

A movie poster for 'The Wicked Lady' featuring Julia Knight. She is a blonde woman with a serious expression, wearing a red off-the-shoulder dress and a black hat. She is holding a handgun in her right hand. The background is a dimly lit, rustic interior with wooden beams and a staircase. The title 'The Wicked Lady' is written in a large, elegant, yellow script font across the bottom half of the image. The name 'JULIA KNIGHT' is written in a large, yellow, serif font at the top.

JULIA KNIGHT

*The
Wicked
Lady*

SANDHAIN productions

Nice girls love a sailor. Naughty girls are quite partial, too.

When a man she thought she loved offered Lady Catherine Harcourt a life wrapped in a velvet bow, she took it. That life wrapped her in velvet chains. Now her status as a respectable widow allows her virginal alter ego, Cecily, to relieve milksop-for-blood dandies of their riches and go back where she belongs. The sea—aboard her pirate ship.

The one knot in her sail is Paul Ambury. Daring, irresistible, and a lieutenant in the Royal Navy. Yet the temptation to indulge in his gorgeous body—all in the name of the plan, of course—is too much to resist.

Paul has known his share of empty-headed society women, and fiercely intelligent Catherine doesn't fit. When he wakes up adrift in a longboat after a blazing night together, he knows why. She took him for a fool—and took his ship.

Plus, the evil little genius has him neatly trapped. If he reveals why he lost his ship, he faces court martial. If he does his duty, he must find her and hang her—the one woman with whom he's fallen in love. Damn it...

Warning: This book includes graphic sex and language, sexy sailors and saucy pirates trying to get one over on each other in the bed...on the floor...on that handy table...

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
Macon GA 31201

The Wicked Lady
Copyright © 2010 by Julia Knight
ISBN: 978-1-60928-188-5
Edited by Linda Ingmanson
Cover by Natalie Winters

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: September 2010
www.samhainpublishing.com

The Wicked Lady

Julia Knight

Dedication

To Bettie, for not fainting.

Chapter One

Cecily. She had to remember she was Cecily today. A certain prim way of walking, a shy look from under her lashes and a soft, quiet voice with a hint of uncertainty to it. She had to remember to try to blush every time a man looked at her.

It took some effort, because Cecily was all the things Catherine Harcourt wasn't, but it got easier with practice. Catherine strolled along Broad Street in Bridgetown and tried not to perspire too much in all the layers of clothing she had to wear while being Cecily. The unfamiliar wig made her head itch. A faint breeze cooled her skin and brought the tang of the sea with it. God knew she'd rather be out there sailing, cool as a breeze, dressed in a shirt and breeches with the wind in her hair.

Not long now, though, and she'd leave Barbados and both Catherine's and the imaginary Cecily's lives behind her. Not long and she'd finally be free of this God-cursed island that had plagued her since her arrival. Just one or two more things to do.

She wandered toward the harbour, intent on finding her mark, poor Lieutenant Matthew Fincher. He was such a dear man, and as gullible as they came, just like the rest of the men on the island. Most of them weren't half as intelligent as pigs and had less than an ounce of red blood between the lot, for all their bluster.

A new frigate had just docked, and Matthew stood on the jetty to meet it. She could tell who he was even from this distance, with his sharp, quick movements and shock of dark hair. The ship had finished unloading, and her crew came ashore. The ratings good-naturedly bantered with each other, and catcalls echoed around the harbour as they made straight for the more disreputable parts of town. It was a long journey from England to Barbados, and most newly arrived crew had a powerful thirst, for beer and other things.

She paid them no attention and manoeuvred her way through a small crowd of giggling girls toward Matthew. The girls were always the same when a new ship came in. They would come down and size up the officers, see if they could find themselves a good catch. Catherine despaired of her own gender sometimes. They couldn't see that life without a husband was so much more free.

A few officers came ashore, but to little interest from the girls. They were too old or too fat or too ugly, though one or two of the girls would do well even to catch one of these. Finally the lieutenant who commanded the frigate walked down the gangplank, and Matthew strode forward to meet him with a clap on his shoulder. Now this one was a much better prospect.

Two women behind her twittered as he strode onto the jetty, and they hurried to “accidentally” meet him. Cecily had to admit he looked very dashing, not only tall, but broad across the shoulders, with a chest that made her wonder what he looked like with his shirt off. His hair was a sun-bleached blond under his hat, worn long and tied back, showing a strong face, but it was the way he walked that held her attention. Bold and purposeful, with a hint of arrogant swagger. She smiled as the two women intercepted him with a flutter of fans and a bob of skirts. Imbeciles.

The new lieutenant smiled at them as though the blatant adulation was only his due and kissed hands with a flourish and a devilish grin. As Catherine got closer, she could see why the girls were so excited. He was really rather handsome, in a bold, rough way. Not his face, as such, though that was pleasing enough, but the way he held himself, as though all the world should bow to him. The sheer confidence that radiated from him was very attractive.

Catherine stopped a moment to gather her thoughts. She’d been cultivating Matthew for weeks now, and this must be the friend he kept talking of, the one he was so excited to see. What was his name? Ambury, wasn’t it? Maybe the plan should change a little. After all, tricking Matthew would be like kicking a puppy, an especially stupid and adoring one. This new lieutenant looked much more to her liking. More of a challenge to start with, and the arrogance—she could really *use* arrogance like that. He’d just taken on his first command, Matthew had said, and this was his first time in the Caribbean with a crew just as green. He was young, single and no doubt pent up after several months aboard, which is why the girls would crowd round him, though he’d get nowhere with these women without a wedding. Shame to waste a body like that too. She could do a lot to take him down a peg or two, and enjoy herself while she did it.

Yes, Lieutenant Ambury might do very well for what she had in mind. Time for demure little Cecily to go back in her box. This one was a job for Catherine.

Lieutenant Paul Ambury was thrilled to be here, finally. At last, he and Matthew doing what they’d always dreamed of—catching pirates, and catching them together. He kissed the hand of some pretty young thing Matthew introduced, favoured her with a lingering smile and an intense look and laughed inwardly at the flush that crept up her neck.

From all that Matthew had written, Barbados was a very different affair from England, and that thought thrilled him just as much.

“Ladies, if you’d be so kind?” Matthew said as he made a path through them. “Let the poor lad get his land legs, at least.”

Paul winked at the little blonde as they passed and, for a moment, he thought she might faint. Barbados was looking as though it might turn out very well already. He suppressed a laugh and followed Matthew.

Once they were out of earshot, Matthew clapped him on the back. "It's good to see you finally. Sorry about the harpies, but a new man, single and headed for promotion—you'll be getting a fair bit of that."

Paul grinned at him. "I expect I'll cope, but it's been a long voyage. I don't need all these highborn women simpering at me. What I need is a good drink and some *bad* women."

Matthew laughed. "I know just the place."

They turned a corner, and Matthew stopped so suddenly Paul almost ran into him.

"Cecily!" Matthew called, and a lady farther up the street half turned and waved.

"Can't stop," she replied. "Lady Catherine has me on an errand."

She hurried off with her head down, prim and proper. Matthew sighed right up from his boots. "That, Paul, is the girl I hope to marry."

"Marry? You, the scourge of respectable women everywhere?"

Matthew snorted with laughter. "Second after you, yes. And yes, marry."

"Good God, man, has the heat turned your head?"

Matthew turned down a side alley. "No, not the heat. You know my father's always going on about making a good match. Having the Atlantic between us only means he does it by letter now. Almost I tire of all this carousing. Cecily is the sweetest, most innocent thing you can imagine. She'd blush if a man even looked at her. I want to see if she blushes all over. The timid ones are always the she-bears in bed." He flashed Paul a grin. "Besides, she's got fabulous tits."

Matthew stopped outside a discreet doorway set into a wall. "And here, my dear chap, we have the magnificent Mrs. Quinn's, an establishment where the brandy is excellent, the ladies, if not of class, are at least cultured, and have *filthy* minds."

"Just what I need after a long journey with only the smell of the bosun to lull me to sleep. Lead on, Macduff."

Matthew laughed. "You've been watching too many plays."

"Watching too many actresses," Paul said with a wink, and Matthew led them in.

Paul stood on the deck, *his* deck, and watched his men run through the drill. Despite himself, the thrill of excitement twitched in his stomach. He'd been stationed in Barbados less than a week, and this was their first patrol for pirates. His first real test. He grinned to himself and leant into the spray.

It was a relief just to get away from port, if he was honest. He'd long preferred the sea and his own company. And the women! Vapid, simpering monsters all. The hints and winks and fluttering of fans—it drove him to distraction, but he had to bear it. He'd hoped that in the Caribbean things would be different, rules and manners more relaxed. Yet the dearth of single men of a certain station seemed to have turned

these young women into rapacious harpies bent on capturing a husband, any husband. Though maybe he could work that to his advantage. It would take far less effort to get them into bed.

As third son of a minor noble, he'd escaped much of these husband-catching antics at home, though there'd always been the pressure from his father to marry well and preferably into money. Here that minor station had lit up the women like a firework, and he'd had not a moment's peace since he'd landed. Well, except at Mrs. Quinn's, though you couldn't really call that peace. After a day or two, Mrs. Quinn's girls began to pall.

He'd never enjoyed using girls in return for payment, though he'd rather take fifty lashes than admit it. It was almost an institution. He preferred those who did it for enjoyment, or were naïve enough to believe the promises he dripped in their ear, and there were precious few of those, even in London. His choices were the pox-ridden whores, or getting married to some air-brained creature who simpered at his every word, and little or nothing in between. Even a mistress was difficult, because the sort of women who consented were generally after only what they could get, or else far too clinging for comfort, who thought that once he'd bedded them, they had him. He'd rather keep his frustrations now he'd rid himself of the worst of them. He'd learned long ago to manage them.

All in all, he was glad to be out at sea, sailing these glorious waters under a hot sun. He and Matthew had dreamed of pirates since he'd read of the exploits of Henry Morgan when he was a boy—they'd wanted to chase them, or become them, but becoming a pirate was hardly likely, and hunting them down seemed just as thrilling.

The frigate sliced through the waters, his crew well trained and running easy. Just as the sun dipped below the horizon and stained the sea a blood-red, the lookout called down. "Ship ahoy, Captain. Looks like it's been attacked."

Paul's heart thumped in excitement as he raised his glass to see. The lookout was right—the stricken carrack had two masts down and the third had almost no rigging left. The foredeck was still smouldering. This might be his chance to prove himself, and what he could do. Time to grab his future by the balls and twist.

"Pull alongside."

First Officer Jennings trotted up the steps to the quarterdeck. "Is that wise, sir? The pirates could be back at any time."

"Then they'll have a nice shock when they find us here in the dark waiting for them, won't they, Jennings? And we'll have a good end to our first patrol."

Jennings frowned and looked through his own eyeglass, obviously unconvinced. "I've heard they like to lay traps."

Paul ground his teeth. Jennings was a good officer in most respects, with one flaw that drove Paul to distraction: second-guessing his every order. Jennings was too faint-hearted by half, which was why he'd

never got a command of his own, even though he was twice Paul's age. But maybe that second-guessing was what made him a good first officer. At least he never did so in front of the rest of the crew, or Paul would have been much harsher with him.

As it was, Paul's voice was hard and brooked no nonsense. "Not traps that involve a known friendly. Did you see the name?"

"Aye, the *Kittiwake*."

"Which was berthed not a hundred yards from us in Bridgetown two days ago. We've a clear duty to aid an ally, or those under our protection, such as this merchantman. I won't be taking any chances, not to fear. Cannon at the ready! Riflemen to the rail."

There were no other ships in sight. *Take no chances, but be bold*. Men dashed about to follow his orders, a sight that always filled him with pride.

As they neared the *Kittiwake*, there was movement on deck, furtive at first, but when those aboard saw the Royal Navy flags, they began to signal, a frantic waving to draw their attention. The look of the ship reassured him. It was definitely the same one that had berthed in Bridgetown—he recognised the figurehead. No pirate vessel this. The sailors looked like ordinary merchantmen. She had a single deck of guns on board, enough to defend herself, but no match for his. A line of sail-wrapped bodies lay along the far side of the deck, awaiting their watery grave.

Paul raised an eyebrow at Jennings, who shrugged and nodded. All seemed in order. The *Newquay* slid gracefully alongside and tied up. It wasn't as good as catching a pirate ship, but a fine start to his career here, nonetheless. Paul bounded down the steps.

"Thank God you're here, sir," one of the merchantman said as Paul and his officers stepped onto the deck with a few armed ratings, brought along just in case. Others stood along the rail of the *Newquay*, guns in hand, but the *Kittiwake*'s crew was armed with nothing but relief on their faces. "We managed to beat the buggers off, sir, got 'em a good shot, right across the bow under the waterline so they was taking on water and had to cut and run, but we're mired good and proper."

Jennings's shoulders relaxed at the man's words, but Paul felt nothing but cheated. Still, this could be a good enough first patrol, if they could get the carrack to port safely. "Who's the captain here?"

A ring of puckered, worried faces surrounded him, and the one who'd spoken nodded toward the shrouds. "Main mast fell on him, sir."

Paul looked at the horizon. The sun was a crescent of light above the waves, and darkness crept up on them. He turned to where some of his crew inspected the damage and discussed what spares were to be had. "Jennings?"

"Might manage a jury mast, sir, but not till morning. Not much rigging left. She'll need to be towed."

Paul nodded curtly. "I want men on watch on both ships. No telling if the pirates might come back, they or others, and we're easy targets sitting here."

A soft voice called one of the merchantmen away to what were surely the captain's quarters. When he returned, he was blushing. "Our passenger, sir. Says a man of your breeding should be thanked proper, and all your crew. Got plenty of rum and some brandy for your officers. A tot for all hands before a fight. Isn't that the navy way? In case there's a fight, here's hoping not. Should keep the night chill off else. And she'd like to thank you in person, sir."

Paul raised his eyebrows. She? The woman was more than lucky that these sailors had managed to beat off a pirate attack—it should be them she was thanking, for keeping her from a God-awful fate. He gave a few more brief orders and nodded to the sailor. He could spare a minute or two. "Very well."

Paul ducked through the doorway into the captain's quarters and looked around in the dim lamplight. It was only when she moved toward him that he saw her. He blinked in surprise, and all thoughts of ships, masts and pirates fled out of his head. "My apologies—"

She laughed, a low, throaty sound that made his belly quiver. Her voice was cultured and refined. A lady of breeding, no doubt. "No apologies required, not that I think you mean them, or you'd turn about, sir. My quarters were in the foredeck, along with all my clothes. They were burned to a crisp, and the dress I was wearing, well, there was a lot of blood. Please, there's no need to stand on ceremony. I'm Lady Catherine Harcourt, but you may call me Catherine. Everyone does."

"Lieutenant Ambury, captain of the *Newquay*." God, she was a bold one—and the name... Hadn't Matthew said something about a Lady Harcourt? He couldn't remember. He was too busy staring. She stood in a pool of lamplight, dressed only in a silk shift stained here and there with blood. The light shone through the thin fabric and showed every curve and line of her body. Her fair hair fell loose around her face, unbound in contrast to the tightly pinned hairstyles or wigs women wore in public. The caress of hair over shoulders was something he'd only ever seen on a woman as she lay in his bed, and was instantly erotic to him. So was her complete lack of embarrassment and the way she watched his face carefully, a hint of mischief in the little half-smile. No simpering in her, no blushing modesty, just a clear intelligence and humour that mocked him. He shifted his feet and hoped the blood didn't rush to his face, and elsewhere too, obviously. She laughed again at his discomfiture and motioned for him to sit.

He hesitated once more. He should at least pretend to be a gentleman, even if he wanted to be anything but right now. What he wanted was to see what was under that shift. What he wanted was to have her believe his lies, the sweetest lies that got women into bed. He looked up from a furtive glance at her body and caught her knowing gaze. He was lost for words. Any lady of class would have had a fainting fit by now, but she seemed to be enjoying herself at his expense. He wasn't quite sure how to react, feeling on the back foot for once. Time to remedy that. "Lady, forgive me, but your reputation, if I should—"

"I told you to call me Catherine, and if I'd a reputation to lose, then perhaps I'd protect it." She sat gracefully in a chair, pulled her legs up underneath her, curled almost like a cat, and leant forward to pour him a tot from a bottle of cognac. Good cognac too.

Paul tore his gaze away from where her body pressed into thin silk. He sat opposite her, took the glass and gulped down some brandy. Catherine poured one for herself, and a drop of blood fell onto the table and splashed the stem of her glass.

"You're bleeding. Are you all right?" Paul put down his glass, glad to have a distraction from his thoughts, which were becoming more ungentlemanly by the moment.

She looked down in surprise and then laughed shakily. "A small cut, nothing too bad." She turned her hand palm up and showed him a cut along her wrist. "One of them got a bit too close. Unluckily for him, my father made sure I knew how to defend myself."

He couldn't resist the perfect opportunity to touch her, and took her hand to make a show of inspecting the cut. A waft of perfume came from her, a spicy scent that seemed to lay heavily on his senses. "Really?" he asked, more for something to say than because he thought she wanted an answer. The cut bled freely, though it wasn't a bad one, but if he bandaged it, he'd have to get closer. At the moment, that was all he could think of. That, and just how glorious she'd look naked.

She leant in, and now he could smell the woman under the perfume. Feel the heat of her arm along his, the hint of her breast pressed into his shoulder. He looked up and her face was next to his as she inspected the cut along with him. She looked at him from under her lashes with an enticing smile. Was she trying to seduce him? If so, she was doing a good job. His breeches had become decidedly uncomfortable. He'd never known a woman to behave like this, as though she knew what she wanted and was doing all she could to get it. At least not any woman who wasn't a whore. Her audacity was almost as intoxicating as the breast that pushed gently into his arm, her perfume or the soft curve of her lips that begged to be kissed.

Her flirting completely unnerved him for a moment, but, being the man he was, only for a moment. He cleared his throat. "I think I'll need to wrap this, to be on the safe side. Do you have anything to use for bandages?"

He couldn't tear his eyes away from hers. They were a dark blue-grey, like the sea, and full of impish fun. She raised an eyebrow. "Well, there's always my shift."

With a laugh, she bent down and, with a little difficulty, tore two strips from the bottom of the shift. It was very hot and stuffy in the room all of a sudden, and Paul passed a hand over his forehead to blot his sweat. He took another gulp of brandy. A few minutes were all he'd wanted to spare. He *should* be out on deck. He'd bind her cut, then go and check all was well. Get some air. For the first time in his life, he cursed his choice of career. Maybe he could come back later...

Catherine handed him the strips of cloth. "Will this be enough?"

He had to get a hold of himself instead of behaving like a half-wit boy on his first time. *Take charge, man!* "It'll be plenty, I'm sure." She held out her arm, and he began to wrap it. After every other twist, he smoothed the cloth down with a thumb, making sure he went well past the actual cloth. The beat of her

pulse at her wrist fluttered under his touch. Once the first strip had been finished and tied, he let one hand linger on her wrist and stroked his thumb along the soft skin there.

Her pulse sped up under his thumb, and a rash of gooseflesh ran along her arm. The corner of her mouth rose in a satisfied smile, and she reached out with her other hand to pick up her glass. “To Lieutenant Ambury. My hero.” She toasted him and took a tiny sip.

His own glass in his spare hand, he toasted her in return and let a long, slow smile spread across his face. There was an unspoken promise in her look, and he intended to collect. He had her. He shifted to relieve the ache in his crotch. “To Lady Catherine, my damsel in distress,” he said and drained his glass.

Her gaze followed every drop as he drank, and he put the glass down with a frown. It was still very hot, hotter than it had any right to be. Sweat trickled down his back and face, sliding off him in waves. All his skin was on fire, not with heat, but with emotion. Catherine’s face blurred before his eyes.

“I think that’s enough for you,” she said. “Don’t want you passing out just yet, do we?”

Paul tried to stand, but his legs wouldn’t hold him. They’d turned to wet rope. He slumped into the chair, blinking heavily and shaking his head, sure he’d heard some muffled thumps and shouts from out on the deck.

“The bosun is a devil with the crew,” she said as she leant over him. “Shouts and screams half the day.”

“What in God’s name—” He tried to push her out of the way, but his senses swam. All he could see was her, sensuously swaying with the ship. All he could smell was her perfume. Anger and lust swirled through him, each vying for his attention.

She undid the buttons of his coat, and moved onward, her hands gliding over the smooth cotton of his shirt. Her breath tickled his cheek, her lips softly parted, and he forgot the shouts, forgot his anger at his helplessness. Lust won.

Chapter Two

Catherine smiled as Paul sagged into the chair, his eyes unfocused. It was a risk really, a great risk, for anyone to know it was Catherine Harcourt behind the surge in piracy of late, but this time it was necessary. Besides, he wouldn't tell. Oh, no, not when he'd lost his ship because he was too busy with her. There'd been times since her husband's death, not often, but sometimes, when she'd wanted a man, when she missed the feel of another body against hers, missed the slither of skin on skin, but she'd give all that up to be her own woman, in charge of her life. She wouldn't allow a man to control her—she'd never bear that from anyone again.

This was the first time she'd drugged the captain of a ship she'd stolen though, and the risk of being captured, of him disregarding everything to turn her in, only fired the thrill in her belly. She'd got as much information out of Matthew as she could without making him suspicious, and she thought that this Paul Ambury would have far too much pride to admit to losing his ship because he was distracted by a half-dressed lady. In fact, she was counting on it.

With a long, drawn-out sigh, he shut his eyes. She hoped she hadn't given him too much—she had plans for Paul Ambury. She sat astride his legs, took off his jacket and emptied the pockets. Nice watch, a few guineas and a rather fine eyeglass, and a sheath. Now that might come in useful. Nothing hidden in his boots. She unbuckled the sword, a finely crafted piece she might keep, and put it with hers, hidden but within reach if she should need it. It would do as a start to the evening's theft.

He was even more attractive up close than he'd been from a distance. Maybe she'd do more than just rob him blind. It would be well worth the risk. He opened his eyes and sat up a little. Good, she hadn't overdone it. He stared at her for a moment, bewildered, then his eyes sharpened and he leant forward. Oh, no, that wasn't how this went. He'd do as he was told. She'd had enough of it the other way round to make sure of it.

She gently pushed him back and watched as his eyes slipped down to where her breasts peeked out from the low collar of her shift. His legs fidgeted under her, the throb of his erection pressing into her thigh. He opened his mouth to speak, but she shook her head and he subsided.

