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A Matter Of Honor

Kit Tunstall

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Edited by *Ann Richardson*
Cover Art by *Kathy M. LaFollett*

Warning:

The following material contains strong sexual content meant for mature readers. A MATTER OF HONOR has been rated NC17, erotic, by three individual reviewers. We strongly suggest storing this electronic file in a place where young readers not meant to view this ebook are unlikely to happen upon it. That said, enjoy...

Part 1: Claiming The Maiden

Chapter 1

1815, Atlantic Ocean

"I do not think this is wise, m'lady."

Rebecca sighed. "As you have said fifty times in as many days, Nora."

"Your father would not have wanted you to do this."

Her mouth tightened. "Well, he should not have gotten himself killed over a gambling debt, should he?"

"Yes, but—"

She leaned against the rough wooden rail of the deck. "There was no one else to guarantee the delivery to the Colonies."

"Your father's men."

She snorted at her companion's naiveté. "Let us please drop this discussion. What is done cannot be undone, and it is making my head ache."

"Would you like an early night, m'lady?"

Rebecca propped her chin on her hand, staring at the sky as the sun began to set. Hues of orange, pink, and red swept across the purple night sky in

glorious strokes. It was impossible to tell where the sky ended and the dark ocean began.

If not for the constant lull of the *Margaret*, named after her mother, on the waves, she might be able to forget they were at sea. “Yes, I do believe I would, and perhaps a bath too. It has been a few days since I imposed on the men.”

Nora nodded, heading off to commandeer a few of the more pliant sailors for lugging pails of water from the galley to the main cabin.

Rebecca turned to go to her quarters, almost running into Stokes, the first mate. “Pardon.”

He gave a half nod of his head. “M'lady, I do not like the looks of this.”

“What, Stokes?”

“The night sky is ominous.” He crossed himself. “It is a bad night to be sailing.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “Especially with women on board.”

Her lips tightened, but she ignored his muttered protest. “Do you have anything to base this on, or is it merely a feeling?”

He glared at her, his cast eye narrowing, but focused on the main sail. “Do not mock me, m'lady. I been sailing the seas since I was but a lad of nine. I know—”

She waved her hand. “Yes, yes, you have told me many times, Stokes.” She bit back a sigh, tired of the constant struggle with him for command of the *Margaret*. “I bow to your expertise, but I am the captain.”

He spat on the wooden planking of the deck. “Ye ain't no captain, m'lady.” He glowered at her. “Dressing like a man will not make ye one.”

“Goodnight, Stokes.” She swept past him, knowing her grand exit was ruined by the lack of full skirts she was accustomed to wearing. Admittedly, the trousers were more practical, but the wool scratched unbearably. It was a relief to enter her cabin and remove the cap covering her long fall of ebony hair.

If not for the bath coming, she would immediately shed the clothing she had purloined from her father's closets and slide into the frothy sleeping gown folded neatly in her trunk. However, appearances with the men must be maintained. They knew she was a woman, but it was to her advantage to not remind them of that blatantly.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. She lifted the latch to admit Nora, followed by four burly men. One carried the small tub Rebecca had brought on board with her, and the other three carried six pails of water between them. Without a word or expression on their faces, they emptied the water into the metal tub, and then exited the cabin.

Nora, paranoid as usual, took the pistol from the trunk and planted herself on a weathered chair, after positioning it before the door. “You may disrobe, m'lady.”

Rebecca rolled her eyes, but didn't comment. She removed the trousers, white shirt, and heavy jacket, tossing them across the trunk at the foot of the narrow bed. She slid into the water, wishing she still had some of the rose oil that had been depleted with her last bath. She settled for the thick cube of homemade soap the men used, grimacing as the rough texture turned her skin pink. Once she had washed her hair, she stepped from the tub and wrapped herself in a soft, absorbent sheet.

“Shall I send for the men, m'lady?”

She shook her head, stifling a yawn. “I am too tired to put those clothes back on so they can remove the tub. Tomorrow morning will be soon enough.” She lifted the lid of the trunk, removing the gown and her gold brush. She blinked back unexpected tears and a wave of homesickness. How she longed to be in their country home, sipping tea in the garden, or riding horses with her younger sister; anywhere but this awful ship. Damn Father for his irresponsibility.

“M'lady?”

She shook her head, looking up at Nora. “Yes?”

“Shall I brush your hair for you?”

She nodded, taking time to drop the sheet and slip into the pale blue, silk nightgown before sitting on the bed and leaning forward. There was comfort in the familiar motion of having her childhood governess brush her hair. Thank goodness Nora had insisted on accompanying her to ensure the safety of her virginity. She couldn't have gotten through this hellish voyage without her. Not that it was over yet. Several more days loomed ahead of them before they saw the port of Boston.

Once Nora moved away, Rebecca pulled back the covers and slid into the narrow bunk. As her eyes closed, she saw Nora sliding out the trundle bed. She tried to offer help, but another yawn stole the words. Her lashes drifted over dark-green eyes as the long day caught up with her and she slept.

Chapter 2

She awoke to a pounding sound outside the door. “Nora?” Rebecca sat up, pushing long strands of hair from her eyes.

“I am here, m'lady.” There was an edge of panic to her voice. “I have been trying to wake you for ten minutes.”

“I am sorry.” She blinked, noticing through the small, round window the beginnings of dawn streaking across the sky. “What is happening? Have I overslept?”

Nora huddled on the bunk with her. “I do not know, m'lady. I awoke to a heavy booming sound and the listing of the ship.”

“Pirates?” she asked aloud, immediately regretting it as she saw Nora wince. “Do not be alarmed. I doubt it is such, but if it were, Stokes and the men are brave and fierce.”

Nora nodded eagerly and jumped as the pounding resumed, this time shuddering the frame of the door. “Oh, m'lady, it must be pirates, for none of your father's men would dare intrude.”

Rebecca pushed back the covers and stumbled from the bed, swaying for a moment until her feet caught the rhythm of the ocean. As Nora had said, the ship listed more to the right than the left. Now was not the time to worry about the precious cargo sinking. Her only thoughts were of removing the pistol from the trunk and making sure it was ready to shoot.

As the door splintered, she stood in front of it, aiming the gun straight ahead. She heard Nora whimpering on the bed, but had no time to comfort her. The door burst open with one more solid hit, and four men swarmed into the room after dropping the beam they had been using to batter the door.

“Look at this. Finer treasure than in the hold.” The man who spoke appeared to be a few years older than she was, with half his teeth missing, and multiple scars lacerating his naked arms and chest.

“The captain will be pleased,” another said. He was as equally scarred, but wore a leather vest, unfastened. Three fingers on his right hand were missing.

The other two didn't speak, but their intensely hungry looks were enough to send shivers down her spine. They paid no attention to the pistol in her hand, seeming not to realize she had it. Her eyes darted about as they approached, fastening on her dressing gown. She snatched it from the rough table and slid it on quickly. As she did so, Rebecca dropped the pistol into the voluminous pocket.

The first one, covered in tattoos, reached Rebecca, with another close behind. Two men had gone to retrieve Nora from the bed, where she huddled in a sobbing ball. “Do not touch me,” Rebecca said firmly, with a bravado she didn’t feel.

“Or what, missy?” His voice was rough, as were his calloused hands when they touched her arm. “We control this ship now, and everything on it.” He tried to lift her.

Rebecca pushed against him. “I can walk.”

The man shrugged, and his companion chuckled. He waved his hand. “After you, m'lady.”

She glared at him, then at the two men manhandling Nora. “She can walk too.”

He shrugged again. “As you wish.” He turned to them. “Let her walk. If she stumbles, cut off her hand.” He leered. “She will not need *that* for our pleasure.”

Nora's sobs increased, but she pushed herself off the bed and ran to Rebecca, hugging her. “I am so sorry, m'lady.”

“It is not your fault, Nora.” Rebecca urged her along, and they walked into the passageway. Following the men's commands, they ended up in the galley. To her dismay, she saw that most of the crew was already quarantined there. Among them was Stokes, who glared at her. She had a sinking feeling the missing members of the crew had departed this world already.

“I told ye women would bring bad luck,” Stokes called out, earning a cuffing from the man nearest him. He subsided into silence, but wore an expression of mingled anger and fear.

“Captain.” The man with the rough voice prodded Rebecca and Nora toward a man standing apart from the others. He wore a torn white shirt smeared with red stains, brown trousers, and black boots. His blond hair was either short or worn in a ponytail.

He was too handsome to be the leader of these cutthroats, Rebecca found herself thinking, as she was pushed onto her knees in front of the captain.

“We found these two in the main cabin.”

“A highly worthy prize.” With a gloved hand, he touched Rebecca's oval face, smoothing his leather-covered fingers over her high cheekbones, straight nose, and full lips. “You men have earned one-and-a-half your share this day.”

Rebecca shivered as his hand moved to her hair, tangling in the ebony strands. She wanted to protest the touch, but prudence held her tongue. She had only to wait for an opportunity.

He turned to examine Nora. “Not bad. You will make a fine prize for the men.” His icy blue eyes turned back to Rebecca. “You shall be my take of the booty.”

As he reached for her, Rebecca sagged forward, pretending to faint. She slipped her hand into the pocket of the gown and withdrew the pistol. She kept it pressed against her thigh as he knelt to lift her. When he was level with her, she brought it up, pressing the barrel against his crotch. “I shan't be anything for you. Neither will any woman in future if you push me.”

His eyes widened, but he laughed. It was a cold, disturbing sound. “She is feisty.” His laugh cut off when she pressed the sharp barrel deeper into his genitals.

His expression hardened. “You cannot escape, m'lady. Even if you shoot me, thirty of my loyal men now control this vessel. You will become property of them all, for the rest of your life.” He lifted a brow. “Knowing this crowd, that should not be more than a day.” He held out his hand. “Give me the pistol.”

“I'll give you the ball,” she said with a vicious jab, satisfied when he winced. Her brain raced, searching for a way out.

Ordering them to leave wouldn't work, despite having the captain's privates in her line of fire. Nor would demanding a longboat for the crew, Nora, and herself. She grimaced at the thought forming in her mind, but reluctantly accepted it as her only alternative. Even it was no true guarantee. “I propose a bargain.”

He smirked. “What sort of bargain?”

“The crew and I will remain here in the galley while your men load the cargo. There will be no resistance from us. We will let you leave without a peep of protest.” She held her breath, already knowing he would discard her first offer.

He laughed. “We can buy compliance with the thrust of a sword, m'lady. Offer me something worthwhile, and perhaps we can come to an agreement.”

“I have not finished.” She tilted her chin. “Nora and I are not to be molested by you or your men.”

“Your conditions keep growing, while my rewards diminish. No deal, m'lady.” His announcement was met with a loud round of cheering from his men.

Rebecca's heart sank as she reluctantly offered her last bargaining chip. “On board this ship is my great-grandmother's diamond necklace. It is worth three

times the value of the contents in the hold." She swallowed back the tears in her throat, hoping her mother would understand why she had to use the necklace as a bargaining tool. "I was to deliver it to my sister, who lives in Boston. When you have unloaded the cargo and your men are back on your ship, I will hand it over to you."

"I can find it myself."

She shook her head. "No, you shan't. I hid it securely so no one would know I had it onboard. You could tear the ship apart and not find it." Rebecca kept her eyes fastened on him, trying to project confidence.

The pain in her knees from kneeling on the rough planks was a distraction, as was the faint hint of skepticism remaining in his eyes. "Do we have a bargain?" She hoped so, for her hand was cramping from holding the pistol steady against his genitals.

He seemed to take great pleasure in shaking his head. "It is not enough."

Her shoulders sagged, although her grip on the pistol didn't waver. "It is all I have to offer."

The captain tilted her head up. "There is one more thing, m'lady."

"What?"

"Your virtue."

She gasped. "How dare you?"

His smile was cold. “Either way, you will not be a maiden by this evening, m'lady. It is your choice whether your servant suffers the same fate, and if you get passed among my men after I finish with you.”

Her hand wavered slightly, and Rebecca used her other hand to steady her arm. “You forget I hold the pistol, sir.”

He chuckled as he claimed a handful of hair and pulled her head back. “Submit, m'lady, and we shall have a bargain. Defy me, and you will not enjoy the consequences.”

She stared into his cold blue eyes, seeing an almost total lack of interest reflected back. He looked bored, as if either outcome would suit him equally. “If I agree to this madness, you swear your men will vacate this ship and leave my crew and companion unharmed?”

He released her hair. “After transferring the cargo, my crew will depart. Your men will be tied in the galley, and the lady will remain as virtuous as she is now.” He sent a mocking glance in Nora's direction. “Although, surely a woman of such mature years cannot be that innocent?”

A blush heated Nora's cheeks, and she dropped her head.

“When will you leave?” Rebecca glared up at him.

“When the deal is concluded, and I have the necklace.”

“How can I trust you?”

He bowed mockingly at the waist, without disturbing the position of the pistol. “You have my word, m'lady.”

She snorted.

He lost his indulgent expression. “Do not presume to question my honor. My word guarantees the safety of everyone on this ship, including yours. You need nothing else for insurance.”

Slowly, she drew the pistol away from his crotch. He took it from her hand, and she squeezed her eyes shut, anticipating a shot that never came. Instead, he lifted her to her feet and pulled her behind him. She cast one last look at Nora, but her companion's sorrowful expression did nothing to allay her fears.

Chapter 3

“Where are your quarters?”

“To the left,” she whispered. Fear quaked in her belly as horrible images of what he would do to her ran through her mind. Would God forgive her for the deal she had made, trading her purity for safe passage? “That door.” She pointed to the shattered door, embarrassed by the thought of it being open while he did what he wished with her.

He pushed her inside and followed. She watched as he stripped the top coverlet from the bed and draped it across the doorway as a makeshift curtain. When he turned back to her, nausea churned in her stomach as she waited to see what he would ask for.

"Do you have a name, m'lady?"

"R-rebecca," she said, licking dry lips.

He nodded. "I am Christoph."

She shrugged.

"Come closer, Rebecca."

The sound of her Christian name on his lips sent shivers of dread racing through her. Somehow, her feet managed to obey his command, although her heart and head rebelled. When she stood within inches of him, her nose wrinkled at his stench—a combination of sweat, blood, and gunpowder.

"Where is the necklace?"

"After—"

"Now." His expression brooked no argument. "Pardon my mistrust, Rebecca, but I want to ensure our bargain is not based on subterfuge."

She swallowed down a retort, knowing she doubted his honor. Why should he feel any differently? She walked to her trunk and removed a dagger from inside. From the corner of her eye, she saw him tense, but offered no

reassurances or explanations. Instead, she turned to the lamp on the table, lighting the wick in the oil so she could see.

As she walked over to the bed, he shadowed her within a step. Rebecca knelt, set the lantern on the floor, and got down on all fours. She wriggled her head and arms under the low bunk and felt for the loose floorboard. She found it within seconds.

Working in near darkness, she used the dagger to pry at the knothole. With a creaking protest and the snap of wood, a chunk of the planking flew up, bouncing against the bottom of the bunk before landing a few inches from her. She felt inside the small concavity for the velvet-wrapped necklace.

