



*His
Heart to
Have*

Heart of the Wolf Trilogy

SABLE GREY

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His to Have

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

Heart of the Wolf

HIS TO HAVE

Sable Grey

Dedication

To Debra Ownbey for the all day brainstorm session that helped me fill in the plot holes so this story could come together!

Chapter One

"Two bottles...the strongest you've got." A deep baritone voice brought Elle's attention up from the mugs she'd been rinsing to the man who stood on the other side of the counter. He was drenched, black hair plastered across the broad planes of his face, droplets hanging from his heavy brow. His face was pale and dark circles stood out beneath his deep-set eyes. With one arm tucked beneath his heavy, damp coat, wrapped with some kind of blood stained cloth up to his elbow, the other hand brought out a water soaked purse where he emptied the contents with thick, trembling fingers.

"I'll send for the physician," Lewis murmured, a scowl creasing the already deep lines of the tavern owner's face.

"No doctor," that voice shook and Elle could tell the watered down stranger was in much pain by the strain on his words. "Just give me the bottles and a room."

Elle watched Lewis eye the coins on the counter and knew he was considering if he wanted to take the hefty amount or send the stranger away. Portsmouth, being right on the water, brought in an abundance of criminal and unsavoury clientele. The small tavern did well but sometimes a bloodied customer also brought trouble.

When Lewis didn't move, Elle stepped forward, wiping her soapy hands on her skirt. "I will tend to him." She'd learned enough about tending wounds to save a few pirates and seamen over the years. "Room seven is empty."

Lewis merely glanced at her, then looked back down at the coins, and finally reached forward to scrape them forward. "Don't get blood everywhere." He pointed at the man, "And you will owe me more in the morning for the room - if you live."

Elle slipped around the counter to the stranger's side and slipped an arm beneath his. "Come, I'll take you to a room." The man hesitated then allowed her some of his weight. He was big, hard as leather, and strong despite his condition, she realised when he grasped her shoulder. She guided him slowly to the stairs.

"One step at a time," she coaxed. He made it to the top without even so much as a grunt of pain. The room was tiny but was one of the few that did have a small hearth. The seaman

would need it because she could feel he was chilled to the bone. He blew out a breath when she helped him ease down onto the bed.

"Don't move. Wait here," she told him. His response was only a slight inclination of his dark head. She turned and left him there to collect two bottles of whisky, extra blankets, the small bag in which she kept all of her supplies for tending injuries, and clean water and linens. She instructed one of the men who worked for Lewis to start a fire in the room, and told the cook that she needed some warm broth for the stranger. When she returned, the fire had already been started and the seaman still sat on the edge of the bed just as she'd left him except he'd removed his coat and tossed it in a puddle at his feet.

Setting everything she'd brought on the small table, she dragged it closer to the bed, then uncorked one of the bottles and passed it to him. He lifted the rim to his trembling lips and drank deeply. She watched his throat work up and down and, when he finally lowered the bottle again, she saw he'd consumed nearly half the bottle.

"Let me tend to your arm. Have you any other injuries?" She sat beside him and reached for the bandaged limb he still had tucked against him. She could see now the large cloth was some kind of huge piece of linen wadded and wrapped around his arm. Carefully she began to pull it away. Her throat closed. His arm had been severed, just below the elbow. The sleeve of his expensive shirt was ragged around the wound. All she could do was cleanse the wound as best as she could, wrap it as tightly as possible, keep it clean, and pray that he lived.

"It could be infected. If I could send for the physician..."

"No," he replied deeply and passed her the bottle. He leant down and retrieved his coat, shoving it beneath the bleeding wound, then lifted his dark blue gaze at her. She winced. It was going to hurt. When she hesitated, he gave her a small nod and reached back to hold on to the bedrail of the headboard. She took the bottle and doused what was left onto the wound. His shout vibrated around the room before he slumped sideways, unconscious. Elle quickly cleaned and wrapped the arm with strips of linen.

She worked quietly removing the rest of his clothes. What she couldn't pull off of him, she cut away. Other than his arm, there were no more visible injuries she could see. In fact, his large body was flawless. Dark hair swept across a deep chest, then trailed down parting

once for his navel before dipping to the nest below. His legs were powerful and thick with muscle.

Elle had seen her share of naked men but this one, she had to admit, was beautiful. There wasn't an ounce of softness anywhere and his male parts were equally impressive. Once she'd unclothed him completely, she had to work until she broke a sweat settling him onto the bed. She covered him with the extra blankets then sat beside him, changing the linens as needed.

He woke close to ten that evening, a fever claiming him so that his skin was hot to the touch. At first he declined the broth she spooned to his lips but, after a bit of coaxing, he took in some of it. The fever did not last and by midnight a chill had taken its place. His entire body shook from it and Elle began to worry that this handsome stranger would perish after all.

Finally, she slipped beneath the blankets and put her arms around him. "Please, don't die."

His thick arm curled around her and pulled her closer, bringing her body closer so his body could have the warmth it craved. "I can't d-die until I k-kill the bastard that d-did this t-to me." His deep voice shook and his teeth chattered around those violent words. They lay in silence for some time and Elle had almost drifted to sleep herself when his deep voice brought her to full wake.

"It's time. Leave me now."

She leant up on an elbow to look down at him. He wasn't shaking anymore. She reached up and touched his cheek. His temperature was almost back to normal. Her hand stilled when he turned his face against her hand, lips brushing her palm. His dark lashes cast shadows in the dying firelight across his cheeks.

"You need someone to tend to you. I will not leave," she whispered.

"No. Leave me. Hurry." He gave her a nudge as he turned away from her hand. He groaned then, a deep sound that shook from within his chest.

"You are in pain." The realisation hit her and she jerked the blanket back from his body to examine him again for other injuries.

"Go." He pushed her this time firmly, with more strength than she thought he should have, succeeding in nearly dumping her to the floor. She scrambled from the bed but leant

towards him when his fingers curled into the linen sheets beneath him. His head thrashed back and forth as if in agony. Then he went completely still. She started to reach forward but he suddenly sat straight up, hair sliding from his face to reveal his dark blue eyes had gone completely yellow. And his voice sounded more like a beast than human.

“Leave!”

Elle stumbled backwards as his breath began to come in shallow rasps. Those yellow eyes glowed at her as she backed away. She reached behind her until she grasped the handle of the door. She pulled it open as he began tearing the linens from his injured arm with his hand. A low growl vibrated from him as she stepped backwards from the room and pulled the door closed quickly. She stared at the wood as the growl grew louder, followed by shouts of agony. Leaning forward she pressed her ear to the wood. From the other side there was a soft knocking noise that sounded like bones popping.

His eyes had been yellow. Eyes of the devil. But as he continued to verbalise his pain, she felt tears wet her own eyes. She didn't like the suffering. And he was alone. Devil or not, no one deserved to be alone.

“Take deep breaths,” she whispered through the door. “Think of something else, something you love, something beautiful to you. Let it take away your pain.”

His agony lasted nearly an hour and Elle stayed outside the door, whispering soothing words to him with hopes she was helping him. Upon the second hour of the morning, the room finally grew quiet. Elle released a few sobs before collecting herself and hesitantly pushing open the door. Her heart thumped as she walked to where he lay on the floor near the window.

There was no movement in his body and finally, despite her fear, she knelt and pushed his hair from his face, so she could see him more clearly in the shadows. Her fingers trembled as she touched his face and pushed open one eyelid. Blue. Not yellow.

Her gaze swept over the rest of his features. Cheekbones set high on his broad face, his jaw a long, masculine line of strength. His eyes were deep set beneath his heavy brow and a defined mouth with sensual lips set below a straight, prominent nose. Tall, attractive, and the coins he'd given Lewis were those of a man with wealth. Any other she might have called a peacock. But everything about him was so male, and even before his eyes had changed to those of a devil, behind the pain he'd suffered, there had been something dark in his eyes

that told her, even in the finest clothes of England, this man was more dangerous than any peacock she'd ever met.

Her attention lowered to his wide shoulders, then down to his arms. She froze. An arm now lived where but two hours before one had not. Her hand shook as she reached out and touched the flesh. Then her gaze darted to his face as his lips parted and drew a short breath.

Seven Months later

Michael Ashton paced the study of Ashton Manor as he lifted the glass of bourbon to his lips and downed half of the contents in three swallows. His heavy boots echoed through the room as he scowled at the walls around him. He was restless, too long cramped in one place. For months he'd done as his brother suggested, keeping a low profile and remaining in London, but with each passing week, he found himself growing more and more resentful of his imprisonment and his temper growing shorter.