She undid the last button and began to slip the shirt off, enjoying the feel of his skin under her fingers. No flab and white skin here, like too many of the other officers. He was lean and muscled, with a fine down of hair. She was just sliding her fingers across to slip the shirt right off when his hand shot out and grabbed her wrist. Hell's teeth! His fingers bit into the cut she'd given herself to make the "attack" seem more

realistic, making her gasp. She wrenched free of his grip and stood over him, making sure she could see where her sword was. This was *not* how it was supposed to go!

He stared at her with bleary brown eyes, blinked rapidly until they cleared a little, and struggled to sit up. His breathing was rapid from the drug, and his gaze fell to the rise and fall of her breasts. She almost laughed to herself. Men were too easy sometimes—show them a bit of skin and you could lead them by their cocks to anywhere. It was a shame about this one. He'd seemed to have a bit more fire in his belly than the rest.

Paul opened his eyes to find Catherine leaning over him. What the— He caught hold of her wrist, more from instinct than any clear thought. She pulled away easily enough. There was a soft heaviness to his limbs, a warmth that seeped through him and made his heart clench. A glass of brandy shouldn't leave him so weak, or with such fire in his veins. He recalled the avid way she'd watched him drink it. She'd rigged the drink, that was plain, but while brothels often drugged clients to rob them, he'd never heard of any physic that had this effect on a man. He blinked his vision clear, but all he could focus on was the way the shift clung to her, how he could almost but not quite see her through the flimsy fabric. The fact that she was hidden stirred him more than if she'd been naked.

She stood there without a hint of coyness, confident in herself and the effect she had. His gaze followed a trickle of sweat that ran down her neck and disappeared from view into the shadowy recess between her breasts. All he knew was that he wanted to follow it, and that one thought pounded in his brain.

He sat up, clearer in his mind now but still far from sober, wanting only to lose himself in the lips that parted in a soft, knowing smile. He reached out to take her arm, but she batted it away and pushed him back into the chair. It wasn't only his body she threw off balance—all the women he'd known, and there had been more than a few, had wanted to be chased, for him to take the lead, in bed or out, and that suited him very well. Not this one. She leant over him so that her neck was scant inches from his lips, but when he tried to kiss the soft skin there, she shoved him away. Her leg wafted tantalisingly over his until she sat on his lap and wriggled on the erection that threatened to break free of his breeches.

Her lips were close, so close he could almost touch them with his own, but when he tried, she pulled away. The way she ground onto his cock as she moved brought a groan from his lips. Only the fabric of his breeches kept them apart, kept him from plunging straight in without a thought for her. Just a piece of cloth between them. What was wrong with him that just the thought of that had him close to coming? Everything was strange, his thoughts not his own. He tried to regain some control, but she wriggled, and the shiver that ran up his cock put anything else from his mind.

Her eyes held him, half-lidded in anticipation, or maybe only in pleasure that she had him at her mercy. He struggled against the languor in his limbs, to take control as he always did, but it was hopeless.

A lazy finger tracked over his chest, trailing goose bumps behind it, worked its way down to the top of his breeches and hesitated. He could barely breathe for wishing she wouldn't stop. All the time, she watched his face. The finger trailed back up, and he almost swore in disappointment, but something in her eyes told him not to speak, that if he did it would be over. He wanted to—he wanted to grab her, take her, make her his, but he couldn't make his body move as he wanted.

Her hand moved across his chest, across his nipple where it paused to let her thumb flick at the erect flesh and send a shiver through him that ended as a twitch in his cock. Her hips ground down as his cock hardened, and she lowered her head. Her lips teased at the nipple, and then her teeth grazed it. His cock swelled against her, and only an effort of will kept him from coming. What had she done to him? Not now, not yet. He had to take her first, had to slide inside her and make *her* twitch and cry out. He pushed her back and tried to kiss her. All he wanted, for right now at least, was the taste of her lips on his, but she smiled seductively, and sat upright on his lap. The heat of her skin seeped through his breeches, enveloped him in its warmth. He wanted to dive in, to take her and wrap his cock in her.

He slid his hands around her waist, marveled at the feel of the silk as it moved over her skin, and tried to pull her down to him, but she wouldn't allow it. Whatever she'd drugged him with had taken all the strength from his arms and pushed it into his cock, made him sweat and pulse at a touch. Yet he couldn't submit.

He yanked her to him and clasped his arms around her. She wriggled furiously to free herself, but he held tight. Her face was next to his, her skin under his lips at last. He went to kiss her, but she turned her head away. No matter. The soft skin of her throat lay there instead, under the scented sweep of her hair. He nudged the hair away and laid his lips on her throat, ran them down to the soft hollow at its base. She gasped and moved against him, her nipples taut under her shift. He raised his hand to tease them through the soft fabric, to hold them and feel their softness under his calloused fingers.

Without warning, she twisted on his lap, drawing a tortured groan from him as she ground on his straining cock, and she was free. She stood before him, her eyes hot and wild, and he could barely think for desire. No idiot blue blood this. No brainless actress willing to believe all his sweet lies. A woman who knew what she wanted and how to get it. His blood pounded, in his brain, his chest, his cock. The *Kittiwake* shifted under them, moving against the wind. He should be out on deck. Thoughts of his crew, his duty, rose in his mind, swiftly buried under a tide of lust.

He went to move but she shoved him into the chair once more. He'd never known a woman like this, never known one who knew her own mind and what she wanted so well. Never knew one who'd done half as much to tease him, or make him want her so much his cock strained with need before he'd even so much as kissed her.

Then, just as he thought she would turn away, that he'd lost his chance, she sank to her knees in front of him. He hardly dared to move. She pinned him with her gaze and ran her hands along his thighs, slowly,

agonisingly slowly, up. Her fingers skirted his cock, oh so close, and onwards to the buttons on his breeches. His arms shook on the chair. God's blood, maybe it was what she'd drugged him with, maybe it was just her, but even the high class whores of London had never made his cock this hard. He had to have her touch him. He had to have her skin against him somewhere, *now*. And yet he couldn't move for fear that she'd change her mind and stop.

The first button opened, the rest in quick succession. His shaft sprang free, and he gasped in relief as she snatched his breeches off and threw them carelessly behind her. Now, surely now. The drug sped heat through his body, centred it in his groin till he thought he might catch fire. Still she hesitated, made him grind his teeth in frustration. God, how long was she going to do this? Was she just going to tease him and never give him what he needed? She ran her fingers along his thigh, eased up to his cock until he thought, yes, now, yes she must! Then they drifted away, accompanied by his groan of disappointment. He grasped the arms of the chair for all he was worth as her fingers came up once more. This time she tantalized the soft skin of his balls and touched the base of his shaft before trailing away. The tip of his cock felt ready to burst, and pre-come trickled down its length. He couldn't hold on much longer. Barring two nights at Mrs. Quinn's that hadn't done enough to ease the cravings, it had been too long since he'd been with a woman, the drugged fire in his blood too hot, and she teased too much. He opened his mouth to speak, but she shook her head and he kept quiet. No matter what, no matter how she tormented him, he didn't want her to stop. If she wanted him silent, silent he would be.

His legs trembled with need, a desperate desire to have her body against his, to thrust inside her until they both cried out. Finally she let her fingers caress the soft skin of his prick. They touched so lightly, so softly, he could barely feel them, but his cock twitched at her skin on his, just where he needed it. He swelled and pulsed, more than he thought possible, harder than the iron of a cannon. His hips rose from the chair. He had to explode, oh God he had to...

She stopped, waited till his breathing slowed, then wrapped her fingers round him, one by one. They moved gently, up and down, her thumb caressing across the tip with each stroke. She pulled him toward her, then her lips were on him. He gripped the chair until his knuckles were white. A soft, wet sensation enveloped his cock as her lips and tongue flickered across the tip. She found his most sensitive part, brushed at it with her tongue, soft yet firm, and his balls tightened. He cried out loud, a nothing word of want and need, and she stopped just before his point of no return. Oh, God damn her, she stopped. "Fuck!" he groaned.

She stood in one graceful movement and looked at him with one eyebrow arched. "Who said you could talk? Don't." She grasped the ragged hem of her shift, pulled it over her head and threw it heedlessly behind her. Lamplight gleamed off her smooth curves, along muscles that were taut yet soft-seeming, up to her breasts. He could imagine his hands cupping them, their soft flesh fitting perfectly into his palm. "Or do you want me to put it back on?"

Paul swallowed hard and shook his head. Even if he'd had the intention to say anything—and he didn't, no, he didn't want her to hide herself—he didn't think he would have been able to past the tightness in his throat.

“Good,” she said and pulled him from the chair. He struggled to stay upright, the weakness in his limbs, the heat in his groin and the fluff in his head making the room spin and swirl. “Because now it's your turn.”

She stood with her body not quite touching his, unabashed, unashamed, the most sensuous woman he'd known, and he had yet to even kiss her. He wanted to spend hours, days, kissing her, all of her.

The top of her head barely came to his shoulder and, when he moved his hand just a little, it came to rest on the side of one silken hip. He ran his fingers lightly over her stomach, just glancing her breast, and her breath quickened. Then on, over the delicate collarbone, brushing the soft skin of her throat. Her lips parted, inviting him to kiss them. His fingers searched her hair as he slowly brought up the other hand. Her nipples tightened under his touch. He went to kiss her, wanting that taste of her, but she pulled against him, turned away with a strained twitch of her mouth, and his lips found nothing but the edge of her cheek.

He hesitated a moment, but if that was how it had to be, he wouldn't complain. The taste of her salty skin under his lips was enough. He teased them around the sensitive skin by her ear, and she shivered against him. Down, along the shoulder and round, his hands always ahead. His fingers grazed her nipples, and she gasped again as his lips found one and took it in. Goose bumps prickled all over her flesh, and he smiled. He'd tease her as badly, as achingly, as she'd teased him. He rolled the nipple with his lips and tongue, worked it till it was a perfection of tautness and released it, gratified at the shiver that provoked. His lips moved almost of their own accord across to the other, as though they knew what they were searching for without his thought.

He skimmed his hands over her waist and along the firmness of her buttocks, smooth and warm under his fingers. His lips traced a line along her belly, then she pushed on his shoulders and he sank to his knees. His goal was in front of him at last. His hands drifted around her hips to the tops of her thighs. His thumbs dipped between them, teasing her with a feathery touch. Catherine's fingers twined in his hair, and she tried to pull him in, but he wouldn't, oh no, not yet. He would torment her first, as she had him. She wouldn't get the better of him.

His thumbs caressed the insides of her thighs. The musky scent of her enveloped him, and dampness coated his thumbs. He edged them up, just brushing her entrance. She gasped sharply and pulled on his hair. He dipped his head forward. There it was, his aim, peeking out of blonde curls, already damp and glistening, waiting for his touch.

He gave it the merest brush of his tongue, and Catherine's legs shook so hard he thought she might fall. Paul steadied her with one hand at the small of her back and dipped his tongue forward, letting his thumb caress along her slit as he did. She groaned loudly and held his shoulder to steady herself. He pulled

his arm more firmly around her, reveled in the scent that seemed to invade every part of him, and took her in his mouth. His tongue found her sweet spot, the one that almost had her legs buckling as he flicked along it. He eased his thumb inside her, and she leant against him, her nails digging into his shoulder as she cried out. But he didn't stop. He let his lips and tongue and hands carry on until her hips ground into him and she cried out again, louder this time. She clenched around his fingers until they dripped.

After a moment, she gained control of herself, twisted his hair more tightly and pulled him away. She was taking charge and, while that normally would have stung his male pride, now he didn't care. He'd never been so aroused, never wanted so desperately to have a woman. It didn't matter what it took to get her, to feel himself inside her, to make her clench like that round his cock.

Her face flushed and she dropped to her knees. Her eyes had a faraway look of both satisfaction and want. Her lips curved into a smile, and she pushed him to the floor, with her on top. Her damp cunny slid along his cock, edging upwards until he could feel her opening at its tip. His cock quivered. Finally. She glided down, achingly slow, and then he was in her. Her smooth muscles enveloped him, and her eyes screwed shut. She began to move against him, but not hard enough. He pushed his hips up, but she shoved at his shoulders, as though to remind him of his place.

The fog had cleared from his mind. His limbs were all his own once more, and he couldn't let her torment him any longer. Couldn't endure more of her teasing torture. Could not, by his nature, let her have everything her own way.

He drifted his arms over her skin as she began to move, and then he rolled, above her in an instant. Her eyes flew open in surprise with a sudden, unexpected vulnerability. He didn't care. He could take the agony of pleasure no longer. He cared only that he was in her, pushing forward as far as he could, harder now as she gripped him and he became desperate for release. She moaned and twisted under him, but he pinned her to the floor with his thrusts, delighted in every shudder of her body, every gasp and cry, every clench of her around his cock. Her nails scored lines along his backside as she sought to pull him in farther, and they only drove him on. Sweat pooled at the small of his back, dripped from his face to mingle with hers. Her eyes squeezed shut, and she moaned and murmured under him, urged him on, her hands splayed and searching, as though gripping for something they couldn't find.

Her body rose to meet his, and she pressed itself against him as every muscle seemed to clasp him to her. She cried out, once, twice, and her spasms rippled along his cock. With one last desperate thrust and a shout of his own, he came, the rush of it feeling strong enough to pull him inside out.

Catherine lay dazed under him, his shuddering breath sweet and warm on her neck. The muscles in her legs twitched involuntarily, and swirls of light spun in her vision. She hadn't meant for it to be like that. She never meant for that, any time. It was always *her* in control, *her* leading them by their cock for her own

satisfaction. But dear sweet God, when he'd thrust into her like that, full of raw, animal want, she'd thought her heart might burst, such was the strength of the spasms that had ripped through her.

She wanted nothing more than to lie there, to have him drive into her with all that intensity, to make her scream until she was hoarse. She couldn't have that. Couldn't let any man have such power over her. With shaking hands, she pushed him away, scrambled onto wobbling legs, angry at herself for letting him do that to her, and angrier with him for doing it. She grabbed for the swords, hers and his, and held the blades toward him.

He propped himself up, looking bewildered and angry now. "What in God's name—"

"Shut up!" Her voice shook, and she gritted her teeth to try to regain some control over herself and the situation. The plan. Yes, the plan. She had to forget him, forget the way he looked at her, the way the lamplight shone on his sweating skin. Forget the way just a touch had made her quiver, or that she didn't want to let this one go. She had to stick to the plan or she was lost. She thrust her blade closer toward him. "Get your breeches on."

He stared at her as though she was mad. Maybe she was right now, coasting along the edge of sanity. This was too close for comfort. *He* was too close, too close to what she thought she'd had when she married. He said nothing more, just grabbed his breeches and dragged them on, glowering at her the whole while.

When he was done, she did what she should have done earlier, before she'd let those broad shoulders and brown eyes she could drown in blind her to what she was meant to be doing. *Don't lose control.* With a practised move, she slipped behind him and smacked him on just the right spot on the back of his head with the hilt of the sword. He slumped to the floor, unconscious, and she stepped over him to find her clothes. When she was dressed, she dried her eyes and pulled herself together.

She'd taken an unconscionable risk, a stupid one. She never let the men she robbed see her when she raided the ships. She couldn't have them know who it was behind this latest bout of piracy. This time, letting Ambury see her, telling him her name, had all been part of the plan. Bedding him had not, but he'd stood on the deck like a young god, reminding her of her husband Jeremiah in the early days, before it had all gone so wrong. Before he'd found out what she was. Paul was fair where Jeremiah had been dark, but there was that same animal vitality to them both, the same bold lines to the face, the same sense of sureness about them. It had been too long since she'd felt another's skin against her own, a heartbeat next to hers.

She'd taken a few lovers since Jeremiah died, but not like this one. They'd been easy to control, and maybe that was why she despised them so much. She'd taken them, used them for her own gratification and thrown them out as soon as she was done. No risk there, no danger of the affair ending up like it had with Jeremiah. She shuddered and pulled her thoughts to the task in hand.

Maybe it would work out. Maybe she could use this. How could Ambury possibly report she was a pirate? He couldn't—the *Kittiwake* had gone missing and Lady Harcourt with it, her first step out of

Barbados and her old life. She had all his crew to say that pirates had attacked it before they'd arrived. Just where had he been when the pirates returned? Drunk, or rather drugged to look drunk, and naked, ruining the reputation of the respectable Lady Harcourt, that was where. She doubted very much he'd say anything about that part. Because if the truth came out... Oh yes, she had a hold over him now, and that was what she'd been working toward for weeks with Matthew. A hold over one of the navy men.

She bent down and patted his cheek. Bless him, he was going to make her so much money. The door opened softly behind her and Fulton sidled in.

"Well?" she asked.

"All out cold, Captain. Won't take long to get 'em in the longboats."

The plan had worked well, by the sound of it; a plan she was proud of. Have a few men pretend to be merchant crewmen while the rest secreted themselves under the sails, playing dead. Offer a tot of drugged rum to every sailor and, when it had taken effect, douse the lights so they were blinded. Most of them would never know what hit them. All they would know was the *Kittiwake* and *Newquay* had been attacked. With the men playing merchants apparently defending, and telling their version of events on the longboats, the navy men would think pirates had returned under cover of darkness to take their prize.

"Make sure you search them all thoroughly. I'll take care of the lieutenant here. And next time, knock." Fulton smiled slyly, and she glared at him. "Go on, get on with it. Have everyone ready to sail as soon as we can, and put a couple of our lads in the longboat, just to make sure this one doesn't spill his guts. Make sure they tell him they know where he was when the attack came. They can be as loud and as coarse as they like in their surmising what he was up to in here for so long. Send them along to fetch him."

"Aye, Captain." Fulton smirked lewdly and sidled out of the door. He was a sly one, for sure, and she always had to keep a close eye on him.

She looked at Paul. For some of the officers, the embarrassment of being left half naked to row for home was worse than the theft of their ship. The last lot had made it to Bridgetown in the longboats, and to see them pitch up bare-chested, flabby and fish-belly white except where the sun had burned them had been one of her few real joys in her role as Cecily Harper. All her fun came in her other life as Catherine Harcourt, captain of the *Wicked Lady*, in outwitting the gentlemen of the Navy and the merchantmen. It was a life she'd been born into and one she'd made a mistake in leaving when she'd fallen in love with a respectable man.

Well, that was over now, for good or ill, and she'd not make the same mistake twice.

Chapter Three

The catcalls and laughter as the longboats landed in Bridgetown stung Paul almost worse than the sunburn from sailing three days out in the open with none of them dressed in anything more than breeches.

Paul stepped out of the longboat and onto the jetty, sure his face was redder than his smarting back. Ratings hurried down with clothes and salve for the burns, but there was nothing to soothe his wounded pride or his livid anger. Matthew came down too, his lips twisted with the effort of not grinning. Paul scowled at him and snatched the shirt.

Matthew glanced at Paul's back and raised his eyebrows. "You got the lash as well?"

"No." Paul shrugged on the shirt hurriedly to cover the nail lines Catherine had left. He still couldn't grasp what exactly had happened, or who'd knocked him out. She'd drugged him, tempted him, taken him in and then pushed him away. He would have sworn it was her who'd knocked him out, but the crew was adamant they'd been set upon by pirates, though they'd seen no faces in the dark and seemed hazy about the details. A couple of the *Kittiwake's* crew had survived on the boats too, and they swore blind the captain of the pirates had got him.

He didn't know whether to be angry at himself for not being more alert, angry at Catherine, or worried that she'd been taken by pirates—a fate worse than death for a woman. Though maybe she'd teach *them* a thing or two. Or maybe, and this was a thought he tried to bury but which kept crawling from its grave to haunt him, maybe she *was* a pirate. He tried to tell himself not to be ridiculous, but the thought wouldn't go away.

Whichever it was, he'd been a damn fool, and lost the *Newquay* for his stupidity. He'd be lucky if the admiral let him have a dinghy after this. In fact, he'd probably be lucky not to be hanged if his commanders found out just *how* he'd come to lose his ship.

"Believe me, you aren't the first to be tricked and sent on his way like this, and I doubt you'll be the last. Though the victims don't usually end up with lash marks."

Matthew's face was alight with curiosity, but he was too well-mannered to probe any further on the matter, for which Paul was grateful. He wanted only to forget he'd ever met Catherine Harcourt, *if* that was her real name, but he wasn't sure it would be possible.

Every hour of snatched rest he'd managed since they'd woken on the longboats was littered with tortured, sweating dreams of her. He wanted to forget her and he wanted to find her, wanted her in his bed

to torment him. Wanted to make her like the rest, to make her clinging and desperate so he could feel the same contempt he did for other women and he wouldn't have to feel like this anymore.

"Come on, let's get you cleaned up." Matthew clapped him on the shoulder, and Paul had to hide a wince of pain. "The admiral's going to want to know what in hell happened."

"I wish I could tell him. I hardly know myself."

Matthew took him to his quarters to smarten up and to find a uniform that fit, even if the rank on the arm was wrong. It would have to do for now, because the admiral was waiting.

Admiral Wagstaff looked at him with a stern eye as Paul and Matthew entered his office. Several of the other captains were there with him, eager to hear what had happened, or to gloat over his misfortune.

Wagstaff was older than Paul by twenty years or so, a grizzled man with a hard face forever parched by the sea, though his countenance belied his generous nature. However, there was still the matter of the loss of one of the navy's frigates, and Paul had no doubt he wouldn't be generous about that.

"Here, my boy," Wagstaff said as he handed Paul a tot of brandy. "I dare say you could do with it. I could do with one myself. That's the third of our ships gone in six months. Three! Not lost in battle—*stolen*. I know at least one's made its way into pirate hands, because the *Swansea* was fired on last week with our own bloody guns!" Wagstaff paced behind his desk before he threw himself into his chair with an irritated sigh. "Go on then, Lieutenant. How did they get you?"

Paul told them of the ruined carrack, the crew and the bodies in their shrouds.

"That's a new tactic. What was the name of the ship?" Wagstaff barked.

"The *Kittiwake*, out of Plymouth. I recognised the name—it was in port here when I arrived."

"*Kittiwake, Kittiwake*—Oh yes, one of the Harcourt ships, sailed the day before you for St. Vincent. So you knew she wasn't a pirate."

"But she'd met some, by the looks of it. Two masts gone. Still afire on the foredeck. The crew said they'd managed to see them off with a lucky shot below the waterline, and the pirate ship had cut and run."

"But you knew they'd be back."

"I thought it likely, but it was dusk, and there was nothing much we could do until daybreak. Too tricky trying to get up a jury mast in the dark, and she'd still probably have needed towing. I set a double watch, and the men were all alert for trouble."