As she wriggled out from under the bed, she felt his hand drop to her hip. "What are you doing?" Being under the bed muffled her voice.

"Admiring your heart-shaped derriere, m'lady."

She grunted as she worked her way out from under the bed before she rested on her legs. She handed him the pouch. "That necklace has been in my family for 100 years. The Earl who married my great-grandmother brought it back with him from one of his travels to the African continent."

He lifted it from the velvet, whistling through his teeth. Even with the meager light provided by the small window and the lantern, the diamonds sparkled brilliantly. "Indeed, this will fetch a fine price." He returned the

necklace to the pouch and laid it on the trunk as Rebecca gained her feet. “But there is one prize still left to claim, and I think it shall be much more valuable.”

Rebecca bit back an instinctive protest as he pulled her into his arms, but couldn't fight back a groan as his head descended. “You stink.”

He pulled back and laughed. “I suppose I do.” His eyes fell on the tub of water, left from her bath last night. “That can be happily remedied.”

“The water is cold,” she said in a rush, not wanting to see so much of him. “You do not have time.”

“I have all day, m'lady.” He stripped off the gloves, an inch at a time, before he unbuttoned his shirt and dropped it on the floor. His boots, belt, and sword quickly followed. He stopped at the trousers.

She unconsciously breathed a sigh of relief that cut off when he pulled her arms in front of her. “What are you doing?”

“Slowing you down.” He pulled off the dressing gown, leaving her only in the thin silk gown she had slept in. “Sit on the bed, Rebecca.”

She shook her head, not quite daring to vocalize a protest.

He ignored her and pushed her down. He tore a strip of linen from the hem of the dressing gown.

“Are you insane? Do you have any idea how much that cost?”

He laughed. “A true noble, through and through.” His tone didn't sound flattering.

She watched, biting back more recriminations, as he knelt on the floor. When he lifted her feet, she kicked out at him, guessing what he planned. “No.”

He held her steady as he wound the strip around her ankles, binding her feet together. He tore another strip from the gown, using his teeth when it refused to tear completely. “Your hands, Rebecca.”

“Absolutely not.” She flailed her arms as he tried to capture them, succeeding in raking her nails down his chest and leaving red marks, but little else. Soon, her hands were bound in front of her. “You are a monster.”

“High praise.” His mouth twisted. “The gown must go.”

She laughed, a triumphant sound. “You cannot take it off now that you have me tied up.”

He shrugged. “You shall live with it being wet.”

She frowned. “What?”

“Come, m'lady. I find myself in need of an eager attendant.”

She gasped in protest as he lifted her to her feet, half-dragging her across the room to the tub. He pushed her into the wooden chair Nora had used last night before he removed his last stitch of clothes.

Heat swept up her cheeks as she got an eyeful of his cock before averting her eyes. She hadn't expected it to be so large. She prayed the knowledge her sister had given her about pairings between a man and woman had been a jest. There was simply no way it could possibly be true. It was a physical impossibility. She dared to turn back to him when she heard water splash in the tub.

“Certainly a lady's luxury.” He shifted his large frame in the shallow tub. “Bathe me.”

“You are not a child. Do it yourself.”

“It is my wish that you wash me, Rebecca.”

“My hands are bound.”

“You shall manage.”

She leaned forward, lifting the still-damp sponge. She threw it at him, and it bounced against his chin. “I am not your slave.”

An unpleasant grin curved across his face. “You are today, m'lady. Unless you want to forget our bargain?”

She scowled at him as she hobbled from the chair to the tub. Rebecca knelt on her knees, awkwardly holding the sponge in her bound hands. She dipped it into the freezing water, keeping her eyes deliberately averted upwards. She ran

it across his chest before she moved to his back. He watched her every movement with intensity.

He handed her the rough cake of soap, and Rebecca ran it across his skin, unable to suppress a tiny smile as he grimaced at the rough texture. For herself, she would have applied it to the sponge first, but not for him. She washed down to his stomach before she moved the bar of soap to his back. He leaned forward slightly to give her better access. When she had finished, Rebecca ran the sponge across his back and his chest. She gasped when he grabbed her wrists.

"You are not finished, Rebecca."

"You can wash your own hair."

He gave her a sardonic look. "There is more to wash."

Heat washed across her cheeks as he forced her hands down between his legs. She gasped as her fingers slid against his cock. "Please, I do not want to."

"I do not care." He continued to force her hands to move across his stomach, thighs, and cock.

Just when Rebecca thought she might faint or die from embarrassment, he released his hold on her wrists. She dropped the soap as if it had scalded her and stumbled away from him. Unbalanced by her bound feet, she toppled onto the wood floor, landing hard on her buttocks. Tears of humiliation and discomfort swam in her eyes, but she forced them back.

“Get on the bed and wait for me.” He took no time to ask after her as he rose from the water.

Rebecca glared at him as she inched her way to the bed. She grasped the frame, pulled herself up, and dropped on the bed. When she managed to roll around, the sight of his buttocks pointing in the air as he bent over the tub, washing his short, blond hair, confronted her.

Her mouth dropped open as he knelt closer to the tub, causing the muscles in his buttocks and thighs to bunch. The breath caught in her throat as he flexed. She barely tore her gaze from him in time to avoid his stare as he turned back to her. He used her bath sheet and walked to the bed.

“Now, to remove that bothersome gown.”

She tried to kick him, but her bound feet wouldn't cooperate. Rebecca screamed in outrage as he tried ripping the gown from her body. The modiste's stitches held, much to her delight and his annoyance.

Her struggles immediately ceased when he reached for the dagger she had left on the floor. Her eyes widened as he brought the blade to the bodice of the gown. She held her breath as he made one clean slice without the blade touching her skin.

“At last,” he muttered, and ripped the silk all the way down. He left the gown draped across her arms and bunched under her back, not bothering to remove it since it no longer impeded his access.

Rebecca whimpered as his calloused palm cupped her breast. Never had she been more humiliated or terrified. Never had she been so angry.

“Lovely.” Christoph tweaked the nipple. “Have you been a good girl as society demands, Rebecca? Are mine the first hands to touch such perfection?”

She remained stubbornly silent, refusing to look at him or acknowledge his words. Only the heat in her face betrayed any reaction. She refused to give him the satisfaction.

He sighed and tugged harder.

Rebecca didn't blink, although it hurt.

“You are most pig-headed.” He pinched the nipple harder still.

Rebecca tried to deny the growing pain in her breast as he tightened his grip. Sweat beaded her forehead, and her lips trembled. Still the pressure grew. Finally, a gasp tore itself from her throat as the pain passed bearable. Even after he released his hold, it continued to throb. She glared up at him.

“That is better.”

“Why? Do you enjoy hurting women?”

He shook his head. “I do not like bringing you pain, but I shall not spend the afternoon with a mannequin. I will settle for whatever kind of reaction I can elicit.” He smoothed his hand down her stomach. “This can be a day of pleasure or pain. It is your decision, m'lady.”

She flinched away from his touch. “I could never find pleasure at the hands of someone like you.”

His mouth tightened, but he shrugged. “That sounds like a challenge, m'lady.”

Rebecca regarded him with ill-disguised loathing, but held her tongue.

A strange smile worked its way across his face. “I have never been one to resist a challenge.”

A shiver passed through her. Was it dread or something else? She tensed as he settled himself on the bed beside her. “Will you untie me now?”

His brow furrowed. “No, not yet.”

She squirmed away from his fingers as they brushed against her hips. She suddenly noticed how cold the air in the room was against her bare flesh. She shivered again, this time more noticeably.

Christoph's hand paused at her thigh. “Do you like that, m'lady?”

Rebecca shook her head. “I am cold.”

He shrugged. “You will not be for long.”

Her green eyes glowed almost black with anger as he shifted her under him. Christoph straddled her, balancing his weight across her thighs, as he moved her arms over her head and held onto her wrists. Rebecca tried to buck him off. “Get off me, you great oaf.”

He laughed. “Relax, m'lady.” He leaned forward, and the murky light seeping in through the window highlighted the sharp angle of his cheekbones.

As he neared her face, Rebecca's body clenched. “What are you doing?”

“Kissing you.”

She turned her head as his lips descended, and she gasped as he turned her head back. His mouth settled firmly over hers, and his lips moved gently. Rebecca clenched her hands together as much as the binding allowed, refusing to betray any reaction to his light touch.

She squeezed her eyes closed when he used his hand to apply pressure to the hollows of her cheeks, forcing open her mouth. As his tongue swept into her mouth, she resisted the urge to bite down, knowing he would perversely be pleased by proof of a reaction.

She forced herself to remain stiff and distant during the onslaught, although her belly quivered. It must be last night's stew. His mouth continued to move on hers for perhaps another minute before he lifted his head. Rebecca bit back a triumphant smile, forcing her expression to remain bland as she stared up at him.

He laughed. “You are most stubborn, but I shall crack that frigid exterior.”

She sniffed, raked her eyes across his face, and yawned. She bit back the urge to giggle as giddiness swept through her. What in the world? The

sensation felt uncomfortably like pleasure. Surely not, for nothing about this encounter was pleasant.

His smile didn't waver as he lowered his head again.

Rebecca prepared herself to withstand another kiss, but barely bit back a gasp as his mouth settled on her nipple instead. It was the same one he had so fiercely pinched, and it still throbbed with every beat of her heart.

To her surprise, he barely touched the peak with the tip of his tongue. She anticipated more pain, but instead, the quivering in her stomach turned into a tingle that seemed to flow directly into her breast and focus on the small bud. She heard him chuckle, and she renewed her determination not to give in.

She dug the nails of her left hand into the side of her right hand as he made sweeping motions with his tongue across the nipple. She bit down on her lip as he released her wrists and brushed his hand across her other breast. He squeezed gently, and the tingling in her stomach transferred to that breast too. Her breathing grew ragged, and she struggled to suppress any harsh exhalations.

Even when his laving turned to gentle sucking, she forced her body to remain rigid. His breath blazed a warm trail across the valley of her breasts as he switched his attention to the neglected bud. Unlike the other, there was no pain or throbbing in that breast. Only extreme sensitivity, she discovered, as his

mouth fastened hungrily on the globe. When he bit her, her legs twitched, but she quickly schooled her reaction.

He lifted his head. “Perhaps more pain will elicit a response?”

Rebecca's body clenched with dread, but she refused to plead for his mercy. She kept her expression stony as he lowered his mouth once more.

As his teeth fastened on her nipple, she tried to prepare herself. He bit more forcefully than before, but it didn't hurt. In fact, it felt so good that she could barely bite back a moan. Her teeth sank through the soft flesh of her lip, and the taste of copper filled her mouth. To her surprise, he withdrew again.

“Or perhaps different stimuli?” He studied her for a moment, before brushing his thumb across her lower lip. He held it up for her to see the crimson smudge. “M'lady is not as unaffected as she pretends.”

Once again, Rebecca denied him the satisfaction of an answer. She tensed as he moved off her thighs and settled farther down the bed. She resisted by clenching them together when he put his hand between her thighs.

He seemed unbothered by her resistance. Christoph wedged his knee between her calves, straining the bonds on her feet and opening her thighs a couple of inches.

She stiffened as his hand slid up to the juncture of her thighs. Rebecca drew in a deep breath as his fingers caressed her most intimate place. One burrowed

through the tangle of curls to trace the outline of her lips. A small gasp broke free, and she knew she had lost.

She waited for him to withdraw, but he continued to stroke her. Incensed, she lifted her head to find him intently watching his hand's activities and paying no mind to her. Had he missed her sound of surrender?

Apparently so. She frowned as he withdrew his hand before he leaned forward. Her eyes widened, as his face got closer to her pussy. “No.”

He grinned. “The lady speaks.”

“You have won. Do what you came to do so I can get you off my ship.”

He paid no attention to her demands. Rather, he remained focused on his goals.

She cried out in shock and protest when she felt his tongue invade her folds. “You are indecent. You must stop this at once.”

He lifted his head. “Do not make me gag you too, Rebecca.”

“But—”

“Shhh.” He returned to his ministrations.

Rebecca tried to squirm away, but there was nowhere to go. Her feet were bound, and his hand was wedged between her thighs, ensuring she couldn't pull them apart or squeeze them together. She attempted to grab a handful of

his hair, but he used his other hand to anchor her to the bed. He held it against her stomach as she wriggled against him.

Heat flooded her cheeks as she realized the wriggling intensified the tingling and burning between her thighs. She froze, but still could not escape his questing appendage. All her lack of movement did was dull the sensation. She resumed struggling, desperate to stop his unholy act.

Liquid heat seemed to invade her entire body, and she felt her pussy growing slippery under his mouth. She panicked, unsure what was happening, but knowing it must be stopped before—well, before something worse happened. “You cannot do this.”

In response, his hand moved from between her thighs to her pussy. He parted the folds and darted his tongue inside.

A moan ripped from Rebecca, and even she couldn't deny that it held more a note of pleasure than protest. “Please…” She trailed off, unsure what she was asking for.

His tongue returned to the tiny bud, stroking it, and stoking a fire deep in her stomach. Rebecca squirmed, thrusting her hips upward. She was no longer trying to escape, but actively participating.

As he continued to lick her clit, his finger slid into her entrance. She wanted to protest, but couldn't find her voice. Even the quick burning and stretching sensation didn't decrease her ardor. She thrust more urgently against him,

feeling his finger slide more deeply inside her. The pain intensified, as did the pleasure. He flicked his tongue across her clit in a series of short, quick strokes as he slid his finger in and out of her.

Rebecca's eyes closed, and her entire body began to shake. It felt like an explosion was gaining momentum in her loins, and she held her breath for a long moment. When it escaped from her with a harsh sob, the explosion ignited, dragging heavily on her stomach, sex, and thighs.

She tensed and, as quickly, went boneless, as wave after wave of exquisite pleasure flooded through her. Tears leaked from her eyes. Tiny convulsions shook her body. When she finally found her voice, it emerged as a husky whisper. “What did you do to me?”

He slid up her body, cupping her face in his hands. “The French call it *le petit mort*.”

Rebecca frowned at him. “I speak fluent French, but have never heard such a term.”

Christoph grinned. “I should not think so, being raised in polite society. It translates to the little death.”

Her frown deepened. “That is a rather strange expression, is it not?”

He shrugged. “Did you not feel as though you were hanging by a thread between this life and the next for a moment there? Every breath felt like your last, did it not?”

She nodded, eyeing him uncertainly. “Is it a practice for death?”

He laughed. “Nay, it is to make procreation more enjoyable, m'lady.” One side of his mouth twitched. “Or, in our situation, just recreation, since we have no plans to produce offspring.”

Her eyes widened with panic. “This leads to babies?”

He blinked at her, looking astonished. “Did your mother tell you anything about what happens between a man and woman?”

She shook her head. “My sister told me a fanciful tale, but mentioned nothing about babies.” Her stomach churned with nausea. “Will I have a child now?” What would she do with a child and no husband? Society would revile her.

