash grabbed a rope, twisted it to his hand, and swung to the ship from his when they got close.

"Blast ye, Sin, this here is a private doin' and ye were not invited." Cutter's sword swished the air and Ash jumped back.

"We need to talk," he grunted, feeling the nick of the blade on his knuckles. "It's about Mercy."

"What about me girl? You downed me favorite ship and stole me girl once. I ain't about to let ye do so again."

"She hasn't told you then." Ash looked at Mercy standing a good distance from them.

"Told me what?"

"I think I may be her baby's father."

"So you be the scoundrel that defiled me daughter."

"I love your daughter," he admitted quietly, out of earshot of Mercy.

"You 'spect me to believe that when you let her husband beat her?" James swung his sword again.

"I didn't let him." Ash jumped back. "Mercy begged me not to kill the man. And if you know her the way I think you do, you'd know how easy it is for her to get a man to do anything she asks."

James lowered his cutlass. "She does have the gift."

"Then can I talk to Mercy?"

James waved his sword for him to go first.

Their steps quickened at the sight of Henry holding Mercy by the throat.

"Let her go!" Ash held the point of his sword at Cree.

"Here, have the bitch. I took her in lieu of her grandfather's gambling debts. He said she'd come into money from her titled father. Since then, I've learned she's nothing more than a daughter to a pirate and a whore to you."

Ash's eyes narrowed on the man as Mercy rushed to him.

"Don't look so shocked, Sinclair. I know you fucked my wife both before and after we were married. I was willing to overlook her affairs, until I learned Duke Hempstead lied to me about her being the daughter of a Scottish nobleman.

"The man ought not to have promised me good daughter in such a way." Cutter stepped forward. "But me title is no lie."

"Father?" Mercy's puzzled expression told Ash she hadn't known that fact either.

"I have been meaning to tell ya, me girl." He scratched through his wiry beard and whispered, "I'm a baron. It ain't much of a title and means nary as much as being a captain of me own ship, but 'tis the truth of the matter and I cannot change it. Now, what say you, Mercy, me girl? Do I cut up your husband for fish food?" Cutter lifted his cutlass in front of the man's face.

Ash looked at Mercy. She held tight to him. He knew her feelings on the matter of killing Cree. "I think it better he seeks a divorce," Ash answered for her. "Speaking as one gentleman to another, wouldn't you agree, Cree?"

Cree's eyes turned dark, denoting danger.

Mercy's shudder traveled up Ash's arm and through him.

"I'd rather my peers hear a sad tale of how my wife died among cutthroats." Cree drew a thin saber from its sheath.

Ash lifted his arm, aiming his cutlass at the man. Blood still dripped from the tap Cutter gave to his knuckles. "Stand back, milady." Ash pushed Mercy toward her father. "Me thinks your husband wishes an immediate dissolution to your marriage."

Ash heard Mercy whimper as the steel clashed. He had to accept she might not forgive him if he killed Cree. The fight danced them around the deck. Mercy's gasps were small distractions compared to the crying baby—his baby—if he were to believe his sister's ghost.

Cree's apparent aggravation grew as Ash's lunges continued, forcing the man back. He cursed up a blue devil, until he charged and took the thrust of Ash's cutlass deep into his gut.

Ash let go and turned to the sound of running feet on the deck. He caught Mercy, lifting her up and hugging her tight.

"I'm sorry." He kissed the top of her head as he lowered her back to her feet. "I know you asked that I not kill him."

Her face tilted up. "Do you think it awful of me if I say I'm not sorry?"

"I'll never have anything but the highest regards for what you think, sweetness." He bowed his head and kissed her.

"What's going on around here, Ashton?" His brother, who wasn't skilled at all with weapons approached from the safe sidelines.

"Weldon, I know this is going to sound strange, and there is no easy way to say this, but Mercy believes the baby is hers."

"What?"

"How dare you!" Marguerite shot Mercy a hateful stare. "You cannot possibly listen to your little whore's wild story, Ashton."

"Hey, I would be watchin' the name calling." Cutter tapped his sword with warning on the deck.

"Yes, I believe her," Ash answered, looking his brother square in the eye.

He took Mercy's hand and felt her squeeze it hard.

"Weldon, if you can say for sure that you saw Marguerite give birth to the child, that you were there, outside her door, and heard the wail of a woman in pain, then I will accept the child is yours."