"And they snuck up on you in the dark. And where were you when this happened?"

Paul couldn't look at him when he answered. He had to be careful here. He *should* have been on deck, or at least have come on deck at the first sign of trouble. Those two crewmembers of the *Kittiwake* had quietly but crudely, and correctly, surmised what he'd really been doing. They'd sworn to believe him

when he denied it, but their grins said otherwise. “I was informing their passenger of the measures we’d taken.”

Wagstaff raised his eyebrows and sat bolt upright. “Passenger? Wait, wasn’t it the *Kittiwake* that Catherine Harcourt was sailing on?”

“That was her, yes.”

“Good God! And she wasn’t with you when you came to?”

“No. I can only assume they took her.” Maybe they had. Maybe his guesses were all off the mark and she was prisoner on some pirate ship somewhere. It didn’t bear thinking about. If that were true, he’d not rest till he found her. If she were a pirate, he’d still not rest, but the end of the chase would be very different.

“Catherine bloody Harcourt.” Wagstaff shook his head sadly and crossed himself. “Poor woman, never had a good bit of luck since she got here. Become quite odd since her husband was murdered, though I daresay it was a relief for her. Very damned odd, to be frank. So they attacked you and took her and the *Kittiwake*. Yet you and the other crew seem relatively unharmed. Just how much of a fight did you put up?”

“The crew says they came upon them suddenly. They seem to have crept up on us unawares. Most of the crew were just knocked out, though I lost half a dozen men.”

“And you, what did you do?”

“Got a crack across the back of the head. I never even saw them.” Paul tried to will away the flush he could feel creeping along his neck, but it was the truth, even if he had left out quite a bit.

“Hmm, well, Ambury, I’m not quite sure what to do for the best. You did your duty in assisting the *Kittiwake*, but to lose your ship, that I can’t have. But your court-martial can wait. I need more officers here for a start, and when they’re here, I’ve got things more important for them to do.”

Wagstaff pushed away from the desk. “Right, it’s time we got shot of these damn pirates once and for all. I want every ship available out and looking for them and Lady Harcourt. I want every man trying to find out where they hole up. We can triangulate a rough area to search from where they hit the ships. And you, Lieutenant Ambury, consider yourself beached, indefinitely. Consider yourself lucky you don’t get the lash. You may yet.”

Paul fidgeted in the corner of the room, hoping to remain inconspicuous. Ten days had passed since he’d lost the *Newquay*, and his cheeks still burned to think how easily his frigate had been taken from him. The last place he wanted to be was at a party for the governor’s wife, with all the attendant manners and fluff, not to mention curious stares. Ten days onshore, with no prospect of getting back to sea. Worst of all, he couldn’t voice any of his suspicions about Lady Harcourt, or not without incriminating himself in some way. He’d been thinking quite a bit about Catherine Harcourt, and he still couldn’t quite decide between

anger that it might be her behind the stealing of his ship and his current embarrassment, or the thought she was an innocent caught up in it all. If so, then by God he wanted to find her. If she were the woman he'd originally supposed, then he wanted her. Wanted to find her, make her cling to him, and then push her away as she had him. Sting her pride as she'd stung his. Or even keep her for a time. Yet he couldn't decide what he believed about her, and the thoughts ran round his head endlessly, making him prickly at best. He'd already managed to offend two ladies this afternoon with a single caustic remark about their lack of brains. That'd do him no good. So he tried to keep out of the way and seethed silently to himself.

Matthew sauntered over, drink in hand. At least he seemed in high humour. "Paul! What are you doing hiding in the corner? Come on, this is the perfect place to introduce you to some of the delectable delights in Bridgetown."

"I'd rather not, if it's all the same to you."

"Nonsense. Come on, the luscious Dowling twins are over there. One each." He lifted his glass in the direction of two insipid-looking blondes. "Personally, I'm awaiting the arrival of the best tits in Christendom. Ah, there she is now. What do you think?"

Paul looked in the direction of Matthew's nod. A petite brunette stood with Admiral Wagstaff and one of the other captains. She was attractive in a delicate kind of way, though how she held herself and looked up shyly at the admiral as he spoke made Paul think she was just another brainless idiot. Yet when Matthew turned to him and made some comment or other, she looked Paul's way and sneaked him a sly wink. That wink quickened his interest, and also made her look familiar.

Matthew offered to introduce him, and he followed without hesitation. "Cecily Harper. Good breeding fallen on hard times. She's Catherine Harcourt's cousin, came out here when her father died. Penniless, the poor bastard. Good timing—Catherine's husband had just died, and Cecily helps keep her company. Catherine never mixed much after that. In fact I doubt I've seen her twice in the last two years, and never up close, but Cecily's always around. I'm hoping one day soon I might manage to get her to agree to marry me. She's very like Catherine except for the hair colour. Don't you think? In looks, at least, not in temperament, from what I hear."

"Still intent on marriage? Seriously?" Matthew hardly seemed the type.

Matthew grinned at him and winked. "Only way to drown myself in her tits. Besides, it's about time I got married. She's a quiet sort of mouse really, but she'd make a good wife. Don't you think?"

"A pretty one, certainly." Paul looked for more than just a pretty face in whoever would end up as his wife. This Cecily certainly didn't look as though she'd match up to it. Now Catherine, on the other hand... He twitched his shoulders. The damn woman was everywhere in his thoughts. The longer he thought on it, the more he was convinced she was the pirate captain. His crew had all complained of dizzy spells right before the attack—and there'd been that tot of rum to all hands, not to mention Catherine drugging his

brandy, but who would believe him? No one, because everyone, from the admiral down, held her in the highest regard, and he could produce no proof without revealing his dereliction of duty.

When he was awake, he silently cursed her name, but when he slept—when he slept, she came to torment him, to lick and tease and taunt him. Every morning he awoke with stained sheets, and he knew if he saw her again, it wouldn't be the piracy he'd think of first.

They reached Cecily just as Admiral Wagstaff was apologising for leaving her to her own devices.

"Cecily, you're looking ravishing this evening. I'd like to introduce you to someone." Matthew bowed elaborately over her hand, and Cecily fluttered and smiled coyly at him. Then she turned her attention to Paul as Matthew introduced him.

A thrill went through him, as for a moment he thought she was Catherine. Then she put out a limp hand for him to kiss, and he realised it couldn't be her. There was no *life* in this woman. He bowed and kissed her gloved fingers. It was only as she pulled away that he saw the recently healed cut on her wrist, barely covered by the glove. His mind flashed to the *Kittiwake*, to Catherine pouring him brandy and apologising for the blood on her shift. The same cut.

He stared at the face, too shocked even to stand up straight. Catherine was fair, and Cecily's dark hair was pulled tight back from her face in a severe style that accentuated her demureness. Even so, it was her, he would swear it. Cecily, or was it Catherine? Or both? Whichever, she raised her eyebrow a fraction, and he knew he was right. If this was Catherine, then he knew now for sure. *Pirate*.

Sweat stuck his shirt to his skin as the fevered dreams of the last few days came back to him. Dreams of her naked body in lamplight, her taunting, teasing lips on his skin. But she'd pushed him away afterwards as though he were unclean, had stolen his bloody ship and got him beached and facing a court-martial. He didn't forget that, either.

She smiled coyly at him. "Lieutenant Ambury. I've heard so much about you."

"All good, I hope?" he managed to say past the dry click that had formed in his throat.

"Mostly." She smiled, a wan little twitch of her lips. "Matthew, would you be a dear and get me a drink? The heat's making me quite faint."

Once Matthew was out of earshot, Paul moved closer. She smiled up at him, as innocent as a babe.

He lowered his voice. "Which name is it? Cecily? Or Catherine?"

Her fan clattered in her fingers, and her cheeks flashed white and then red. A trickle of sweat ran down her hairline. "I—er—I feel very faint. Would you mind escorting me outside? I need some air."

Paul wavered a moment, torn between livid anger and sneaking admiration, but he'd have his answer *and* his bloody frigate. He nodded curtly, took her arm none-too-gently and led her out onto the veranda. She steadied a little in the fresher air, though it was still sultry. The usual breeze had died, and the air was close enough to suffocate.

"Well?"

She wouldn't meet his eyes, but began to stroll around the veranda, toward the rear of the mansion. "I don't know what you mean, I'm sure. My cousin and I are similar in looks, I've been told, but we're not the same."

He took her arm roughly, and she jumped at the touch. "Your 'cousin' had a fresh cut just here,"—he jabbed at the scab on her wrist—"when I last saw her. And you're not just similar. You *are* her. How on earth do you get away with it?"

She sighed and pursed her lips. "Clearly I didn't drug you well enough. I get away with it because Catherine rarely goes out, or allows herself to be seen in public. Cecily, on the other hand, does. Wigs are such useful things—no one thinks a thing of it if you wear one. She's so much more demure than Catherine, wouldn't you say?"

She stood straighter, threw back her shoulders from the coy pose she'd adopted as Cecily and looked him in the eye. Yes, this was the woman on the *Kittiwake*, there was no doubt now, if there'd been any before. A thrill of excitement started round his heart and travelled rapidly down to his belly, mingled there with his anger at what she'd put him through. She'd stolen his *ship*! "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't turn you in as a pirate right now."

She laughed up at him and raised an eyebrow. "Catherine could 'escape'. I need only take off this wig, get rid of this dress, dishevel myself and tell some tale. I could tell the admiral how you took advantage of a poor, innocent woman before those nasty pirates came and took both our ships. My account will be much more coherent than yours, I've no doubt. And taking a drug while in command and on duty? Really, I think you'd lose more than I."

He dropped his hand from her arm. "He'd never believe it."

"Would you like to find out? I've known him a lot longer than you have, and I could find a crew member or two to escape with me and back up my claim. Who do you think he'll believe? A man who lost his ship on his first patrol, or a titled woman with a faultless reputation? Or I could say I'll mention nothing if you mention nothing. A deal?"

They reached the rear of the mansion, and Paul leant on the balustrade to gather his thoughts. She leant next to him, close enough that they touched, and that jumbled all his thoughts. It must be that or the heat. She was different from any other woman he'd ever met, in so many ways. Confident, complicated, intelligent—and all kinds of trouble.

Could he keep the knowledge that she was a pirate to himself? Maybe, if she got him his frigate back. That was all he wanted. His ship...his home too. His life. *Dare* he keep it to himself? If he was found out, the court-martial was certain, along with the gallows, but dare he say anything? That would be as bad. He'd be hanged for dereliction of duty. She'd almost had him court-martialed once already, had mortally embarrassed him and gotten him beached. Had it been worth it for that one dream of her, one he wanted nothing more than to repeat?

Maybe, just maybe, he could do something. He could string her along as he had so many women, before he tired of them and left them. If he could gain some control over her, he might have a chance at the court-martial. Not to mention that would involve taking her to bed. He could try to tame her—though whether she was tamable was the question. He doubted it, even half-hoped she wouldn't be, and maybe that was what thrilled him about her. But, God damn, he could try. His cock stiffened at the thought. Oh yes, take her, tell her all his lies and have her testify on his behalf at the trial, and get to fuck her in the meantime. He'd fuck the worth of his ship out of her, and maybe, if he was subtle, get her to give the *Newquay* back. The plan was perfect, whichever way you looked at it.

Maybe she could read his thoughts, because she took his hand. Her smile was playful, mischievous, and it did things to him he didn't want. His breathing was loud in his ears, competing with the sound of his thumping heart. She pulled at him, toward a dark doorway. He allowed himself a step, another, then sanity asserted itself.

He should turn her in, no matter the cost to him. That was his clear duty. This woman was nothing but trouble, and he knew it, but he was rapidly starting not to care. It was as though he were drugged, only this time with nothing but lust.

She stopped a moment and looked up at him, serious now. "I'll leave tomorrow. You'll not see either of us after today. I swear."

He didn't want that, either. Right now, this second, all he wanted was to kiss her, to rip off her clothes and see her naked in the lamplight once more. To hear her cry out against him. He shook his head, words failing him. *Take control, what's wrong with you?*

She pulled him on with a taunting smile. "Come on, show me you're up to the challenge. Show me how much more fire you have in you than those inbred fops in there. Show me the man I think you are, that I know you are." She pulled on his hand again. "*Show me*. And maybe I'll tell you where your ship is."

Catherine and his ship—he could have both; they could both have what they wanted. All his resistance fled. He could no more refuse than he could stop his heart from beating. He strode for the door, pulled her in after him and held her tight. He didn't bother to identify the room, only made sure it was empty. She kicked the door shut after them and locked it.

Her breathing was as rushed as his. The thread of her pulse flickered under his hand when he laid it on her neck. It seemed as though her eyes filled his whole mind in the dim light, and the touch of her skin overloaded his senses. He didn't know where he was, or almost who he was. It didn't matter. It only mattered that the dream would repeat itself. That he would have his ship from her. The anger at what she'd cost him resurfaced. He would do it. He would screw his ship from her, make her his and leave her, make her pay for his humiliation.

Even as he thought it, he knew he fooled only himself.

Catherine shivered in anticipation as Paul wrapped his arms round her. He was a thrilling change from the usual well-bred, bland men stationed here. He was purposeful and full of fervour. Very full, from what she felt pressed against her so pleasingly.

He bent to kiss her, but she turned her head, and his lips landed on her throat. He'd not get her like that. The thrill gathered pace and heat in her belly and spread out as she rubbed against his growing cock. No teasing this time, no long, drawn-out torment. She just wanted him *now*. Wanted a strong man, strong arms to lean on—and yet she wouldn't allow herself to keep them. She'd had enough of respectable men to last a lifetime.

She let her arms fall between them and fumbled for the buttons on his breeches. She shook too much. *Stop it!* She was supposed to be having this effect on *him*, bending him to her will, not the other way round, but the strong hands on her back, moving to pull up the front of her skirts, the insistent kisses at her throat that made her nipples tingle and ache for the touch of his lips, told her she was losing control. That it was him in charge of her emotions now. She'd always been a fool for a man with self-assurance. She couldn't allow that loss of control, but even as she wanted to pull away, to regain her poise, he touched her thigh. A whispered laugh escaped him as he must have realised there was nothing between his hand and her skin. His fingers snaked an insistent trail upwards, and she was lost.

He ran his fingers over her cunny, and she didn't resist. Daydreams of this since she'd seen him here had made her restless. She was ready to ditch a well-thought-out plan on the spur of the moment, and was ready for him, for this. More than ready.

He slid a finger in, and her mouth parted in a gasp as he ground the heel of his hand against her clitoris. All she wanted was for him to take her now, as relentlessly as he had before. She finally managed to undo his buttons and pull out his cock. The heavy feel of it was heaven in her fingers, would be even better inside her. There was no time to waste—someone might come at any moment.

She lifted the skirts of her dress out of his way and pulled him toward her. She didn't want to wait; she couldn't wait. The tip of his cock touched her entrance and held there. She tried to pull him in, but he waited a moment, for what she didn't know or care. She had to have him, and a word escaped her in a low moan, one she hadn't uttered to a man since the disaster of her wedding night. One she'd sworn she would never utter to a man bent on fucking her. "Please, please, now."

He laughed under his breath, lifted her and set her down on the edge of a table. His cock had never left her entrance, and the movement served only to make her try to pull him in. Her legs twitched in anticipation, her cunny dripped its juice along the length of his cock, and still he barely moved—just enough to make her shudder and moan, her eyes screwed shut.

Finally, deliciously, he shoved into her. Every nerve ending where he touched quivered, and she cried out. He tried to cover her mouth with his, but even now she would not let him kiss her. She buried her lips in his shoulder and tried to hold in her cries. Her back arched of its own accord, pushing her onto him. Her

nipples, tight and aching, rubbed against the cloth of her dress and brought their own thrill. Again he sank into her, and it was too much. The fullness of him inside her, her aching need, the fervour of him burst within her, and she cried out louder so that he covered her mouth with his hand. He didn't stop as she came, but carried on with deep, relentless strokes.

She opened her eyes as her muscles loosened, and he looked down at her with a triumphant smile, perhaps because he'd done this, made her come hard in just two thrusts. His breathing was ragged, and he buried his face in her hair, driving ever faster, harder, deeper. He seemed more desperate, as though what he'd seen in her eyes brought him closer to his own goal. Her desperation grew with him. A flush of excitement, nerves and anticipation tangled together in her loins till, with a strangled voice, she came in great, shuddering spasms that ripped through her from her toes to her throat, sent flashes of heat and icy-chill across her skin until she might faint from it. At that moment, he cried out, a coarse, guttural, "Fuck!" that almost brought her to coming, and then his final few strokes slammed into her, ensuring her spasms didn't weaken but grew deeper until her body strained with the effort.

He fell forward, supporting himself on the table with his arms either side of her and, for a moment, she clung to him, all her muscles wrung out and useless. For a moment. She couldn't afford more, couldn't afford to look him in the eyes. Couldn't afford to give in to temptation and let him any closer to her heart. It was well she was leaving today, because if she stayed much longer, she wouldn't be able to resist. One day he would kiss her and she would let him. She would feel for him something other than lust, and she would be lost. Her arms dropped from him and she leant away.

He frowned at her, not angry now, but perplexed, perhaps, hurt. Then he turned from her before she could push him away. And this time she wanted to pull him back. She wanted to linger here with him, but couldn't. She bit her lip to shove that thought from her mind. By the time he'd rearranged his clothing and looked at her, she was all business.

She stood and smiled at Paul as though he'd just commented on what a fine day it was. Only a sheen of sweat across her breasts and a flush to her cheeks hinted at anything different. She wouldn't meet his eye, and that hurt, burned in his heart like the worst betrayal. He'd thought when she'd wanted him like that, moved against him like that, he'd thought... He'd been wrong. When she turned for the door, he grabbed her arm. He couldn't just let her walk out, at the very least not without some account of what she'd done with the *Newquay*. She stared at the insignia on his jacket as he spoke.

"Don't make a fool of me a second time, Catherine. You don't have to—" The handle of the door rattled, and they both jumped. If they were caught in here, he was dead. The charge would be bringing the navy into disrepute. *At best.*

She swore and reached out to turn the key in the lock before he could stop her. It rattled again before she got the key turned. She flung open the door and glared at the three men who stood there. Paul

recognised one of them. He'd been on the *Kittiwake* as part of Catherine's crew. A bloody pirate! He went for his sword without a thought. Catherine's hand on his arm stopped him.

"Who would you rather have? Your admiral to catch us in here?"

She had a point, but if he let them go—

"Door weren't supposed to be locked," one of the men said.

"And he's not Fincher, neither," said a second.

Fincher? Why would they be expecting Matthew?

"God's blood! Couldn't you see the plan changed? And it's locked because this time I *didn't* want to be interrupted."

"Plan?" Paul shook his head, trying to keep up with what was going on. Mostly his head was telling him these men could lead him to his frigate and get the stain off his record. They could get him back to sea, back to his life. "Catherine, what plan?"

"Go on, get running," she said to her men, and they took off along the veranda and over the balustrade like coursers after a hare. "I'm sorry, Paul. It was meant to be Matthew, and they'd interrupt before he could get too far. But you—I..." Her voice trailed off, and she blushed. "I'm sorry. You'd best get after them."

She straightened her back and screamed as though he'd just stuck her with his sword. Paul took hold of her shoulders and shook her until she stopped.

"Catherine, what—"

She rolled her eyes heavenwards as though she couldn't believe how dense he was being. "*Cecily*, remember? And aren't you supposed to chase pirates? What's stopping you?"

"I have a pirate here, don't I?" For all his talk, somehow he was letting her make a fool of him. Shouts and the sound of running feet rang out as men came to answer to her scream. Just as they turned the corner, Catherine sighed with an irritated edge and fainted into his arms.

Half an hour later found them in that same room, only this time they had company. Paul stood and sweated, hiding his rage, wondering just how he'd gotten himself into this and how in hell he could get himself out. It wasn't him; it was her. She'd done this to him. And again, he could say nothing.

She sat in a chair playing the demure Cecily, fanning herself and shyly accepting an offer of brandy. If Paul hadn't known, he would have sworn she'd been frightened half out of her wits and was only now recovering.

Matthew fussed around, and Admiral Wagstaff came to sit by her, looking at her with a sympathetic, fatherly air. "I'm sorry, Miss Harper, but if you're recovered enough, maybe you could explain what happened?"

Paul was grateful the questions hadn't started with him, because what would he say? But everyone had focused on her, on reviving her and making sure she was well, or on chasing down the armed men they'd spotted running from the grounds. They'd been too quick, with too long a lead, and had gotten away.

It was almost impossible to tell it was the same woman he'd been in here with less than an hour ago. None of the confidence remained, none of the sparkle or sexual allure that she held for him. Just a fluttering, idiotic nervousness that grated on Paul's nerves even though he knew it for the act it was.

She stammered over the first few words. "I—I felt faint at the party. Lieutenant Ambury offered to escort me for some air." She sipped at the brandy and shuddered as though it scalded her on the way down.

"Oh yes?" Wagstaff raised a sceptical eyebrow Paul's way.

"It was very kind of him," Cecily replied with a hint of reproach, or Catherine, or whoever he was supposed to think of her as. He was beginning to wonder if either of them was really her.

"Of course, do carry on."

"I didn't feel much better, and the lieutenant offered to fetch me a drink to help. He'd only just gone around the corner when they...those *awful* men came."

Wagstaff patted her hand, and she managed a tight, brave little smile with tears lurking behind it. Paul had to fight the urge to roll his eyes. How could they believe it?

"There, there, my dear. What did they do?"

"They—they—" Cecily dabbed at her eyes with Matthew's handkerchief. "They ripped my dress."

It was only then that Paul noticed the tear in the bodice. He hadn't done that, had he? Maybe he had. Or maybe she'd ripped it afterward, when he wasn't looking. It was difficult to tell *what* she might do or say at any given moment. Maybe that was what fascinated him so much. He wiped at a trickle of sweat on his upper lip and hoped she didn't get too fanciful.

At Wagstaff's prompting, she carried on in little more than a whisper. "They were going to, well, you know." She lowered her eyes shyly, and Paul almost laughed at the indignant look on Matthew's face. If only he knew what she really had to look shy about. "Lieutenant Ambury must have heard me screaming, because he came back and scared them away. I don't know what I'd have done if he hadn't been there."

She gazed at him with an innocent and frankly adoring look, as though he was the most dashing hero she'd ever met. Matthew flushed a deep brick red and he glared at Paul while he laid a gentle and proprietary hand on Cecily's shoulder.