He sighed. “There is more involved in the process, which we will get to, but you shall not have a child.”

“How do you know?”

“A man can do certain things to prevent it.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Such as?”

He shook his head. “Trust me, Rebecca.”

It was her turn to sigh. “Very well. What else is involved?”

“It will be easier to show you than tell you.”

She tried to pretend the thought of another little death didn't send a dart of anticipation throughout her body. “May I be free now?”

He leaned over the edge of the bed, plucking the dagger from the floor. “Hold out your hands.”

Rebecca’s compliance earned her freedom. Reflexively, she rubbed her wrists, although the bonds had not been tight enough to restrict circulation. Once Christoph had cut through the bonds on her feet, she was able to pull her legs apart, and she noticed the cramps in her thighs.

When he leaned forward to kiss her, Rebecca didn't bother to keep up her pretense of no response. What was the point now? He had overcome her defenses, but it hadn't been an unpleasant experience. She ardently submitted to his kisses, returning them with equal fervor.

Soon, he was kneeling between her thighs. “I fear you will not enjoy this aspect so much, Rebecca.”

She found that difficult to believe, remembering the last experience. “I am ready.” She frowned as he pulled on her thighs, bringing her pussy closer to his cock. “What are you doing?”

“Claiming your maidenhead.”

“But…” She nibbled on her lip and winced as her teeth raked across the exposed wound. “How?”

He lifted a brow. “It requires a joining between us.”

Her eyes widened as she remembered her sister's account of her wedding night. “Dear Heaven. Could Elizabeth have told me the truth?”

He laughed. “I imagine she did, judging from your look of horror.”

“You cannot,” she blurted. “It is impossible.”

“It is possible and highly pleasurable.”

Rebecca shook her head, but her protests were cut short by his sudden possession. A cry tore from her throat. “It hurts.”

“Only for a few moments, m'lady.”

Rebecca shifted, trying to push him away and relieve herself of the stretched, burning sensation between her thighs. “I do not like this.” She glared up at him, pounding her fists against his chest ineffectually. “I demand you desist.”

Sweat beaded his forehead, and his jaw was tightly clenched. Through gritted teeth, he said, “Quit squirming. Remain still, and the pain will fade.”

“I do not believe you, sir. I wish to end this now.” She put the palms of her hands against his chest, pushing with all of her might. “I said…” She trailed off with a startled gasp as he moved his hand between their bodies. Rebecca's eyes widened when she felt his thumb sliding across the tiny nub that had given her so much pleasure. To her surprise, the pain began to fade as the tingling

sensation took over again. “I—” She moaned as he withdrew slightly, then thrust into her again.

“Has the pain faded, m'lady?”

“It has lessened.” Even as she responded, the pain became negligible, almost completely usurped by the pleasure. Her body responded instinctively to his, as her hips rose to meet each of his thrusts. He continued to touch her while he surged into her, and Rebecca felt another explosion coming on. As he filled her again, she felt her insides quiver. Her pussy contracted around his cock, and she started trembling. She clung to him as the little death revisited her. Soon, she was sobbing and crying out his name.

As Rebecca fell back against the bunk, he withdrew. She made a murmur of protest and frowned as she felt wetness across her stomach. “What are you doing?”

“Preventing babies.” Christoph slowly eased away from her, yawning. “I believe this was a most pleasurable bargain we made, m'lady.”

A blush swept across her cheeks, and Rebecca averted her eyes. She refused to confirm his words. “Well, it is over now.”

He chuckled, throwing his arm across her waist. “Not yet. We shall sleep, eat, and partake of each other a bit more before this day ends.”

“But—”

He pulled her head onto his shoulder. “Rest, Rebecca. You will need your energy for later.”

With a sigh, she submitted to his request. She nuzzled her nose deeper into his neck, enjoying the male scent of him. How had she become such a wanton in so short a time? Her lids were heavy, dragging themselves down, and she was too tired to dwell on her descent into decadence. Later, she would worry about that.

* * * * *

She awoke to the pleasurable sensation of his tongue in her pussy, probing for the sensitive spots that elicited so much pleasure. Rebecca blinked open her eyes and raised her head. He had removed the remnants of the nightdress before beginning his exploration, and she was completely nude. Her stomach clenched with excitement at the sight of the pirate kneeling between her legs. “Sir,” she whispered shyly, as her juices flooded his mouth. “What are you doing?”

He lifted his head and smiled at her. “Preparing you. I wish to be inside you again.”

She shifted restlessly, pushing her hips upward to reclaim his attention. “So soon?”

"Aye," he said, and returned his mouth to her pussy.

Rebecca tilted her pelvis upwards to allow him better access and winced as her sore muscles protested. Soon, his tongue made the flash of pain a memory, and she buried her hands in his hair, pulling him more firmly against her. She felt a twinge of conscience as she imagined the picture they presented. Her legs spread wide, and Christoph lying between them. What would Mama say if she knew?

She bit back a giggle at the thought of her mother catching them. Rebecca would be as horrified as her mother, but she couldn't resist picturing the expression Mama would have on her face. If she had been near apoplexy the time Rebecca, as a child, lifted her skirt to her knee to show off a nasty scab to her cousin, she would probably collapse if she saw what her daughter was doing this day.

Within seconds, her thoughts detoured from Mama's reaction, as Christoph's tongue pressed firmly against her clit and began rotating in slow circles. His hands were under her buttocks, kneading her cheeks, and pressing her upward. Rebecca moaned as her lower body clenched with anticipation. Her nipples throbbed almost painfully, and she reached up to rub them to ease the ache.

When Christoph sucked the nub into his mouth and grazed it with his teeth, she cried out and tightened her thighs around his head. Within seconds,

the first wave of an orgasm swept over her, and she was convulsing. He continued to slide his tongue through her pussy, causing already sensitive areas to become supersensitive. Before the first little death faded, another was upon her.

She trembled and shook, and slowly her body calmed. Her heartbeat slowed in her ears, and her legs stopped shaking. Rebecca took a deep breath and stopped rubbing her nipples.

Christoph lifted his head and licked his lips. “You have a delicious pussy, m’lady.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

He chuckled and traced his fingers across the swollen lips of her cleft. “Your pussy is not only beautiful, but tasty. I could eat you for hours.”

A hot blush swept up her necks, across her cheeks, and settled in her ears. “You should not say such things.” She tried to deny the way her pussy spasmed at his inappropriate words.

He sighed and raised himself onto his knees. As he crawled up the bed toward her, his cock jutted out.

She quickly slid her eyes from it, still not able to look at his cock or touch it. When he lay down on top of her, she spread her legs farther. She frowned as he lowered his head. “What are you doing, sir?”

“I am attempting to kiss you, m’lady,” he said, and his lips brushed against hers. “Did you not find the experience pleasurable…before?” His last word was spoken into her mouth, as his lips parted hers.

Rebecca remained still as his mouth touched hers gently. Christoph’s mouth pressed more firmly on her own, and his tongue slipped through her parted lips, stroking across her tongue.

She jumped when she tasted her own juices on his tongue. The taste was musky and salty, but not unpleasant. As he explored her mouth, his hand cupped her breast, and he fondled the nipple.

Rebecca’s thighs clenched as a jolt of electricity shot through her. She felt her pussy getting wet again as his tongue pressed against the back of hers, while his fingers massaged her nipple. “Please,” she moaned into his mouth. She was exhausted, but she wanted him to work his delicious magic again and bring her the little death.

Without moving his mouth from hers, Christoph adjusted their position, and his cock pressed against the opening of her pussy.

Rebecca whimpered as he pushed into her. The brief pain she had felt earlier returned in force, making her cry aloud. She pushed against him, urgent to dislodge him.

He moved away quickly. “Is there pain?”

She nodded.

“It is too soon, m’lady.” He sighed and sat up. “You cannot take me again, I think.”

Disappointment darted through her, but she wasn’t able to overcome her aversion to pain, even with the promise of pleasure. “I do not think so, sir,” she agreed.

He shrugged. “There are other ways.”

She frowned as he leaned over to retrieve her dressing gown from the floor. When he returned to the bed and stretched out beside her, she watched with puzzlement, waiting for him to explain.

“It is an interesting sensation, the silk against my cock.”

“I do not understand, sir.” What did he want from her?

“I will show you what to do.” Christoph took a corner of the garment and wrapped it around his hand. Then he took his cock in his hand and began to slide his hand up and down.

“What are you doing?” she whispered, fascinated by what she saw.

“Relieving myself.” With his free hand, he took one of hers and brought it to the dressing gown. “Sit up. You will do it now.”

She sat up, frowning as he pushed her hand against the silk. She mimicked his motion of wrapping it around her hand as he moved his hand from his cock.

Her gaze flicked across it, taking in the engorged head and purplish tint, before she quickly looked away. “I cannot—“

“You can. Grasp my cock firmly.”

Rebecca wet her lips and fumbled for his cock, determined not to look down. She heard his breath hiss through his teeth as she cradled him in her hands. “Now what, sir?”

“Move your hand up and down.”

She did so, intrigued by how hard his shaft was through the barrier of the silk. It was like nothing she had ever felt.

“Maintain a firm grip, Rebecca,” he reminded.

She squeezed her hand around his cock and rubbed him with the silk. She heard his breath coming in ragged gasps and realized she was breathless too. A flood of warmth between her thighs caused her to squirm, and when his hips bucked against her hand, her pussy spasmed.

“Faster,” he grunted. His face was bright red, and he looked like he was in pain.

“Are you certain?”

He nodded, appearing to struggle with the simple movement.

She increased the speed of her hand as his cock swelled in her hand. Rebecca continued to squeeze and stroke him as he thrust against her hand.

When she felt warm stickiness splash against the silk, immediately followed by a slight softening of his cock, she instinctively loosened her hold and moved her hand away.

Christoph lay on his back, panting heavily, for several moments. Gradually, his breathing slowed, and his color returned to normal. He lifted his arm and pushed back her hair with his fingers. “I do wish we had more time, m’lady. You are an excellent pupil. I can only imagine the things I could teach you.”

She dropped her gaze from his. “The day is almost done, sir.”

“Aye. Let us rest awhile, Rebecca.” He moved his hand to the back of her head and pulled her forward, until her face was against hers. “Kiss me.”

She kissed him enthusiastically, feeling a twinge of regret when he pulled away. She settled against him, and her eyes closed. She could feel sleep forcing itself upon her, and her last thought was the pirate would be gone when she next awoke. She knew it with absolute certainty, and the knowledge was accompanied by another dart of regret.

Chapter 4

She awoke to a timid knock. Rebecca lifted her head, realizing she slept on her stomach. She glanced first at the window in her cabin, noting the complete

absence of light. She looked over to the ruined doorway, finding Nora hovering at the entrance. She rolled over, blushing when she remembered she was naked. She pulled the covers up to her neck. “Yes, Nora?”

“Will you be wanting dinner now, m'lady?” Nora held a bowl in her hand.

She nodded. “And a bath when I have finished eating.” She frowned at her companion. “There is no need to lurk in the doorway.”

Nora shuffled inside and placed the bowl on the table. She averted her eyes as Rebecca slid from the bed and lifted the emerald dressing gown from the planks where Christoph had tossed it for the final time earlier in the day. She noted it was now a few inches shorter, thanks to the strips Christoph had torn from it. She tried to be casual when she asked, “Have the pirates left?”

“The crew departed our ship several hours ago. The captain left at sundown, m’lady.”

Rebecca denied the dart of disappointment. Why would she care if he said goodbye? The man meant nothing to her. “I see. How long ago was that?”

“Nearly two hours. He left instructions that I should wake you about now for dinner. He said it would be alright to release the crew after you were up.”

She nodded. “I suspect he wanted to be long out of our reach in case we changed our minds.”

“Will we?”

“No. A bargain is a bargain.” She lifted her head from the warm stew, noting Nora's distress. “Did he keep his word? You are…unharmed?”

“Yes, and the remaining crew is still tied in the galley, but otherwise unhurt.”

“Very well. You may release them now, Nora.” Rebecca frowned when Nora remained standing. “Was there something else?”

“Was it awful, m'lady? Has he hurt you terribly?” Nora's eyes were wide with apprehension.

“Nay, it was bearable.” The aching in her thighs reminded her it had been much more than bearable.

Nora sighed. “This voyage was all for naught. The cargo is gone, as is your precious family heirloom.” A wail broke from her, which she quickly stifled. “Worst of all, you have lost your innocence and any chance at a good match.”

Rebecca winced, but forced herself to be pragmatic. “None know of the incident but you and the crew. They do not move in the upper echelons of society. However, should their tales reach the ears of any gentleman offering for me, I am not overly worried.”

Nora frowned. “Why is that?”

“Do you remember Cynthia Summerland? Her papa caught her at an inn during a rash elopement attempt.”

“I remember.”

“The boy was sent to the Colonies, and she was packed off to the country estate for the remainder of the year. During the next Season, the rumors peaked within a month. By the end of that Season, she had three offers for her hand.” Rebecca's brow furrowed. “I believe she settled on the viscount, deciding his wealth and vitality compensated for the lower title.”

“Yes, but what has that to do with your situation, m'lady?”

“Lord Summerland is quite wealthy.” She shrugged. “He bought acceptance for his daughter's scandal. Mama shall do the same, if needs be.”

“You are most logical, m'lady.”

“How else should I be? It is done now, and I cannot alter events. I am who I was. Nothing has changed.” She ignored the clenching in her stomach that might have indicated otherwise. Rebecca looked pointedly at the tub. “Now, I suggest you free the crew so that I may have a bath sometime this evening.”

Nora curtsied, something she hadn't done in years, and scurried from the room.

Rebecca returned her attention to the tepid stew, but found it unappealing. She pushed herself away from the table and went to the trunk to fetch a change of her father's clothes so the men could enter her cabin. As she lifted the lid, her breath caught in her throat. With a trembling hand, Rebecca lifted the velvet

pouch, noting it felt lumpy. Her heart stuttered with anticipation as she opened it. The glittering diamond necklace spilled into her hands.

Part 2: Taming The Pirate

Chapter 5

"Nora, I would like to speak with Johnson before we leave the ship."

"May I ask why, m'lady?"

Rebecca set aside her teacup. "I wish to discuss a business matter with him before we meet Elizabeth."

"Of course." Nora hurried from the cabin, exiting through the hastily repaired door.

Rebecca leaned back in the hard chair, shifting restlessly in the unaccustomed encumbrance of the rose-colored day gown, confining corset, and heavy slip. Instead of the sturdy boots she had gotten used to wearing, dainty silk slippers stretched across her feet. A parasol sat across the bed, awaiting her departure from the *Margaret*'s cabin. Nora had carefully groomed her black locks into a prim roll, adding only a pink barrette to soften the starkness. Once again, she was Lady Rebecca Stanhope.

She sighed, fiddling with the white gloves lying by her china teacup. Why didn't she feel like Lady Rebecca? For two weeks, Christoph's image had preyed

on her mind. Images of their day together haunted her sleep, causing her to awaken wet and ready for him, only to discover his absence once again.