"Please, brother, sit, before you walk a hole through the floor." Victor finally looked up from his desk then rose and stepped around it to reach for the glass in Michael's hand, "For God's sake slow down."

Michael's scowl deepened. "I've run out of things to do."

"Then find a whore and occupy yourself." Victor turned and set the glass aside. "The entire household is afraid of your unpredictable temper and I am weary of your scowl. You cannot leave London, but I beg you to give this house some peace."

Michael glared at his brother before reaching forward and swiping up the glass. He threw back the remaining contents and slammed it back to the surface of the desk. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he said nothing, then turned and stalked from the room. Once through the manor and out the door, he waved away the driver, Peter, who had stepped forward. The young man lowered his gaze and quickly stepped aside, most likely relieved with his dismissal.

The walk into the bustle of London was a short one, and as he wove his way towards the docks, he ignored those who stepped clear of his path and moved around him. Hurst had started the rumours about the Ashton family after Victor had forced him to divorce Cadence so he could marry her himself. It hadn't helped that whispers of a yellow-eyed devil had

found their way into London when Michael had left Portsmouth. By the time he arrived, Hurst had disappeared and all of London had turned a suspicious eye on the Ashton name.

So his family had agreed to keep to London allowing those who worked for them to keep business running as usual. While his brothers seemed content with being confined to the city, Michael's blood yearned to return to the sea. It was where he belonged—London was too tame for him.

He continued through London until the expensive suits were replaced with the tattered worn clothes of the poor. The late afternoon darkened and the women grew less refined and rather than averting their gazes, looked him right in the eyes as they beckoned him to join them in the alleyways between the buildings. Even the smell in the air changed. He was considering a brunette who looked cleaner than the others when someone bumped into him. A hand brushed the front of his trousers, even as the soft feminine voice murmured an apology, and her other hand slid across his chest.

Turning he stared at the woman that quickly bustled away from him, realising the lightness of the pocket inside his coat. The wench had lifted his purse. Striding after her, he watched her turn and look over her shoulder before bolting. He took chase and caught up with her just as she rounded a corner and darted through the arched entryway of an alley leading to a row of dilapidated apartments.

He caught her arm and jerked her backwards, shoving her against the crumbling brick of the archway. "I believe you've something that belongs to me?" Without waiting for her response, he began searching her clothes. She tried to push at him but he ignored her attempts.

"Where is it?" he demanded when he found nothing.

"You are mistaken, I have taken nothing from you..." That feminine soft voice sounded vaguely familiar to him and he searched his memory to place how he knew her. The words found him, taking him back to Portsmouth. *Think of something else, something you love, something beautiful to you. Let it take away your pain.*

No, he argued with himself as he scrutinised her. While he'd been in much pain those months ago, he did remember her hair, honey blonde, long and silken. The hair on the woman in front of him was so filthy he couldn't tell what colour it was. He grasped her chin

and forced her to look up at him. He saw her blue eyes suddenly widen as if she recognised him, followed by wild fear.

"How do I know you?" he asked without releasing her. She swallowed loudly, shaking her head frantically and in doing so, that filthy hair slipped aside, revealing it was indeed part of a disguise. He reached up and swiped the wig from her head then stared at the honey gold strands that tumbled down from atop her head to fall around her thin shoulders.

"I do remember you," he stepped back, tossing the wig to the ground, but kept her arm in his grasp. "You would not leave me when I bid you away."

"You...you are mistaken, sir, it was not I. I've never seen you before." Her gaze darted towards the shadows. "You are a stranger to me." Michael turned his head slightly. He could smell the scent of the male on the other side of the archway.

"You took my purse."

"I've taken nothing from you, sir. You know that yourself as you have searched my person and found nothing." She licked her lips. "I'm no thief."

Michael gave her arm a shake. "If you are innocent, why would you run?"

"Because you were chasing me, sir."

Michael glared at her. He should hand her over to the nearest officer but had no proof that she'd stolen anything. Finally he released her arm and shoved her away from him. He turned and headed back to the main street.

"Had you known better what to look for, you would have found a larger purse just inside the sleeve of my coat." He didn't look back. Not until he turned the corner and made his way around to circle back and slip between two apartment buildings on the other side of the archway where he was concealed in darkness to watch her. The man from the alley stood in front of her, scowling, and Michael recognised his pointed face as that of the tavern owner in Portsmouth.

"Who was he? Do not lie to me, Elle."

"I don't know, Lewis. He was mistaken..." she yelped when Lewis's hand clapped the side of her face. "I don't know who he was! He smelled of bourbon and sounded half mad!"

"A mad man who knew you had lifted something from him," Lewis said pointedly. "You are getting sloppy." The woman lifted her chin, glaring back at him.

“Not so sloppy I didn’t manage to keep what I’d lifted.” She kicked the bucket at her feet to the side revealing her booty, Michael’s purse included. Clever wench, Michael thought to himself as the man knelt and swiped up her success.

“I want my share,” Elle demanded.

“You get nothing from this; you were almost caught. You have to *earn* your share.” Lewis headed away from her, back through the archway and up the stairs to one of the apartments. Michael stepped forward the moment the door closed, eyes locked on the woman as she reached down and angrily swiped up her wig.

“A thief *and* a liar, and no good at either,” he spoke when she was within his reach causing her to whirl around and stare at him. She started to bolt but he caught her arm and pulled her to his side. “Now you and I are going to spend a little time together so we can get to the truth.”

Chapter Two

Elle stumbled when she was released and shoved forward into the tiny room of the inn. Her heart pounded in her chest as she whirled to face the man who'd forced her there and retreated until her back hit the wall behind her. She knew him. And to her horror, he remembered her too. She would have to think fast and hope the devil that stepped into the room and closed the door behind him wouldn't kill her.

She held up her hands, hoping he would cease his advance on her and give her time to think her way out of the situation but his stride didn't slow until her outstretched palms connected with his chest and pushed them back so that he stood just inches from her.

Frowning, she tried to shove at his chest with no success in budging him. She glanced to her right at the table next to the bed. If she could get to the lantern she might use it as a weapon, not that she was certain she could do much damage, but it might allow her enough time to escape.

To return to what, she argued with herself. Lewis? Another beating? She shoved at him again but he was solid and wouldn't move.

"Are you finished?" He planted his hands on either side of her head, leaning close. "Because I would like to know why the hell you and that inn owner are in London thieving when he owns the Portsmouth Buckle Inn. Who sent you here?"

Elle stared at him. "Lewis sold the Bucket two weeks after you'd been there. That's all I know." She licked her lips as a thought came to her. "Well, I *do* know something else." She took a deep breath, hoping she wasn't making a mistake.

"Your name is Michael Ashton. Your arm had been cut off. You were in great pain and I tried to help you as much as I could. I saw you had the devil's eyes and wept for you when I thought you had died." She didn't look away from his unblinking glare, hoping he didn't guess the fear that pumped through her veins. "I didn't tell what I'd seen, told no one that you came in with but one arm and left with two. A week later a man came asking about Michael Ashton and gave your description, said your arm had been damaged. Lewis beat me and so I told him of your eyes but still told them nothing of your arm."

At least he was listening, she told herself, so she continued. "Four months ago, Lewis beat me again. He'd learned of your return to London and that you had no injured arm. He beat me for lying to him." She lifted her chin and forced hardness into her voice, "So I believe I have suffered enough on your behalf that I don't deserve being dragged around London by you over a few stolen coins!" She shoved at him again and to her surprise, this time he took a small step backwards.

She wasted no time and lunged to the right, grasping the lantern and swung it. But despite his size he moved quickly, dodging the strike so that her weapon merely cracked against the wall. A moment later, one large hand curled around her wrist, squeezing until she dropped the lantern, while the other dragged her against him. She tried to jerk her head backwards, hoping to connect with his nose but he avoided injury. In desperation, she raised the heel of her shoe and brought it back into shin. She heard his grunt and delivered a second kick, this time, his grasp on her wrist loosened and she drew back her elbow and slammed it into his face.

Free! She darted towards the door and had almost reached it when a growl sounded behind her and in the next moment, his heavy body forced hers to the floor. Flipping her over, he straddled her, his legs pinning hers, hands pushing her wrists above her head. The corner of his mouth was red and bleeding and she wished desperately she'd knocked out a tooth.

"The man who bought the Buckle Inn - what was his name?" Michael gritted down at her.

"I don't know." She struggled to free herself.

"Was it the same man who came asking about me?"