"No," Mercy cried.

Ash wrapped his arms around her and held her back.

"Me daughter says that's her child," James came forward with his cutlass raised at Weldon.

"Would you let me handle this?" Ash asked, shooting James an irritated glance.

"Marguerite did not have the baby at home," Weldon answered. "She went to France with friends. Yet that doesn't convince me."

"Did you have sex with her when she was growing with the babe then?" Ash continued.

"No, and how dare you ask." Weldon gave him one of his reprimanding tones.

"He asks to get to the truth." James wagged his blade at Weldon again. "You'd best be answering honestly."

"Weldon, you have to see something." Ash turned Mercy to face him. He looked down at her face covered in tears and put a hand to her cheek. "I need him to see your birthmark."

"Why?" she asked, as he unbuttoned her dress.

"You'll see. James, will you lend your daughter your jacket?"

"Aye." He wrenched it down his arms and tossed it to Ash.

Ash put the jacket around her shoulders, and carefully eased her dress down her arms. He fingered the rim of her chemise, loosening it. Then he walked Mercy to his brother and pulled the chemise down a little farther.

A heavy breath escaped Weldon. "Marguerite, how do you explain that our daughter and Lady Cree bear the same birthmark?" he demanded.

Ash wrapped the jacket together around Mercy and pulled her back, then helped her get her dress back up into place beneath the concealment of her father's garment.

"Coincidence. Why yes, the girl is part Scot and so am I. Maybe we even have a branch of the family that is linked."

"Beggin' yo' pardon, milord, but might I have me a say?" One of Cutter James' crewmembers hobbled forward on a stick tied to his thigh for use as a leg.

"Sure ye can, matey. All is equal amongst friends and foe today," James declared. "Especially, since I still have me cutlass. Right, men!" He thrust the blade into the air at the cheer behind him.

"Yeah, let Peg-leg Jack have his say," a man shouted from the crowd.

"Jack, huh?" Ash nodded a greeting to him. "Well, Jack, what did you want to say?"

"Only that she cannot have no wee one of her own." He motioned toward Marguerite. "She were goin' to have a babe once and done got rid of the thing. It messed up her innards."

"How do you know this?" Ash's hand slid down Mercy's arm to hold her fingers laced in his.

"Why, that there woman is me wife, Ada," he answered. "What I know 'bout her would curl your short hairs." He nodded to Mercy, "Beggin' yo' pardon for the foulness of me words, Miss Mercy."

"Forgiven, Jack." She grasped Ash's hand with her other.

He felt her hope.

Marguerite's nostrils flared and she turned a bright red. "The man is lying. I've never seen him before in my life. He knows her and they have all plotted to take my child."

"Emma is my baby," Mercy shrieked with the fear Ash knew she was suffering. "Just because I know the man, doesn't mean he would lie for me, I swear, Lord Brighton."

"Pirates would do anything for money," Marguerite exclaimed, looking to her husband.

"Rightly so, Ada," Jack laughed. "But then look at what a pirate's wife has gone and done. You stole Cap'n James' granddaughter."

"It's a lie and I'll say no more to you. My name is Marguerite Sinclair and I'm the wife to the Earl of Brighton. Weldon, please make them all go away." She turned to the nursemaid behind her. "Give me that baby and we will go to my cabin."

Mercy's hand squeezed Ash's hand so hard he had to pry her free.

"No." Ash held his saber up, preventing the nursemaid from moving forward. "Move to the other side of His Lordship with the baby. Jack, do you have anything more to add to make us believe you have not concocted this whole story?"

"Ada always said she was going to get rich men to take care of her, and damn if she didn't find the top of the shit pile." He nodded to Weldon. "Beggin yo' pardon, Your Lordship, for me language, cannot rightly change an old seafaring man's words, even when he is in such fine company."

"Weldon, I swear I don't know him, I tell you. You cannot believe a filthy pirate,"

she pleaded.

"I ain't no filthy pirate, me dear, I took me a bath twice this year," Jack declared, and all his compatriots agreed. "I can also prove what I say, milord. She has a scar on her right side where a man in the tavern cut her where she worked. Right nasty wound it was and didn't heal up proper, so it is all lumpy."