She had meant nothing to him, so why did he continue to plague her? Well, he *had* left the necklace, but that didn't mean anything. It might have been a simple oversight on his part.

She frowned, knowing how ridiculous that was. A man driven by profit and plundering didn't accidentally leave a diamond necklace in a secure place. Again, she was forced to wonder about his motivation for allowing her to keep the heirloom.

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. “Come.” She looked up from the gloves as Nora reentered the cabin ahead of Johnson, who removed his cap.

He was tall and tanned, with white-blond hair, a heavenly smile, and a dimple in his cheeks. He had worked his way from cabin boy to second mate during his ten-year tenure with Stanhope Shipping. He was also the only member of the crew who did not openly leer at her now, or treat her with less respect than due a woman of her station. “Ye sent for me, m'lady?”

“Thank you for coming. I want to discuss a business matter with you.” She pleated the gloves before she saw Nora's reproving glance and dropped the delicate silk scraps onto the table again. “When the *Margaret* returns to England, you will be first mate.”

He frowned. “But, m'lady, that is Stokes's position.”

She nodded. “As of today, Stokes will no longer be with Stanhope, and most of the other crew will be dismissed as well. I am charging you with the duty of finding a reliable crew who will respect the fact that a lady is on board. They should be prepared to accept direction from me.”

He folded the wool hat in his hands. “Begging yer pardon, miss, but what will the men do?”

Rebecca forced back a niggle of pity. “I do not know, but I cannot tolerate their behavior and wagging tongues.” She looked past his shoulder. “It is not just that they know about the attack on our ship and subsequent matters. The men have treated me with an appalling lack of courtesy and decorum these past two weeks.” She shook her head. “I have feared for my safety.”

His worried expression faded a little. “I see. Why are ye retaining me?”

“You have been the most loyal of the crew and deserve the recognition.”

He nodded his head. “I shall see to it. Do ye want me to speak with Stokes?”

“Nay, I shall do so on my way off the ship.”

“Yes, m'lady.” He bowed awkwardly at the waist. “I shan't let you down.”

She waved him away, sagging against the chair as soon as he closed the door behind him. “Well, Nora, what do you think?”

Nora hesitated. “I understand, m'lady, but I fear Stokes shan't take it well.”

A hard laugh escaped Rebecca. “No, I suspect he will not.” She slipped on the gloves. “Come, Nora. Let us enjoy solid land for a few days before we return to this cursed ship.” She scooped the parasol from the bed before exiting the cabin.

When they emerged on the deck, she saw Stokes standing near the wheel, pointing to the main sail, and yelling at two men hanging from the pole. She mustered her courage and strode toward him. “Stokes.”

He barely turned in her direction, ignoring the politeness of a greeting completely.

She spoke his name more formally, finally getting him to turn. He wore a look of irritation, and something else. She barely restrained a shudder as his lewd eyes slid over her. “Your employment with Stanhope has ended.”

His mouth dropped open. “What?”

“Your services are no longer required.” She held out her hand for the list she had made last night. Nora handed it to her quickly. She read the other names, then looked up at Stokes again. “These men are all terminated, as well. You shall see to the duty before vacating the ship.” She attempted to hand him the list.

“I cannot read.”

“Very well. You are to dismiss all but the second mate and cabin boy.”

“Ye cannot fire me. I am first mate. Practically cap'n of this vessel.”

She glared at him. “All but Johnson and Hews are to go with you. Now, clear off my ship.”

He took a step toward her, with his fists balled up.

Rebecca forced her spine to remain straight. “Shall I call for the port authority?” She gestured to a group of men wearing the militia uniform. “I am certain they would be pleased to escort you off the *Margaret*.”

He backed off, but his eyes bored into hers. “This ain't over, m'lady.”

She curled a lip at him, but didn't deign to respond. Nora tapped her arm, pointing to her sister's carriage, and they left the ship.

When she set foot upon the busy Boston Harbor, Rebecca's head spun for a moment. Her legs seemed to be made of jelly, and it took her awhile to adjust. She gripped Nora's arm, smiling as she realized her companion was in much the same state. By the time they had acclimated to ground that didn't rock under them, Elizabeth was hurrying toward them, followed by a burly man.

She embraced her blond-haired sister, frowning when she felt her sister's rounded stomach. “You have gained weight.”

Elizabeth blushed. “You are so impolite, sister.” She leaned closer, whispering, “I am with child.”

“Oh, Betsy.” She hugged her sister again.

“Shhh, do not call me that,” Elizabeth said as she pulled away. “That silly childhood name is best left in childhood.”

Rebecca giggled. “Now that you are a mature *lady*, of course.”

Elizabeth hugged Nora before she grasped her sister's hand. “Come on. Philip is waiting at home.”

Rebecca followed her sister through the busy docks, as Elizabeth's guard and driver shadowed them. She tried to conjure a mental picture of Philip, but their acquaintance had been brief. She had met him the day he married her sister, and once more on the day of their departure for Boston, three years ago. Mama did not approve of him, so he had not been a frequent visitor. Nor had Elizabeth been after their hasty marriage.

They climbed into the carriage with the man's assistance and held on while they jostled through the streets of Boston. Rebecca couldn't keep her eyes from the buildings sprouting up all over the port city. “I never imagined it would be so like London.”

Elizabeth nodded. “A great deal is different, but there are many similarities. For example, Hardwick's Shoe Emporium is two blocks over.”

Rebecca shook her head. “How can that be? Mr. Hardwick is back in London.”

“His cousin runs the business, silly.”

“Oh.”

“How was the voyage? Was it simply awful?”

She shrugged. “It is over now. I can assure you I am not looking forward to the voyage home.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Perhaps you will not return to England.”

Rebecca's eyebrows arched. “Not go home?”

Her sister laughed. “Surely you knew Mama wished for me to find you a husband? Why else would she have allowed you to captain Father's ship?”

She blinked. “Mama wants you to play matchmaker?”

Elizabeth nodded. “She says you have exhausted the supply of suitable men in London with your callous attitude.”

“I am not callous. Merely uninterested in their boring prattle, inane chit-chat, and clumsy attempts to steal kisses.” She fought down a blush as she remembered Christoph's lips on hers. No. She mustn't think about him.

“I shall endeavor to find you less boring suitors during your stay.”

“It shall only be a few days, so you are welcome to try.” Rebecca yawned, not bothering to hide it behind her glove.

Elizabeth shook her head. “I have Mama's missive at home. I am to keep you throughout the remainder of the year.”

“Four months?” She frowned at her sister's phrasing. “Am I a lost puppy that you are to keep me?”

Her sister sighed heavily. “Do not be so prickly, Rebecca. Men find it unbecoming.”

“Not all men.”

Elizabeth laughed again. “What do you know of men? Only what I have told you in confidence, and you refused to believe me.”

Rebecca subsided into a grumpy silence as the carriage drew to a halt on a street lined with tall, sleek homes rising three stories in the air. The one they were parked before was plain white, but ornate etchings in the wood and moldings gave it personality. The front door swung open, and a man strode toward them.

Elizabeth hurried from the coach to meet him halfway, throwing her arms around him. He could only be Philip.

“They must still be very much in love,” she said quietly.

“Aye, m'lady.”

She sighed. “To have love like that must be most wonderful.”

Nora gave a wistful sigh too. “Yes, m'lady.”

They exited the carriage with the driver's assistance and hurried forward to be reintroduced to Philip.

He had grown somewhat plump, if her memory served, but otherwise looked the same. His brown eyes still twinkled, and his long, black hair was still worn caught back in a black bow. There was a pleasant flush to his cheeks, and his hands were soft when he grasped Rebecca's between them. “What happened to little Rebecca?”

She blushed. “I have grown up.”

“It cannot be that only three years have passed.” He eyed her from the top of her head to the tip of her pink slipper. “You were a gangly child when I last saw you, but now you are a lady.”

Her blush intensified.

Elizabeth laughed. “She was a child, dear.” She threaded her arm through his. “Rebecca is seventeen now.”

He blinked, giving him an owlish look. “I say, has that much time truly passed?”

“Yes, darling.” She turned from her husband. “Come inside and see your quarters. You will rest tonight, and tomorrow we shop.”

Philip groaned. “I say, Elizabeth, if you keep up this ghastly habit of spending money like water, I shall prove your mother's prediction true.”

She giggled. “I shan't spend you into the poor house, Philip.”

He patted her hand where it lay on his arm. “It would be worth the poor house to ensure your happiness.”

Rebecca watched their exchange with an uncomfortable pricking at her eyes. Normally, she had no patience for tender sentiments, often expressed so eloquently by fops who had nothing better to do with their days than compose sonnets. However, the affection between her sister and brother-in-law was palpable. Would she ever find a man like that, one she could truly love?

Chapter 6

“You are doing it on purpose,” Elizabeth said as she plopped onto the sofa in the parlor. “You deliberately foil their advances.”

Rebecca took the cup of tea Nora offered, hoping to fortify her nerves. If only she could sneak a nip of whiskey from Philip's supply. Alas, it was too early in the day. “I do nothing deliberately.”

“Exactly. You do nothing when they speak with you, invite you to dance, or compliment your beauty. It has been eight days already, and six social occasions, but you have not let one man call on you.”

She sipped the tea, grimacing at the bitter flavor. “None have caught my attention, sister.” She leaned forward to add cream to her tea, looking up in time to see Nora frown at her. “What?”

“You do not normally weaken your tea, m'lady.”

“It is bitter today.”

Elizabeth interrupted their discussion with a wave of her hands. “You must make an effort, Rebecca. You do not wish to be a spinster like Aunt Maude, do you?”

“Of course not. Nor do I wish to be the financier of some blackguard's gaming habit, or prize for some egotist.” She shook her head. “I have heard of the wager, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth appeared to suddenly find the cabbage rose pattern of the sofa compelling. “I do not know of what you speak.”

“Several of the men in your acquaintance have wagered on who will be the one to get through my cold shell.” She bit her lip, suddenly recalling Christoph's very similar words. “I counter their wager and say none.”

Her sister sighed. “Some men have nothing better to do than make sport of everything.”

“Like Father. I shan't marry a wastrel like him.”

She sighed again. “I understand, but you cannot dismiss every man.”

“Introduce me to someone of interest, and perhaps I will not.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Tonight is Alexander Hanover's ball to celebrate his homecoming.”

“Who?”

“He is a wealthy merchant with many ships and a lucrative import business.” Elizabeth's look turned speculative. “Somehow, I think you will find him interesting. He intimidates most of the young ladies, but you are not like most.”

Rebecca sighed. “We shall see.”

“You must wear the lavender tonight.”

She set her cup on the table. “I am quite capable of dressing myself.”

“I know, but it is the most stunning of the gowns Madam Brovay completed for you, and you have not worn it in public yet.”

She inclined her head. “If it makes you happy.” She lifted her cup again and looked at Nora. “Would you see if there are any remaining lemon biscuits from yesterday's tea?”

Nora's eyebrow shot up. “But you do not like lemon, m'lady.”

She shrugged. “I have a craving for one.”

With a sigh, Nora left the room, returning shortly with a plate of lemon biscuits. Rebecca found the scent off-putting, but the tartness made up for her initial reaction. She couldn't imagine why she hadn't liked lemons in the past.

Chapter 7

The lavender evening gown was indeed lovely. A white, ruffled petticoat showed through where the lavender slim, silk overskirt was caught up with bows. Puffed sleeves nearly touched her ears, and tiny seed pearls had been sewn to make rosettes on the sides of each sleeve. The bodice dipped too low for her taste, exposing an alarming swell of bosom, but she trusted that Elizabeth and the modiste were up-to-date on the very latest styles. The hem ended three inches above her ankle—the absolute highest she had been willing to go.

Nora curled her hair and pinned it loosely on her head. Finally, she tucked a single white lily behind her ear and secured it with a pin. White gloves and slippers completed the ensemble. Rebecca eyed herself in the looking glass, satisfied she wouldn't embarrass her sister—at least not by her state of dress.

"Your cape, m'lady."

Rebecca took the silk cloak, lined with mink, and draped it around her shoulders. She rolled her eyes at Nora. "Wish me luck in snaring a husband."

“I do, and hope it is quickly,” Nora said softly.

“What?”

“Nothing, m'lady.”

She left the suite and swept down the wide staircase. She found Philip and Elizabeth already waiting for her in the sitting room. The empire waist of her sister's white gown hid the bulk of her stomach. She looked innocent until Philip ruined the image by kissing her, making Elizabeth giggle. When she became aware of Rebecca in the doorway, she cleared her throat. “You look stunning.”

“Thank you.”

“Shall we go fishing, ladies?” Philip offered his arm to Elizabeth, then Rebecca as they neared.

“You are impossible, dear.” Elizabeth rapped her fan across his forearm gently.

“It is naught but the truth,” he said, and winked at Rebecca. “Are we not fishing for a husband for your sister?”

Rebecca couldn't hold back a laugh. “Elizabeth and Mama are fishing, but never asked me if I wished to be bait.”

Philip had a sympathetic expression on his face. “It has been my experience that you seldom realize you are bait until someone reels you in.” He patted his wife's hand again. “It is not an unhappy circumstance, so take heart, Rebecca.”

She forced a smile for him, but did not voice her thoughts. She had no wish to be reeled in by any of the gentlemen in her acquaintance. She doubted any of the men her sister knew would change her mind. Only one man consumed her thoughts, and he was unattainable.

The carriage ride to the Hanover townhouse took nearly an hour because of the surrounding traffic. At one point, Rebecca asked, “Why not simply walk the six blocks?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “Part of an evening of socializing is seeing and being seen.”

Rebecca rolled her eyes. “Much like riding through the park at five in London.”

Her sister nodded before she turned her attention back to Philip.

She leaned back against the seat, battling a yawn. It wasn't nine yet, but she felt ready to retire. She gave in to the yawn and hid it behind her white lace fan. To her relief, they finally arrived at their destination.

Mr. Hanover's home was considerably more expensive than Philip and Elizabeth's. It stood alone on the block, surrounded by lush green lots on each side. A metal fence encompassed the entire block. The three-story home was

fashioned of brick and wood, with a steep roof and marble stairs. A man wearing a tuxedo stood outside the entrance, accepting invitations and opening the doors for the crush of guests.

Once they had entered the home, Rebecca bit back a gasp. Marble had also been used for the entryway, but someone had ruined its splendor by laying down a long red carpet that led from the entrance to the ballroom.

The doors stood open, and she could see a large number of people milling about the room. She followed her sister and Philip inside. Her nose wrinkled at the mingled odors of perfumes, cigar and pipe smoke, and food displayed on long tables against the far wall.

"Would not you love to be mistress of this home?" Elizabeth whispered behind her fan.

Rebecca shrugged. "I suppose." It would take more than a spacious home and an adoring assemblage to impress her. "Where is this Mr. Hanover?"

"Lord."

"Hmm?"

"He inherited a bankrupt Viscount title from his mother's great-uncle, or distant cousin, I've heard," Philip said. His voice lowered. "Although, I have also heard that when his elder half-brother, The Earl of Hanover, inherited the title, he sent his brother packing. Apparently, Hanover has a murky past."