"I don't..." she stopped her struggles when she realised he wasn't going to hit her back and took a breath. "Get off of me or I won't tell you anything else at all."

"Tell me or I'll smother the life out of you," he countered.

"Damnation! I'll get your purse back!" She yelled up at him.

"This is not about a few coins, woman. I want to know if the man that sent you here was the bastard that cut my arm off!" His nose flared slightly and to her surprise his hands released hers and he pushed himself up and off of her. "Get up."

She scrambled from her feet and moved backwards, away from him. She watched him reach for the lantern, set it on the table, and light the wick. While she'd cracked the casing, the oil had not spilled and it still worked. Light filled the small room and as he turned, his shadow cast across the wall behind him, large and almost intimidating as the man himself.

"You are a devil. I saw your eyes. You've brought me here to kill me. Why should I tell you anything at all?" She pointed a finger at him.

"I am not going to kill you." He wiped at his mouth, frowning at the blood on his fingers. Elle wasn't certain she could trust that he was telling the truth. She watched him drag the wooden chair in front of the door and sit down. The wood groaned beneath his weight but did not give.

"I am going to keep you here until you tell me what I want to know." He crossed his arms and stretched his legs out in front of him. She realised that as long as she had something he needed he wasn't going to do anything. It gave her an upper hand.

"I'm hungry."

Those blue eyes narrowed. "Then talk."

"I can't remember anything with an empty stomach." She lifted her chin defiantly. She saw his jaw tighten but he stood and stepped around the chair, opened the door, and called out for food. Elle jumped forward, grasped the chair, and had raised it when he turned pointing a finger at her.

"Don't. I warn you. While I don't want to hurt you, by God I will if you strike me with that chair."

For a moment she considered hitting him with it anyway. But that would be stupid. Slowly, she lowered the chair. He grasped it and jerked it away from her as he closed the door. But he didn't sit. Instead he stood there, arms crossed, glaring at her.

"I was afraid when I discovered your arm was healed," she said after a moment of silence. "I ran and didn't come back to the Buckle until the next evening. Lewis thought I'd left with you. He was angry, and beat me for whoring and keeping the money from him. He didn't recognise you tonight though."

"Tell me about the man who asked about me."

She bit her lip, gaze dropping to his right arm. "Tell me what happened to your arm."

Silence filled the room for several long seconds. "I attacked one of his ships just off the coast but he retaliated quickly. His men were doubled and ready. My arm was cut off in fight and I was dumped into the sea. And it was there, bleeding, I watched the bastard burn my ship. I was left to die so I swam to shore."

Elle stared at him. "With but one arm? That must have..."

"Hurt like hell. The Buckle Inn was the first place I came to." He turned when someone rapped on the door behind him. Elle watched him take the tray of food and closed the door again. He stepped forward, set the tray on the bed, and nodded towards it.

"Eat."

She waited until his step carried him back to the door and he leant against the solid wood before she moved forward to swipe a bowl of the soup. She ate hungrily. Lewis never gave her much, preferring to keep her weakened so that she was more inclined to do as he wished. She was grateful she was allowed to eat her fill before Michael Aston began his questions again.

"Now tell me about the man who asked about me. Was his name Hurst?"

"No."

His eyes narrowed. "You are certain?"

"His name was McKenzie." She watched his eyes harden.

"I knew it. McKenzie is one of Hurst's men. " He kicked at the chair and sent it tumbling across the room. She remained sitting on the bed as his hands opened and closed at his sides.

"I could go to Lewis. When he sleeps, I could look through his desk. I could find the name of the man who bought the Buckle." She watched him, thinking he looked like an animal about to attack but some of her fear of him was ebbing away. He was angry that she'd stolen from him. That took away much of the danger she'd feared for herself.

"Lewis cares for you?"

Elle laughed at that. It was too absurd to take seriously.

"I'm afraid I give you no power over him. Since we've moved here, he's found several new women to work for him. He might be angry if something was to happen to me but the next day, he would move one of the others in with him." She shrugged.

"How do you know that for certain?"

"It's what he did before. The one he used most died. The next day, I was moved into the Buckle. He had me tutored and I became his new favourite."

"You are his lover?"

Elle scowled. "His slave. He owns me. He owns others. We do what he says or we get beaten and used. But," she bit her lip as a plan suddenly formed, "if I help you, you could help me. If he was sent away, out of the way, I'd have enough to start new for myself."

"I could kill him tonight and find the documents myself," Michael countered.

"The apartment is his set-up from which he can run his street business with his women." She began to see a light in the small room, one that could give her freedom for the life she'd lived since she was a girl. "He has many other places. As his favourite, I am privileged to often accompany him to those buildings. It would be easy enough to go through his papers and see if any of them could lead me to the whereabouts of the man you call Hurst."

He pushed off from the door and stepped towards the bed. She could see she had his attention with her quickly devised plan. The lantern light played shadows across the wide planes of his face as he regarded her in silence.

"And why should I trust you to do any of what you say to help me?" His eyes narrowed. "What do you have to gain?"

"After you find Hurst, you will make Lewis sign over his holding to me and free me. Show him your devil eyes and scare the hell out of him so that he leaves London and never returns." She couldn't help the feeling of triumph that began to grow in her chest. She'd attempted to escape Lewis Brisby in the past, to no avail. This time, there might be a chance for success.

The man before her showed no expression and she couldn't decide how close, if at all, he was to agreeing to her plan. Her hopes started to plummet when he shook his head and turned.

"Forgive me if I find it hard to trust a woman who makes her living stealing and lying to others."

She stared at the back of his dark head then reached down and pushed up the hem of her skirt, exposing some of her calf. "How am I any less trustworthy than a devil with yellowed eyes that plots murder right before me?"

He grunted and glanced back at her, his attention instantly dropping to her legs. Slowly his gaze lifted back to her face. There was tension there but he made no move towards her. Damnation! No matter how much of a devil, he could not be without some desire. What did he want? She'd have to find out if she wished to convince him to go along with her plan. She slowly stood, readying to push at him until she saw a break in his expression.

"I'll expose you." She lifted her chin when he continued to regard her evenly. "I'll tell everything I know."

His head tilted to the side and the brow above his left eyes raise. "Are you threatening me?" She shrugged, lifting her hand so that her fingers ran along the rough wood of the wall as she moved to the corner opposite of him, putting as much distance between them as possible.

"I know your secret. I'll be hysterical, frightened, weeping. What does a thief have to gain by going to officials to report a monster in the streets of London? They'll believe me when I tell them what you are." She watched him advance a few steps. "They'll pull Hurst in when they learn you mean to kill him. What do you think he will do? Deny the story I've told? The only reason you would be looking for him would be because he didn't want to be found by you."

"And how will you tell them *anything* at all when I cut out your tongue?"

"They'll go to your home. Have you a wife? She would be interrogated far more roughly than you did so with me moments ago. Have you a family? What would it do to them?" She pressed and at long last, she found the break she was looking for. Those eyes darkened and his strong jaw tightened so she pounced.

"If they are any kind of family they will try to protect you and when they do, they will be arrested and accused of being devils too. What do you think will happen to them?" She took a step back but he moved far more quickly than she'd anticipated. His hand connected with her chest and pushed her all the way to the wall.

"I believe you've just reached the end of my patience," he warned quietly.

"It can all be avoided if we work together." She knew he could most likely feel her heart pounding in her chest. "I *can* help you. You know I can. You already know there is a connection between Lewis and Hurst. It's McKenzie. I can give you your revenge. You have

much more to lose by not trusting me." She grew silent and waited. Maybe she'd pushed too far.

"You *will* do as you said and search your owner's papers and bring your findings to me. You *will* do it quietly. You will *not* tell anyone anything you think you know about me or my family." He let his hand fall from her chest so he could step into the space between them, his gaze never leaving hers. "Do you understand?"

She took a shaking breath, forcing herself to remain solid. "I will...*if*." She closed the last step between them despite her thumping heart, in an attempt to show him she would not be backed against the wall and intimidated. "If...you agree to do as I have proposed. I want my freedom just as madly as you want Hurst. A murdering devil and an untrustworthy thief can surely appreciate a bargain where they both get what they want."

She blinked when his gaze softened. Something that looked like amusement glittered in his eyes. Amusement and maybe even respect. Hope rose again.

"You are unrelenting and stupidly brave," he said after a moment.

"I am *not* stupid," she countered, "And neither am I unrelenting. I am willing to allow you have more than what I have offered you already as proof that I mean to uphold all that I have said I would do."

"Anything I want, I could take," he said as his gaze dropped to the bodice of her dress.