Weldon stepped back as if she had the plague. "Give Lady Cree her baby," Weldon ordered the nursemaid.

Ash let Mercy go to Emma.

Holding the baby close, she turned to Weldon. "Thank you, Your Lordship," she rose up on her toes.

Ash watched his brother graciously lean and let her kiss his cheek. Tears sprung to his eyes, and he wiped a hand over his face, knowing the pain Weldon had to have felt losing a child he thought was his for nearly a year.

"I'm extremely sorry for your pain." Weldon cupped Mercy's face, and then touched the baby's cheek. "I assure you, she was taken very good care of."

Ash stepped forward and put his arm around Mercy as his brother turned to Marguerite.

"You are a despicable, loathsome creature." Weldon glared at Marguerite. "It was a mistake to marry you and I'm glad that I'm not your husband."

Marguerite turned from him, glaring at Peg-leg Jack. "You're a fool, Jack. You need only have come to me in private and I would have given you a fortune for your silence. Now you've ruined everything."

"But, Ada, you is me wife, and I don't rightly think the Earl will begrudge me some coin for the news that he's not beholden to keep you as his, are ye milord?" He grinned.

"I think a reward is very fitting." Weldon took Marguerite by the arm and shoved her toward Jack. "You can have her back as well." Then he took out a leather pouch and tossed it to him as well. "It will not be enough to keep her long. Of course, you already know she's a costly bitch."

"You can't do this, Weldon. You married me," Marguerite wailed. "It's legal."

"Only until I go to the church and get a special dissolution." Weldon turned away from her.

"Please, Ashton, help me." Marguerite begged. "I took care of your child when your whore wanted nothing to do with it."

"How is it you came to getting little Emma?" Ash asked.

"A message was sent to the estate for you from the Duchess of Hempstead. She wanted you to take responsibility for fathering a bastard. I knew you didn't want to have anything to do with the girl, so I went to the Duchess and informed her that you had no interest in her granddaughter. Then I made a deal with her to take the child. I knew eventually, you'd want your baby. I wanted her to be our child."

Ash looked down at the little girl in Mercy's arms. "I can't believe she's really mine"

"She's a creation of all things good about that night in the gazebo, Captain Sin."

Mercy replied.

Ash looked at the men tossing Henry Cree's dead body over the side. He had led a carefree, yet dangerous life. Then he glanced at Marguerite, reflecting a moment on all the reasons he never wanted to marry. When his gaze returned to Mercy, her warm smile melted the last walls of resistance he'd built around his heart. His sister was right. He

needed Mercy. She had been generous with her heart all along, and he had done a great disservice to her by not accepting responsibly for the affections he had greedily taken.

A cool nudge to his back made him smile. He knelt on one knee and laced his fingers with Mercy's over the baby. "Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife, Miss James?"

"What are you doing?" Marguerite shrieked. "You said you'd never marry. I deserve that position more than she does."

"Ash," Mercy bit her bottom lip in that nervous way he loved and then shook her head. "You don't have to do this."

"There is neither a good time, nor a right time to confess my many flaws. However, milady, I want you as my wife, and I can only hope you'll forgive the grievous errors I've made in getting to this point." He stood up and bowed to Cutter James. "With your permission Lord James, I would like to take care of your daughter for the rest of her life."

"On me ship or any ship, it's Cap'n James," he whispered. "Me men cannot be knowin' I am a Scottish nobleman. They would slit me throat whilst I slept thinking I was a traitor for hanging onto me title and me estate."

"I know exactly how you feel, except you are here with only a few very loyal men that will guard your secret, and this is a deal I wish to make with a gentlemen, not a pirate."

"Me daughter has a mind of her own, Lord Sinclair. I never stand in her way, for fear she'd box me ears. The lass is a handful, as you well know, and I warn you, if you think you might be givin' her back after you've tasted her anger, then I would only be too happy to send you to the drink with her first husband."

"Father!" Mercy gasped. "You promise, Lord Sinclair, you'll not fight with him ever again when he is my husband."

"Fight? When have we ever fought, Sin? Tell her it's just some friendly sport we engage in from time to time to keep our minds sharp and our aging bodies from stiffening like a corpse," Cutter laughed.

"Speak for yourself, James. I'm still a man in my prime." He lifted the baby from Mercy's arms and kissed Emma on the forehead. "Here, James, see how it feels to hold your granddaughter."