She ignored the tidbit of gossip. “I thought Americans did not give a whit for titles?”

He nodded. “That is true. Hanover will be the first to tell you to dispense with such nonsense.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “Titles are not nonsense, my dear.”

Philip took her hand. “You are speaking to an American, Elizabeth. I shall never understand the point of them.”

“Perhaps because you were not born with one?”

He shrugged. “Perhaps. Titles are not important to you either, or you would not have refused that Viscount to accept my indecently hasty proposal.”

“Must you always mock Mama?” She sounded aggrieved, but her lips twitched with suppressed laughter.

“Shall we dance, m'lady?”

She curtsied to him. “Of course, sir.”

Rebecca watched them glide away to join the minuet, feeling a dart of envy. It was quickly squelched as she saw William Bradleaf making his way to her.

He was tall and lean, with carefully arranged brown curls and strange golden eyes. His navy jacket was the latest in style, with reproduced family crests on each of the real gold buttons. His cravat was intricately tied, and white

gloves encased his large hands. He had never been anything other than polite and respectful, but she was wary of him just the same.

She stifled a groan and tried to force a polite smile. “Good evening, Mr. Bradleaf.”

“Miss Stanhope, er, Lady Stanhope.” He bowed at the waist, extending a gloved hand. “The Lancers is beginning, m'lady.”

She looked at the dance floor, where dancers were lining up to perform the modified Quadrille. “I have never been good with the intricate steps, but thank you.”

He shrugged. “No matter. I shall keep you company.”

She bit back a sigh, resisting the urge to tell him he would not be winning the bet circulating among the gentlemen of Boston. “There is no need. That young lady looks eager to dance, yet lacks a partner.” She pointed to a painfully shy young girl who retained much of her baby fat.

He frowned. “I am certain someone will ask her.”

Rebecca fluttered her lashes at him as she fanned herself. “It would be gracious of you to invite her, sir. You are quite popular among the younger men and will surely set the trend.”

His mouth tightened, but he nodded. “If it pleases m'lady.”

“It does.” She watched him walk away with a stiff set of his shoulders, barely biting back a giggle. Her mirth turned to annoyance as she searched for a way to dissuade him. Unlike many of the other gentlemen, he seemed deliberately obtuse. He ignored her brush-offs, while returning for more. His persistence was driving her mad.

She turned away from the sight of him escorting the awkward girl onto the dance floor and froze. Across the room, she saw a gentleman speaking to a small huddle. He wore a black overcoat, white shirt and waistcoat, and long pants in place of the knee breeches many of the men still favored. He wore white gloves on his hands and clutched a top hat. Unlike the other men, his blond hair wasn’t carefully curled and styled.

She squinted, trying to place him. He seemed familiar, but she couldn't tell from her current angle. Rebecca took a few steps to the right, until she had a clear view of his face. A wave of dizziness passed over her, and she struggled to catch her breath. How different he looked in those clothes instead of the white shirt and tan breeches. Her pirate had transformed into a gentleman.

She felt nauseated and breathless. Rebecca ignored an approaching man, detouring around him to make her way to the balcony. She stepped into the cool night air, relieved to find herself alone. She leaned against the rail and sucked in air as if she had been recently drowning.

It couldn't be. That man could not be Christoph. What pirate could pass among civilized people? Yet, he had been educated and articulate. He had been logical and methodical in approaching their bargain, and had kept his word. Could it be that he was passing himself off as a member of polite society?

She lifted her head as the music stopped and someone spoke. Her curiosity piqued, she hovered near the door of the balcony, gazing up at the man standing on a step a few feet above the crowd. Her eyes memorized every detail, convincing her he was the man who had taken her virginity.

“Thank you for coming to my home this evening. I have missed Boston and America. It is with great relief that I return to our fair city and rest before my next voyage.”

His voice sent shivers up her spine. It was him. There could be no doubt, despite the superficial differences such as clothing and etiquette. What should she do?

Her eyes fell on a soldier nearby, but she discarded the idea. She was reluctant to report him to authorities, because she was not anxious for others to know the details of their encounter.

She had to leave before he recognized her. What might he do to protect his identity and secret? Murder did not seem farfetched, as he and his cutthroats had slaughtered five of her crew.

Rebecca pushed her way through the crowd, seeking out her sister and Philip. She saw them near the foot of the staircase and hurried toward them, keeping her face turned from Christoph's direction.

When she reached them, Rebecca grasped Elizabeth's arm. “I must leave.”

“What? We have not been here more than a half-hour. It would be impolite to leave now.”

“I am not feeling well,” she said in a rush. “A headache,” she added quickly, seeing her sister's concern. “I will take the coach and send it back for you.”

“That shan't be possible, m'lady.”

Rebecca stiffened as his voice came from behind her. He was close enough to touch her, but didn't.

Elizabeth bowed her head. “Lord Hanover.”

He lifted her gloved hand and kissed it. “Mrs. Gallow.” He turned to incline his head to Philip. “Mr. Gallow.”

“Sir.”

Rebecca shivered as his icy blue eyes rested on her. She tilted her chin up and tried to meet his stare without faltering.

“This is my sister, Rebecca Stanhope.”

She resisted the urge to tug her hand away when he lifted it to his mouth. She shivered when his hot breath caressed her fingers through the thin silk. “M'lord.” Her voice emerged as a croak.

“I could not help but overhear your quandary, m'lady. I am afraid your carriage is boxed in at the moment.”

“I shall take a cab.”

He shook his head. “It would be unsafe to allow you to return home unescorted.” Christoph turned back to Philip. “I shall see your charge home.”

“We could not impose.”

“It is not an imposition. I find myself weary of the social niceties already.” His lip curled. “It takes little for one to become jaded.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I shall see Lady Stanhope home before I return to my bed. It has been a wearing journey.”

“I am sure.” Rebecca gave him a simpering smile. “I could not keep you from your bed, sir.”

“Nonsense. It shall be my pleasure to see you home.” His eyes spoke words too vivid to utter in polite company.

She had no trouble interpreting them. Before Rebecca could form another protest, Elizabeth settled the matter.

“You are most gracious, m'lord.”

He smiled at her. “Call me Alex, m'lady.”

She stiffened, prepared to expose him…anything to avoid enduring the ride back to her sister's home in his presence.

Christoph's mouth twisted into a parody of a smile. “That is a lovely necklace.”

Her eyes widened at the deliberate mention of the necklace. Was he reminding her he wasn't the only one with secrets?

Elizabeth blushed and nodded. “Thank you, Alex. It was my great-grandmother's. Only recently did it come to me.” She flashed Philip a quick smile. “Mama forgave my hasty marriage,” she whispered to her husband.

Rebecca opened her mouth, uncertain what she would say, but he had spirited her from the room before she could think of anything. With dizzying speed, she was standing beside him, with his hand resting lightly at her waist, wondering how they had gotten outside.

He lifted a hand to flag down a passing hansom. When the driver stopped, Christoph opened the door for her, and then asked for the address. Once he had relayed it to the driver, he joined her in the coach, lowering the curtain on the window.

Rebecca glared at him. “How dare you pass yourself off among polite society?”

He laughed. “It may interest you to know I was an aristocrat long before I was a privateer, m'lady. You would think it challenging to turn from gentleman to pirate, but one picks up a great many skills necessary to plundering in the company of other nobles.”

She snorted. “Privateer? Do you imply America sanctions your actions?”

Christoph shrugged. “In the past, I confined my business transactions to foreign vessels and gave my government no reason to stop me.”

“But, why? Surely, you do not need the money? You are a Viscount and own an import business.”

He lifted a brow. “You know much about me, Rebecca.”

She colored. “My sister told me something about you, but I did not know you were a murdering pirate.”

He leaned forward. “Murder is subjective. I prefer to think of it as an unpleasant aspect of my former occupation.”

“Ask my crew if they feel that way.”

White teeth flashed against his tanned skin. “No one made them protect the cargo.” He sighed, leaning back against the rocking seat again. “Would it make

a difference to you to know I was simply collecting payment for a debt your father owed me?”

Rebecca's mouth dropped open. “What?”

“Lord Stanhope was not a reliable associate, but I did not know that until it was too late.” He shrugged. “After exhausting other channels, I chose the only recourse open to me. I came out of retirement for a brief time.” He winked at her.

She shook her head. “You lie.”

“Do I?” He looked beyond her shoulder. “How did your father die, Rebecca?”

“You bastard.” Without thought, Rebecca launched herself at him, pleased when her hand connected with his cheek. If only the glove hadn’t softened the blow, she would have been even more satisfied.

He captured her hands in his, holding her pressed against his body. “So eager, m'lady.” He bent to kiss her.

She turned her head away from him. “My father made mistakes, but he was not a bad man.”

Christoph followed her twisting head, resting his lips against her ear. “He was a man without honor. He owed half of London money and died in a staged

argument to escape his debts. He paid Lord Fenwick to shoot him through the heart."

"No." Tears burned behind her eyes. "Why are you doing this?"

"You deserve the truth, and you must know it all, or you will expose me." He pulled her further into his arms, ignoring her futile struggles. "I am no longer a pirate by profession, but I do not like to be taken advantage of. Your father cheated the wrong man."

"Pirate or no, you are ruthless and heartless." She tried to wrench away from him, but he didn't loosen his hold. "My father would never have done what you accuse him of."

He sighed. "I did not think you would believe me." He released her left hand and grasped her chin. "Know that you will be sullied if you choose to spread tales about me. I circumvented the law so that your father's debt was settled with me, but I do not make a habit of such acts anymore." He shrugged. "In my youth, perhaps I built my empire by less than scrupulous methods, but I no longer employ such tactics."

"I am supposed to believe you? What proof do I have?"

"My word."

She frowned at him. "I do not trust you, Christoph."

He smiled. “I know.” His voice lowered. “My name is Alexander Christoph Hanover, m'lady. I prefer Alex.”

Her eyes widened. “If you are no longer a pirate, why lie about your name?”

“It was inevitable that you would eventually find your father's papers and see my name listed as an associate to whom he owed a substantial amount. You could not connect me to Christoph.”

“Your explanation is too neat.”

“Believe me or not. That is your choice. All I truly require from you is silence, and will ensure you receive the same from me.” Once more, he lowered his head to kiss her.

Rebecca squeezed her eyes shut, warring with her conscience and desires. As his mouth settled on hers, she sagged against him. She opened her mouth to allow his tongue inside, moaning softly as it slid against hers. She buried her free hand in his hair, straining to get closer.

“Rebecca, I have thought of you often,” he whispered against her lips after pulling away. “Your soft skin, delicate scent, and beautiful hair. I ache to be inside you again.”

She swallowed, biting back an admission of thoughts of him. “Why did you leave the necklace?”

He leaned away from her. “What does it matter?”

“I must know.”

Alex sighed. “The cargo on the ship was adequate to cover the debt. I had no right to take the necklace.”

She blinked back tears. “You had no other reason?”

He hesitated, then shook his head.

“I see.” She bowed her head. “Please release me.” She returned to the opposite seat and opened the curtain when he loosened his hold. Rebecca looked up at him as soon as she felt composed. “Thank you for the escort home. I see Elizabeth's block in sight.” She turned her head to look at the open window on the door. “You shall have my silence.”

“I promise none will hear of what transpired between us.”

She inclined her head, swallowing a lump of moisture in her throat as the cab halted before the Gallows' home. Rebecca opened the door and stepped out, pausing when his hand fell on hers. “Yes?”

“I did not mean to hurt you, Rebecca.”

She forced a brittle smile. “You have not hurt me, Lord Hanover. You are naught but a criminal, despite your words. How could one such as you hurt me?”

His mouth tightened. “My mistake, m'lady. I sometimes forget women of your station have no emotions not inspired by greed and propriety.” He thumped on the side of the door. “Driver, return to my home.”

Rebecca watched the cab disappear from sight before she touched her lips. She could still feel the imprint of his on them. She bit her knuckle to suppress a sob as she turned and ran into the house. She bypassed the butler and hurried up to her room, where she threw herself on the bed and sobbed. Confusion filled her. Was he telling the truth, or had he fabricated a web of lies in the time it took them to exit his home?

Chapter 8

Rebecca awoke with a sour stomach and a pounding head. She saw Nora hovering over her and realized she had fallen asleep in the lavender gown. “What time is it?”

“Just after eleven, m'lady. Lady Elizabeth asked me to wake you.”

Rebecca sat up, groaning at the assorted aches and pains accrued from a night of sleeping in an awkward position. “Why?”

“The modiste arrives at one.”

She groaned. “Not another round of fittings?”

Nora shrugged. “Your sister did not say.”

With a groan, Rebecca slid from the bed. A wave of nausea caught her by surprise. “I—”

Nora pushed her gently on the bed and set a tray of tea and toast beside her. “The cook tells me this helped Lady Elizabeth early in her condition.”

Rebecca shook her head, accepting the cup of weak tea automatically. “I do not understand.”

Nora's gaze dropped to the floor, and her face colored. “When your sister had morning sickness, weak tea and toast helped her.”

Her brow furrowed. “Morning sickness?”

Her voice lowered to a whisper. “It happens to many women early in their pregnancies.”

She blinked and burst into laughter. “That is impossible. I am not with child.”

“M'lady—”

“He told me he would ensure I did not have a baby.”

Nora shrugged. “I do not know much about such matters, but I do not think there is a way that always works to prevent babies.”

Rebecca shook her head. “It cannot be. You are mistaken, Nora.”

“When did you last have your monthly, m'lady?” Nora's face was bright red. “Oh, that your mother was here for this,” she whispered.

“Well, I—” She frowned, counting backwards. Rebecca flinched when she realized it had been more than a month.

Nora sat on the bed beside her, grasping her hand. “You must take a husband immediately.”

Rebecca shook her head. “I will not be used, nor will I use someone and foist my child on them.”

“Think of your child. Do you want to raise a bastard?” She said the last word so low that it was more of a breath than a sound.

Rebecca crumpled against her former nanny. “How did this happen?” She buried her face against Nora's chest, trying to stifle sobs. What would she do? It was intolerable to take a husband she didn't love, but she loved no one. It wasn't love she felt for Christoph—Alex. And for all she knew, he had a wife. What had she done?

Chapter 9

“You look peaked tonight, m'lady. I have heard you left Lord Hanover's indisposed yesterday evening.”

Rebecca forced a wan smile for Bradleaf. “Yes. I have not recovered yet, but Elizabeth insisted getting out would do me good.” In fact, she had chosen to go to the Drendens' ball in hopes that a man would catch her eye and sweep her

off her feet—right into a marriage bed before he realized her deception. Unfortunately, her heart wasn't in the hunt.

His voice sounded strained. “I have also heard you left in the company of Lord Hanover.”

“He was kind enough to see me home.”

William shook his head. “His reputation is unsavory, m’lady. You must be careful.”

She bit back the hysterical urge to laugh. “He was a perfect gentleman, Mr. Bradleaf.”