"Would you not rather have it given willingly?" She lowered her lashes, "Have me come to you, and beg you to do as you wished?"

"You would not beg." He reached out and lifted her chin so she had to lift her lashes and look at him. "I could pay any prostitute outside to come to me willing and beg me."

"But I have seen your true nature, Michael. Would you have them so easily if any of them had seen that side of you, chance those devil eyes glowing at them?" She shook her head. "I doubt you would find someone so easily bought. Not one who would do *anything* you wanted, who would welcome you to be as rough as you liked, who would not expect tenderness and feigned affection just to get what you wanted."

"Anything?" he murmured.

She touched his arms and slid her hands up to his shoulders. "I *will* do anything you wish." She saw his attention drop to her mouth and purposely licked her lips. "I am yours to have anyway you like. Is that enough of an offer to buy my freedom?"

Chapter Three

Michael could not deny the wench tempted him and was certain he'd never met a woman who would not surrender no matter how dangerous the circumstances. She'd fought at him like a wildcat, refusing, despite the fear he'd seen in her eyes, to allow him to intimidate her into backing down. She'd used her words as her weapons when he'd taken her physical ones away and now turned her body into the most dangerous weapon of all.

It wasn't much she was asking of him, a chance at a life where she did not belong to another. Normally he didn't become involved in the lives of those who were not his family or not his responsibility. She was making it damnably hard for him to discard her situation, not only because she could be useful to his finding Hurst, and not only because she'd not left him those months ago and whispered words to help chase away his pain, but mostly because of the grit on her spine.

"You are too thin," he said when her hands slipped beneath the lapels of his coat and to push the wool over his shoulders. "And I prefer brunettes." Now *he* was lying.

"I'm sure you can find some way to overlook your disgust." Her sarcasm was thick as she tugged the coat down until his arms were free. It wasn't completely for his benefit. He'd felt the shift in the tension when he'd warned her not to hit him with the chair. She'd been fearful of him before but now he could smell her arousal as her hands grasped his shirt and began tugging it free from his trousers. He stood there without lifting his arms to offer her assistance and after a moment she met his gaze as she reached up and grasped the collar of his shirt. With one jerk, she ripped the front of the shirt in half.

Mother of God. He sucked in his breath sharply when she spread her palms flat on his chest, then scratched her nails through the hair. She didn't hide the fact that his reaction pleased her for a smug little smile curled in the corners of those full lips and she pushed the ruined shirt over his shoulders. The wench knew she'd won.

"You will not tell me what you secretly desire? What if I were to share a secret with you?" Her nails glided against his sides as she moved closer, tilting her head upwards so she could whisper in his ear, "In Portsmouth, I thought your body flawless and your face

handsome. You are so male and perfect." Her words fuelled his reaction and his cock hardened. He swallowed when she leant forward and licked at his shoulder, humming softly against his skin.

His gaze swept over her deceiving features. She looked soft and feminine, freckles dotting her cheeks, her mouth a full bloom that feigned innocence. But she was far from an innocent. In those large blue eyes, a woman who'd seen ugliness and survived it, fought for triumph in situations where there was none. Hope for better had not been broken and she'd learned how to manipulate and seduce to get what she wanted in a world where she had no rights.

"You're a very dangerous creature," he murmured and stilled, closing his eyes when her mouth found his shoulder again and her small teeth pressed against his skin. Heat wound through his abdomen and tightened. When she released him, moved half an inch inward then bit again, he grasped her hips and thrust his against her.

"Interesting," she purred before moving another half inch and biting again. Michael's breathing deepened as that heat thickened inside of him. His cock strained against the material of his trousers and he felt like leaping on the woman. Then her hand slipped down between them to rub at him.

"You'll make me so damned rushed that I'll have no control," he warned. The wench bit again, this time harder, and Michael made a sound that was half grunt, half growl.

"It is the pain you like?" she whispered.

"I haven't felt any pain. It's that damnable mouth..." He dragged a ragged breath and this time she bit down with force. His fingers tightened on her hips and his body jerked forward, slamming her against the wall.

"How much can you take before you break?" she tempted.

His laughter sounded strangled. "My breaking point is not what you want, woman." He grasped her shoulders so she couldn't lean forward and bite again. "Push me too far and I'll want to bite back, to make you mine, forever."

Her eyes rounded as her hands stilled on his chest. "I understand."

But she didn't. Not really. She couldn't. If she did, she wouldn't have leant forward to bite him again as soon as he loosened his hold on her shoulders. It felt good. Too good. Her hands ran up and down his stomach then dropped to loosen his trousers. He watched her

undress him and remove his boots. When he stood naked, her gaze washed over him, appraising every inch. He could smell her arousal—an intoxicating blend of desire and her natural feminine scent.

Capturing her mouth, he kissed her roughly, thrusting his tongue forward, and tasted the sweet warmth behind her teeth. Her soft, obliging lips worked against his, kissing him back with equal fever as he pushed up her dress and removed her undergarments. She moaned against his mouth when his hand dipped between her thighs to caress the soft folds of her sex, the sound causing a terrible, aching need in his groin.

When he released her from his kiss, he saw the shocked look in her heavy lidded gaze and knew she could see that his eyes had started to glow. It couldn't be helped. He didn't have the same control his brother had. He couldn't keep his wolf tucked away as if it didn't exist, not when this woman made him want to crawl atop her and show her exactly what kind of animal he could be.

Her pink tongue slid along her bottom lip and hesitantly she leant forward. Her tongue pressed against his shoulder and she sucked at his skin. The draw of her lips caused him to hold his breath but when those small even teeth applied pressure, he released that breath loudly. His arms shook and the heat that filled him could not be slowed.

"More?"

"Oh God yes," he answered, his voice sounding more akin to a beastly growl than human. She should have run. She should have screamed and cowered. Instead, she bit down on his shoulder once more and didn't pull back. Torturous pleasure wound through him until his whole body shook. Grasping her leg at the knee, he brought it to his hip so he could dip forward. His cock bumped against her cunt as her back touched the wall. He thrust into her and she cried out against his skin, her teeth gripping him harder. She was slick with her own excitement and rocked her hips for more, the walls of her sex tightening around him when she did.

"More," he said between ragged breaths. "Harder." She obliged, those teeth tightening so that the blood pounded through his body. He slammed his hips into her, grunting with every thrust as desire overwhelmed him. He couldn't slow, driven now by pure need.

She released his shoulder and as her pants became cries, she gripped his arms tightly. "Hurry," he growled and she bucked beneath the force of pleasure, nails raking across his

shoulders. He rode her until her cries became screams then sobs. Now he would take his fill of her. He was hungry and had little control left. She took the last of it when she leant up and bit him where his neck met his shoulder.

It was half shout, half sound of the beast. He buried himself as he spilled into her, wild dizzying heat shaking through him. Her teeth pressed harder and the pleasure intensified until lights danced in the corners of his vision. He threw his head back as his canines pushed through his gums. He released her knee, planting both hands on the wall behind her as his nails lengthened into sharp points.

Adrenalin pumped through him as she released him from her mouth. "No more," he rasped. She stared up at him as he took several deep breaths. He could feel her pulse against his cock and her feminine scent filled his nose. His whole body shook as he fought the urge to sink his own teeth into her. It was not love which was what drove most to make a mate. She was a dangerous woman and had found what triggered his loss of control and took him to the very edge between man and beast. It made him want to keep her.

"Any more and I make you *mine*." He dragged long breaths through his nose loudly.

"What *are* you?" she whispered.

"I am wolf." He closed his eyes, forcing his body to calm. "I warned you not to push me." He pulled from within her but instantly wanted to push back into her tight warmth and ride her again. Once the shaking stopped, his canines and claws retracted. He pushed off the wall and turned his back to her, walking to the window to look out at the darkened docks in the distance.

"Leave me." He heard the rustle of her clothes and listened to her steps as she moved to the door.

"I'll return to you tomorrow." Then the door closed behind her.

He knew she wouldn't. She'd seen him now, realised the danger. He would have to find Hurst on his own. Sighing, he reached for his clothes and, once dressed, pulled on his coat. A low chuckle rumbled from his chest as he discovered the leather purse was missing from the sleeve.

Chapter Four

"Michael." Victor's voice pushed through sleep and brought Michael to full wake. He sat up, squinting through the late morning sunlight that poured through the window. His brother stood in the doorway, a quizzical smile twisting his lips. Behind him, a head of honey gold hair and large eyes peered around and into the room.

"She said you would want her to come up?" Victor's voice hinted with amusement.