James sheathed his cutlass and took the baby without hesitation.

Ash turned to Mercy. "So, how say you, milady? Can you stand to have me around every day?"

"Go on, Lass." James pushed her to him. "You best be tellin' the man you are in love with him, so you can get busy on producing me a dozen more young'uns I can spoil. You and wee Emma are the spittin' image of your mother, and I sure do miss that fiery hellion."

Mercy took Ash's hands and looked at them.

He saw the blood she did, and he felt a panic rise in his chest. "Mercy, you will marry me, won't you?"

*Give her a chance to gather her thoughts, Ashton. You heard her tell her father she would,* Emma piped up.

"Stay out of this," Mercy and Ash said in unison.

"Mercy?" he looked at her curiously.

"I'm sorry. She's right. I should not delay in giving you an answer."

"You hear my sister? You hear..."

"Emma," she finished his sentence. "I've seen her too. From the time at the ball, I think she has been watching over me like a guardian angel."

"I know she has been watching over me." His eyes watered.

*Tell her how you feel.* Emma prodded. *She needs to hear the words.*

"No, I don't." Mercy moved closer to him. "I've always felt loved by him. Yes, Ash, I'll marry you. I love you too much to let anything stand in the way of that."

*Tell her now or I'll haunt you forever,* Emma warned. *She has told you, marking my time done with her. You can only see and hear me now, Ashton. I swear, if you don't let me leave this world, I'll become the greatest pestilence since the locust upon Egypt.*

He didn't need the voice of his sister rolling around his thoughts anymore and smiled. It felt good to experience the deep love and happiness Mercy brought into his life. He had a daughter and it would change his future forever.

"My sweet, sweet Mercy, you deserve far better than me, you know."

She tilted her face up as he drew her into his arms.

"Your daughter was a gift I clung to with shameful greed. Your kindness to me since has been a virtue which I have treasured. I'm the one humbled by your offering of marriage, because I know it's something you never wanted."

"Not until you." He bowed his head close to her face. "I fell in love with you across a crowded room. A rake with my actions and a fool for letting you get away, I should have been strung up on the yardarm of my ship. Not even the Isle of the Indigo Winds should have gotten in the way of us being together."

"Now you have both." She smiled.

"I love you, Mercy." He kissed her. "I love you very much," he repeated.

Cutter handed him the baby and he took his daughter in his one arm while holding tight to Mercy with the other.

"You just remember, I am trustin' you to take care of me daughter and me grandchild," James told him. "Speakin' of which, will England be your home now?"

Ash looked over at his brother. "No. I still have no wish to be the Earl. I will leave that title in the hands of Weldon. Besides, Mercy likes to go barefoot, and you want more grandchildren. So, I think it best to let her run wild on the island, and keep her belly round with many more babes."

"Oh, you do now?" She nestled into his arm surrounding her and little Emma. "Just how do you figure on accomplishing that when you're off on your ship?"

He covered her hand over the baby and kissed her. "Remember, my plans were to live a life of leisure on the island. My adventures from now on will be with you and the children we have. I love you, Miss James."

"I don't think it can be nearly as much as I love you." She smiled.

"Then I'll do my best to show you otherwise." He kissed her softly on the lips.

"I'll look forward to it, Captain Sin. Now please kiss me again." She sighed, putting a hand behind his head and holding him to her mouth for a very long time.

**The End**

**About the Author:**

Even though I was born on Halloween, in New Jersey, USA. I've actually lived most my life in Alabama. Married with one son, I have a farm full of animals and a house full of cats. Luckily, since my husband and I are in the contracting business, I reaped the benefits of having a huge house to fit all my hobbies including taking in stray felines and collecting books.

I've written for more years than I should say, but lets just say it started in the 1970's and we'll not get into just how old I am. I started out a poet and have had hundreds of poems published in magazines. I dabbled with short stories and non-fiction, yet novels were a lingering attraction.

After the turn of the century I turned my attention to writing longer works. E-publishing gave me leeway in what I wanted to publish and erotic romance became a big word in my house as I reworked old stories to fit the genre.

I love writing stories and with a supportive family, I spend endless hours doing what I love. I believe I have the perfect life...well outside of having a few billion dollars, I do.

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