“Surely you have heard the rumors?”

She lifted a brow. “Rumors?”

“They say he made the money to start his company by plundering vessels when his brother refused to share the family fortunes.”

“A pirate, you say?” She shrugged. “I had not heard that nonsense, but I cannot imagine it to be true.” She frowned when he took her hand, instinctively trying to pull away.

His grip tightened. “I beg you not to fall for his charms. Allow me to save you from yourself.”

Rebecca succeeded in extracting her hand from his. “What are you speaking of?”

“May I call on you tomorrow after I speak with Philip? He is your guardian while in Boston, is he not?”

“I suppose, but why must you speak with him?” She took a sip of her drink, trying to disguise her concern. There were few reasons why Bradleaf would seek out Philip, and none of them could be good.

“To plead for your hand.”

The punch sputtered from her mouth when she choked. When she had regained her breath, Rebecca stared at him. “I beg your pardon?”

“I want you for my wife.”

“You do not know me. We have met less than a dozen times.”

He placed his hand against his chest. “I know I love you.”

She snorted. “More likely, you love the thought of collecting the ever-growing pot from the local gentlemen's clubs if you succeed in persuading me. I am certain my inheritance is added incentive.”

He looked wounded. “I had nothing to do with that ridiculous wager, Lady Stanhope. As for your inheritance, it would not matter to me if you had not a pound to your name.”

She grimaced. “There is no way to prove that, sir.” Rebecca tried to bite her tongue, knowing it was stupid to sabotage his proposal. Yet, the thought of being his wife and sharing his bed nauseated her. She could not accept him.

He took her hand again. “I must have you.”

“I would refuse any offer, so do not waste your time.” She snatched her hand from his and marched away. She paused to glance over her shoulder, catching the dark look he sent her before he turned and strode from the ballroom.

Rebecca stopped near a pillar, using it for support. She took a deep breath, then another, before her heart stopped racing. The confrontation with William Bradleaf had her rattled.

“I see you have a taste for rakes.”

Her heart skipped a beat, and she whipped around to glare at Alex. “Must you creep up on me?”

He ignored her question. “You seem to have angered Bradleaf. I have heard he has a most unpleasant temperament. Among gentlemen, such tales run rampant.” Alex glanced off in the distance. “He is said to have peculiar tastes, and many brothels will not serve him because of damage inflicted to their girls. He is dangerous, Rebecca. Not just to soiled doves, but to the foolish and naïve of society, as well.”

“Interesting that he was just saying much the same about you.”

Alex arched a brow. “Warning you off, was he?”

She shrugged. “And proposing.”

His light-blue eyes turned frigid. “Are congratulations in order?”

“Of course not. He is much too insistent for my tastes.” She shuddered. “I suspect he is one of the fools behind the wager circulating throughout the city.”

His expression warmed. “Ah, yes. Who shall capture the lady and penetrate her icy shell?” His voice lowered to a whispered breath across her bare neck. “We both know the answer to that, do we not, m'lady?”

She stiffened. “I thought we had an arrangement. My silence for yours?”

He waved a hand at the clustered groups. “None are near. Only your ears and mine hear of what I speak.”

Rebecca moved away as he moved closer. “I do not care to be reminded of the incident.”

He chuckled. “Tell me, do you waltz?”

“Upon occasion.” She gasped when he took her hand. “No, I…not here, with you.”

“Smile and pretend you are fond of me, m'lady.” He swept her onto the dance floor as the music for the waltz began. Most of the older couples had stopped dancing, but the younger ones threw themselves enthusiastically into the dance.

She held onto him as they spun around the floor, carefully following his footsteps. “Mama does not approve of this dance, so I have had little opportunity to try it,” she said the third time she trod on his dress shoes.

“You are doing fine. Do not concentrate on the steps so much. Look in my eyes and let your body feel the rhythm of mine.”

A blush swept across her cheeks as she immediately thought of a different type of rhythm. Their gazes locked, and time seemed to stop at that moment. She was aware of moving around the floor, but wasn't sure how they managed. All she could feel was his solid presence so close to her. She could smell him—this time a heady aroma of sandalwood and something unique to him that reminded her of their last time together.

“You learn quickly.”

She nodded, tearing her eyes from his. Rebecca took a deep breath as she realized how hot it was in the room. She took her hand from his shoulder to flick open her fan.

He frowned down at her. “Are you alright, m'lady?”

“It is unbearably hot in here.”

“Fresh air,” he decreed, leading her from the dance floor to the gardens outside. He pulled her down onto a stone bench beside him and handed her his handkerchief.

She blotted the perspiration from her face as she sucked in air. Nausea welled up, and she struggled to force it down. Rebecca continued to fan herself until she had a tenuous mastery of her body once more. “I apologize if we were a spectacle.”

Alex shrugged. “It is unimportant. Are you feeling better now?”

She gave him a wan smile. “I think I shall retire early once more. I see it was unwise to venture out tonight while feeling poorly.”

“I shall see that your sister is informed, as it would not be proper for me to escort you home two nights in a row.”

Rebecca looked up at him, sensing he wasn't being honest. His words made sense, but there was a sense of falseness to them, as if he had other reasons besides what society might think for avoiding the task. Did he wish to avoid spending more time in her company? Was she so unpleasant?

She pushed back her hurt. “There is no need. I will find her myself.” She stood, intent on hurrying from his presence, but a wave of dizziness caught her by surprise. “Oh, my.”

“What is it?”

“I do believe—” Before Rebecca could sit down, she felt herself falling, but didn't reach the hard stone ground before fainting.

Chapter 10

The first thing Rebecca noticed as she came around was the jostling of the carriage. She blinked open her eyes and found herself looking into Alex's blue ones. They were filled with concern and something else until he realized she was watching. They returned to their normal watchful state, minus any emotions. “What happened?” Her throat felt dry.

“You fainted at the Drendens,” Elizabeth said.

She tried to sit up and noticed she had been lying across Alex's lap. He helped her into a sitting position braced against the seats. “I cannot imagine what happened.”

“No doubt you became overexcited from the waltz.” Elizabeth's mouth pursed in disapproval. “I hope you realize now Mama was correct about the dangers of that dance.”

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes and forced a bland smile. “I am feeling better now.” She turned her head to frown at Alex. “Thank you for accompanying us.” Her eyes narrowed. “Why have you?”

Philip and Elizabeth immediately made apologetic sounds, but he ignored them. “I found myself seated in the carriage after carrying you from the Drendens’ ball, without quite realizing how it happened.”

“Oh,” she said in a small voice. When would she stop torturing herself, hoping he would admit to some small measure of feeling for her? The carriage stopped before she could humiliate herself further. Elizabeth and Philip climbed out, and Rebecca tried to ease past Alex, frowning when he put his arm up to block her. ”Let me pass.”

“I will carry you.”

“There is no need.”

“Please let him, Rebecca. I do not want you to take another tumble.”

She frowned at her sister. ”I got overheated and nothing more. I am in no danger.”

He exited the carriage, then leaned in and lifted her onto his shoulder.

She gasped with outrage, kicking her legs against him. Her eyes widened when he slapped her bottom. ”How dare you?”

“Relax, m'lady.” He sounded unconcerned as he lugged her inside with all the care he might show a sack of flour.

To her surprise, he didn't lower her to her feet on the landing. “You may put me down now.”

”Where is your room?”

“You are not carrying me to bed.”

He swung around to Elizabeth. “Where are her chambers?”

"On the second floor—the third door on the left."

Rebecca could see her sister clutching her hands together if she craned her neck around. "Make him unhand me, Elizabeth."

"It is for the best if you do not tax yourself."

She grunted. "Why do you never listen to me?"

"I am certain Lady Rebecca would appreciate a nice cup of tea," Alex said as he began to climb.

Elizabeth inclined her head and hurried into the kitchen, leaving a bewildered Philip behind.

Rebecca struggled to pull away as he carried her into her chamber. "Nora!"

"There is no need to wake your maid."

"Companion," she snapped. A small sound of surprise issued from her when he dropped her on the maroon silk coverlet. "Nora will assist me. You may leave."

"I will stay until your sister arrives."

"There is no need…" She trailed off, looking into his pale face. Was she imagining things, or were his hands trembling? "What is it?"

"Are you ill, Rebecca?"

She blinked at him, bemused by his evident concern. "Not overly so."

He sat on the bed beside her, gripping her arms. “Are you or are you not?”

Rebecca touched his leg, feeling his bunched muscle slowly loosen. “I shall be fine.”

He sucked in a deep breath. “What is wrong with you?”

She slid her eyes from his to the door connecting her room to Nora's. Where was she? “I will recover in time. Now, you really must leave.”

“Rebecca.” He wore a determined expression.

She twisted her hands together. “It is better for you not to know.”

Alex released his hold on her arms. “Oh, God.” His breath hissed through his teeth. “Why did you not tell me on board the *Margaret* you were ill? I never would have allowed you to make that foolish bargain if I had known.”

“I was not ill at that time. The symptoms are more recent.”

“Have you seen a physician?”

She shook her head.

“Right. I shall send for my private physician immediately.”

She put a hand on his. “There is no need. I know the cause.”

“Well, tell me, for pity's sake.”

She dared to meet his eyes again, seeing them boring into her. He was annoyed, but also worried. She took a deep breath, preparing herself. “Your methods were not as effective as you thought.”

He looked confused. “Pardon?”

She dropped her head, squeezing the hand under hers. “I am with child.” Complete silence greeted her announcement. She dared to peek at him and frowned, seeing his flabbergasted expression. His mouth hung open, and he had stiffened. “It is yours,” she whispered.

His brow furrowed, and a flush swept across his cheeks. “Of course it is. I did not think otherwise.” A half-smile curved across his lips. “You would not want another in your bed after I had pleasured you.”

Rebecca bit back a sniff at his arrogant words. Exhaustion was catching up with her quickly, and she suddenly wanted him to be gone. “You may leave now that you have been assured of my health,” she said dismissively.

He stared at her as if she had gone mad. “I am supposed to walk out of here and leave you to deal with the consequences of my actions?”

She moved her hand from his, toying with the reticule still hanging from her wrist. “I thought that would please you.”

“It would be dishonorable to abandon you in such a condition.” His mouth tightened. “We shall wed.”

“No.”

“What?”

“I shan't marry for anything other than love.” She gasped when he cupped her still-flat stomach. “What are you doing?”

“Your option of marrying for love is not available any longer, m'lady.” He squeezed gently. “He changes that.”

“He?”

“My son.”

She frowned at him. “And if she is a girl? Would you still insist on marriage?”

“It is a matter of honor.” There was a stubborn set to his shoulders.

She shook her head.

“I will not accept no, Rebecca. You will become my wife as soon as possible.”

She burst into tears, and then nearly fell from the bed as he slapped her on the back. “Why did you hit me?” she blubbered amid tears.

He sighed again. “I was offering you comfort.”

Rebecca wiped her face on the long sleeve of her pink gown. “Do so more gently in future, m'lord.”

“Why are you crying?”

“Everyone will know why we wed so hastily,” she whispered. “I cannot bear the scandal.”

He shrugged. “Gossip will wane, Rebecca. I shall apply for a special license, and we will marry in three days. None will know of the event until you are settled in my home. We will not affix a date to the ceremony. If any ask, you shall tell them we wed in London during my last trip, but you wished to spend a few weeks with your sister upon your arrival.”

She shook her head. “Who will believe that?”

His chin tilted. “I shall ensure no rumors reach your ears, m'lady. There are few who would contradict me if I were to announce the sun is blue and the moon is pink. Money and social position buys complicity and discretion.” His mouth twisted. “It can also buy silence.”

“You are so cynical.” She leaned away from him. “How can we form a bond built on love and trust?”

He snorted. “You are a romantic, my dear. Our marriage will be one of *my* convenience.” Alex pulled the pins from her hair, sending the locks cascading down her back. “Our marriage bed will not be cold and empty.”

“Lovemaking without love?” Could she do such a thing again, knowing how she felt while knowing how he did not feel?

“Exactly. Let the poets speak of tender sentiments, but never let such words pass our lips. If we approach this partnership logically, we will have no need for the illusions other couples see turn to ash before them.”

“You are most practical.” Rebecca tried to suppress another round of tears at his unfeeling words. How could she enter such a union—one where her body was freely shared, but not her heart? “One might say bitter, even, m’lord.”

Alex shrugged. “It is not bitterness. I have seen unions built and businesses thrive, while others born from contrived affection whither and die. My parents had such a marriage.”

She frowned. “I do not understand.”

“My father broke a contract to marry an heiress so he could wed my mother. Their passion faded, and they were left with nothing.”

She shuddered. “I will not have such a union.”

He nodded, looking satisfied. “Precisely. If you enter with your eyes open—”

Rebecca vigorously shook her head. “I shall not enter it at all. I will not marry you.”

Alex’s mouth tightened, and his hand pressed more firmly into her stomach. “You have little choice, m’lady.”

She tilted her chin and met his gaze. “I do not wish to marry. Ever. I shall run Stanhope Shipping and provide for my child.”

A hard laugh escaped him. “A woman in business? Have you lost your mind, Rebecca? Your delicate condition is obviously interfering with your logic.”

She glared at him. “I am as capable of running the company as my father. More so, because I shan’t succumb to the evils of gambling, drink, and women.”

He still appeared amused, but he didn’t smile. “The creditors will pick apart your pathetic shipping company within months. As soon as they catch up with you here in the Colonies, they shall seize your ship and cancel any contracts you might manage to secure.”

Rebecca dropped her eyes, determined to hold onto her impulsive plan and resist marrying any man. “I will earn enough to repay his debts.”

Alex pushed up on her chin, forcing her to meet his eyes. “No merchant will give you a contract. I shall ensure it personally, though it is hardly worth the bother. What sensible person would entrust cargo to a woman?”

“You are a hateful man.”

“And the father of your child.” His grip firmed. “I will not have my son raised as a bastard. Do not make me go to your guardians. Your sister will be crushed, and Mr. Gallow will no doubt do the right thing. You will be just as married to me, but without privacy, and at their terms, not ours.”

Her eyes darted around the room with desperation, seeking a way out. “I shall run away.” Even to her ears, the threat sounded weak.

“I will find you,” he said firmly. “Be sensible, Rebecca. Think of our child. Do not be selfish or obdurate. It is unbecoming in a woman.”

Was it selfish to want love in her marriage? She had thought never to marry, yet what choice did she have? His hand on her stomach forced her to acknowledge whatever choice she made affected her child too. She wilted. “If we must do this, I wish to finish with the details quickly.”

“I shall arrange it all, Rebecca. You will stay in bed and rest.”

“But—”

He put his finger against her lips. “Until the wedding, you will stay in and conserve your strength. We will allow a few days for the gossip mongers' tongues to stop wagging before either of us venture forth into society.”

She sighed. “Very well.”

He leaned toward her. “Let us seal the arrangement with a kiss.”