"What in hell are you doing *here*?" Michael demanded and his brother stepped aside.

"You were not where I left you last night. I told you I would return." Elle stepped forward. "It was not difficult to find you. I merely asked someone on the street. I didn't know you were so wealthy."

Michael ran a hand over his face as she moved closer and sat on the side of the bed. "That doesn't answer my question."

"I brought a gift," she held out a bottle of rum, "to apologise for my leaving so hastily last night. Lewis will be furious. I stole it from his personal stores...at his office."

"Close the damned drapes," he growled and his brother moved to block out the light so Michael could focus on her face. Then his gaze dropped to the bruises around her neck.

"What happened to you?" He reached forward and tilted her head to the side. Clear marks of fingers wrapped around her throat.

"Lewis was angry I'd stayed out so late. It's nothing. Did you hear me? I was at his office last night." She tried to push away his hands but Michael's anger must have shown in his eyes. "I'm used to his heavy hand and his suspicion, though this time I suppose his accusations were true."

"I've changed my mind. I think I would like to beat what I want to know out of him." Michael let his hand fall away and glanced at his brother to find Victor's brow furrowed.

"You needn't. You were right. If you'll stop fussing over me like a mother hen, I'll tell you what I've already found out." She pulled out a piece of parchment from the basket she carried. "He drank too much wine last night and while he slept, I transcribed the document for you." She held it out to him.

"What is this about?" Victor moved closer.

"Hurst," Michael answered absently as he reached for the parchment.

"It wasn't Hurst who bought the Bucket, but the more I thought of what you'd said and about that man McKenzie, the more I wondered if you were not spot-on with your suspicions. So, I slipped away early this morning and visited a constable that often uses Lewis's prostitutes. A bit of blackmail and he told me the name on the document. The man who bought the Bucket—Thomas Pent—is an attorney here in London and works as Josiah Hurst's accountant." She beamed at him and crossed her arms. "I paid a boy to sit outside Thomas Pent's office. I'm to meet him tonight and he will relay to me everyone who came and went."

"You blackmailed a constable?" Michael chuckled. "And I wonder how you could afford to pay anyone to do anything."

"You were stupid to have trusted me not to take the purse once you'd told me where it was," she defended.

"She stole from you?" Victor laughed suddenly. "Who *is* this woman?"

"Elle Riley. Your brother and I are business associates," Elle answered, eliciting another laugh from Victor.

"I took your advice yesterday and found a woman to occupy my time with. She is helping me to find Hurst so that I am not made to sit in this house and do nothing." Michael threw back the covers and reached for his clothes, very aware of Elle's gaze when it swept over him. Apparently, Victor noticed as well.

"I'll leave you to your...business discussions. Join us downstairs when you are finished here." He turned and slipped through the door, pulling it closed behind him.

"Have you no desire for me now?" she asked when he started to pull on his clothes. When he looked back at her, he found disappointment in her gaze. He was surprised she would offer herself after she'd seen his true nature the night before.

"First, I want to read this document. Did you find anything else?" He pulled on his trousers.

She lifted a second parchment. "The owner of the buildings that Lewis bought. Can you guess? Thomas Pent."

Michael swiped it from her and read over her precise handwriting. "There are no addresses here."

"I told you I was not stupid. If you had the addresses, you would have no need for me." She stood as he swept a shirt over his head and stepped forward to grasp the material. Keeping her gaze on his, she began tucking the material into his trousers, purposely pushing her hands lower and against his cock.

"You think I would cheat you?" He arched a brow as she reached around him to tuck in the back, pushing her breasts against his chest.

"I think you want to kill Josiah Hurst as much as I want to be free of Lewis Brisby." She lifted her hands and began combing them through his hair. "That doesn't make you a cheat."

"You are a manipulative wench." He finally lifted his hands to her waist and she smiled slyly. "Why are you here? I know you were frightened of me last night."

"I had all night to consider that fear. How should your being a wolf instead of the devil I'd thought make much difference in our arrangement other than I may still have a chance to avoid damnation?" Her hand slid down to his face. "And...well, I also considered how you were with me. You could have taken what you wanted. I offered it freely and instead you gave me pleasure too. Most wouldn't have done that in the same situation."

Michael said nothing as she leant into him.

"And you could have beaten me for stealing from you, beaten me for striking you when I tried to run. You didn't. Even when you were changed, you warned me of what danger I was in." She took a breath. "I do recognise kindness and that wasn't part of the deal. And kindness is appreciated for I do not know it often."

Michael wanted to go to the apartment across London, wait for Lewis to arrive and rip out his throat. This woman, who'd obviously seen her fair share of ugliness in the world, had not been broken. She fought. She survived. She grasped hope and triumph wherever she could find it, no matter how large or small. A slave to a man, and yet she blackmailed constables to get what she wanted.

"You are smiling, almost look as if you are laughing at me," she said.

"I'm attempting to imagine a constable bending to your will," he admitted and she grinned devilishly.

"He turned three shades of red and threatened to have me thrown from his home into the street. He might have followed through but I asked him how he would explain it to his wife when I tore open my dress and wept at his steps for him to take me again and again as he had the night before." Her eyes glittered. "He sputtered and huffed then blurted out the information I asked for."

Michael did laugh that time, he couldn't help it. "I've only met one that matched your power of seduction and manipulation."

"I suppose you hate her too."

Michael shook his head. "No, I love her as I love no other and yearn to return to her as soon as Hurst is dead." She saw her eyes widen.

"Love? Truly? Who is she? What is her name?"

"The Atlantic." He released her and strode to the door. "Come, we will have time later to explore what desires you mean to fulfil. My brother will need to be filled in on our plan and may be able to offer advice on how to proceed."

Elle sat quietly in a chair in the study of Ashton Manor, watching Cadence Ashton as she busied herself in keeping the men's cups filled with coffee. Her gown was expensive silk and jewels sparkled at her throat and ears. When Victor looked at her, she could see the depth of love he felt for the woman.

"Hurst's business continues in his absence." Victor leant back in his chair. "I'll send someone to Portsmouth to see if he's taken residence at the Bucket Inn. But I suspect he is here, somewhere in London."

Michael looked at Cadence, "Where do you think he might go to hide?"

The woman settled on the settee and waved a hand. "I haven't the slightest. I wasn't even allowed into his study. He never told me anything."

"How do you know him?" Elle asked.

"I was married to him." Cadence's revelation surprised Elle. She glanced at Victor then Michael. Victor was married to the woman that was once married to Hurst.

"You took his wife?" She looked at Victor but it was Michael that spoke, holding up his hand.

"*After* he took my arm and burned my ship and all that it carried, including my crew."

Elle inclined her head adding, "After you attacked his ship." She glanced at Cadence. "Perhaps if he thought you wanted him back?"

Cadence leant forward. "You mean I could lure him out of hiding? He might be tempted, for otherwise he would not be so foolish to show himself while there was the threat of one of these two coming after him. He did *see* Victor in full wolf form."

"Absolutely not," Victor interrupted. "I will not use you as bait and if he even so much as looked at you, I would carve out his eyes."

"You would do no such thing, for you know Michael's mood would then be intolerable," Cadence laughed, rolling her eyes.

"Then what *would* I do, wife, since you assume once again to know?" Victor raised a brow and Elle watched Cadence open her mouth and close it again as her cheeks flushed deeply. "I think you do it purposely," Victor accused in a quiet voice as he rose from behind his desk and stepped behind his wife, placing his hands on her shoulders.

"I only meant..." she stopped when he leant forward, his lips next to her ear.

"Do you do it purposely?"

Elle almost stood, ready to leap on the man if he meant to raise a hand to his wife but the small smile that turned on Cadence's lips stopped her. Those eyes cut up at her husband and for a moment their gazes met.

"You know well I only do as I wish."

Victor's gaze dropped to her smile, his own mouth curling. "So you do." He straightened and moved away, back to his desk. "Cadence, despite her test to my patience, is right. Hurst will not show himself until he can either prove the rumours he's spread of our family is true or he feels there is no longer a threat."

"Or he believes to be meeting with someone he trusts," Elle added, "someone like Thomas Pent. I did not find out all that I have without thinking things through. If we pay for Pent to be watched, and see that he is indeed meeting with Hurst regularly, it would be easy enough to find out where and be waiting for him."

"And how would we do that?" Michael asked.