Wagstaff looked up at Paul, his shrewd eyes wondering under bushy brows. "Lieutenant?"

Paul pulled himself straight and tried to look honest. God damn the woman, he was having to lie to cover for her actions and not for the first time, but he'd no choice. If he admitted even a part of what had happened, he'd be drummed out of the navy at the *least*. Quicker than spit too. He could at least not lie outright, just lie by omission and tell what he did know to be true. "I recognised one of them, sir, from the *Kittiwake*. I'd—I'd have given chase, but I thought my first priority was to Miss Harper, sir."

“While it does you credit that your first thought seems always to be the protection of the innocent, didn’t you think those men could lead you to your ship?” Wagstaff stood and began to pace. “Bloody pirates, in my port! On my bloody *grounds*! Beg pardon for my language, Miss Harper, but this has gone too far now.”

Cecily ducked her head and murmured that it was quite understandable.

“Right, Fincher, Ambury, I want you and the rest of the officers in my office right now. We’re going to do something about this lot if it kills me.”

“Admiral?” Her voice was still only just above a whisper. “Would you be so kind as to loan me the lieutenant to take me to my carriage? I’d feel much safer, and I do so want to get home and try to put this behind me.”

Wagstaff smiled down at her. “Of course, my dear, of course. It must have been very frightening for you. All right, Ambury, off you go and see her safe, and to my office the moment you’re done.”

The daggers of Matthew’s eyes stabbed into Paul’s back as Cecily preceded him out of the door and into the new dark. They walked in silence for a minute or two until he was sure they were out of earshot of everyone else.

Paul grabbed her arm and stopped her. Instantly she was Catherine, a knowing grin spread across her face and mischief in her eyes.

“Are you going to tell me what in God’s name is going on?” It didn’t come out half as angry as he’d meant it. It was something about the way she smiled at him, the way her posture subtly changed to become less rigid, more fluid, that stirred his blood.

“I’ve gone a little way to restoring your good name, haven’t I? Hero of the hour! You’ll be beating the girls off now.”

“But why? What was it all for? And why—” His throat wouldn’t let out those words. *Why use me, not just once but twice? Why let me close and then push me away like I’m the devil himself? Why make me want you so much I barely know what I’m doing, let me have a glorious taste, and then spurn me, and worse, make a fool of me while you’re doing it?*

The words caught behind the anger choking his throat and his pride wouldn’t let him say them. He’d never see her again, she’d said. Half of him was glad, and the other half wanted nothing more than to take her to his room and not let her leave for a long, long time. He stopped at the top of the steps that led down from the veranda to where her carriage waited.

She started down the steps, then turned to face him when she realised he’d stopped. For a moment, her eyes dulled and the shine in them died. The masks had slipped, both of them. She opened her mouth to say something, but a shadow detached from the wall and ran toward her. Paul stiffened in alarm, but it was only a maid. The girl smirked at Catherine, dropped something into her hand, then bobbed a nod and made for the carriage.

Catherine stared down at what the girl had given her. She opened her fingers and let a fine chain dangle from them. A ruby the size of a pigeon's egg spun at the end. Paul had never seen anything of its like. The worth of a frigate, at the least.

"The admiral's wife's. My men were the distraction and you my alibi, bringing everyone to that side of the house while my maid took it. I had this planned for a long while," she said slowly. "A long while. My last act of piracy here, and then Cecily was to join Catherine. I want to be one person. I want to be *me*. I can't bear it here anymore." She stared at the ground for a moment, took a deep breath and looked up at him. Her eyes were very wide, very bright, and her voice was urgent, as though she desperately needed him to understand. "I never meant for that to happen on the *Kittiwake*. But when it did, I wanted more. So when you were at the party, it was my only chance, my *last* chance to put right, a little, the wrong I did to you when I stole the *Newquay*. And a chance to have you one more time before I say goodbye. Which is now. I'm sailing as soon as I reach my ship."

She turned away, and Paul ran down the steps to stop her. He wasn't angry now. He didn't care that she was a pirate, or that she knew enough about him that a word in the right ear would see him hanged. God help him, he didn't even care she'd stolen the ruby from the admiral's wife. He stopped her with a touch and turned her to face him. He traced his fingers along her throat, across the rise of her breasts, felt goose bumps rise under his skin as he raised his hand to her face. He took a step closer, close enough that he and Catherine touched all along their length. He could hardly bear for her to be so close and not take her. Wild thoughts raced through his head, idiotic plans of how he could keep her. "Give it up," he said. "Let Catherine 'escape', let her come back and give up pirating."

"Give it up?" She shook herself away from his touch, and her forehead creased into an angry frown. "Could you give up the sea? The sheer joy and freedom of it? Could you give up the only place where you can be yourself? Should I stay here, pretend to be everything I'm not and end up having to marry some blithering idiot who only wants someone to breed his stupid children? I tried it once and it didn't end well for either of us. Not only can't I give it up, I don't want to. No man will rule me." She laughed scathingly. "I'll be just like old Good Queen Bess. Now run along and get your orders like a good navy boy."

It was on the tip of his tongue to say more, to ask why, to beg her to stay or grab her and march her down to the cells, but once more pride stopped him. It stopped him from doing the one thing he wanted to, and that was to stop her from getting in that carriage and riding out of his life. Instead, he stood there and watched her go, and wondered what in God's name she'd done to him.

Chapter Four

Paul barely noticed the walk to the admiral's office. Everything seemed greyer, blander, sucked of all interest. He started up the steps and noticed Matthew, and the shouting, only when a hand landed on his arm.

"Not a good time," Matthew said.

"What the bloody hell do you mean?" The admiral's bellow reverberated through the wooden walls, and Paul flinched in sympathy for whoever was on the receiving end. "It can't just be gone. It was in the sodding safe. You were supposed to be alert. Good God, man, pirates get into the grounds and the first thing you do is leave your post. I've a good mind to have you flogged!"

A low, apologetic murmur was all they could hear of the reply. Almost every officer in the fleet waited nearby, mostly pretending not to hear the tongue-lashing.

"Seems the attack on Cecily was a distraction," Matthew said. He stared ahead rigidly, but even in the dim light the angry flush across his forehead was evident. His usual friendly tones were noticeable by their absence, and his voice was formal and clipped. "While we were all busy, someone stole some of Mrs. Wagstaff's jewelry. Is Cecily well?"

Paul floundered for something to say. Matthew was an old friend, his best friend, and in love with the sham that was Cecily. "Matthew, I didn't—"

Matthew rounded on him, too far past angry to be anything other than coldly, scornfully polite, at least to start. "Didn't what? Didn't mean to make her look at you like that? Didn't mean to be the hero and sweep her off her feet? God damn you, you jumped-up bastard. You knew how I felt, you bloody *knew*, and you went ahead anyway."

The fist came from nowhere. One second Matthew was livid but still as a statue apart from his words; the next, Paul was flat on his back with blood pouring from his nose.

"Please tell me I didn't just see that, Lieutenant Fincher." The admiral stood at the top of the steps. "Because I need every damn ship and officer I can get, and I don't want to have to have you flogged for brawling like a drunken rating. In here, all of you."

They crowded in, no one eager to be too close to the admiral. Paul mopped up the blood that dripped from his nose as Wagstaff paced like a wild thing, pausing only to glare at each of them in turn. Finally he stopped, leant his fists on the desk and roared in sheer frustration. "I've had enough. More than enough! Merchantmen plundered, sunk and taken on our watch. And we can't catch the ones who did it. Three of

our own ships stolen. We still haven't got more than a hint of where they are. Then tonight, the pinnacle of your incompetence. They come onto *my* grounds, attack one of *my* guests and steal *my* wife's ruby!" He took a deep breath. Some of the high colour left his face, and he looked less like he'd have an apoplexy any second.

Then it became worse—he adopted a forced composure that was like the eye of the storm, the calm that would only make the coming winds all the worse. Feet shifted and shoulders stood straighter as men braced themselves for the blast.

"Ambury," he said, and Paul's heart missed a beat. "Miss Harper, is she well?"

Paul struggled not to let his relief show. For an instant, he'd been sure the Admiral knew everything, that he could read it on Paul's face. "She's, er, shocked, sir. Not herself."

"Well, yes, not surprised. Poor little thing. But just another reason why we're going to get these bloody pirates if it's the last damn thing I do."

Catherine ripped off the wig and threw it over the side, watched it swirl away into darkness along with poor, imaginary Cecily. The dress was next, and she stood in little but a shift with a sweet night breeze to cool her from its confines. She *should* be happy, *should* be celebrating, but now it came to it, the day she'd so long planned for, she didn't have the heart for it. Not now she'd had a taste of Paul and had to leave him behind.

Ropes creaked around her as her crew made ready to sail. Catherine's ship, a sleek caravel by the name of the *Wicked Lady*, was her home, where she'd been born and raised into a life as free as the wind. She'd been dreaming of this moment for months. No—more than a year, almost two. Had it really been so long? Today was the day she finally threw off her shackles and those chains not of her making. The day she returned to her real life, not just for sometimes, not just when she could get away from prying eyes. For good. And yet...and yet the thought of never having to play the respectable woman, never having to wear a bloody corset, even the prospect of living her life the way she'd always loved before she'd met Jeremiah, was no longer enough.

Fulton sidled up beside her, looking sly and predatory as always. Something about him gave her the shivers. The way he eyed her, the way his lips smacked as though he was contemplating what she tasted like. She'd have got rid of him long ago if it weren't for the fact that her father had set such great store in him—and because he was the best first mate in the Caribbean. He wasn't much of a fighter, but the *Lady* was always trim, spotless, with never a rope or knot out of place, and woe betide the sailor who didn't hop to it when Fulton gave them her orders. His way with her ship had got them out of trouble more times than she cared to admit.

“Had your fun then?” Fulton asked with a knowing look. “Bet he weren’t much good though, eh? Big lads like him, they ain’t never big all over. I could show you—”

Catherine reached out and grabbed him by the collar, her right hand snaking for the knife at his belt. She snatched it just before he did and held the blade to his face. “One more comment like that, Fulton, and I’m finding a nice little island for you to be king of. Maybe one with cannibals. You remember those islands, don’t you?”

Fulton’s lip curled, and he raised a fist. For a second she thought he would hit her, but another jab of the knife, and probably the knowledge that she was a damned sight better at fighting than he was, held him back. He lowered his fist with a sullen scowl and pulled himself free.

“Now get to bloody work. I want us out of here before the tide goes against us.”

Fulton turned away with a mutter. She’d best keep a sharp eye on him. He was getting bolder with his lechery by the day. And while she could fight with sword and dagger, and fight well, she preferred to find a way using her brains rather than her blades. Mostly she was successful, and she could only hope she would be with him. But if he got any worse, he really would be left somewhere. Her crew was like a family—were family to each other in some cases—but one malcontent could cause endless trouble. She didn’t intend to lose her ships because of a lecherous old man.

Or a lecherous young one, either. Her grip on her crews had slipped of late, since they’d taken the *Newquay*. Since she’d met Paul, her mind hadn’t been on her ships or her crew; it had been on him. That was a luxury she couldn’t afford.

Strange, he was nothing like the sort of man she usually went for. Since Jeremiah, at least, men who let pride rule them were not on her agenda, but something about him made her insides quiver. He knew what she was, and it hadn’t seemed to bother him, not like it had Jeremiah when he’d found out, and her husband and his damnable pride were the reason Paul was best left behind.

The *Wicked Lady* pulled away from the secluded coast where the caravel had been hidden, waiting for Catherine and her crew who’d come with her to return. The movement under Catherine’s feet soothed her, made her remember why all this had been worth it. She was free of Barbados and all its ghosts and memories, free of the expectations of others. Back to where she should have always stayed, and for good now. Yet she couldn’t suppress the hollow chill inside her at the thought.

Paul hesitated outside Matthew’s door. They’d been up most of the night helping the admiral make his plans. Almost every ship would sail with the tide an hour after dawn to check the old pirate haunts the navy knew about to find the new hiding places, to find *this* particular pirate, by any means possible. The whole thing made him sick to his stomach, because he knew who they were chasing and wanted nothing more than to both find her and not have her found.

What made it all worse was Matthew. His anger had died with the punch, but all through the meeting Paul was aware of Matthew's gaze on him, aware of the hurt on his face.

Paul steadied himself against the rocking of the deck and knocked.

Matthew wrenched open the door and glared at him through red-rimmed eyes. "What in God's name makes you think you're welcome here?"

"I know why you hit me, and I don't blame you. But I truly didn't mean for it to happen."

"Went off with her the first chance you got though, didn't you? As soon as I wasn't there, off you went." Matthew lurched to a chair. A half-drunk bottle of brandy stood on the table next to it. He poured a generous measure. "Fraid I'm not going to offer you one in the circumstances. Please, just go away."

Paul stepped inside and shut the door behind him. "Matthew, I swear, it wasn't, *isn't* Cecily I'm interested in." He had to tell somebody at least part of it, even if he couldn't say who Catherine really was. Paul had known Matthew since they were born and trusted him not to spill any secrets. He'd kept plenty of them before now.

Matthew ran his hand through his hair and laughed. "Really? You're hiding it well by trying your luck with her."

"I didn't try my luck with her. I only wanted to talk because I wanted to know more about Catherine." Paul had to tread carefully here, but he badly needed Matthew on his side. He may have enjoyed solitude, may have spent months at sea essentially alone. He'd borne that, even relished it. Now he could not. He'd met Catherine twice but, and it was ridiculous, now he felt acutely alone.

"Catherine?" Matthew looked puzzled for a moment, and then his brow cleared and he laughed. "Catherine! I'd forgotten you'd met our elusive, reclusive Lady Harcourt. And you're—I see by your face you are. You poor bastard."

Matthew poured a good slosh of brandy, gave it to Paul, and that was it, all enmity fled. Paul thanked God for Matthew's generous nature and took a sip. All his frazzled nerves settled as it burned down into his stomach. "What do you mean, poor bastard?"

Matthew sat back in his chair. "A very strange woman, so I hear. Never met her, myself. But good Lord, to hear some of the men talk, she's a real honey-trap. Or she would be, if she did anything but look down her nose at men. What was she like?"

Paul toyed with his glass. He didn't know what it was about her, but there was *something* that made his spine tingle. An excitement about life, a thread of mischief in her that lit her eyes. The way she cared nothing for society or the way it should trap her, *did* trap him. He couldn't tell what it was she'd do or say next, and both dreaded and looked forward to finding out. She was a lady on the outside, with strength and passion inside, and possessed of a raw sexuality she wasn't ashamed of. And yet...and yet there was a vulnerability he couldn't put his finger on. A softness she tried to hide behind the mask. He wanted it all,

every last drop of her. He almost laughed at himself. His plan had been to catch her, not have her catch him.

“She’s the most intoxicating woman I’ve ever met,” he said finally.

Matthew shook his head. “And the pirates got her.” He leant forward and laid his hand on Paul’s arm, his eyes full of concern. “I thought I had it bad. You know there’s little chance we’ll ever find her?”

We may never, and not for the reasons you think. Paul smiled tightly and took a big slug of the brandy. Right now all he wanted to do was get drunk, but in four hours, less now, the fleet would sail. He’d be ashore, but he had to help them get ready. When they were gone, maybe then he’d get good and drunk, go and drown himself in brandy and the girls at Mrs. Quinn’s. Maybe they could take his mind from Catherine, although nothing they offered had half as much to excite him. In his mind, they’d be pale imitations of Catherine. Drunk, though...drunk he could manage.

“Poor woman, never had a spot of luck since she came out.” Matthew topped up Paul’s glass.

“In what way?” Paul almost didn’t care. He *wanted* not to care. He wanted to hate her for what she’d done to his life. Another part of him wanted—no, *needed*—to know everything about her. To know why she pushed him away, why, maybe, she wouldn’t leave his thoughts. Why every time he closed his eyes he could feel her skin against his.

“You want all of it? Yes, I suppose you do. Not too much to tell really—only guesses. The only thing anyone, apart from maybe Cecily, knows is that she was sent out here three years ago. It’s rumoured there was some sort of scandal in England and her father had to reach this far to find someone to marry her. She found Jeremiah Harcourt, and that was it. They both seemed well pleased at first, by all accounts, but not for long, not once they were married. From what I hear, there was always something a bit odd about him. A hint of the lunatic. By the time I got here, he wouldn’t let her out of his sight, or out of the house. Before the end, he’d become agitated if anyone even mentioned her in conversation. There were rumours, of course, but nothing more than that, other than his odd behaviour. Poor woman, shut up in that house for months on end, and from what I hear not a woman to endure that well. And then, what seemed like luck for her. They found him, must be six months ago, with a knife through his heart, dead in a gutter behind a whorehouse.”

Dear Lord. Well, maybe that went some way to explain her. Some way, but not all. “So she was free to come and go after that. Yet you say even then she was barely seen.”

“Oh, free to come and go as she pleased. But it seems to have affected her oddly, though if only half the rumours are true, it’s not a surprise. She hardly ever went out of the house, though she inherited her husband’s business concerns. He left her half a dozen merchantmen and estates all over the Caribbean, mostly plantations. Pretty much the only time she left the house was when she took ship to see them. I think it was a blessing for her when Cecily arrived. For them both, perhaps.”

Paul took another sip of the brandy to cover his reticence. How could he tell Matthew that not only were Catherine and Cecily the same woman, but that Matthew had been right in his original assessment of Paul's intentions? By now it wouldn't matter—both Cecily and Catherine were gone and not likely to return. Should he tell Matthew that? Or let him find out for himself? He didn't want to say, couldn't without some suspicion landing on her, when she'd left the very hour of the theft. He cursed himself for a coward, but said nothing.

Even three weeks later, when the ships started to return with news, Paul still found it difficult to broach the subject of Cecily with Matthew.

Paul was waiting on the jetty to meet him when Matthew's frigate tied up. Matthew bounded down the gangplank like an overgrown puppy. "Found them! We know where they are, I'm sure."

"How?" Paul had resigned himself over the last weeks to never getting his ship back, or Catherine. If he had one, he'd lose the other. He'd never have both. At last, he'd found someone who might have mattered as much to him as the *Newquay* did, and she had slipped away from him. Matthew's news did nothing to cheer him, only brought his torn heart into sharp relief.

"Good God, you look like shit. Never fear, I have the answer. If Catherine still lives, then I know where she is. Bosun!"

"Matthew, I—"

Matthew ignored him as he turned to his bosun. "Bring the prisoner and get him along to the admiral. Sorry, what were you saying?"

"Prisoner?"

Matthew wagged his eyebrows and grinned. "Yes, a prisoner. One who knows exactly where they are. And they still have the *Newquay*. They're refitting, it would seem. Not long now and we'll have you where you should be, on the quarterdeck. You'll see."

Paul managed a wan smile and led the way to Wagstaff's office. All captains and lieutenants had to report as soon as they landed. Paul's new role as Wagstaff's unofficial aide had tried his patience, and his eardrums, as the admiral grew ever more agitated. They could hear him from a hundred feet away.

Matthew slowed down, his feet dragging at the sound. "And Cecily, has she recovered from her shock? I never got the chance to say goodbye before we left."

Paul hardly dared look at him. How could he say it gently? He couldn't—so he just came out with it. "She left, Matthew."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Matthew snorted a disbelieving laugh. "Of course she hasn't left." He stopped in his tracks and turned to stare at Paul. "Has she?"

"She left word with the admiral. I'm sorry, really I am, but no one saw her, and so no one could persuade her otherwise. Her message said it had been bad enough when Catherine was taken, and she held out no hope of ever seeing her again. The attack on her was the last straw. She didn't want to suffer Catherine's fate, and she took passage on one of the Harcourt ships. For England." That was for the best, for Matthew's sake. Poor bastard, in love with a fake.

Matthew licked his lips, his tanned face suddenly pale. "For England—and I never asked her." He stared helplessly at Paul for a moment. Paul could think of nothing he could say, nothing that might help. "Catherine's fate, had she news? Paul, have you heard anything?"

Paul resumed the trek to the office. "No, and I don't think it's likely, either."

"Oh God, Paul, I'm sorry." Matthew laid a hand on his shoulder, but Paul shook his head and shrugged it off. He couldn't bear sympathy from Matthew, the friend he'd lied to.

"Matthew, it's all right. It's not as though I knew her well, is it? I wasn't planning to marry her, not like you were planning with Cecily. I only met her that twi—once." He caught his mistake just in time.

This was what he told himself when he couldn't sleep, or when he did and dreamed of Catherine. He didn't know her. He doubted anyone could really know her, even after a lifetime's acquaintance, and if he didn't know her, he couldn't love her. If he didn't love her, then this ache that plagued him was nothing—a fever perhaps. He should ignore it, concentrate on finding the pirates, doing his duty. Yet even that thought didn't comfort him. "Shake a leg, Matthew, admiral's waiting, and you know how thin his patience runs."

Paul wiped at the sweat on his brow and tried not to breathe too deeply. The cells were a hellhole, dank, stuffy and thick with the smells of unwashed people and their waste. Matthew, in an odd mix of humour, half dejected, half bursting with pride, led the way to the cell that held his prisoner. "Here he is, sir. Name of Fulton. Used to be part of the crew. Found him stranded—beached, by the look of it, though he wouldn't say much."

"And you're sure he's from their ship?" Wagstaff peered at Fulton as he glared at them from his filthy cell.

Matthew smiled grimly. "Aye, sir. Found this on him." He held up a chain and let something fall from it. Paul started in surprise—a gold watch. *His* gold watch.

"There you are, Paul." Matthew threw it toward him. Paul caught it and rubbed his thumb over the inscription. It had been a present from his father when he got his first command. "I never expected to see this again."

"I never took it, sir!" The prisoner's voice floated out through the bars. "I won it, aye, in a game of dice. Fair and square."

"A likely tale. Right then," Wagstaff said. "Let's see what we can get out of this bugger."

Matthew unlocked the cell door, and they entered. Wagstaff dabbed at his eyes. "Good Lord, the smell!"

Fulton didn't move, but he caught sight of Paul and grinned slyly. Paul's mouth dried up—this man knew far too much about him.

"Sir," Paul began and had to swallow past the dry closing of his throat. "A word, sir?"

Wagstaff raised an eyebrow. "Very well." He led the way outside. "What is it?"

"I saw him on the *Kittiwake*, sir."

"One of their crew?"

Paul tried not to notice the sweat running into his eyes and held himself straight. This pirate knew where his ship was. He also knew where Catherine was, and Paul didn't know which he wanted more. The ship would be less trouble. Paul had to play a close game here, but he had to know, had to at least try to get the *Newquay* back. Life ashore was hell and the risk worth it, for him. "Maybe not, sir."