“I—” Her protest was swallowed by his lips against hers. Rebecca tried to move her head away, but he put a hand at her neck to anchor her. She closed her eyes and submitted to his soft kiss. It was gentle and undemanding, and he made no attempt to deepen the caress. She sank against him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

They pulled apart when a crashing sound came from the doorway.

“What are you doing?” Elizabeth looked shocked, with her hands on her hips. “You will leave now, Lord Hanover.” An angry blush stained her cheeks. “You are to stay away from my sister.”

“Your sister will be my wife.”

Rebecca squeezed his hand to get his attention. When he turned his head, her eyes implored him not to speak of their true reasons for marriage.

“What?”

A besotted expression crossed his face, and he pushed a lock of hair off Rebecca's face with a gentle hand. “I have fallen victim to your sister's charms.”

Rebecca shot a cautious look at her sister, stunned to see a large smile enveloping her face. “You are not angry?”

“I am ecstatic.” Elizabeth rushed forward to embrace her sister, walking right through the debris from the fallen tea tray. “You have found a husband. I told Mama sending you to Boston was a splendid idea. She will be so happy.”

“Yes.” A lump in her throat made it difficult to force out the word.

Alex rose from her bed. “I shall arrange it and send you a missive with the details.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “What do you know of planning a wedding? We shall begin making arrangements immediately.” She wrung her hands together.

“Oh, it will take at least three months for Mama to receive a letter and make travel arrangements. Allow another three months for her arrival—”

Alex cleared his throat. “We have decided to dispense with waiting. The marriage will take place three days from now.”

Her mouth dropped open. “That is impossible. You have only just met, for one thing. What will people say?”

“We met in London,” Rebecca blurted out. “We formed a…friendship, and when we met again, we realized it was more than that. Neither of us wishes to wait for half a year.”

“It is indecent.”

Rebecca smirked. “You married Philip one month after meeting him.”

A guilty flush blossomed in her cheeks. “That was only because Mama was so opposed to me marrying a merchant without a title. He had to return to Boston, and I wanted to come with him.” She glared at her sister. “At least Mama was invited to my wedding.”

“I am sorry to distress you, but we have decided.” Alex inclined his head. “Rebecca will need help making her personal arrangements, and I am relying on you to see she rests and recovers from this illness.”

Elizabeth's mouth closed with a click. Eventually, she capitulated. “Very well. I see you are as stubborn as my sister.” She sighed. “At least the gossip

will die down in a month or two when there is no evidence to support their speculation."

"Er, right." Alex lifted Rebecca's hand and pressed a kiss to her palm through the glove. "Good evening, my love."

"Good night." She dropped her eyes from his, unwilling to let him see the hurt his false words caused. If only they were the truth, she would have no hesitation accepting him as a husband. If only she *was* his love.

"Good night, Lady Elizabeth." Alex left the room and presumably the house.

She braced herself for her sister's words. Silence followed his departure. She stared up at Elizabeth. "Well?"

Her sister heaved a sigh. "I do hope your hasty union is worth injuring Mama's feelings."

She flinched. "I have no desire to hurt her, but she lives far away. I cannot wait."

"Why not? What is the rush, sister? I know how love can be, but surely you can restrain yourselves for a few months?"

Rebecca hated to continue hurting her sister, but she was forced to shake her head. "In three days I will marry him. Nothing you say can change my mind."

“Fine.” Tears welled in Elizabeth's eyes. “Good evening, Rebecca.”

“Sleep well.”

With a sniff, Elizabeth swept from the room.

Rebecca wiped her own streaming eyes as she rose from the bed. “You may come out now, Nora. They are gone.”

Within seconds, her companion entered the chamber, wearing a robe over her nightdress, and a ruffled cap on her head. “Was that the pirate, m'lady?” Her voice was a timid whisper.

“Aye, but he is not truly a pirate.” She sighed. “It is a long story, and I am tired. Tomorrow, I will explain.”

Nora bowed her head. “Are you happy, m'lady?”

Rebecca let her expression answer as she turned for Nora to unbutton the pink gown. What had she to be happy about? A husband who did not want her, and a sister who had been hurt by her inability to be truthful. Add to that a soon-to-be angered mother and she could see little to buoy her to a more cheerful frame of mind.

Chapter 11

“By God's authority, I pronounce you joined eternally in His sight and by His holy ordinances.” The priest, a portly man with a baldhead and kindly smile, closed his Bible. “You may kiss your bride.”

Alex pressed a chaste kiss to her mouth, and then lifted her left hand, where his ancestors' ring now rested. Together, they turned to Elizabeth and Philip, the witnesses and only guests in their own parlor. As she had done for the last three days, Elizabeth avoided Rebecca's eyes.

“Thank you for allowing us to have our wedding here,” Alex said.

Philip nodded. “Of course, Alex. Now, I believe Cook has prepared a special luncheon.” He turned to the priest. “You are welcome to join us, Father Shaunessy.”

The priest shook his head. “I have much to do at the rectory, but thank you for your kindness.”

“Of course, Father.” Philip returned his gaze to Alex and Rebecca. “Shall we?”

Alex lifted the fob and opened his pocket watch. “I did want to get Rebecca settled at my home.”

He waved his hand at Alex. “Servants can deal with that while we dine.”

Alex nodded his head. “Thank you for your continuing hospitality.”

“I must remove this gown,” Rebecca whispered. It was irrational, but she felt like the high-necked, slim-fitting white dress was choking her. “If you will excuse me?” She didn't wait for a response as she hurried from the dining room and rushed up the stairs to her room, where Nora awaited.

Nora was unbuttoning the tiny buttons when the bedroom door opened, admitting Elizabeth. Rebecca held herself stiffly, hurt by her sister's behavior during the past few days.

“Congratulations.” Elizabeth wrung her hands and dropped her gaze to the carpet. “You looked beautiful.”

“Thank you.” She winced at her cold tone. “You did a lovely job decorating the parlor.”

She shrugged. “I did my best with the time I had.”

“Will you continue to remind me that I have hurt you and Mama long after this day has passed?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I did not mean that as an admonishment. Only a statement of fact.” She glanced away as Rebecca stepped out of the gown. “I came up here for another purpose.”

“Yes?”

“I did tell you about what happens between husband and wife, but you refused to believe me.” Her face was a fiery red. “I wanted to ensure you knew I spoke the truth.”

Rebecca nodded. “I am convinced.” She lifted her arms as Nora assisted her with a pink and yellow floral-print day dress with white ribbons trimming the hem.

Elizabeth bit her lip. “Do not be alarmed if you do not enjoy the experience at first. It will soon become pleasurable.”

Her eyes widened. “Not everyone enjoys it the first time?”

“Heavens, no. It will hurt, but it is your duty to endure.”

“Surely the pain fades and pleasure takes over?”

Elizabeth looked dumbfounded. “I do not think so, sister. Do not expect such a thing.” She came forward to squeeze her hand. “Endure it as you must, and soon you will adapt to what is expected of you. One day, you will anticipate the act as much as your husband.” Her blush deepened with the admission.

Rebecca nodded, incapable of words. What kind of lady was she? She had more than endured her first experience with Alex, and had spent the last three days anticipating another encounter. Was she depraved and wicked for craving his touch? “Thank you for telling me, Elizabeth.”

Her sister nodded and scurried from the room. Rebecca's head bowed as Nora fastened the buttons. “I am a wanton,” she whispered.

Nora squeezed her shoulder. “No, m'lady. Each experience is different—or so I have heard. There is nothing wrong with receiving pleasure from your husband's touch. It is a gift from God.”

“But he was not my husband.” Rebecca turned, laying her head on Nora's shoulder. “He was not even in my acquaintance, and I let him…I wanted him to take me.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Heaven help me, but I still ache for him.”

“Do not be overly alarmed, m'lady. Love and passion can often overwhelm a person, causing them to act contrary to the way they always believed themselves to be.” She stroked Rebecca's hair. “Take joy in his presence and hold him close to your heart.”

Rebecca lifted her head, forcing a smile for Nora. “You are right.” But what happened when a husband took no joy in his wife, and forbade her expressing affection? What did a wife do when her husband did not share her feelings? How did she find joy in a mockery of marriage? “I must join them downstairs.”

Nora's eyes were misty. “I did wonder if I would ever see this day. I have cared for you for fifteen years.” Her voice softened. “I could not love you more if you were my own child, m'lady.”

Rebecca swiped at her weeping eyes. She could find no words to reply to Nora's, so she settled for another tight hug before rushing from the room to rejoin her family and new husband.

Chapter 12

Rebecca eyed the master suite with wide eyes as she followed Alex inside. Like the rest of the house, it was exquisitely furnished. She failed to take in the general details in more than a cursory way. Her attention was immediately drawn to the large bed in the middle of the room. A white coverlet covered its expanse, and heavy curtains had been drawn back.

"Rebecca?"

She blinked, returning her attention to him. "Yes?"

"Your room is through this door."

She frowned at the way her stomach dipped. It was indigestion from their luncheon; certainly not disappointment at finding they had separate rooms. She followed him through the door, passing through the dressing room and another doorway before entering her room.

The bed was considerably smaller, without the posts and privacy curtains. A dark-blue velvet spread covered the bed. The rest of the room was bare

except for a cheval looking glass, a set of shelves, a gilt chair, and a table near the bed. A fire already burned in the gray stone fireplace in the corner of the room. A thick, white rug lay before it.

"Will it suit you?"

She nodded.

Alex stood by the door for a moment. "Do you require anything further?"

Rebecca shook her head.

"Georgina has already unpacked most of your things."

"Georgina?"

"The upstairs maid. She shall be your personal attendant until Nora rejoins you. If you need anything, please summon her or Bentley."

"Thank you." His reminder left Rebecca wanting to cry. She longed for Nora to join the staff, but her companion had insisted on remaining with Elizabeth until the baby came. She had seen the excitement on her face and suspected Nora would once again return to the position of nanny. It was irrational to feel abandoned, but she did.

He sighed. "I shall see you at dinner."

"Would you please send up a tray?"

Alex frowned. "Are you unwell?"

"I am tired. May I also have a bath?"

"Of course."

"Thank you," she said again as he left. Once he had gone, Rebecca collapsed into the chair near the fireplace, hoping to ease the chill inside her. It was a chill that came from fear rather than cold. Would he want her tonight? Could she lie with him without revealing how she felt?

She closed her eyes, wishing she had someone to counsel her. Marriages without love were commonplace, but she had hoped for more. If she had to settle for such a state, why must she love her groom? Damn her traitorous heart.

Rebecca jumped when someone knocked on her door. "Enter."

A plump woman in her late-twenties entered, curtsying. "M'lady, I am Georgina. The master said you wanted to bathe?"

"Yes."

She inclined her head. "Bentley is seeing to it now. Would you prefer to eat before your bath?"

"No." The special luncheon had left little room for a meal anytime soon.

"Yes, m'lady." With another curtsy, Georgina left the room, returning soon with two men, who filled a tub for her.

After they had left, Rebecca slid into the hot, rose-scented water, glad to have a larger tub than the one on the *Margaret*. She was able to sink down and brace her head on the rim, allowing some of the tension that had built up

during the day to melt away. It was only the water turning tepid that forced her from the bath.

Georgina had laid a sheer white nightdress on the bed—a wedding gift from Elizabeth, sewn by Madam Brovay. Once she had dressed and Georgina brushed her hair, she slid into the soft bed, laying her head against the feather pillows. To her surprise, Rebecca found herself slipping easily into sleep. Despite her turbulent thoughts, her body craved sleep. She did not resist or try to keep her lids open, seeing no reason to stay awake. It was doubtful Alex would come for her tonight.

Chapter 13

She awoke as the bed dipped under his weight. "Christoph?" she asked, still in a haze.

"Alex," he corrected in a gentle voice. "You did not wait for me."

A yawn overtook her as she struggled to gather wits scattered by a deep sleep. "I was tired."

He chuckled. "You sound annoyed, Rebecca."

"What are you doing?" She suddenly realized he was in bed beside her. "What time is it?"

"After midnight. I found myself unable to focus on business matters for thoughts of you." He pulled her against his bare chest. "There is no reason to deny myself."

"But—"

"You are my wife." His expression turned from anticipation to concern. "Are you indisposed?"

She bit her lip, tempted to lie, but knowing she couldn't avoid his touch indefinitely. Nor did she want to. She ached for him and couldn't resist, regardless of what that indicated about her moral fiber. "No. Just sleepy."

His head lowered, and he brushed his lips against hers. "I believe I can keep you awake."

She snuggled closer as his mouth took possession of hers. Her eyes widened when she felt his bare leg with her foot. She explored his hip, finding him free of clothing. She wanted to feel her bare flesh against his.

He seemed to read her thoughts as he pushed the gown up to her hips, pulled her into a sitting position, and removed it. Without looking, he tossed the lace confection over his shoulder, uncaring of where it landed. His mouth moved to her neck as he cupped her breasts.

Rebecca bit back a moan as his fingers toyed with her nipples. She arched her back.

“Shall I kiss them?” His voice was low and hoarse.

She nodded, throwing her head back as he trailed his mouth from her neck to her right breast. She winced as he clamped his lips over it.

He lifted his head. “Are you alright?”

“They are sensitive.”

Alex nodded as he returned his mouth to her breast, this time caressing so gently her stomach quivered. She closed her eyes and gripped his shoulders as he laved one nipple before switching his attention to the other. He showed no favoritism and alternated frequently.

“Your breasts are perfect,” he said, lifting his head. “They fit in my hands as if they were made to nestle there. The nipples are firm and round.” He took time to run his tongue across her left nipple, and it beaded into a hard knot. Alex looked at her again, licking his lips. “I am hard-pressed to choose which is more perfect—your breasts or your sweet pussy.”

A blush threatened to stain her cheeks, and she tried to hide her embarrassment with his scandalous—but pleasing—praise. He seemed intent on teaching her everything her proper upbringing had failed to. She moaned and tangled her hands in his hair as he dipped his head once more and rolled her nipple around his tongue. One of his hands settled on her thigh, near her pussy.

Pussy, she thought to herself. The thought of uttering the word brought the scarlet flush she had tried to fight down to her cheeks, sweeping up from her neck. She tried whispering it, but her tongue refused to obey.

His mouth at her breast soon distracted her, as did his hand stroking up and down her thigh, flirting with her pussy, but not actually touching it. By the time he lifted his head again, she was whimpering and desperate for release. "Please."

"What do you want?"

Her cheeks burned bright red, and her voice shook when she said, "You."

He rested his forehead against hers as he pulled her onto his lap. "I want something too, Rebecca."

She was willing to agree to anything, if only he would take her. "What?"

"Touch me."

She moved a hand from his shoulder to his waist. She squeezed gently, eying him uncertainly. "You want me to touch you, without a barrier?"

Alex laughed as he lifted her hand and placed it against his chest. He took one of her fingers and rubbed it across his nipple before he dropped his hand. "Just your skin against mine, love."

She focused completely on the hard nub, first exploring with a light touch, then increasing the pressure. She froze when he gasped. "Have I hurt you?"

“Nay. You are doing well.” He sounded strained.