Elle grinned, "Men tend to reveal much when there is a chance for a romp with a woman. I'll go to him and ask for work. I will do anything he needs me to do for a small price that will buy a loaf of bread to feed my younger brother. He will suggest a meeting

later that evening to discuss how I could be of use to him, but I cannot in the evenings for I couldn't leave my poor brother alone at dark. Instead I suggest the time, but he has a meeting and cannot. Where is it, I innocently inquire, and I shall wait for him after the meeting." She shrugged. "Then you have where and when."

"And what if he is one who, once propositioned, will not wait?" Michael asked.

"Then I pretend to enjoy the rutting pig and ask for him to meet with me again," Elle answered. "Either way, we get what we are after."

"It is a sound plan," Victor said after a moment but Michael only grunted. "And what do you get out of helping us?" Victor's gaze swung to Elle, narrowed eyes reminding her very much of the way Michael looked when suspicious.

"My arrangement is with your brother," she answered.

"It's a small matter," Michael added. "She wants freedom from the bastard who left those marks on her neck."

"Freedom?" Cadence echoed.

"She's a slave. It should take only a minute or so. A man who strikes a woman is almost always one that can be intimidated by another man," Michael stretched his legs forward. "I should be able to convince him to sign his holdings over to her rather easily, and I imagine he'll be on his way out of town before I even suggest he leaves."

"I might remind you that you threatened me yourself yesterday," Elle said pointedly.

"Only when you had that chair readied to bash over my head and had already bloodied my lip," he glanced at Victor, "like a wild thing trapped in a corner." Victor laughed easily.

"And now I learn you are no more dangerous, and perhaps even less, than a tender hearted old woman." Elle shook her head, exaggerating a sigh. "Your underbelly is fully exposed now and I wonder if you'll be able to intimidate a child from my path."

"I may not strike you but I still might cut out your tongue, wench." Michael threatened as he stood. "Come, I won't be made to just sit here and wait for the report from the one you have watching Pent. In the meantime, I can at least check any ships of Hurst's that might have arrived to see if he's hiding aboard."

"I'd not thought of that," Elle admitted.

"He goes every morning and every evening," Victor supplied as Elle rose to her feet. She followed Victor from the study.

"That's not what you were doing last evening unless the captain of the ship is a busty brunette with red skirts," Elle whispered, surprised when Victor laughed again.

"He's a wolf. He *can* hear you." Michael slanted his gaze at her as they stepped from the manor. "He can also smell you."

"Can *you*?" She watched him wave for the driver of the carriage. The young man quickly opened the door and stepped aside.

"I can," he said as she climbed in. He followed and settled beside her.

"Interesting." She tucked a leg beneath her and turned towards him. "So how do I smell to a wolf man?"

His mouth twitched with a hint of a smile. "Like prey."

She laughed. "Prey?"

His eyes glittered at her before he faced forward again. She liked him. She couldn't help it. He was rough, less refined than his brother, but there was no pretence about him. She'd glimpsed he shared his brother's sense of humour though he did not laugh nearly as easily. And he'd compared her to an ocean...a whole ocean, something he loved.

"The ships will keep," she touched his arm. "Call for the driver to stop." He looked at her and for a moment she thought he would not. Then he lifted his hand rapped firmly on the roof of the carriage. She smiled when they slowed and then finally came to a halt. She moved forward, sliding onto his lap so she could straddle him.

"Now tell me what prey smells like." She smiled when he hardened beneath her and she reached between them to free him from his trousers. "Does prey smell good?"

"Enough to eat." The thickness in his voice sent shivers down her spine as his hands pushed up her skirts, then stilled. "You are wearing no underclothes."

"What good would it do if you are just going to rip them away?" She sucked in her breath when he lifted her and his cock pushed into her. Then he brought her down, angling his hips so he pushed deep into her. He felt good and when his strong hands slid up her back, pulling her forward to him, she welcomed his lips. He kissed her deeply, hips rising to meet hers when she began to move atop him.

His fingers worked the buttons at the back of her dress until the material loosened and he could tug it down around her, trapping her arms at her sides. One hand moved to her breasts and caressed, kneaded. When she leant away from his kiss, she tried to pull her arms

free but his other hand pulled the material tighter behind her making it impossible. His eyes glittered up at her as his thrusts upward became sharper and the hand at her breasts dropped to slide between them to her clit.

"I'm supposed to be pleasing you," she said on a whisper as he plucked at her.

"You *are* pleasing me." He planted his thumb against her and began moving it in a small circle. She closed her eyes and hummed.

"No, look at me." His words brought her eyes open again. Tension made her whole body sensitive. Every touch, every stroke, and her pants grew heavier. Heat wound through her, made her rock faster on his cock. She gazed at his face, watched the planes of his face flush, his nose flare, those intense eyes darken. Powerful. That's what she liked best about him. He didn't have to force. He didn't have to threaten. He carried power and confidence on him like a thick woollen cloak, with no fear of anything.

She moaned his name as pleasure threatened and the muscles of her body grew taut. "Dear God, yes." Her voice lifted as tension broke and a thousand sensations exploded through her body. She bucked against him and when his hand left her back, she jerked her arms free, reaching forward to grasp his shoulders.

"Damn. Damn. Damn," his words found her as she drifted down and her body settled from rapture. He thrust upward, deep, and came into her, his fingers grasping her hips to hold her to him. He bared his teeth as he shouted through them, nose flaring with every ragged breath, the cords of his neck constricted. She reached up and stroked his face when he leant his head back, and dragged breath through his lips. A throaty laugh surprised her and he shook his head without looking at her.

"I remembered you at the Bucket Inn as a gentle woman, soft, and perhaps even innocent." He lifted his head, eyes searching hers.

"Would you have me pretend to be that way?"

"I would *not* but I would have you in a bed next time. I have no liking for being cramped where I cannot move." He lifted her off of him and she pushed down her dress as she settled at his side. It took him but a moment to adjust his trousers and then reached up and rapped the roof of the carriage again. A moment later it jerked into motion.

"How often does Brisby beat you?" The question came out of nowhere.

"Normally, not often, only when he thinks I am cheating him of money he thinks I've made or keeping secrets from him." She smoothed back her hair. "He is suspicious when he doesn't know where I am and I return with no coin for him. I am beaten, sent to my room, sometimes made to go without meals for a day or two. Normally, I can find something to eat when I'm out working however."

"When you are free of him, what will you do?" Michael asked.

"Whatever I wish," she said and smiled. "I don't know what that is yet but it shall be of my own choosing." She studied his face as he glanced out the window and saw his scowl as they rumbled into the bustle of society..

"You do not like being made to stay here," she said aloud.

"I despise this place," he admitted, then shook his head. "No, you are correct. It's the being confined here that makes me despise it."

"You need a wild storm to ride," she nodded when he looked at her. "London is too small for you, especially when you are caged here. I am content with any place but I do know the feeling of being trapped. You feel the world waiting just outside the door but cannot go. It burns inside of you, makes you restless."

He angled his body towards her, watching her as she continued. "You start to hate those around you because even though they stay, it is not because they are made to. You start to stare out at the horizon, watching the road that leads somewhere...anywhere. And eventually, you become obsessed with hatred for what keeps you caged, willing to do anything to rid yourself of it." She took a breath and smiled sadly. "Your captor is Hurst, mine is Lewis."

He winced. "My captor hasn't the same hold on me as yours does."

She touched his hand. "Of course he does. You would leave but with him still alive, he threatens your family's secret, and that can be as binding as being owned." She offered a wink when he said nothing. "I told you I was not stupid."

"No, you are not," his voice softened, then he looked away.

Chapter Five

The boy was only twelve or so but had more than earned the money Elle had given him to sit outside Pent's office. He carried a sketchbook and in it was a charcoal drawing of every person who'd visited Pent that day. Unfortunately, neither Hurst nor McKenzie were among any of the faces depicted and the boy told them that Pent hadn't met with anyone.

"You did well, boy." Michael said as he closed the sketchbook. He reached inside his coat and retrieved a small purse, holding it out for the boy. The boy's surprise was evident on his face.

"Thank you, sir!"

"Run home now, Charles, so your father won't worry. Come back tomorrow," Elle told him and the boy started to turn, then stopped, looking down at the purse in his hand.

"Sir, if I were in bad business I wouldn't do it in the light of prying eyes." He looked at Michael. "I'd wait till dark and meet somewhere I thought was safe."

Michael stared at him. "Would you?"

He shrugged. "The only ones to see me up to no good would be those in the dark up to no good too."

"You are a clever boy, one I hope I'll never find somewhere in bad business of your own." Michael warned.

"Not me, sir." He turned and bound down the street.