Wagstaff stared at him intently. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not so sure that the men already on the ship weren't the pirates and not the *Kittiwake*'s real crew. Or why would he have my watch?"

Wagstaff became very still, his eyes darting to and fro as he thought. "But Lady Harcourt? You spoke to her? And she said nothing? That seems unlikely."

Shit! How in hell was he going to get out of this? Even if he managed to persuade the admiral now, this Fulton no doubt knew full well what Paul had been doing in the captain's quarters with Catherine. Yet, much as he wanted his ship, he didn't want to reveal that she was one of them. He had to think quickly. "No, sir. I'm not sure how much she knew of what had gone on." A thought struck him, a lie that might get him, and her, away with this. For now at least, if he could keep Fulton's mouth shut. "She was quite drunk, sir. Said it was the shock of the pirate attack. I don't think she's used to brandy."

"Drunk enough to believe that the pirates had been repelled?"

Paul shrugged. "I don't know, sir. She said she stayed in her quarters until they caught fire. She may have seen little of the actual fight. But she didn't seem to think she was in any danger. They looked as respectable as any merchantmen, and they told us the captain was dead—how many of the actual crew would she know by sight?"

Wagstaff grunted and looked thoughtful before he turned a beady eye on Paul. "And yet you failed to mention this before. Are you being entirely honest now, Lieutenant? Because you've just admitted you lied in your first report, or at least omitted this."

"Sir, I'd—" He was at a loss for a moment, and then Matthew rescued him.

"I think Lieutenant Ambury was trying to save Lady Harcourt from any embarrassment, should she be found."

“Hmph! Well, we shall discuss your lack of honesty later, Lieutenant. Most thoroughly. For now, I just want to know where to find the bastards. And Lady Harcourt, of course. You two, find out what you can. I don’t care how you find it out, frankly. Just get me the location.”

Wagstaff stumped off up the corridor, muttering to himself, and Paul let out a long, slow breath. “Thanks, Matthew.”

Matthew turned a puzzled look on him. “Why *didn’t* you say before?”

“Until Fulton turned up, how could anyone know the crew *were* the pirates? It’s not as if they wear a uniform, is it? It only struck me when I recognised your prisoner.” Until he saw Fulton, his secret could have stayed secret. Now his only concern was keeping the man quiet, while at the same time getting the location out of him. “Matthew, how about you let me talk to him first?”

Matthew’s frown deepened. “Paul, is there something you aren’t telling me?”

Paul shut his eyes and swiped at the sweat on his forehead. “Matthew, please. It’s nothing to concern you, I swear. It’s just—”

“It’s just he might tell you what they’ve done with Catherine.”

Ah, Matthew, bless your generous heart. Saved me twice in two minutes. “Something like that, yes.”

“She really must have made an impression on you. You met her once, weeks ago, and still she’s on your mind.”

“I should have saved her.” That was true enough. He should have been able to stop her in this madness and stop her making an idiot of him. He should be able to stop thinking of her, start thinking of getting his beloved ship back. Catherine had made it abundantly clear what she wanted, and it wasn’t him. “I should have saved her, and I didn’t.”

Matthew laid a hand on his shoulder, but it gave him no comfort, because it offered sympathy for a lie.

“Go on then, I’ll wait here, if it’s that important to you,” Matthew said. “The threat of the gallows should be enough to get something out of him.”

“Thanks, Matthew.” Paul went into the cell, blanched at the fetid smell that hit him in the face like a slap and shut the door behind him.

Fulton grinned at him. He was an oily little man with a permanent sneer and a body seemingly made to sidle. “Told ’em both a pack of lies there, didn’t you? Drunk, my backside! What’s it worth not to tell ’em what you was really up to?”

“Put you off her ship, did she?” Paul was in no frame of mind to try this softly. The man was a maggot, and very dangerous to him. “Why’s that?”

“Cos of you, that’s why.” Fulton spat into the rotting straw that passed for his bedding. “Didn’t take too kind to a little joke of mine about you. Women! Got no sense of humour.”

Paul grabbed Fulton by the shirt and yanked him to his feet. "I'd stay very quiet about her if I were you. It might keep you from the gallows."

"Gallows?" All the bravado seemed to bleed away from Fulton.

Paul smiled at him, a slim twitch of his lips that he hoped was full of threat. "Yes, gallows. What else did you expect?" He let go of the filthy shirt, and Fulton dropped to the straw. "Of course, if you're helpful, *and* if you don't mention her, then matters might be arranged. If not—" He mimed a noose being yanked upward from his neck.

Fulton's pale face ran with sudden sweat, his eyes wide with fear. "What do you want?"

Paul almost laughed. Best not to get too complacent with the coward. He looked a *sly* coward, and they were men to watch. One wrong word from him and Paul could look forward to the gallows himself. "Where's my ship? One simple little question and you might live to the end of the week."

Fulton stared at the floor, but not for long. No loyalty in this one. "And I get to go free?"

"Free? No, not free, and certainly nothing guaranteed before we find them. I'll recommend that you not get the death sentence, *if* what you tell me is true. *If* you keep your mouth shut about her. Maybe you'll survive the prison long enough to get out."

Fulton laughed. "She got you, then? Witched you good, didn't she? Aye, there's many a man on that crew who wouldn't mind a bit of that. Your flotilla will find out about her as soon as they find where she's holed up. They'll soon find out who's the captain then, won't they? Then what're you going to do?"

Truth was, Paul didn't know. Plead ignorance? That day, the day they caught her, loomed large in his thoughts. It would also be the day, with luck, that he got the *Newquay* back. His heart burned to be at sea, to be in command without anyone to overbear him. To see a far horizon and know he could go wherever he pleased within his orders, and the order to catch pirates could lead him anywhere.

He knew, with a sudden blinding clarity, why Catherine couldn't give it up—for the same reasons he couldn't. The day he got all that back, she'd be caught and hanged. Was it worth it, having what he wanted, if she were dead and he the cause? He shook himself.

"What I'll do is none of your concern, Fulton." Paul drew his sword, held it toward Fulton's belly and tickled at the skin under his shirt. Fulton tried to get away, but the wall at his shoulders stopped him. "Your concern is whether you think telling anyone is worth a sword twisted in your belly and being left in the sun to die like the dog you are."

Fulton glared at him, and his voice, when it came, was soft, but full of pent-up bile. "Aye, sir. I'll take your deal, damn your eyes. I'll take it, and I'll bet you get a grisly death before I do. Gallows or a sword in the gut. *Her* sword, wouldn't surprise me. She'd kill you without a second thought, if it meant she kept her ship."

Paul leant forward so the point of the blade pierced Fulton's skin. Fulton yelped and stared at the small bloom of blood seeping through his shirt.

“Then she’s little different to me,” Paul said. “For I intend to have my ship, no matter who stands between. And I’ll kill you without a second thought if it gets me that.”

Chapter Five

Catherine lurked in a dark corner and cursed herself for a fool. How had she persuaded herself she needed to be here? Because she was an idiot, that was why. It wasn't too late. She could still walk away, trek to where her caravel was secreted and get the hell out of here, but if she did, she'd never know for sure whether the navy had got wind of where she was hiding, and if so, when they would attack. But outside *this* window? She should've dressed as Cecily and gone to Matthew—he'd tell her anything if it meant he might get a chance with that innocent. No, Cecily was gone now, for good or ill, and Catherine didn't miss her.

So here she was, against all her better judgment, outside Paul's window. He was nowhere near such a sure thing as Matthew. Paul was his own man, not one to tell her what he shouldn't. She knew that, as she knew, deep down, that it was all just an excuse anyway. She was here because she wanted to see him. And not just see him, now she was being truthful. She wanted *him*, a man with fire in his veins rather than the water that filled the hearts of most men. She wanted everything, and she risked all she had for that. Idiocy.

She crept to the window, keeping to the shadows as far as she could, and peered in. The moon was no more than a sliver, giving just enough light that she could make out Paul's prone form on the bed and determine that he was alone. Her fingers tingled with unaccustomed nerves. *Stupid, stupid, stupid*. Even while she thought the words, she lifted the sash and eased in over the sill. Her soft-soled boots made no noise on the carpet as she padded toward the bed.

Paul lay spread out over the bed on his stomach, the skin of his broad shoulders highlighted by the silver glow of moonlight. She'd once looked down at Jeremiah like this, with an ache of passion in her belly. She'd loved his muscular chest, the warmth and strength in the way he'd curled his arms round her, as though while he was there, nothing could harm her. She shivered in the heat. She'd loved Jeremiah at the start. Before he'd found out what she was, what she'd been. Before she'd tried and failed to give it up for him. Before protection had become control, pride had become unreasoning jealousy, strength had become cruelty. Was there any way to tell whether Paul would be the same in the end? Whether, driven by desperation and a fear for her own life and sanity, she'd end up thrusting a knife through his heart too and leaving him in a gutter somewhere?

Her hand trembled on the hilt of her sword, and her step faltered. There was no way to tell. She should leave, now, before it was too late, before she was in too deep. Before she lost herself in him. She knew herself too well to think she could resist for long if she gave in now. She should never have come.

Paul rolled over and stretched in his sleep. He opened a bleary eye and mumbled, “Catherine?”

She held herself very still as he struggled out from sleep and sat up. It was too late. She stepped forward into the small patch of pale moonlight so he could see her properly.

He blinked at her and rubbed at one eye, as though he didn’t quite believe what he saw. “Catherine, I thought—” He shook his head, seemingly at a loss.

With a frozen smile that she thought might crack at any moment, she slid down onto the bed next to him. He reached out to touch her black silk shirt, and then he laughed. “I dreamed that you came, and here you are.”

The silk crackled as he moved his hand over it, slowly as though not to scare her away. The warmth of his fingers through the thin material made her shiver in anticipation. When he pulled away, sat up straighter and frowned at her, she bit her lip in frustration.

“What have you come for? To make a fool of me?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes.”

“Later.” It wasn’t words she wanted now. She leant into him, and his musky scent made her mouth dry up and her heart thunder in her ears. She didn’t seem able to keep her gaze from his body, from the hard muscles across his shoulders down to the flat stomach that she could probably bounce pennies on. Mesmerised, she leant in still farther and set her lips to his neck. The throb of his pulse quickened under her lips, and she smiled. “We can talk about it later.”

Paul took her arms, not rough but firm, and pushed her away till he held her at arm’s length. “Not later. Not this time. What in God’s name are you doing here? I should turn you in and watch you hang.”

“But you won’t.” She made her voice confident, although she wasn’t. One shout from him and it was all over.

He turned away. “No...no I won’t. Not today, but I should. It’s my job, it’s what I’m *here* for.” All the muscles in his jaw clenched, and he stared at his uniform draped over a chair. “Some bloody naval officer I turned out to be. Letting you steal my ship, *helping* you steal a bloody ruby, and now you want me to help you again. A known pirate—at least *I* know you are. Please, get out and don’t come back unless you bring the *Newquay* with you.”

A shard of something pierced her heart. Fear, hurt, something else? Whatever, it raced along her nerves and prickled her skin, made her voice sharper than her sword. “Certainly. There’s more than one officer in port who has the information I need. I could dress as Cecily and Matthew would tell me everything I could wish, just for a chance to suck on her virgin tits. I would’ve preferred it to be you, but obviously I misjudged your enjoyment.” She stood briskly and turned for the window.

“You came to me because you wanted to offer sex as a trade?”

The cold granite in his voice brought her up short, and she turned on him. “Forgive me, but I was under the impression that was what you offered me in return for staying, for giving up my life. A trade.”

His frown deepened before he turned away. “Is that what you thought?”

She watched the way his shoulders twitched as though he expected a lash of words. “Yes,” she whispered finally.

He shook his head and tried to laugh. It cut off abruptly, and he grabbed a pillow and launched it across the room. The sound of glass smashing, the tinkle of it as a bottle collapsed into a cloud of fragments, was muffled under the pillow’s weight.

“Please, Catherine, leave now. You’ve got a price on your head that no man in this port would turn down if he was sane.” He laughed, raggedly, as though he was out on the edge of something. The sound drew soft shivers all over her. “But obviously I’m not, so go. Before I recover what sanity I used to have before I met you.”

“Paul—” She got no further.

“Come on, woman, you’re not stupid. I’m a navy man, through and through, and you’re the person I have to condemn. Go away, and stay away, before I do it.”

Catherine wasn’t about to leave without getting what she’d come for. She sat on the bed and ran her hands along his back. He flinched away from her, but not too much. Her thumbs massaged the tight muscles in his shoulders.

“Please, Catherine. Please leave before I throw you out or decide I’ll have that price.” His voice was barely more than a whisper, choked through a tight, angry throat, and she knew she had him.

“Can’t we forget that for now, for tonight? Forget what we are and just be *who* we are?”

His shoulder muscles relaxed a fraction, and he looked at her with a wary hurt. His eyes searched hers, and she couldn’t pull away. “And who are we? Who are *you*? Is this it? Is this really you?”

Her smile faltered. “Yes, this is really me. This is the me I’ve always been, underneath. I can’t give it up. I tried, truly I tried, but I can’t, I won’t. But forget about that now. It doesn’t matter. It can matter in the morning.”

She brushed away his hair from his nape, and he wriggled his shoulders as though a goose had walked over his grave. With a sudden movement, he was facing her, on his knees, his face so close to hers she could feel his breath on her cheek, fluttering through her sweat-dampened hair.

“And just how much of you is this?” he said. “Not much, I’ll warrant.” He caressed her neck. So strong, his hands, but so gentle when he wanted them to be. He bent forward, his lips searching for hers. She ducked her head, so he kissed her cheek. He pulled her face back round. “No, not much of you. And if I’m going to do this, I don’t want only part of you, Catherine.”

She shut her eyes for a moment. He wanted what she couldn’t give him. “You’ll have all there is I have to give you.”

When she opened her eyes, his were still on her. They'd lost the softness from earlier, lost the open, searching look. She almost shuddered at the way they bored into hers. She'd lost him. She might have him for tonight, but she'd lost him with her words, with who she was, as she had Jeremiah.

He traced the softness of her silk shirt, teasing her nipples on his way to the buttons, and a hard look of anger darkened his face, as though he sought to show her what she'd turned down. As though that would be enough to make her give up everything she'd fought for. Almost, almost it was.

Because it was different this time; he was different. The way his hands moved over her was softer, slower, as though he meant to make the most of this time. As though he meant to burn it into his memory.

He undid the buttons and pushed the arms of her shirt over her shoulders, trapping her for a moment and following the sliding silk with his lips. Warm, sweet breath grazed her skin, tightened her nipples and her belly in anticipation. When she moved to try to stroke him, to run her fingers over his back, he edged his hands down farther, stopped her with a firm, gentle pressure. For once she said nothing. She didn't mind. She didn't lead him, or order him, or try to wriggle out of his control. For the first time in a long time, too long, she yielded herself to a man's wishes, let him take his time. Allowed him his own pleasure in hers.

She felt his lips curve in a smile against her skin, and she shut her eyes and gave in to it. To him.

Her nipples were aching long before he even touched them. Every lick of his tongue, every movement of his lips on her, was an agony of anticipation. A silvery trail of saliva drew circles over her breasts, along her collarbone and down, and each time he would just avoid touching her nipple. Each time, she tried to move, tried to guide his mouth there, but he only smiled against her and moved his tongue the other way.

He let a warm shiver of breath play across her nipples, his lips just out of reach, and she tried to reach forward to make him touch them, but he wouldn't. He held her there for a minute more, until she was almost faint with expectancy. Then he smiled again, a soft movement of his lips against the edge of her areola until she had to bite back a demand. The words drowned in a groan as finally, deliciously, he took her nipple in his mouth, drew it out with his lips and circled it with his tongue at the same time his hand took the other. The merest hint of teeth made the skin tighten so far it was just on the edge of pain, and a shivering thread expanded from them, down and out, up to her neck which ached for more kisses, along her belly, and down into her groin, where it peaked into a silver spike of pleasure.

She couldn't help but move in his grasp. He released her, but only long enough to guide her down onto the bed. She tried to reach into her breeches because she had to be touched there, had to, she couldn't wait. He stopped her before she could get halfway there and twined his fingers with hers, and did the same with their other hands, pushed her onto the bed.

Kisses trailed across her belly. When he lifted his head away, the bite of cool air on her wet skin almost had her gasping. He paused to unbuckle her sword and pistol and take off her boots. Finally he teased at the buttons on her breeches. She couldn't bear it. Her hands were free and she had to touch him,

had to feel his warm smoothness. Eyes half closed, she stretched out, but could reach only his shoulders. She moved her hips round and moved downward, torn between wanting his kiss on her, wanting his tongue in her and wanting to touch him, to kiss every inch of him.

As she moved, he gripped her breeches, pulled them down and off in one swift movement. He fell forward and leant over her, propped on his forearms, his head level with hers, his hair falling over his shoulders to brush her neck, a tiny, feathery touch. He moved his legs out from under the sheet, slid them over hers. His length was a scorching hardness against her thigh. Without thought, her hips moved, sought to catch him between her legs. Lord, he hadn't even touched her there yet and she was ready, a hot wetness between her thighs. Her heartbeat throbbed in her clitoris, a painful, pleasurable ache, one that waited only for him to trigger it.

His eyes were dark with some thought, and they searched her face in a way that made her tremble. She was naked before him, and not just for a lack of clothes. Her breath wouldn't come, blocked behind a tightness in her throat as she stared up at him. Her heart fluttered, desire and fear mixed so well she almost couldn't tell one from the other. Desire for him, for his touch, for him in her. Fear for what would happen if she succumbed, if she let him see her true self. Fear of what he might become if she should turn his mind, as she had Jeremiah's.

"What is it that you want?" he said, and she couldn't answer. Couldn't because that would be to admit all she didn't want to say, everything she refused to admit, even to herself.

With a pained grimace, he shut his eyes and shook his head. His hair flicked across her skin, and even that small touch was enough to make her breath come harder.

"Tell me, tell me what you want, give me something of you. Tell me." He rested on one arm and, starting at her cheek, ran his other hand along her body, trailing over her throat and stomach, across her hips so lightly she almost forgot to breathe. His fingers reached her tangle of pubic hair and stopped there. So different this time, she thought again. And then she saw it, knew what the difference was. He was naked before her too, and she could see the hint of fear in his eyes to match hers.

She said the only thing she could. "You. I want you, now and tomorrow, even as I know it can't be. I want you not to be a navy man, I want me not to be a pirate, not to have it graven in my heart what I am. I want not to be afraid any more. I want the wind in my hair and salt spray in my face. I want the thrill of taking another ship. I want to see different horizons. I want to be my own person, be me, on my own. I want—I want..." And then she had to stop because a rush of tears almost blinded her before she blinked them away. She couldn't say she wanted above all to be in control of herself and what she did or felt or desired.

Now, this minute, all she wanted was him, his body alongside hers, his cock thrilling her, his desire burning her, his sweat on her tongue, and his arms around her afterwards.

Tomorrow she had the sea, and a ship, and the whole world to explore. All she'd ever wanted. A whole world of men to give her one night, and she could leave them in the morning. Never let them have all of her. A deep, dark part of her told her she was lying, told her that this man would not hurt her as *he* had, wouldn't try to control even the thoughts in her mind, but she ran it off with a rough shake of her head.

"Tonight I want you," she said, and hoped it would be enough.

He said nothing, his only reaction a thinning of his lips as though he kept some words or strong emotion shut tight behind them. Then he smiled, and his fingers moved, down into the folds of her cunny, his fingers light and gentle. Her legs twitched and her eyes flew open. He almost had her coming, just from that one touch. Her hips moved to give him more room, encourage him further.

She took in his body, the feel of it against hers, and reveled in its touch under her fingers. He shivered when she ran a thumb over his nipple and it peaked into sharp relief. She carried on, along the sides of his muscled stomach, taut and smooth. Along his hips and over, where he tilted to give her more room. There it was—the softest skin along his length. He twitched as she touched it, along and down to his balls, and traced a pattern with a gentle touch of her nails. Up, and her thumb picked up a drop of his pre-come that seeped out the top. She eased it along his most sensitive part, gratified when it made his breath grow uneven.

He tangled his fingers with hers and pulled her hand away. Catherine cursed in frustration—her hand could still feel his cock, ached to have it there, to put it where it belonged. She reached across to try with her other hand, but he took that too, held them both tight and smiled that disconcerting smile.

He moved onto his knees at the bedside and lowered his head. She clenched her teeth against a moan as his breath wavered over her clitoris, but couldn't hold back when he flicked his tongue across it. Her hips twitched, and when he drew his tongue away, she strained to follow it.

He dipped down, ran his tongue over and round before he settled to a slow, insistent rhythm that sent pulses of lightning along her nerves. Sweat trickled along her breasts, and she twisted under his tongue. He freed one of her hands and brought his fingers down to brush at her aching wet cunny. He nudged them forward, just a touch, a hint and a promise at her entrance. The promise was enough. Her hips arched off the bed as she came and cried out nonsense words. His arm lay across her, held her down to the bed, and his tongue moved more quickly, harder now.

Even before she'd stopped coming, her clitoris shuddered once more, wrenching another cry from her. Her free hand flailed around her, searching for something, anything to hold on to. All she found was his head, and she pulled him into her, tight into her thighs, to where her pulse throbbed and pounded under his tongue. Every part of her was a delicious ache, a hot yearning to be filled, to be fucked.

Finally, when she was a mass of trembling limbs, he drew his head away. She lay panting on the sheets, trying to regain herself, but he gave her no time. He ran his hands up her legs, over her thighs and

hips to her waist and pulled her down the bed. The touch of his cock at the top of her thigh was almost enough to have her coming.

He leant forward, wrapped her fingers in his and licked the sheen of sweat from across her breasts, kissed his way up her neck and finished with his mouth by her cheek. “Tell me. Tell me what you want.” His whisper was deep and husky in her ear. Oh God, that wasn’t fair, waiting till she was all but helpless, until he knew that all she would be craving was his cock. Not fair.

Paul slid his hips forward and nudged at her entrance. Her juices glided over the tip of his cock, and he had to resist the urge to plunge in. He’d only restrained himself this far with a great deal of effort, and the way she twitched and moaned at the touch of his cock, he couldn’t hold on much more. His legs shook with the need to be inside her, to feel her muscles clench around him, her hips arching up to meet his own. Just the thought of being inside her was almost enough to put him over the edge, but he had to hear her say it. God help him, he had to get her to give up this madness, stay here with him, because he was more than half in love with her already. If the only way he could persuade her was like this, by giving her every pleasure, showing her what she would miss if she left, then he would.