"He's right. We'll wait and follow Pent tonight," Michael decided. Their wait wasn't long. Pent, an image the boy had drawn on the very first page, appeared only ten minutes later and locked the door. They followed him by carriage to his home, and then waited for hours.

"He isn't going anywhere. His driver is retired for the night." Michael pointed at the carriage house where no light burned. "Hurst could be hiding inside for all we know."

"Well, I'll just go find out." She started across the street, waving at him when he called out to her. Up the steps, she smoothed down her skirts and then lifted her knuckles to rap

soundly. A moment later Pent opened the door and peered out at her, his pointed nose wrinkling slightly.

"Forgive me, sir, but I am looking for work..."

"There is no work here," he interrupted.

"Nothing, sir?" she asked before he could close the door. "No floors to be scrubbed? No linens to be washed? My brother is but seven. I am all that he has to look after him. We needn't much." She waited as his gaze looked her over.

"Where is your brother now?"

"We have an apartment, sir. I do laundry and manage to pay the rent but my brother is hungry." She reached forward and touched his hand. "Please, sir, I will do anything you need doing."

He frowned and then reached inside his vest, retrieving a purse, and counted out several coins. "This does not mean you will come here again," he warned.

"Oh no, sir, I couldn't." She stepped back, shaking her head. "I earn any coin I have."

He studied her, then nodded. "At least you have pride which is more than I can say for most others of your misfortune. Come inside. You can scrub down the foyer." He held out the coins again and she took them, feigning elation.

"Oh thank you, sir. Your generosity is appreciated." She glanced behind her when he turned to lead her inside and barely made out Michael's outline in the shadows. She flashed a grin before hurrying to follow Pent.

"I'll have soap and water brought to you. My maid will be relieved to have someone ease her duties," Pent spoke as he walked through the foyer and into the corridor. Elle watched him open the door to his salon and leant to peek inside at the man sitting in a chair. Her heart leapt in her chest and she whirled as the door closed behind Pent. Out the front door and she flew down the steps. She didn't stop until she reached Michael's side, pulling him farther into the shadows.

As she caught her breath, she stared at the door, fearful that it would open. "I don't know if he saw me and, if he did, whether he recognised me."

"Hurst?" Michael's voice tightened.

"No, I have never met Hurst. McKenzie." She drew a deep breath, then another, forcing herself to calm. And then the door opened and she grasped Michael's arm, her heart feeling

as if it leapt right into her throat. McKenzie stepped out, looking both ways down the street, Pent behind him.

"It was only a beggar," Pent's voice carried across the empty street.

"It was not. It was that girl, the one from the Inn, Lewis's little tart," McKenzie hissed, moving down the steps. "What was she doing here?"

"She was going to scrub my floors. I tell you, she was looking for work." Pent glanced around nervously. "Come back inside before someone sees you here." After a moment, McKenzie turned and retreated back into the house.

Elle's hands shook. "I am stupid. Stupid stupid stupid." She covered her mouth as Michael faced her. "He saw me. He knew who I was. He'll go to Lewis. I've ruined our plan."

Michael stood staring at the house. "Not if you lie to him as you did before about knowing who I was. Tell him you were looking for work all day, it will explain why you were gone so long. You had no luck thieving so you begged to do housework so that you would not return tonight empty handed. When McKenzie goes to him, he'll know you were there scrubbing floors."

"Yes. That might work." She nodded. "I made up a story about a brother to help my chances. I saw McKenzie and ran not wanting him to recognise me and give away my ruse. It's a lame excuse but it might not make a difference if my being there and what for are confirmed."

"Now that you are breathing again, it wasn't stupid, reckless but not stupid. You found out McKenzie was in there so we know we're not wasting our time." Michael crossed his arms. "I'm tempted to go in myself and just beat him until he tells me where the bastard is."

"Can I ask you something?" Elle watched him look at her a moment before inclining his head. "Why are you so set on killing him? The rumours will die and he can't prove you are a wolf. You lost your ship, just bribe him for money. You have your arm back."

"If I did that, then I wouldn't need you anymore."

That shouldn't have hurt her but it did even though she knew what he meant. "Why?" she pressed.

"My brother ruined Hurst's arm because of what he did to me and, while Victor wanted to, he did not kill him for what Cadence suffered. Victor refrained because he thought I would want to retaliate for what was done against me." Michael shifted. "You saw Cadence,

how she is. She's gentle and loving. And when I think of...if Hurst hurts her, he hurts my brother."

Elle stared at him. No. Cadence was the kind that wouldn't have been able to protect herself. Victor had saved her but Michael meant to make certain Hurst was never a threat to her again. It was that moment that she knew she loved him. Hurst was not his captor at all. Michael was caged by the love for his family. She wanted to leap on him and bite him until he shook with pleasure.

Michael suddenly breathed in deeply and then looked at her. "You cannot possibly be aroused when only moments ago you were terrified," he growled. "You seem excited by any promise of violence."

"Perhaps I am," she said. "Perhaps I long to ride a wild storm before it's smooth sailing again." She wouldn't tell him that it was his honour that truly made her want for him. She would not trap him. He wanted freedom to return to the ocean he loved and she would not get in the way of that.

He chuckled. "You compare me to a force of nature?"

"An angry squall," she corrected and his chuckle became laughter.

"And you are my dangerous waters to rage against?"

"I'm the pirate that takes your ship when you are too busy dancing with your beloved Atlantic," she teased with a giggle. "I sell it and all its goods off to the highest bidder and spend my gold on whisky and sex."

She gasped when his arm slipped around her and pulled her to him. "Always finding a way to steal from me." His lips brushed over hers, hovered above her mouth momentarily as he inhaled deeply. Then he kissed her, those defined lips coaxing her to return his affection. She parted for him and moaned when his warm tongue invaded and danced. Lifting her hands to his face, she kissed him back passionately, pressing against him. When his arm tightened, she pressed her teeth around his bottom lip until that deep sound—half groan, half growl—vibrated from his throat.

"Your weapons are more dangerous than those of a pirate," he murmured when she kissed at his jaw. "Unrelenting and cruel." She nipped lightly. Disappointment filled her when the door of Pent's home opened again and he released her.

She stood at his side and watched McKenzie move down the steps and start out at a quick pace down the street and around the corner. Michael followed but she turned and hurried in the opposite direction where they'd left their carriage. The driver straightened when she neared, opening the door for her, his gaze darting behind her.

"We'll pick him up around the corner. Hurry," she told him. She watched from the window and, just as they rounded the corner, she saw McKenzie's carriage pull away. Michael stepped out from the shadows.

"Let's go," she called, "before we lose him." She sucked in her breath when he looked at her with yellow eyes that instantly dimmed. He climbed inside calling for the driver to follow the carriage. They wound through the streets of London in silence, and the driver stopped the carriage far enough back that McKenzie didn't notice when he climbed from his own. A man stepped from the shadows to greet him and a low growl crawled from Michael's throat.

"Is that him?" Elle asked.

"It's him." He slammed open the door and strode forward, leaving her to follow. The two turned at the sound of his quick, heavy steps, and Elle saw the look of surprise on Hurst's face. McKenzie however looked at her when she ran forward to catch up with Michael. He nodded as if he'd known all along what she was doing at Pent's house. It was too late though. There would be nothing he could do to stop Michael.

But she shouted when he pulled a pistol from beneath his coat, pointed and fired. The bullet struck Michael in his shoulder causing him to turn with its force. Bright yellow eyes met hers momentarily before he faced forward again. Instantly, McKenzie threw the gun aside and drew the sword at his hip. The end sliced at Michael's arm when he neared but Michael moved with the glide of the blade so that he only took a slight graze. In the next moment, his arm connected against McKenzie's chest and sent the man sailing backwards and out of his way.

Elle stared at the strength Michael showed, instantly remembered her fight against him. He could have hurt her easily with little effort. But Michael Ashton didn't hurt women, she reminded herself. He protected them. It's why he was here tonight.

“You little bitch!” A hand jerked her backwards and around so that she was facing a familiar face. “What have you been up to?” Lewis’s eyes glittered and behind him Pent stood next to the constable. A moment later Lewis’s fist connected with her cheek.

Chapter Six

Michael closed the distance between himself and Hurst in moments, and revelling in the horrified realisation he saw in Hurst's eyes that death was finally upon him. He had no time to run, no one to save him. The sound of the strike sounded like a cannon in his ears followed by Elle's cry. He stopped, turning. Behind him two men stood watching, one of them Pent, while Lewis bent over Elle and raised his fist again.

His head snapped around when Hurst realised his hesitation and made a run for the plank that led to his ship. Michael's blood drummed with need to follow the man, to make certain he would never threaten anyone in his family again. But it wasn't as strong as the anger that welled within him when he heard Elle cry out again.

He whirled in time to see her kick at Lewis, managing a successful blow to the man's stomach. She struggled to her feet only to have the man Michael didn't recognise grab her by the hair of the head and drag her backwards.

"You think to blackmail me? To threaten me? I am a constable and you are just a slave whore." He snarled as Lewis straightened. "You'll learn your lesson today."

It was Pent who saw Michael coming and called out to the others and Michael stopped in his tracks when the constable produced a blade and pressed it to Elle's neck. "This is not your concern, Ashton. I don't know what lies she's told you but she belongs to this man. By law he can do what he wishes with her."

Lewis glanced at Michael and then smirked. "You think you are the first she's used? There have been many. Did she tell you she'd do anything you wanted? Do you know why? Because she'll always do whatever any man wants of her for the right price. Won't you, Elle?" He looked at her and shook his head. "Until now, I've been lenient with you. This time you've gone too far."

"I fucked him for free." She hissed, eyes flashing. "Again and again and again. I liked it. I chose him because I liked it and not because you sold me off for the night. Free."

"Elle, don't." Michael warned but she didn't even flinch. She wielded her words and drove them straight at her mark.

"Nothing you do now will change that I *chose* him." She smiled triumphantly. "Nothing. I kissed him freely, fucked him because I *wanted* to. And that's something you can *never* have."

Behind him, he heard the crew of the ship working to get it moving and stepped forward. The knife glittered threatening.

"No, Michael." Elle looked at him. "Go after him. Kill him."

"I'll slit the whore's throat if you take another step closer," the constable called and Pent backed away, clearly not liking what was happening.

"You do that, sir, and I'll blow a hole through the back of your head."

Michael grunted at the look of shock and then horror on the constable's face as the driver pressed the barrel of the weapon against his head. Instantly, he lifted his hands, letting the knife fall from his fingers.

Michael moved forward and his gaze first rested on the constable, then dragged to Lewis. He held out his hand for Elle and she slipped her trembling fingers into his. He pulled her to him and then pushed her behind him.

"You," he pointed at Pent. "Have you a parchment and quill?"

"In my carriage." The man's voice shook slightly.

"Get it. And if you try to leave, I won't give you the chance later," Michael warned. He saw the man's eyes lower to the bullet wound on his shoulder before nodding and turning to hurry back to the carriage. He returned and held out the parchment, quill, and inkwell.

"Give them to him." Michael nodded at Lewis. "Now you write out that you free Elle from slavery."

Lewis's head snapped up. "She is mine."

"Do it or I will kill you right here and she will be free anyway," Michael vowed. Lewis's gaze lowered to his arm.

"What are you?"

Michael took a step forward. "I am the last thing you want to cross. Start writing."

Lewis motioned to Pent to turn and placed the parchment against the man's back. He wrote quickly and then held out the parchment.

"Now sign over everything you own to her," Michael told him. "She has earned it."

"I will not!" Lewis threw down the quill. "You *will* have to kill me."

"If that's what you choose but I promise you it will not be quickly." Michael let the heat of the wolf begin to fill him, just enough that he knew by the look of horror on Lewis's narrow face that he saw the change in his eyes.

"Mary, mother of God," the constable whispered as Lewis swiped up the quill, dipped it in the well that Pent held, and began writing frantically. His hand shook when he finished and held the parchment out.

"Sign as witnesses, both of you." Michael instructed the constable and Pent. They both did so without hesitation.

"This is your chance to leave, Pent. I know where you live but I'm certain you won't give me cause to ever come to your home," Michael said as he took the parchment and passed it back to Elle. Pent nodded and turned, running to his carriage, and calling out to the driver. Michael's gaze swung to Lewis.

"You will leave London now. You won't come back. You won't have anything else to do with Elle, ever. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"You won't get away with this," Lewis shook a finger at Elle. "You ungrateful bitch."

Michael struck him hard, hard enough to knock him to the ground. "*Now* do you understand?" Lewis clapped a hand over his jaw and stared up at him. Then slowly, he rose to his feet, turned, and strode away.

Finally, Michael faced the constable. "You can lower your weapon, Jasper." The barrel fell away and the constable breathed out with relief. "You are going to go home and if asked will say that Lewis freed Elle of his own will and signed everything he had over to her. You will publicly announce that the rumours about my family are untrue and remind everyone that we have always been respected in London and will continue to be respected by you personally. You will do this or this woman will provide witnesses of your under-handed dealings – some which are real and some which are made up for my own amusement."

The constable nodded quickly. "Of course, I understand."

"Leave."

The constable turned, his short legs working quickly to escape. Michael stood watching until his carriage too disappeared from the street. Then he gave the driver a nod and faced Elle.

"Hurst lives," she whispered. Michael frowned at the bruises colouring her face.

"His days are numbered and when the constable makes his public recommendation, he will have nothing else to threaten us with." He crossed his arms. "You are free."

"And you," she smiled. "Where will you go now?"

"India. I've been away too long." He reached out and stroked her hair, brushing it down. "And you?"

"I've always wanted to go to France." She laughed when he wrinkled his nose then stepped forward and leant up to kiss his cheek. "Thank you." He started to turn but she grasped his hands, her eyes glittering with tears when she looked up at him.

"Thank you," she repeated. He nodded and watched her turn. She disappeared into the night and for a moment, he almost went after her. But she deserved her freedom.

"Shall we go home now, sir?" the driver asked.

"Yes."

Seven months later

Miles off a coast in India

"It's Hurst's!" The man in the eagle's nest called down. Michael strode across the upper deck and watched the ship that neared. Good God, the bastard was coming to him. A white cloth waved from the deck.

"He's surrendering!" the crewman called down.

"Well, that's disappointing." Michael glanced at his first mate who laughed. "Weapons at the ready. If anyone even looks like they mean to fire on us, blow the bastard out of the water." His men moved in unison, readying for a fray. The ship neared. No shots fired.

Closer.

Nothing.

Michael lifted a spyglass and peered at the ship. No one aimed a weapon. The cannon panels were closed. And that white cloth remained lifted...by a slender arm attached to a head of honey blonde hair and a dress. He leant back and then looked again in disbelief. Elle stood on the deck and waved the cloth, a huge grin spread across her face.

"What in hell..." he lowered the spyglass. "Lower your weapons!" He waited for the ship to sail alongside his, heart thumping, until he was staring down at Elle, her hair

whipping about in the wind. What was she doing here? How had she found him? *Why* had she found him? Hope filled his chest but he could not embrace it completely.

"Michael!" she called as one of the crew of her ship helped her up and reached for a rope connected to the main mast.

"What in hell are you doing?" He called back.

"Say hello to my French crew," she waved back at her men who cheered. "I bribed them to sail this ship right out of the dock." She reached up and grasped the rope while the one who assisted her wrapped the end around her leg. Good God, she was coming aboard. Again his chest tightened. He'd thought of nothing but her since he'd left London. She'd haunted his nights and made his days too long. He'd found no peace on land or water.

"It was just sitting there and I recognised the flag. It belongs to Josiah Hurst." She pushed off and swung across the water and above them. When she was nearly within reach, she released the rope and he had to lunge to catch her around the waist.

"So I stole it." She beamed up at him when her feet met the deck.

"You *what*?" He stared at her. She was here, beneath his hands. At long last.

"I thought you might want it."

"You are giving me a bloody ship?" He laughed.

"Well, I'll give it to you...*if*." Her eyes glittered up at him.

"What in hell do you want now?" His fingers tightened on her waist and he waited.

"You."

He let joy fill him. She'd come to him. It had been a selfish longing he never thought would actually happen. She had chosen him, freely. His mouth covered hers and she slipped her arms around his neck. A chorus of whoops sounded from both ships and she laughed against his lips.

About the Author

Sable Grey resides in the deep south of the United States with her wonderful husband, three very spoiled dogs, and three crazy cats. She spends her time writing, designing cover art, watching moves, and reading.

With favourite authors like Stephen King, Piers Anthony, and Iris Johansen, it's no mystery where the inspiration to write tales of love, adventure, and mystery come from. An avid reader and storyteller at a young age, Sable began writing small stories as a child for her mother. However, it wasn't until she was well in to her twenties that she realised that her calling was sharing her stories with a larger audience than just family members and friends.

Now, Sable is dedicated to her craft and to bringing her readers quality fiction with unforgettable characters. For her, writing a story means writing a story meant to touch the mind, body, heart, and soul.

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