He tightened his fingers around hers and inched forward, the salt of her sweat on his tongue. Her hips strained toward him as she tried to draw him in. He pulled back, afraid he would come right there, and there was far too much he wanted to do to her first. His cock throbbed, desperate to be in her, but he gritted his teeth and held on.

“Tell me. Tell me what you want.”

With eyes half-closed, she shook her head. Her mouth parted as though she wanted to say something, but couldn’t force the words out. He wanted to kiss her, desperately, to feel the softness of her lips on his own as he took her, a long, slow, deep kiss that might last forever, but he knew what the effort would bring—nothing. The one thing she denied him. That, and herself. He had to have something of her, something that wasn’t soft skin or a wet cunny. Something of her heart and soul.

“Tell me what you want, tell me.”

She shook her head wildly from side to side, barely even seeming to know where she was. Her panting breath was hot on his neck, and even so he hardly heard what she said. “You, oh God, Paul...” Her voice trailed off into a groan as she tried to pull him in. That was enough. He’d made her say it.

He pushed into her, a slow thrust that made her eyes snap open and her breath stop as he gradually filled her. He’d barely got halfway when her muscles clasped him, and he was a hairsbreadth from coming himself. She thrust her hips up to meet him and cried out, a great shout that drove him on. He didn’t stop to let her recover, but carried on, slowly at first, and she let out a tortured moan every time he withdrew. Each time he drove in a little faster, a little harder, until her voice gave out, and he knew when she came only by the clamp of her on his straining cock and the twist of her under him. The thought of that power over her,

that he could do that to her, throbbed through his cock in a feeling so intense he thought he might explode. And then he did, coming in great shuddering bursts of exquisite pleasure that thrust him as far as he could inside her.

His shaking arms gave way, and he half fell across her. She wrapped her arms round him, held on to him as though her life depended on it. He laid his head on her chest and her heart fluttered in his ears, swiftly, almost panicked, like a trapped bird's.

He slid out of her with an ache of sated hollowness and drew her onto the bed properly. They lay tangled together, hearts slowing gradually as they kissed the sweat from each other and brushed damp hair out of their eyes.

For long moments, Catherine barely knew where she was, or cared. Her muscles trembled, her skin prickled where the cool air and his kisses dried her sweat. His warmth was on her, his lips teasing her neck. He drew her quivering body against him so that they touched for the whole of their lengths, their legs twisted together, as though the last hour had been a dream and now they'd woken they had to be sure each other was real.

A bird chirped outside, then another, and then the dawn chorus began in earnest. Catherine sat up. How had it got so late? Paul reached up to pull her to him, but she rolled off the bed and grabbed her clothes.

"Catherine?"

She turned to look at him while she buttoned her shirt, and the fleeting look of hurt on his face tore at her. She regretted it then, all of it. She'd meant to use him, and she had, but she'd never expected this. Never expected to want him quite so much, or to care whether she hurt him. Never expected this sharp pain in her heart at having to leave. She turned away from the look, shamed that she'd caused it. "I can't be caught here, and I will be once it's light. I have to go. Don't worry, if you can't tell me when they plan to attack, I'll— It's all right. I'll get out as soon as I can. Find somewhere new to hole up."

The bed creaked as he sat up behind her. "Making a fool of me?" His voice was cold, bitter, and stabbed her in her heart. She pinched her lips shut. There was no use—whatever might be between them could never work. He was navy and she was pirate, and even if there wasn't that, she would be no man's woman, not ever, not in thrall to anyone. Not even him.

"No, you're not a fool." She turned to him, but still couldn't look at his face. Shame burned her cheeks. "Not a fool. I didn't come to lie in your bed, or not only for that."

He traced the shape of her face and turned her so that unless she shut her eyes she had to look at him. "I'm a man afflicted by pride, Catherine. I don't want what's only half-offered. It's all or nothing. Tonight's what you could've had, *we* could've had, if it was all. I'd hoped that you would choose me."

“A trade, was it? Was that all it was? You think I’ll give up everything, all that I am, because you fuck well? I can’t give you all, I can’t. I can only be what I am, and the same for you. Even if it weren’t, I don’t—” She gritted her teeth to stop the words. *I don’t want it to end like that with Paul, dear God, I never want that. It was me who sent Jeremiah mad, my actions, my love. My tainted love that led to his death. I don’t want that for you.*

His face shut down. His eyes lost all their warmth and his generous mouth clamped into a thin line. “Nothing, then.”

With that, he leapt from the bed. He yanked on his breeches, grabbed a shirt and opened the door. He turned toward where she sat, still as a statue in shock. “Three days, that’s when we leave. They know where you are, but not yet *who* you are. But they will, and I can’t stop that. Three days, with the tide. And when I see you next, it’ll be at the end of a cannon.”

Paul slammed the door shut behind him and stalked off down the corridor. Damn, fuck and blast the woman! He yanked on his shirt and headed outside. The cool dawn air did nothing to make him feel better. He slumped down and propped himself against the wall. It was hopeless, as he’d known from the start. She’d never give up her heart or her free life. A compliant woman wasn’t what he wanted either, but God damn it, she was *too* self reliant, too stubborn! He dropped his head to his bent knees. He had to forget her. She’d caused him nothing but trouble since he’d first laid eyes on her. He’d been a good officer. He’d have made captain within the year, and who knew after that, maybe even higher. Now his life was in tatters. Because of her.

Yet *still* his cock throbbed just to think of her. Still the thought of being with her crowded his brain. Of having her, all of her, not just her body, but her heart too. He was greedy. He wanted everything of her with a physical ache, but not at this price. Time to forget her, time to try to rebuild what was left of his shattered career. If he could.

The sun had just touched the horizon when Matthew appeared, flustered and out of breath. “Good, you’re up already. Come on, finish getting dressed, and quickly.”

He held out his hand and Paul took it to pull himself up. “Why? What’s wrong?”

Matthew grinned at him. “Time to hunt pirates, man! What we always dreamed of, raiding the pirates and coming out victorious. And possibly richer.”

“But that’s not today. Wagstaff’s waiting for all the ships to return. We aren’t leaving for three days.”

Matthew laughed at his puzzlement. “Wagstaff changed his mind. Come on, get your clothes on. I’ll tell you on the way.”

God curse him, no matter that the *Newquay* waited at the end, that his childhood dream had come true, that he could have his life back, Paul's first thought was that Catherine wouldn't have time to get away before the fleet arrived and he had no way to warn her.

Chapter Six

Catherine knew something was wrong the moment her foot landed on the deck of the *Lady*, but it was a moment or two before she could work out what, exactly. The boards shifted under her feet, and that was when she knew. She cursed Fulton and his foul mouth, cursed that she'd had to put him off the ship or risk a mutiny. Whatever else, he'd been a good sailor.

"Bailey! What the bloody hell's going on? We're almost aground!"

The *Lady* had a shallower draft than many and certainly could go places no navy frigate could, which made her perfect for hiding in little inlets like this. Even so, the *Lady* had drifted too far around toward the sandbanks.

Bailey glared at her sullenly. "You was supposed to be here by dawn, you said. Wind's backed something fierce since. Been all I could do to keep her this far from the sand bank. By dawn, you said."

"By dawn, I *hoped*." Catherine shrugged. "Took longer than I thought. Let's get going before we end up aground. We've a few days start, at least."

"Fulton was right," Bailey muttered as she turned to go. "You ain't thinking of your ships, of us, just lately. Got your mind on something else."

Catherine whipped round, her sword already out. She laid the side of the blade against Bailey's cheek, just as he went for his own sword. "If you've something to say, say it to my face."

"That I will. You led us good all that time. Even when you was married to that toff, to start with. When you didn't come no more, we managed till you came back. She's your ship, and we kept her for you. You left old Adams in charge and he done us well. But now he's captain of the *Kittiwake* and *our* captain ain't here, even when she is. And when she ain't, well, we get to thinking who she's with and how much we'd be worth if she was to turn us in. We's thinking we might be best off with a captain who'll look after us, who'll get us plenty of money. Who isn't spending all her time with a *navy* man, or when she isn't with him, is thinking of him. Who risks our lives just so's she can fuck him. We's thinking you're not a captain, you're a millstone."

Catherine pushed the blade forward an inch and bit down on her anger. He was right, loath though she was to admit it. Stupid woman. She'd risked her crew for an excuse to bed Paul one more time. To *see* him one more time. Well, that wasn't likely to happen again, and that was probably for the best. "Are you questioning my loyalty? Because if you are—"

A rattle of steel behind her alerted her to more of her crew, just as disgruntled as Bailey. Shit. *Concentrate! Think about what's important. Forget him.* It was never going to be any more than a quick tumble, whatever she'd hoped. She took a deep breath.

"Because if you are, you're wrong. I know where they're coming from. I know when. They're after us because we stole their ships, and their admiral's livid." She looked up at Bailey and grinned slyly. "Because we're bloody good pirates and they hate that. I went ashore to see how long we had, and three days is what we've got before they sail. Time enough to clear out and be home free before they get there. Let them find nothing but empty houses. So it is you I'm thinking about, you and the crews of all the ships. And if you think he's a problem, he isn't. He can't say a damn thing without incriminating himself, and now it doesn't matter anyway. Because we're off, and with luck, the poor, dear lieutenant will never cross our paths. And I, for one, won't be sorry." Dear God, she was getting good at lying, even to herself. But she could be sorry later, alone in her bed. She could hold her pillow and dream it was him, dream of his mouth on her, but now, here, she couldn't let what she felt for him interfere. "I think we should head for waters new. There's plenty of good pickings for a pirate with men behind her. Are you with me or not?"

Bailey appeared to consider her words gravely. "You got your mind where it should be, instead of in your cunny?"

Catherine tightened her grip on the hilt, but she held her temper. "It was never in doubt. Now are we going to get this caravel to sea, or are we going to let her run aground?"

Bailey stepped away from the point of her sword and nodded at the men behind her before he turned to start bellowing orders. Catherine allowed herself a silent sigh of relief. She'd come close to losing everything for a *man*. A mistake she intended never to repeat. Ever. Even if it meant she spent the rest of her life like a nun. She turned for her quarters, but found no solace there. Just her bed staring at her, taunting her with its emptiness. She shoved the heels of her hands in her eyes, but as the ship pulled out of the inlet, the tears came anyway.

Paul could hear Wagstaff long before he and Matthew saw the office. By the time they entered, the admiral's anger seemed to have abated somewhat, though his cheeks were still near purple with rage. All the available commanders were there with him.

"Ah, glad you could join us," Wagstaff snapped as Matthew and Paul found room at the back of the office. "We're leaving today, as soon as all ships in port can be made ready. We can't wait for the rest. They'll have to follow as and when they come in."

"Why the sudden rush?" asked one of the more senior captains. "We were all set to leave in three days. Some of our best ships still haven't returned. We'd be fools to go now."

Wagstaff turned on him. "Because I bloody well say so!" He took a deep breath, clenched his hands into fists behind him and paced. "If we don't leave today, they'll be gone, if they aren't already."

"Why would they suddenly leave? Your man tells us it's a permanent base, more or less. Why leave that behind?"

Wagstaff stopped his pacing, and his gaze fell on Paul. Fear crept through Paul's belly in an icy chill. There was something about that look...

"Because we've an informant in port. I'm bloody sure of it. And if they know we're coming, and when, they'll be off before you can say jackrabbit."

Wagstaff still stared his way, and the fear dropped from Paul's belly down to his balls, which shriveled from the chill. Wagstaff turned away, and Paul could breathe again.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Get on with it!"

The commanders ran from the office to ready their ships. Paul hesitated—he had no ship to get ready, or even the notion of whether he was to stay here. Wagstaff waited till the rest were gone before he barked his orders. "Ambury, I want you and that prisoner on board my flagship and ready to leave in under twenty minutes."

Paul's heart skipped a beat. He'd be going, and he didn't know which he wanted more—to see the *Newquay* or to see Catherine. Or which loss he feared more. "You want him to come too?"

"He's given us the location, and more besides, but I'd feel happier about it if he was with us. He's the one told us about the pirates' informant, though he didn't give a name, damn the man. As for you, I'll need someone to captain the *Newquay* when we get her out of their clutches. You got the information out of him, and he's been most forthcoming. If we catch them and get your frigate back, that *might* go some way toward mitigating your punishment come the court-martial. Well, don't just stand there!"

"Aye, sir." Paul ran for the cells.

Ten days later at sunset, they were within striking range, a mile or so up the coast from where Fulton said the pirate base was. They were waiting for dark before they attacked—a volley of shot out of the night should surprise anyone.

Paul barely slept the whole ten days. Every time they spied a ship on the horizon ahead, his heart clenched. She couldn't have had more than two or three hours head start, at best. He didn't know whether he wanted Catherine to be gone when they got there, to have escaped once more, or whether he wanted the *Newquay* still there. *Catherine* still there. If he could have both, then maybe he could be content, but Fulton was adamant. Catherine had the *Newquay* now. It was hers, another ship in her fleet, and she wouldn't give it up lightly. There had to be a way out of this, but if there was he couldn't see it.

He shut his eyes against the exhaustion and reveled in the feel of the sea under him, the creak of the rigging, the shouts of the crew. The changes in the feel of the frigate whenever the wind shifted, as though she were alive and talking to him. He was as close to home as he could be without the *Newquay*.

“Ambury!” Wagstaff’s bellow sliced through his thoughts. He’d been insufferable the whole trip. Worse, whenever he looked at Paul, Paul was sure the admiral was searching his face for signs of guilt. But Paul’s threats had kept Fulton’s lips shut. So far.

Paul pushed away from the rail reluctantly and made his way to the admiral’s quarters. “Sir?”

All the commanders were gathered there, poring over a detailed map that Paul had managed to threaten out of Fulton. Wagstaff looked up at him as he entered. “As you’ve managed to get Fulton to cooperate so willingly, I’ve got a nice job for you, Ambury.”

“Yes, sir?” Paul didn’t like the sound of that.

“See here on the map? This was a settlement, abandoned twenty years or so ago—raided by pirates I don’t doubt. Not so big, but big enough for this lot. Solid buildings. They’ve five ships, your man says, and we’ve eight, and we’re taking the buggers by surprise. Good odds on that, but we need someone to take out the cannon they’ve got along here.” He pointed to a section of the map where the curve of the bay jutted out to sea. “Whoever this chap is, he’s not stupid. It’s a narrow inlet, probably why they’ve never been spotted before. So narrow that one ship at a time barely makes it through. That cannon has range right across the bay, manned at all times—they’ll fire long before any of their ships can be brought to bear.”

“So you want me to take it out?”

“That’s the plan. You’re the only officer here with no ship to command. Instead, take a longboat and some men and see what you can do to disable that cannon. Once you’re done, fire a shot into their ships as a signal. Think you can do it?”

There was no other answer but, “Aye, sir.”

“Good. Now our man says that the main caravel, the *Wicked Lady*, always berths here.” He indicated a point in the small harbour. “We’ll be going for that one first, so aim your shot there if you can. The longboat’s ready and waiting. Take whichever men you like.”

Paul strode out of Wagstaff’s quarters and set about finding the right men for the job. Several of his crew were aboard—they’d been split among the remaining ships. He rounded up half a dozen and added a couple of ratings he knew to be good in a fight. They launched the longboat just as the sun touched the horizon.

By the time they’d beached the boat and clambered, sweating and swearing, up the first thickly wooded hill, it was fully dark. Light flickered between the leaves of the trees, a small fire set behind an outcrop so it couldn’t be seen from sea. It showed them their way unerringly.

They stumbled in the shadows that drifted among the trees. Paul hissed at the men to be quiet as they neared, but it was all but impossible. Finally, when they were only yards away, he had them take cover in the darkness of the undergrowth before they were heard.

The brazier that lit their way stood on a rough stone shelf, sheltered from the sea by an overhang. In the pool of darkness beyond the light, Paul could just make out the glint of metal. The cannon. He watched for some minutes, waiting till his eyes were used to the light to check the lay of the land. At least four men stood watch, two by the cannon, one at the brazier and another who paced around the whole outcrop at intervals.

He beckoned to one of his most experienced men and nodded at the patroller. His man grinned, nodded and slunk off into the bushes. With hand signals so as not to be heard, Paul indicated where the rest should attack. In moments the three guards were dead and his men priming the cannon. Paul hurried over to them and looked down the almost sheer slope into the bay.

The settlement was well lit, with lanterns hung outside every house. There was some sort of uproar, people running here and there in panic. Catherine had made it here before them, then, even if only just.

Four ships stood in a wide bay. There she was: the *Newquay*. They'd taken her figurehead off and altered the rigging, but it was she. He'd know her in his sleep. Paul grinned in the dark as his men finished priming the cannon. Before they could fire it at the only other ship as large as the *Newquay*, a muffled grunt followed by a liquid scream behind him made him turn, his sword at the ready.

The man he'd sent after the patroller fell from the top of the outcrop and crunched to the stone beside the brazier, his eyes wide and staring, blood frothing at his throat. A bullet zinged off the rock at Paul's feet, and he leapt to one side without thinking, halfway along the narrow path before the corpse had finished moving.

Three of his men came up, only half a step behind him, and they burst out onto the top of the outcrop to be confronted by two more pirates. An extra lookout post. Almost as soon as he was clear of the rock, a sword sliced past Paul's face. He was only just quick enough to dodge and parry. The pirate's blade skittered along his own and jammed into his upper arm. With a harsh cry of pain, Paul pulled free, barreled into the man and sent him to the stone. The man struggled beneath him, but Paul's greater weight kept him pinned.

To his left, his men fought with the second pirate. A sword ran the man through, but not before he threw something into the brazier below. The pirate beneath Paul laughed, got a fist free and slammed it into the wound in his arm. Paul released his grip with a yelp of pain, and they wrestled for a moment before two of Paul's men dragged the pirate away and slit his throat.

Paul hauled himself to his feet, his breath coming in hard gasps that were more excitement than fear.

"Sir!" one of the men below called. Paul looked over the outcrop just as the brazier exploded in a shower of hot metal and flame. Damn it all! Gunpowder—a signal.

“Fire the cannon now! And we’d best get out of here quickly.” Paul checked his arm. Not too bad a cut, but bleeding freely.

The cannon roared just as he and his men came down from the outcrop. The shot went wide, missing the carrack they’d aimed for but blasting through a coarse house at the end of the street. Paul grinned. Now *that* was a signal.

Then he heard the thin screams on the wind, and his smile faded. There weren’t just pirates here, those screams told him. There were their families too. That wasn’t what he’d expected. Not what he’d signed up for.

“Sir, more on their way. There, coming up the hill.”

The rating pointed down into the dark, but the exploding brazier had destroyed his night vision and Paul could see little. He heard them, though.

“Keep firing the cannon. And try to hit the bloody ship this time. It’s big enough! The rest of you, with me.”

Without even waiting to see them move, Paul was off down the slope. The top part of the path cut across an almost sheer slope, high mud and rock one way, a sharp drop to the bay on the other. They’d be caught like fish in a barrel there. Farther down, he could make out the dark shapes of trees overhanging the path. If they could get there, get off the path, maybe they’d have a chance.

The cannon roared above them again, spewing flame and metal over the bay. It should have hit the ship they’d aimed at—but its sails were up now and it swung about. It ignored the cannon on the hill and faced its own guns toward the entrance to the bay.

They made it to the trees, and Paul jumped off the path. The slope fell away more steeply than he’d thought, and he grabbed at a tree. His feet scrabbled in the mud as he almost lost his grip and nearly tumbled down to the bay before he caught his balance. Cursing erupted around him as his men fought the hill.

A group of men shouting in a mix of French, Spanish and the odd word of English came up the hill, swords and pistols drawn. Paul and his men weren’t far enough off the path or quiet enough for them to miss. No chance of surprise.

Using the tree as leverage, Paul heaved himself up and launched himself at the closest of the pirates. The fight was short but brutal. Two pirates and one of his men fell screaming down the steep slope, their descent blocked by trees that snapped the men’s limbs before they ended in the bay. Paul and his last two men stood over the rest, gasping for breath in the humid air. The roar of guns echoed across the bay. The navy was here. No chance now to help Catherine, find her, make her change her mind. Only time for obedience, and God help him if he didn’t obey.

Paul and his men leapt down the path toward the settlement. By the time they reached the street, fully half the buildings were in flames. Men ran to and fro, making for the ships or grabbing loved ones from the wreckage. Paul's gaze was on only one thing: the *Newquay*.

One of the pirate ships was already alight in her sails, but she stood intact at the entrance to the harbour, effectively blocking it and firing at the navy with all guns. The cannon his men had commandeered fired once more and caught the main pirate ship a blow on the foremast. Wood screamed under stress, and the mast fell to the deck. A familiar figure darted forward and dragged a man from under the wreckage. Catherine. At the sight of her, the *Newquay* was forgotten.

Matthew's frigate came up alongside, and a swarm of men jumped aboard. In an instant, a pitched battle raged across the decks. Catherine ran forward, her blade nothing but a blur, but she was hard-pressed. The sight made his stomach clench. Paul glanced at the *Newquay*. There was nothing he could do there. No navy ship was closing on it yet, and here he had just him and two men, but he could help Matthew—and Catherine.

He looked down toward the harbour from the relative shelter of the path. A few longboats were still afloat, and at least one was small enough that three men could row it.

Catherine swore viciously as she dragged one of her men from out of the wreckage of the mast. Too late. His head flopped at an odd angle and his eyes stared ahead, unblinking. He wasn't alone in death.

The *Black Cat* was already alight under the barrage of the navy, but her captain had managed to block the narrow entrance to the harbour. Only one ship had made it through thus far, but it was rapidly closing.

"Stand to!" Catherine shouted over the roar of her guns as they tried to hole the ship. It was coming in, far too fast. The *Wicked Lady* was going to be boarded.

Where in hell had they come from? Three days, Paul had said, and yet she'd not had even three hours. He'd lied to her. Like the rest, trying to catch her, stop her from being who she was. Catherine caught sight of the figurehead that loomed toward her. Matthew's ship. Even worse. She ran to gather her men to repel the boarders, but she knew there wouldn't be enough. Her ship, her precious *Lady*, was going to be destroyed at the hands of the navy. Bugger that. Not if she had a say in the matter.

Navy men swarmed aboard, hacking, cutting and bludgeoning as they went. The *Wicked Lady* was far outnumbered—most of her crew had been ashore when the hilltop crew had signaled, and they'd not had time to get aboard before the cannon had ripped apart half the settlement.

Shot whizzed past her head and embedded itself in the main mast. God damn it, she'd never been boarded before. With her back to the mast, she parried and thrust at the attackers, ever more desperate as their numbers increased. A sword grazed a cut along her ribs, and she gasped in pain. Her men fought back with a fervour that amazed her, their anger and determination against the navy, against those who

represented the men who had enslaved or bonded them giving drive to their sword arms. But there were too many, and too many of the bodies of her men slicked the deck with their blood.

She kicked out at the man in front of her, drove her foot into his belly and brought her sword round to slash at him as he bent forward from the blow. A wild, hoarse voice called out. The attackers fell away as the remnants of her crew took a defiant stand and a pitched battle broke out toward the prow. A wide space opened around her, and only one man came forward to fill it: Matthew.

He stared at her as though she were a ghost—and maybe he thought she must be. One of his men came at her from the side, and she knew, even before she made the attempt, that she'd be too slow to deflect the attack.

"Hold!" Matthew shouted, and the man stumbled as he pulled his blow. Matthew took a step forward, a frown twisting his good-natured face. "I know you."

She said nothing. Poor Matthew had been nothing but an innocent dupe in all this. Why it should matter this time when it hadn't before, she couldn't say.

His gaze slid from her face, down and then up to look her in the eye. He seemed incredulous, as though he didn't believe it. "Cecily?"

She shook her head. "Catherine. There is no Cecily."

His jaw moved as though trying to find words. "What do you mean, there is no Cecily?" he managed finally.

"I was Cecily, or I pretended to be. She was a figment of my imagination."

Matthew pinched his lips together and shook his head. Then, before she had the chance to do or say any more, his pistol was out and aimed at her. The black pit at the end of the barrel stared her in the eyes, though it shook a little. "You played me for a fool. Paul too. He thought—he thought you were kidnapped. He wanted to rescue you."

"Yes," was all she could say. No point in telling Matthew that Paul knew. He may have lied to her, but that would achieve nothing. She'd done enough to him already.

Matthew tightened his finger on the trigger. "And it's Lady Catherine Harcourt behind all this, behind all the piracy?" He laughed, a breathy sound more shock than mirth, and his lips twisted into a snarl. "Then good riddance, to you and Cecily both. By God, I'll kill you now and laugh as your blood runs over the deck."

Catherine looked about her wildly. If she could just duck out of the way...but he was too close. By the time she saw his finger move, she'd be dead. Someone thudded onto the deck behind her as more men clambered aboard her ship. Navy men no doubt, come to break her precious *Wicked Lady*. They would take her life and the only thing that gave it any meaning.

“Was Paul the traitor?” Matthew asked. “Wagstaff was sure you had someone tipping you off. Was it him? Did you tempt him like you tempted me? Because if so, I’ll see that bastard hang.” His hand was shaking. “Was it you who stuck Jeremiah like a pig and left him to bleed to death in a gutter?”

Catherine couldn’t look him in the eye. Yes, she’d killed her own husband. He’d found out what she was, what she’d been born into, the life she’d reveled in before she’d met him. The life she couldn’t leave behind, even for him. When he’d discovered her secret, he couldn’t accept it. It had broken him. Never entirely stable, finding she wasn’t who or what he had thought and that he wasn’t her first or even second lover, had driven him into a frenzy of jealousy. He’d kept her locked up and taken his rage, his moral disgust and his deep disappointment out on her. “Yes, I killed him. I killed him rather than live locked in a room my whole life, rather than suffer his cold hatred and his hot rage.” She spat on the deck. “I’d do it again.”

“And Paul?”

At least she could keep his name out of the mud. “If there was an informant, do you think I’d have been here when you came? He knew nothing, told me nothing. I tricked him as I tricked you.”

“Yes, you did.” Paul’s voice was by her ear, but she didn’t dare turn. Matthew looked far too ready to pull that trigger, and Paul’s appearance did nothing to lessen that.

“Stand away! Stand away, Paul. I mean to end her here and now. The bitch tricked the pair of us, made fools of us.”

Paul stood half in front of her. “Wagstaff wants her alive to be tried, to set an example. Clap her in irons and take her to the admiral. Don’t let her turn you into a murderer.”

“Keep out if it! She’s had me fooled for months. I *loved* her, for God’s sake. Or rather, I loved a figment of her imagination.”

“Matthew—”

“You knew, didn’t you? I can see it on your face. You knew!” The gun turned on Paul. “All those questions, all that talk about how it wasn’t Cecily you were after, and you knew the whole time it was her. You betrayed me too.”

“All I wanted was my ship, Matthew. That’s all. It still is. Can’t you understand? Once I found out Cecily was a...a puppet, how could I tell you? Let’s take her to Wagstaff. You’ll see her hang. I’ll have the *Newquay*.”

Catherine’s stomach sank to the seabed. He would too, would see her hang because she wouldn’t give up everything for him. Just like Jeremiah, who couldn’t see past what he wanted her to be. She bit back a sharp retort, one that would have shown him her hurt. He’d not have that satisfaction from her. She’d spit in his face before she was hanged.

Matthew screwed his eyes up and turned his face away for a moment, but when he looked back, his gaze was hard with hate and a kind of madness. Paul barreled into Catherine before Matthew could squeeze

the trigger. What on earth was he doing? Catherine fell to the deck and gasped as her injured chest smacked against the hard wood. Paul leapt up and grabbed at Matthew, at the pistol, trying to wrest it from him.

Matthew brought the gun down and round, and cracked it across Paul's face with a sickening slap that sent him to his knees. The end of the barrel pressed into Paul's throat. Blood dripped from Paul's brow as he looked at her, and back to Matthew, maybe best calculating what he'd just lost.

His words had been a bluff, an expansion of her own lie. Her heart twisted painfully. He could have been safe, could have found a way through, if only he'd let Matthew shoot her. Now he'd just thrown everything away. For her. Unless she could do something. There was only one thing *to* do. She pulled herself to her feet. "Matthew, I—"

"Shut up, you fucking bitch. He's right. Wagstaff wants you alive, but I think he'll be happy enough to have found the traitor in his camp not to be overly sad that you're dead."

The gun whipped round toward her, but Paul thrust out an arm and deflected the barrel. He drove his shoulder into Matthew's gut, and the pair of them fell to the deck, the gun clattering off somewhere. Catherine groped for her own gun, just in time to use the butt of it to smack Matthew's man across the nose as he came for her. He staggered back and dropped to the deck with a thump. The two ratings who had come aboard with Paul hung back, likely not wanting to get involved with a fight between two captains. If they picked the wrong side, they'd be flogged for sure. She readied her gun with a shaking hand. Matthew managed to get on top of Paul and raised his fist. She shoved the pistol's barrel into his nape. "Get off him."

Matthew stood slowly and turned to face her with wild eyes in a white face. Paul got to his feet. "You can't kill him."

"Watch me," she said. "What did you go and do that for anyway? I thought you'd made your position clear enough." She couldn't make him out. He'd lied about the raid, but saved her when he should be helping to kill her. *Don't trust him. Remember, don't trust any man with your heart.*

Paul's hand was on her arm, the heat from his fingers radiating up. She ignored it, and the itch in her belly, but his voice was insistent. "He was going to kill you. You thought I'd let him?"

She took her gaze off Matthew, flicked it over Paul's face and back again. He'd made it clear on that last night that if she couldn't give this up, then he'd treat her the same as he would any other pirate. She thanked her stars she'd had the foresight to keep her heart aloof. Not aloof enough—his rejection still stung her, still wrung her heart like a damp rag. She'd thought...what? A load of soppy nonsense, that was what. "You're a navy man, aren't you? That's what you do."

Paul looked between the two of them and shook his head slowly. "I can't kill him, or let you kill him." He laughed mirthlessly and ran a hand over his face. "All I wanted was my ship, and maybe another night with you, or all that you'd give me. But it was the *Newquay* I wanted most—no, what I thought was more likely I could have—my ship, my life. You know that, how that feels, don't you?"

The cannon on the hill roared once more, not at the *Wicked Lady* this time, but at the navy frigate that stood to the other side of the burning ship that blocked the inlet. Her men had recaptured it, and shot flew across the bay to tangle in the rigging of the navy frigate. Farther down the bay, the *Newquay* sliced toward the *Lady*, getting into position to blast Matthew's ship from the water. More of Catherine's crew were rowing towards the *Lady*, reinforcements in the nick of time.

Catherine pushed the gun more snugly into Matthew's neck. "Yes, I know that—but you won't have it if you're dead. And if he gets back, tells the admiral what you've been up to, you're as dead as I am." It was all she could give him. A chance.

She looked up at him, expecting to see guile there, that this was some ploy of his to catch her, but his eyes were steadfast and he wasn't judging her. He didn't look at her and think less of her for who, or rather what, she was. He already knew the worst of her, and still he'd saved her from Matthew's gun. Why? It didn't matter. He wanted her to change, and she couldn't, wouldn't. Neither could he.

"Catherine..." Paul watched her, his head spinning, with her gun at Matthew's head. The battle for the *Lady* was over, at least for now. More of Catherine's crew clambered aboard from the longboats. The *Newquay's* guns roared and took the rear mast of Matthew's ship. Even now the sound of those guns, *his* guns, stirred pride in his breast.

Most of Matthew's crew were dead or trying to scramble to their own guns. Two of Catherine's crew came and grabbed Matthew, dragged him away to the brig, to be held for ransom no doubt. More headed for Paul and the two men with him. The *Newquay*—that was all he wanted, he'd told himself. His ship, his *life*. Did it matter whether he was with the navy or not, so long as he had the ship? He shut his eyes. That had been his and Matthew's dream, ever since he could remember, to be pirates or to chase them. There'd never seemed much difference when he was a child, except the pirates went where they pleased. It seemed the same to him now. He wanted his ship, to go wherever the wind took him, but that wasn't all.

Catherine watched him, an oddly vulnerable look to her. As though, tough as she was, one wrong word from him would crush her and then she might turn the gun on him. She held her hand up to her crewmen, and they hesitated.

"What?" she snapped. "Tell me, Paul, what is it that *you* want? Your ship? Take it. After all the grief I've put you through, it only seems fair. What else? Me to give this up, become the respectable woman, the good little wife? I tried it once. I tried, and a man I loved is dead because I couldn't do it. I won't try again. Yet you saved me from Matthew. So, what is it that you want? Name your price."

He stepped forward, and now she did turn the gun on him, but it didn't matter. He barely even saw it. All he could see was her face in the light of the ship that burnt merrily across the water. The sharp cheekbones, the soft hollows of her face, her eyes, wary and mistrustful. Afraid, but mastering it. He reached out and pushed the gun away, and she barely even tried to stop him. Her eyes were wide, like a

rabbit's in a trap, but watchful. Maybe he had her, finally. *Maybe*. Or maybe she could still shoot him. He could never tell what she might do or say next. The excitement of her surged through him, finer than the best brandy, sharper than the cleanest wind. She was no simpering brainless idiot, no clinging ivy, no predictable lady.

"I want everything." He took another step, and they were almost touching. "I'm greedy, Catherine. I want a ship, *my* ship. I want a horizon to aim for and a good wind to get me there. And I want you, Catherine. All of you, as you are. Not just the part you're willing to share for a night. All of you." He laid his arm around her waist, still not sure whether she'd kiss him or kill him.

She did neither, but shook her head and laughed under her breath, wriggling away from him. "Don't be stupid. You came here to hang me. You're a navy—"

"Fuck the navy," he said. "I want my ship and you. I intend to have both."

Her laugh was ragged, incredulous. "No, you—"

He'd had enough of this, enough of her pushing him away, enough of games and lies and masks. Another step and she had her back hard against a door. She brought the gun round, but it was a half-hearted gesture, and he pushed it away easily. He'd seen her in all her naked glory, he'd bedded her, made her scream with pleasure, but there was one thing she'd never let him have, and he wanted it, now. More than his ship, more than the navy, maybe even more than getting out of this damn cove alive. He'd meant to catch her, make her want him, make her his, and he knew now that maybe that was impossible. She was nobody's but her own. Nothing he did would ever change that, but if he could have a part of her heart, he could live with that.

He slid a hand round the back of her neck, raised the other to her cheek. Her body was warm and trembling against his as he bent his head, took in the scent of her and breathed in her ear, "I want—"

A whistling boom echoed across the bay, a hefty splash in the water not two feet from the keel of the *Wicked Lady*. What he wanted would have to wait. Catherine wrenched free of him and swore viciously. "Nice attempt to keep me busy till it's too late. You should've been a pirate." The gun tracked him. "But it won't work."

Shit! He'd almost had her, she'd almost been as much his as he could ever hope for. Maybe she still could be. Maybe there was a way out of this, for both of them. "Get me to the *Newquay* and I'll fire the signal. They'll stop."

"Then what?" She glared at him suspiciously, and her finger tightened on the trigger, but she hesitated, and he took heart from that.

"Then you're the poor, frightened captive of the pirates that kidnapped you, and we get you a hostage against your safe passage."

"I already have two. You and Matthew."

"We won't get you far. Wagstaff won't give two shits if he gets your head. What you need is an admiral. Play the lady one more time and you can have him. Safe passage, maybe even a hefty ransom."

"I don't think—" Another roar, and this time part of the figurehead blew into splinters. She looked round wildly. She couldn't be sure who to trust, he could see that plain on her face.

"You have to trust me." Though he'd hardly earned it.

Her lips twisted bitterly. "I did. That's why we're in this bloody mess. Why trust you now? I'd be better off putting you in the brig."

"Because I'm sunk—as much as you, maybe even more. If this doesn't work, we're both dead." Cannon roared, close enough that they both ducked against the sound, against the blast of splinters. "There's no *time*, Catherine. Give me the *Newquay*. Let me fire the signal. I'll get you out of here. Safe, you and yours."

Another navy frigate drifted out of the smoke. Catherine's gaze darted to and fro as she thought, then she nodded tersely to two of her crew. "Get him over there, quick smart. Now! Have him fire that signal, or shoot him dead." She turned to Paul. "If you get us out safe, you'll get your precious *Newquay* back. I owe you that." Her jaw tightened, and she stared at him intently, looking for regret, perhaps. Or wondering just how far to trust him. "If not, I'll shoot you myself. I owe you that too, for this slaughter. What happened to the three days grace you promised me?"

"Wagstaff changed his—"

"It doesn't matter. My men are dead. Keeping the rest alive, that's what matters." She turned away and began shouting orders as her crew hustled him toward the rail and the *Newquay* that lay in grappling range off the port rail.

Catherine shouted out her orders to her crew and tried to revel in the danger, but her mind was only half on it. The other half listened for the signal shot, wondering whether she could trust Paul. Oh, she'd given her crew orders to shoot him, but there was plenty he could do. If he didn't signal, they were lost, caught like rats in a pipe. The navy frigate was firing all guns now, and she couldn't return fire, not if they were to believe the signal "All pirates dead or captured". She was sunk. Far outgunned, out-maneuvred. Out of time. And she'd thought she could trust what he'd said.

The *Newquay* fired her signal. Catherine couldn't suppress a cautious smile. The navy ship stopped firing, but the ratings were ready at the rail. She'd best get below. Her smile faded as she ran down the stairs. His plan, whatever it was, might save her and her crewmates' lives, but she and Paul would still be on opposite sides. There was no way to reconcile his life with hers, no way she could allow herself to feel for him. Now, though she was loath to admit it, she wanted to. She just dared not risk all that had happened before.

A series of thuds above told her she didn't have much time. The navy were aboard. Aboard *her* ship. She'd long ago set up a plan for such an eventuality, and the crew knew what to do. The plan she'd drilled them in was for the open sea though, not for quite this situation. Some of them might get away with pretending they were hostages like her, or making to be ratings. She'd had the foresight to make sure they all dressed in a similar fashion to navy lads, in clothes she'd ransacked from the ships they'd stolen, but some would have to play pirate, and if Paul didn't follow through, they were all dead.

It was a big risk she took, a huge one. So why was she taking it? She flew into her quarters and grabbed for the bloodied shift, the one with the torn hem. It smelled of him, of Paul. She couldn't think of that now. She got herself changed and ran for the brig. With a curt order to the crew to take Matthew out and gag him somewhere, she shut the brig door after her. *Lady Harcourt*. That's who she was. Lady Harcourt, who'd been a prisoner all this time. Who'd known who knew what indignities. Another series of thuds, this time from the *Newquay* side.

Paul's voice boomed out above the others. "The admiral wants them all alive, to hang them as example. Put them all in the brig. I've enough men here to take these ships in."

Was this his plan to save them? Or to save his own neck, and maybe his career in the navy? She straightened the shift and tried not to hope too much.

Paul stood on the deck of the *Newquay* as dawn made grey ghosts of the crew, the pirates dressed in clothes they'd stashed for just such a thing. Smoke still clung to the waves, but the light was clear enough as they moved out of the narrow mouth of the bay.

"Run up a signal. Pirates dead or captured, one prisoner rescued. Admiral's presence requested urgently."

"Aye, sir." The rating eyed him warily and ran to run up the signal. It wasn't long before the answering signal came: "Stand by for admiral".

Paul smiled to himself and went forward to meet Wagstaff's longboat. His bellow floated up from the water as he puffed his way aboard.

"So, you got them, eh? Might go a long way toward seeing that court-martial isn't such a bad affair for you. A long way. So, what's the urgency?"

"Lady Harcourt, sir. She's, well, not so good, to be honest, sir. And she was asking for you. I thought it best to—"

"Ah, the delectable Lady Harcourt. Amazing she's still alive. Must have been a terrible time for her. Of course I'll see her, of course. Can't expect her to come to me, after that. Was she—?"

"Couldn't say, sir," Paul said, leading the way to his quarters. "Shocked, of course, and quite drunk I'm afraid, poor woman. I didn't stop her. I thought it might help calm her, a shot or two of brandy."

"Calm us all, after this night."

Paul opened the door, ushered Wagstaff through and shut it in the face of the officer the admiral had brought with him. "I expect I've some left, if you'd care for one?"

Wagstaff stared at Catherine, who sat hunched in a chair at the far end of the room, still in the bloodied shift. She'd barely spoken to Paul, aloof and wary. When he'd tried to speak to her, she'd glared at him with such ferocity he'd kept quiet for now. He couldn't blame her. She didn't trust him, and with good reason. Or she didn't trust him *yet*. He aimed to change that, to do everything he could to show her he'd meant every word he'd said on the deck of the *Wicked Lady*.

Paul handed Wagstaff a glass of brandy and watched attentively as the admiral took a good mouthful and went to Catherine.

"My dear Catherine, this must have been awful for you. Not to worry, you can watch them all hang once we're home. Paul, they tell me you captured the pirate captain? And Catherine—couldn't you have found the poor woman some clothes? She's half decent, and cold as the grave."

Paul smiled and locked the door quietly behind him. "Oh yes. Caught and ready for you, sir. In this room, as it happens, and not much point finding her more clothes. I intend to have her out of them at the earliest opportunity."

Wagstaff's eyes bulged out of his head. "You intend what? You, sir, are not a gentleman. After what this—"

"No, you're quite right, I'm not. But then I don't think my pirate captain would like it half so much if I were. In fact, I'm sure she wouldn't."

Catherine shot him a glance, her eyes wide in sudden realisation. She hadn't thought he'd do it. She'd thought he'd had something else in mind, that was plain, but he'd burned his bridges, shown his hand and that maybe, just maybe, she could trust him. If she couldn't change, or give it up, maybe he could give up something not as important as his ship. It was the *Newquay* that had him and ruled him. The sea, not the navy. His career had been only a means to an end, and it had taken her to show him that. Show him what was important.

Wagstaff opened and closed his mouth helplessly, his face growing steadily more purple as he realised what Paul had said. "Your pirate—" He spun toward Catherine. "Catherine fucking Harcourt! I'll have your neck for this treachery, Ambury!"

"Actually, I think you won't." Paul smiled at him, noticed the sheen of sweat on his brow, the slightly fuddled look to his eyes. Someone fell against the door behind him with a cry, but Paul ignored it and concentrated on the drugged admiral in front of him. "The pirates you think are safely locked in the hold aren't. They're the crew. The men you brought with you are now in the brig, along with Matthew and what's left of his crew. You'll join them soon enough. A nice hostage. The signal's already been sent that you'll come with the *Newquay* to port, that we need repair urgently, the remaining pirate ships to follow.

The rest of the fleet are to stay and mop up what's left. I'm sure we can find somewhere to get a good ransom for an admiral, a captain and a score or more of ratings. Don't you?"

Catherine laughed, and his stomach burned at the sound. Someone knocked at the door, and a muffled voice came through. "All in the hold, Captain."

"See, there you are. And now we make sail. If you'd be so kind as to follow my man?"

Paul unlocked the door and four ratings came in, all well-armed. Wagstaff blustered and shouted, but there was nothing he could do, even if there'd been nothing but brandy in that glass. The way the deck moved under them, it was plain they were under way, and not a shot from the fleet. Suddenly Paul saw what it was that lured Catherine to this. The thrill of the risk, that it might so easily have ended in disaster, in a noose, but it hadn't. A laugh ripped through him, tore free all his notions of what was proper, what he should be and do. Always he'd been railing against it, but he'd never found the one thing that would free him from the constraints he'd been born into.

Catherine stood staring up at him as though she couldn't quite believe he'd done it. He grabbed her and swung her about. She'd shown that to him.

He kicked the door shut behind him and caught her round the waist, holding her tight so she wouldn't push him away this time. "I know what I want. You, all of you. Every last drop. And this time, I won't take no for an answer."

Catherine tried to pull away, her mind whirling. She'd thought it all a ruse, a bluff, not suspecting for a minute he'd really go through with it. The window stood propped open in case she needed a hasty escape. She even had some money she'd thieved from his desk. And now he'd really done it.

Paul gripped her tighter as though trying to keep her with him, but sudden fear made her wrench away. He might have severed all his ties with the navy, but the thought of giving him what he wanted, giving him her, made her heart race with panic. She was alone in her heart, had been for too long now, and the only time she'd ever dropped her guard, it had ended in disaster. She couldn't risk that with Paul. For either of their sakes.

She spun toward the door, but he was quicker than she'd thought. He trapped her, face to the wall inside the cage of his arms, then pressed against her with his mouth at her ear. She trembled against the wood. Was this how it was going to start, the disappointment, the rages? A quick feint to one side, and she lunged for the door. Again he caught her against the wall. This time he threaded the fingers of his left hand through hers as he spoke soft words in her ear.

"Don't push me away, not now."

Catherine rested her forehead on the wood and tried to still the trembling in her legs. Tried not to notice the way he pressed against her, and the thrilling tremor in her loins at his touch. "I can't change, I told you. I tried and it won't work. I—I don't want it to end that way for you."

He laughed softly, and his breath tickled the side of her neck, sending shivers down her spine. "I don't want you to change. I never really did. I love you, Catherine, exactly as you are. I love the fact I never know what you'll say or do next. I love your fearlessness. I love you." He ran his right hand over her shift, round over her stomach and down. His fingers caught at the silk, and drew the skirt up in folds till he was touching her bare thigh. "It's not that you can't. It's that you won't. Tell me to stop, and I will."

His hand drifted up her thigh, and she trembled not from panic but from his touch on her skin. Fingers slid through her pubic hair, and she gasped when one found her sweet spot, flickered over it gently, then more insistently. She shut her eyes and tried to remember why she couldn't do this. Why she shouldn't let him into her heart. Why she should cry out and run, as fast as she could, for her own ship. For the sweet haven of her quarters on the *Wicked Lady*. She'd be no man's slave. She'd been alone all her life, bar her one disastrous attempt at love, alone with no one to trust, and she ached for that. When he touched her, all she wanted to do was agree to anything, anything at all, just as long as he didn't stop.

He pushed his finger inside her, and she bit back a gasp. But he knew; she could tell by the way his mouth curved against her neck. He pressed against her, his length pushing into her through his breeches and the thin fabric of her shift. He took his hand away, and she moaned with disappointment, but after a few fumbled moments, he pulled up her shift. His cock slipped between her thighs, teased her by sliding past her entrance, and then his hand was back. Her clitoris throbbed and strained to meet it, twitched almost painfully when his skin met hers, and she nearly cried out.

Still she couldn't say it, couldn't bring herself to say the one little word that he wanted, and couldn't bring herself to say stop either. She couldn't say anything. Her brain refused to work. She could only do.

She twisted in his grip, lunged for the door, but his grip was too strong and she ended up with her back to the wall. She shut her eyes, not daring to look at him. He pressed in close, and she shivered against the warmth of him. A warmth she didn't dare to share. His breath was on her neck, along her cheek, a breeze across her lips. Before she knew it, before she could push him away, he kissed her, and she was lost.

A soft caress at first, his lips testing the waters. When she didn't pull away, he drew her into him, rained hard, insistent kisses on her that robbed her of breath. Her heart was beating fit to burst in panic, in fear and want.

He pulled away a little, and she opened her eyes, looked at him as he searched her face for something, for a hint that she might say what he wanted to hear. When she said nothing, he kissed her hard enough to thrust her against the wall, and pulled at the front of her shift. His fingers trailed soft fire across her thighs, melted the tightness in her stomach, loosened her muscles to encourage him further, even as she wanted to run.

"God damn it, woman," he said into her neck. "God damn it, I'm going to fuck some sense into you if it's the last thing I do."

Without warning, his cock was in her, pushing in with ease as he thrust her backwards. She did cry out then, an almost-scream as every muscle twitched and clenched at the feel of him, his hot breath fanning her neck, his cock sliding out, slowly, ever so slowly before he thrust in. At the words he whispered in her ear: "Let me in, Catherine. Let me love you. Say yes."

He thrust in, harder, and again she shouted, a word this time. His name. He slowly withdrew until she thought he'd pull out. She meant to say, "I can't," but "No, don't stop, please don't stop," were the words that appeared on her lips.

The fingers of his left hand tightened around hers, and she grasped at them, as though only they saved her from drowning. His right hand sent silver shivers through her muscles, her bones, her brain. He plunged in, and this time he didn't stop. Each time deeper, each time his breath harsher in her ear, and then she wasn't just crying out, she was screaming against a taut spasm that spun through every part of her, robbed her of the ability to think or move, that brought unbidden tears to her eyes. Her muscles were water, and she almost fell, but he caught her, his arm around her waist and his lips kissing her neck as he slammed into her. With a final push that almost had her off her feet and a "Fuck!" he came.

He fell forward, so they both leant against the wall. His arm tightened around her waist, and he shook his head before he rested his cheek against hers. He smelt of smoke, of gunpowder and brandy. There, in the cage of his arms, she no longer felt a prisoner. She felt safe, as maybe she'd never felt safe before. That someone was ready to protect her, if she needed it. Someone was on her side. She wanted, so badly, to let herself love him. It was a risk to her heart, though. A risk to what made her *her*.

Paul took in a deep, shuddering breath and enjoyed the smooth feel of Catherine's skin against his. He hoped that he'd shown her, the only way he knew how, that she could love him, that he wouldn't hurt her as her husband had. That he loved her as she was, knew what she was and didn't care. That he loved her *because* she was who she was.

Before he could catch his breath, gain some control over the muscles in his thighs, she wriggled out from under him. She stared at him, and the mask had slipped. On her face was the one thing he'd never thought to see there: real fear, a terror that tore at his heart. A few stray tears ran over her cheeks as she shook her head. "I—I can't."

Paul leant in closer, and she shrank away from him, but he couldn't give up now. He let his fingers trace the tears and wipe them away. She trembled at his touch, but she had nowhere left to run. "I'm not him, Catherine. And whatever happened with him, whatever went wrong, it won't happen with me. I promise you."

Closer still and her breath was soft on his cheek. Her eyes were very wide and her pulse fluttered under his hand. Her lips twisted, as though she screwed up her courage for some terrifying ordeal. Then she

grabbed at his head and pulled him down. She kissed him, her lips hesitant, soft and yielding under his for a brief moment.

She pulled away, her eyes searching his. “I want to. I want to, but I’m afraid.” Every mask gone—this was her, the real Catherine.

Paul drew her to him, gave her a kiss of his own, a long, soft kiss that shuddered his spine. She relaxed into him, her body lithe against him, and his cock stirred.

Her arms moved around his shoulders, and she stood on tiptoe to kiss him harder. And then she laughed under him, her breath sweet in his mouth. “Some bloody pirate I am. I live for the risk in everything else. Why not in this too?”

She kissed him harder now, her tongue flickering along his, her hands pulling at his shirt. Buttons pinged to the floor as she ripped at his shirt and threw it off. Paul pulled her away from the wall, tearing at her shift. They fell onto the bed, naked and still kissing. She rolled on top of him and slid herself down the length of his body. The soft warmth of her skin against him, the thought that finally he had some part of her, had him ready. It was three days’ sail to anywhere worth berthing, and he wanted to spend the whole three days kissing her, fucking her till they were raw. Loving her.

He ran his hands over her firm backside and up before she sat up, wriggled against his cock and smiled at him. The smile behind her mask. The real Catherine, at last. He tried to pull her down, but she shoved playfully at his chest, and he sank onto the bed. She gave him a gaze that prickled the skin on his nape as she leant forward and kissed him, long and slow and lingering, and he had her. All of her. And she had him, had done almost from the moment he’d met her. She was going to be trouble, and plenty of it.

He couldn’t wait.

About the Author

To learn more about Julia Knight, please visit www.juliaknight.co.uk. Send an email to Julia Knight at Julia@juliaknight.co.uk

Look for these titles by R. G. Alexander

Now Available:

Ifayne's Bane
Love is My Sin

The darkness in his soul could claim her love...or her life...

Savage Kingdom

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Freygard, a world where women rule and men are slaves, would seem to be a female Nirvana. Not for the warrior Nerya. So far her required visits to the coupling chambers have been awkward and embarrassing. Until Jaden. Despite his chains, the defiant slave's expert pleasuring satisfies her body—and sparks a determination to defend him from her cruel queen.

Jaden couldn't be in a worse position. Nerya has not only claimed his prized white stallion, she's somehow managed to abscond with his ability to resist her sexual appeal. His escape attempt is disastrous, until Nerya intervenes with an unheard-of deal. In exchange for guiding her to an unmapped kingdom to find the sister she never knew she had, she will free both him and his men.

On the journey, Nerya's determined to resist her powerful attraction to Jaden melts away in the heat of his desire. Leaving her wondering just who is in control—and what it is about him that bothers her. When they are forced to face a soul-stealing mage, his secret is revealed.

He is warrior of the feared Dai'Shi-en, legendary for the dark magic that fuels their violence...and their lust.

Warning: Contains hot, sweaty warrior sex, sex in chains and sex in a tent.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Savage Kingdom:

She'd made a mistake sitting so close to him because, moving more swiftly than she could ever have expected, Jaden grabbed her and pulled her toward him. Keeping her imprisoned in his strong arms, he took possession of her lips, kissing her with unrestrained passion, thrusting his tongue into her mouth. She should fight him, try to get away, yet she couldn't find the strength. Her body responded to his sensual demands, and her tongue darted between his lips, eager to explore the hot, moist interior of his mouth. Raw unrestrained lust flooded through her as the kiss deepened and continued until she was boneless and trembling with desire.

As Jaden let go of her, Nerya shakily straightened. She rubbed a hand against her face, but that wouldn't wipe away the blush that tainted her cheeks. How could she have allowed herself to get so carried away with lust for a mere man? She was a warrior. She must act like one. Yet still part of her longed for him to touch her again. "How dare you! I could have you whipped for such disrespectful behavior."

"You stare at me with disdain and call me slave. Yet I have only to touch you and you melt in my arms."

"You deceive yourself."

"Your attraction for me terrifies you, doesn't it?"

“The women of Freygard do not feel desire for slaves.”

“Don’t try to deny it. Your expression tells me all I want to know.” He continued to stare at her with eyes so black she could lose her soul in them. “Leave now, then. Find some other man to couple with, if all you want is fertile seed.”

What sort of warrior would she be if she fled from this challenge? Nerya couldn’t tear her gaze from the face of this demon who tempted her to deny all she’d been taught. She’d bedded a number of women, but she’d never experienced the pleasure she’d felt when she’d coupled with Jaden. Deep down she had to admit she was desperate to experience that exquisite pleasure again. Her entire body ached with desire for him.

“Men are put on this earth to serve women, and if I order it, you will serve me right now.”

“Yes. I’ll serve you.” He slid his long legs off the bed, and Nerya sprang to her feet, the stool clattering to the floor as she took a step back, out of his reach. “But not in the way your queen demands it. Unchain me and let me show you what true pleasure can be.” As she stepped back another pace, he added, “You’ve no need to fear me. I won’t harm you.”

“I don’t fear you. I’m a warrior. I fear nothing.”

“Except your own desire.” His voice was lower pitched now and caressingly smooth. “I’ll not harm you or even attempt to escape.”

“This is insane.”

“Sex wouldn’t be quite such a humiliating experience if I was unfettered,” he replied, his arm muscles flexing as he pulled against his chains. “Surely you don’t keep all the slaves who serve in these chambers chained?”

“Of course we don’t.”

“Perhaps I should feel honored, then, that you all fear me so much. You’re curious about me and my mission, are you not? If you release me, I’ll tell you all you wish to know.”

“*All* I wish to know?”

“Everything, Nerya. In fact, there are things you should know that may well eventually concern the fate of your land as well as mine.”

Was he telling the truth? Did he have such information? It might be wise to take advantage of this situation and learn all she could. Even if she released him from his chains, there was no way he could escape. He had no weapon, and she was perfectly capable of defending herself if the need arose.

“If you are lying to me...”

“I’m not lying.” He put his hand to his heart. “I swear on my honor as a nobleman that I’m not.”

Nerya walked to the table, flipped open the small wooden box and removed the key to his manacles. Not at all certain why she was acting so rashly, she returned to Jaden and slid the cylindrical iron key into

the lock. With a quick twist, the locking pin released and the heavy manacle fell open. Jaden gave a sigh of relief, flexing his arm while she opened the other manacle.

Jaden sprang from the bed and grabbed her, reacting far too swiftly for her to even attempt to resist him as he pulled her back against his muscular chest. Yet she was certain he'd no intention of harming her as one of his hands reached for her breasts, while the other slid across her stomach. He eased her closer. Her bottom pressed against his groin, and the rigid line of his cock dug seductively into her buttocks.

"Relax," he whispered in a low, hypnotic voice as his warm breath brushed her earlobe. "I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to give you pleasure."

He kissed her neck, then tipped her forward a little so he could unfasten the back laces of her gown. Pulling them apart, he eased the neck open wider and slid the garment from her shoulders and down her arms. The silky fabric crumpled around her waist, and Nerya shivered as one of his large hands clasped her left breast. He kneaded the firm mound until she gave a soft, pleading moan. Then his fingers brushed against her nipples. Arching her back, she ground her buttocks against his cock as Jaden rolled the tiny teats between fingers and thumbs, pulling on them until they stiffened and elongated into hard cones.

"Jaden." She gasped as he twisted her around and eased the white silk from her hips. The dress slithered downwards, landing in a crumpled pool at her feet.

He towered over her, and she was faced with a broad, muscular chest still hidden beneath the linen tunic. She lifted her hands, caressed his dusky skin and threaded her fingers through his black, silky locks. Jaden's mouth covered hers, and he kissed her long and deeply, sensually exploring her mouth with his tongue. Her fingers reached for the ties that held his tunic together at the shoulders. She wanted him naked—she needed to feel his warm flesh pressed close to hers. Nerya's fingers, normally so agile, fumbled with the knots. Her insides twisted with desire and her limbs felt weak, while his kiss made her breathless with lust.

"Let me." He pulled at the ties, ripping them away. The tunic fell to the floor. Jaden kicked it aside, scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bed.

Before Nerya knew what was happening, she lay on the mattress and Jaden crouched astride her legs. As he leaned over her, the ends of his hair brushed erotically against the skin of her stomach, and she shivered with pleasure. He caressed the firm curves of her breasts, then kissed the soft flesh. Taking one aching nipple between his lips, he sucked on it until a starburst of pleasurable sensations surged through her body, flooding her veins with desire. Pulling the nipple deeper into his mouth, Jaden grazed it with his teeth as one of his large hands slid down over her midriff. His sword-roughened fingers explored her body, his hand molding itself to the swell of her hips, moving seductively over the flat plain of her stomach.

Trembling, she lay there, too weak to do anything as he splayed his fingers over her lower belly then threaded them through the springy curls covering her pubis. Her heart leapt as his hand crept between her thighs. Never had she dreamed she could feel need like this.

Nerya shuddered as his long fingers eased their way between her sex lips, sliding deeper into the soft folds. They moved with tantalizing slowness along the narrow pink valley until they reached her clitoris. At once the pleasure grew and expanded, unfurling like the petals of an early blossoming rose. Nerya gave a keening gasp as he circled the sensitive spot, rubbing it with his fingertips. Moaning with bliss, she allowed her thighs to roll fully open as he slipped his fingers inside her. Moisture flowed, making his movements more fluid as he began to thrust into her with a seductive rhythm, while the pad of his thumb teased her pleasure nub. This was like no sexual encounter she'd experienced in the past. Nerya closed her eyes and gave herself up to the erotic delight.

Love sometimes comes late and, perhaps, at too great a price.

Damon's Price

© 2010 Ali Katz

Widowhood agrees with thirty-eight-year-old Claudia Sabina. Her husband and father left her wealthy, but her most prized possession is their gift of independence. She enjoys a freedom few women in male-dominated Roman Society will ever know.

One of her most valuable assets is Damon, a young Greek slave bequeathed to her by her father. Intelligent, resourceful and educated beyond the norm for even a freeborn Roman citizen, Damon is a man of many talents. It doesn't hurt that he is also a pleasure to look at.

For months, Damon hides the fact he's fallen in love with his new mistress. He convinces himself he can be satisfied with her nearness—until the night he walks in on her bath, and his rigid control deserts him. Consequences fail to matter as he offers her full use of talents that, until now, he's never revealed.

In a moment of weakness, Claudia crosses the line laid down by Roman law and custom, immersing herself in an illegal and dangerous love affair. A choice that threatens both their futures.

Warning: Imagine what you might do with a naked, Greek god whose sole purpose is to satisfy your every whim, then keep on imagining. This title contains an abundance of hot, hot, hot M/F loving.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Damon's Price:

Damon crossed the room to deposit the tablets and take his place beside the desk.

"I knocked," he said.

"The right thing would have been to leave quietly and come back later," she warned him coldly. She slid into the chair without looking in his direction.

"I didn't want you to worry about who had tried the door."

"Kind of you." She should tell him to leave. He could wait elsewhere for the correspondence.

Instead, Claudia tried to focus on the first letter. Damon's meticulous transcription decayed to a blur on the tablet. She needed all her concentration to control the trembling in her hands.

She heard a sharp intake of breath and glanced up to catch him staring at her breasts.

Her body's instant reaction stunned her. Her nipples grew taut against the slick fabric of the robe. A warm, liquid rush dampened her sex.

The evidence of his arousal swelled behind the fabric of his tunic. She turned in the chair to face him. The robe didn't turn with her. It slipped open, exposing her chest and all of one leg. She made no attempt to correct the problem.

With one hand gripping the back of her chair, she returned his scrutiny. The boy was certainly a pleasure to look at. She'd admired his form often enough, but always with the appreciation one might give to an especially fine marble likeness—almost always.

At the moment, there was no comparing him to any image carved from stone. His living heat radiated between them. She drank in his rugged charms—sweetly disheveled hair, black as night, worn longer than was fashionable, black brow, midnight eyes. The shadow of a beard darkened his face. He was slim but well fed and well muscled, and he was the most intelligent man she'd ever known.

Yes, man, she reminded herself.

"How old are you, Damon?" she asked.

"Twenty-six, *Era*."

Titus, her son, would soon be twenty-three.

"Why would you suggest such a thing? What do you expect in return?"

The question clearly insulted him. He cast his gaze aside, but not fast enough to hide a spark of anger.

"To watch your pleasure," he said.

As simple as that? Not likely. She read no dissemblance in his face, however.

Against her better judgment, Claudia continued her examination of his beautiful body. She was playing with fire, but the fire in her loins and in his eyes compelled her. Without diverting her interest from the breadth of his shoulders beneath the loose fitting tunic, she amazed herself by asking, "If I said yes, what would you do?"

A sudden gasp stopped the rise and fall of his chest. The quick glance with which she'd intended to judge his reaction became a prolonged gaze into his eyes when she recognized in them something she had not seen in a very long time. This beautiful young man lusted for her—for her, a woman twelve years his senior.

"What would you do?" she whispered.

His full lips parted for a sigh. "First, I would take down your hair." His hand twitched. "Do you know how beautiful your hair is? How it shines in the sun? Why do you hide it in a knot behind your head?"

"This is how matrons wear their hair."

"You're no matron."

"I am a matron with two grown children, Damon. I've outlived a husband and a son." Her words did not have the sobering effect she'd expected—on either of them. "Tell me, what do you want?"

His gaze traveled over her exposed throat and chest. A little groan escaped him.

"I want to feel your flesh quiver under my touch." Again, his lips parted. His tongue slipped between to wet them. "I want the weight of your breasts in my palms. I want to drown in the sounds of your pleasure."

Every hair on her body stood on end. She shivered, as much at the sound of his voice as at the words he spoke. It was madness to encourage him. Death came to mind. Rome did not look lightly on her women having sex with slaves.

“What you’re suggesting might be quite costly for either of us. Both, more likely.” Yet everyone knew the practice was as common as a man taking a mistress.

“I have a mouth for your pleasure,” Damon said. “No one will know. I’ve longed to taste you from the first moment I saw you.”

His breathy baritone purred over her skin, raising goose flesh. Once the possibility took root, it would not be wrenched free.

Too far, she thought. *I’ve let this go too far*. She had invited him to seduce her and had willingly succumbed.

“Show me,” she breathed.

Before the words passed her lips, Damon moved in to straddle her knees. He swept the band from her hair, letting the steam-dampened curls shiver down her back. His long, slender fingers combed through the curls, tugging slightly, smoothing them.

Claudia’s eyes drifted closed. Fingertips grazed the length of her neck and nudged the robe past her shoulders. The soft fabric whispered to her waist.

He knew just where to touch, how hard, how fast. His hands fluttered over her back and shoulders. Her flesh quivered beneath their callused surface. These were not a scribe’s hands, but the hands of a man used to sharing in the planting, pruning, harvesting, hauling—hard labor their business required. Labor he was not obligated to do.

Those wonderful hands trailed fire wherever they fell. The rough pads of his thumbs brushed her aching nipples. Claudia bit her lip, willing herself to silence. Though her rooms had their own wing, she couldn’t take the chance any of the servants might hear. Her breath came in silent gasps.

One knee insinuated itself between her legs. Without volition, they opened to him and he knelt on the floor in front of her, tugging at the knot of her robe until the fabric fell away and the reality of what they were doing sank in.

Her breath seized in her throat. She shouldn’t allow this. She didn’t know this man, not like this. He was loyal, but to whom? She’d moved in on him, usurping his position when she took over her inheritance. Until four months ago, he was in charge and she’d never considered he might resent her. Yet, here she was, considering it. Common sense warned her. This shouldn’t happen. He could ruin her. She needed to stop.

But when his whispered endearments reached her ears, “...beautiful...*Era mea*...”, and she felt his hot breath bathe her flesh, she knew there was no stopping. The tenderness in his voice drew her eyes. Even in the dim light, she could see the heat in his half-lidded gaze. He appraised her with something akin to worship. Right or wrong, she trusted him. No one could look at her like that and mean her harm.

But how would she forget that look in the morning?

Without warning, Damon dug his fingers into her sides and yanked her toward him. The coarse shadow of his beard rasped over her skin as he covered her breast with his mouth and sucked.

Claudia stifled a moan and leaned into him, encouraging him. The smooth surface of his tongue stroked the sensitive nipple. Her sex throbbed to his rhythm, seizing now and then, hinting of things to come.

Damon shuddered. His kisses moved north, alternately nipping and kissing in a line to her shoulder and neck, nuzzling his way to her ear. His lips brushed her cheek and over her lips, just a breath.

Fire surged through her. All thought of consequence melted in the heat. Like an infant seeking sustenance, she turned into the caress, chasing the gentle kiss. She needed that kiss, a real kiss. But his lips didn't part for her when she captured his mouth, though his breath quickened and his heart pounded beneath her palm which had somehow found its way to his chest. A desperate, painful longing burst inside her. She drew away.

He removed her hand. "Best you don't touch me," he whispered, his voice full of gravel. He stood, lifting her from the chair, his hands cradling her ass as he carried her to the bed and laid her atop the woolen covers.

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