Rebecca bit her lip, wondering what else she could do. Inspiration struck as she remembered how wonderful it felt to have his lips around her nipples. She bent her head and ran her tongue across his other nipple, this time smiling when she heard him gasp again. She nipped him before she slid her tongue across his chest, through the light hair, to suckle the neglected nub.

“Rebecca.”

She lifted her head reluctantly. “Yes?”

He took her hand from his rib and slid it down his body. “Stroke my cock.”

She had resisted touching his cock directly when she bathed him weeks ago and relieved him later that day, but now she relished the opportunity to explore the length of him. Rebecca slid her fingers across his smooth skin, carefully tracing each throbbing vein. She paused at the tip, cupping her hand around his cock and sliding the skin down, then back up. He moaned, making her giggle.

Her giggle cut off abruptly as he lifted her higher onto his lap. “M'lord?”[1]

“You know what you do to me, despite that air of innocence.”

A melancholy expression crossed her face. “We both know I am no innocent, Alex.”

He shook his head. “You are. One day of loving does not make you any less so.”

She buried her face in his shoulder. “It made me a wanton. I am no lady.”

Alex laughed, pushing up her head. “What makes you say that?”

“Elizabeth said I was not supposed to enjoy our first time together.”

He lifted a brow. “You told her about our…liaison?”

“No, of course not. After the wedding, she imparted her knowledge so I would be prepared for tonight.”

He shook his head. “There is no shame in enjoying sex. You are lucky you find pleasure in the act, for many women do not.”

“Oh.” She frowned at him. “How can they not?”

Alex shrugged. “I suppose they have incompetent partners, or they were taught to believe a lady does not enjoy bedroom games.”

“Oh,” she said again. Maybe they felt no love for their husbands. She left the thought unvoiced. Her gaze moved downward, settling on his cock. “I am no true lady, despite your words, Alex.” She spoke with deep conviction. How could she be, when she had so eagerly embraced such wicked pleasures of the flesh?

He frowned again. “I thought the matter settled to your satisfaction.”

“I am depraved.” She shook her head, dropping her voice to a whisper. “My body tingles when you say those words.”

He sounded amused. “Which words, precisely, love?”

She shook her head once more, unable to utter them.

Alex stroked his finger across her swollen pussy lips. "Come on, love. Nothing should be forbidden as long as it brings us both pleasure."

She looked up at him, fighting her blush and drawing reassurance from his tender gaze. "P-p-pussy," she managed to stutter out, before a fit of giggles threatened to overwhelm her. She grew giddy as she fought to suppress them.

He nodded, looking satisfied. "Do you like my cock in your pussy, Rebecca?"

She nodded.

"Ask me for my cock, and it will be yours."

Her light-headedness increased. "Oh, but—" She frowned, and absently trailed her hand down his chest. She had moved her other hand to his hip, and she shyly brought it back to his cock. "May I…will you please—?"

He laughed. "Aye, love, I will."

She smiled at him as she tentatively touched the head of his cock. "Thank you, m'lord." It seemed ridiculous to be so polite, but she didn't know what else to say.

He appeared to be biting back a laugh when he asked, "Now, shall we partake of each other?"

Rebecca nodded. Her eyes widened as he pushed her onto her stomach and raised her hips. He knelt behind her, slowly easing the full length of his cock into her pussy. Her body clenched around him, and she felt the familiar tingling. When she could catch her breath, she asked, "Can we do this?"

He frowned at her. "We are doing it, are we not?"

"Yes, but is it proper? I thought there was only one way between a man and woman."

Alex laughed so hard his chest rumbled against her back. "There are many ways, and I look forward to teaching each one to you, love."

"I have learned all I care to know for today," she managed to say primly as he grasped her hips and leaned back on the bed, with her lying on top of him. He lifted her hips and withdrew from her. When his cock was almost completely out of her, he pushed into her again.

Alex cupped her breasts as he settled against the headboard. "Lie back with me."

She pressed her back against his chest, not allowing him to slip from her body. She groaned as the new position pushed his cock against the nub that brought her such pleasure.

"How I enjoy fucking you, Rebecca." Alex caressed her nipples in slow circles, squeezing gently.

The blush returned with a vengeance. As naïve as she was, Rebecca knew what "fuck" meant. She remembered seeing a stallion mount a filly once back home in England. She had been hidden from sight near the fence, and she heard one of the grooms say to the stable master, "'e's gettin' a fine fuckin'."

It hadn't taken her long to realize what fucking meant, though she had not heard the word again until it passed Alex's lips. She nodded, unable to find her tongue to speak as his cock pushed deep inside her, causing her to moan as she spasmed around him. He pushed down firmly on her clit as he buried himself deep inside her.

It popped into her mind without her thinking about it: She liked fucking her husband too. The thought made her want to giggle again, and she bit down hard on her lip, until her thoughts were swept away by the orgasm overtaking her.

* * * * *

She awoke in the middle of the night, half-buried under Alex's body. He had rolled on top of her, and she was having difficulty breathing. Her arm had gone numb, pinned under his chest, and she extricated it carefully.

Rebecca rolled away from him and out of the bed. She padded to the window, noticing a delicious ache inside her pussy. Alex's gism had dried on

her thighs, but she was unconcerned about the reminder of their joining. She was still basking in the glow of their lovemaking, even hours later.

She pushed aside the drapes and stared out. The street was silent, and the night sky was velvety black, with only a quarter-moon suspended in the sky. Surely, everyone in the world was asleep, except her.

And Alex, she discovered, when he came to stand behind her. He wound his arms around her waist and pulled her against him. She laid her head against his chest.

"Could you not sleep, love?"

"Nay. I woke to the pleasant sensation of lying under my husband." She shifted impatiently as his hand stroked across her stomach, moving toward her breasts. "I needed to stretch."

His voice was throaty against her ear. "I can accommodate m'lady."

Her eyes widened when he moved his arm from around her waist to her bottom. He squeezed the flesh a couple of times before he began to trail his fingers across her smooth cheeks.

She gasped when he ran his finger down the cleft of her cheeks and continued on, finding her pussy with ease. Her legs independently parted to allow him better access, and she bit her lip when he circled her clit with his thumb. Instantly, she was wet.

As he rubbed her clitoris, Alex grasped one of her breasts and repeated the motion on her nipple. The simultaneous pleasure caused her entire body to turn into a trembling mass. She had difficulty standing, and she didn't resist when he moved his hand from her pussy to her lower back. He pushed her forward, until her forehead rested against the cold glass of the windowpane.

"Do you want me?" he asked, sounding hoarse.

"Oh, yes," she moaned. "Please, Alex."

"Shall I fuck you, Rebecca?"

An image of the stallion mounting the filly flashed through her mind, causing her already wet pussy to flood with proof of her arousal. Until this moment, she hadn't found the memory at all sexual, but she realized she was in the same position as the horse, waiting for her stallion to mount her. She ached for Alex to fill her.

"I want your cock." To her surprise, she felt little more than a twinge of embarrassment at uttering the word.

He caressed her bottom as his hand moved from her breast to her hips. He leaned her forward a bit more, and then nudged her thighs apart. She stood bent at the waist, with her legs bowed so he had room to slide between them.

Rebecca buried her hands in the drapes as Alex used a hand to hold open her pussy lips as he guided his cock inside her. She pushed back against him,

ignoring the stretching, burning sensation between her thighs. It didn't matter that she was sore. Nothing mattered but Alex's possession.

He lifted her slightly, bearing the brunt of her weight as he thrust into her. He was making low, grunting sounds as he thrust inside her and went still.

She moaned at the torment of having his cock inside her without moving. Rebecca squirmed impatiently, wanting all of him. When he withdrew to thrust, her teeth sank into her lower lip, and she bit back a protest at the brief separation. Then he was inside her again, and they were one, not two.

It felt more right than she wanted to admit. She wondered if Alex felt the same way. Did he care for her even a little, or was she just an inconvenience he was using at his convenience, as he had said he would?

The thought chased away her arousal, and tears burned behind her eyes. She kept her hands buried in the cloth of the curtains, drawing the strength to stand and endure his lovemaking, knowing he felt no love.

She was surprised when she suddenly climaxed. She had been so consumed with thoughts of Alex's emotions that she hadn't paid attention to the signals her body had sent her. Her knees weakened, and she collapsed forward, allowing Alex to hold her up as he spent himself inside her.

She let him carry her back to the bed and tuck her in. Rebecca turned away when he settled in beside her. She felt his hand on her back, and she held her

breath, waiting for him to say something, anything at all, to break the silent tension.

She wanted to scream as the seconds lengthened. Finally, she heard him sigh as he rolled away from her. She turned her face into the pillow and let the tears flow. She was a lady, and knew all about silent sobs. She doubted he was aware of her torment.

When she heard him snoring a few minutes later, she knew he had remained oblivious. If only she could be so oblivious to the way she felt, she could endure their loveless marriage.

Chapter 14

It was early morning when Georgina woke her from a sound sleep. Rebecca bit back tears when she realized the space beside her was cold, indicating Alex had left the bed many hours ago. A faint indent remained on the pillow he used. Only that and the ache between her thighs offered proof that his visit in the night had not been a fevered dream.

“Mrs. Gallow is here to see you, m'lady.”

Before Georgina had completely uttered the sentence, Elizabeth burst into the room. Her blonde hair was in disarray, and her eyes were red from

weeping. Her green pelisse hung off one shoulder, and the yellow morning dress underneath wasn't buttoned properly. She held a crumpled piece of paper in hands bare of gloves.

With a curtsy, Georgina slipped from the room.

Rebecca scrunched under the covers, attempting to hide her state of undress. “What has happened, sister?”

She waved the letter in her hands. “Mama and Clarise are coming here to Boston.”

“Because I got married?”

“Of course not. Mama does not know of that yet.” She took a deep breath mingled with a sob. “She is virtually penniless. Aimes helped her smuggle a few valuable items from Stanhope Manor and pawn them. She was able to recover a few thousand pounds from the bank before the creditors got to the accounts, but that is all.”

“Slow down, Elizabeth. What are you talking about?” Her heart had stuttered at the mention of creditors.

“Father owed so much money that there are not sufficient funds to cover all of his debts. The creditors came knocking and seized the house and assets, allowing Mama only a few hours to pack. She and Clarise stayed at an inn for a few days while arranging passage to America.”

“They were driven from England?”

“Fled, Rebecca. Viscount Riche withdrew his offer for Clarise's hand after the terrible rumors surfaced and news of Father's debts leaked out. Mama and our sister are pariahs in London.” Elizabeth pleated the thick paper between her fingers.

“What rumors?” she asked in a hoarse voice, dreading the answer.

Elizabeth shook her head. “I cannot say them.” She hurried forward and thrust the abused missive at Rebecca.

She pulled an arm from the covers to lift the letter.

My Dearest Elizabeth,

By the time you receive this missive, your sister and I shall be on our way to Boston. I anticipate we shall arrive within the two months following receipt of this letter. Many dreadful things have happened to change our circumstances, beginning with that fool, Lord Fenwick. At one of the gaming hells, deep in his cups, he sputtered ridiculous nonsense about a deal with your father. He claimed Winston paid him the sum of 100 pounds to stage the duel and shoot him.

Some refused to believe, but many shunned us. Viscount Riche withdrew his offer for Clarise's hand. Poor dear is horribly distraught still. When I

thought it could get no worse, the creditors stepped forward, picking at our fortune and your father's reputation like the vultures they are.

Rebecca dropped the letter on the bed, needing to read no more. Tears slipped down her cheeks. “How could Father do such a thing?”

Elizabeth's response was a wail and wringing of her hands. “I am so ashamed.”

She nodded. “As am I, but we are not responsible for Father's actions.”

“All in Boston will know of these events within days of Mama's arrival.” She turned white. “Many missives arrived today. Do you suppose all and sundry have been informed by now?”

Rebecca shrugged, accidentally displacing her sheet, which she hastily restored. ”I do not know. It matters not.”

“Rebecca!”

“We cannot run from the scandal, so we must face it bravely.” She bit back a groan, realizing how news of her hasty marriage would cause the rumors to spread even more quickly. “However, there is nothing wrong with regrouping.”

Elizabeth looked confused.

“Begin your confinement early. You had planned to cancel social events in two weeks. Do so now. Refuse visitors and invitations. Allow some of the talk to die before venturing forth again.”

Her sister blinked. Calm seemed to gradually replace the fear on her face. “That is wise, dear sister.” She wiped her cheeks. “You are rational, as always.”

She inclined her head.

“What shall you do? I have a perfect excuse for taking a rest, but you will be expected to be out and about.”

Rebecca's brow furrowed. By her count, she had seven months until her child came, so she could not use that as her excuse for declining obligations. “I will say I am spending time with my husband in privacy to get reacquainted.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “He will be gone in a day. That will be the end of that reasoning.”

“What?”

Her sister frowned. “He told Philip yesterday that he must leave on business tomorrow. He asked us to check on you and keep up your spirits.”

She bit her knuckle to fight back a scream. “He knew even then and did not tell me?”

Elizabeth bit her lip. “I am sorry, Rebecca. I assumed you knew.”

She forced an overly bright smile for her sister. “I knew of the voyage, but did not expect it to be so soon. Perhaps I will accompany him.”

She gasped. “You cannot go with him while he does business. No, we must think of another excuse.”

Rebecca sighed. “There is no need to excuse my absence, for I will face them all with my head held high. Mama and Clarise must do the same when they arrive, as should you when your child is born and you reenter society.”

Elizabeth nodded, but still looked worried. “I should get home. Philip will be looking for me.”

Rebecca swallowed the lump in her throat, wishing she felt as brave as her words. “Good day, sister.”

As soon as Elizabeth departed, Rebecca slid from the bed and saw to her morning ablutions with a quick hand. When Georgina entered the chamber, she was struggling to fasten the buttons on a white muslin morning dress with two rouleaux trimming the bottom of the skirt. The maid hurried forward to offer assistance.

“Where is my husband, Georgina?”

“At his office near the docks, m'lady.”

“Please tell Henry I require transport.”

“Yes, madam.” She hurried from the room without a sound.

Rebecca put on a white bonnet trimmed with small pink flowers and grabbed a reticule as she swept from the room. The white slippers on her feet pinched, but she didn't bother to search for a more comfortable pair. She paused only to put on a navy pelisse lined with ermine to protect her from the chilly morning air.

When she stepped outside her front door, she could hear the clatter of the horses' hooves on the street. Henry and the carriage came around the block a few seconds later. She met him at the end of the walkway, waiting as he opened the door before climbing in. “Lord Hanover's offices, please.”

He bowed his head, then closed the door and secured the latch. “Right away, m'lady.”

The jostling of the carriage through the uneven streets did nothing to quell Rebecca's morning round of nausea. She gripped the strap hanging from the roof and focused on taking deep breaths until the carriage drew to a stop a short while later. She succeeded in subduing the nausea as she stepped from the carriage and got directions from Henry.

She switched to shallow breaths as the stench of rotting fish assaulted her nostrils. Rebecca fished a kerchief from the reticule and pressed it against her nose as she walked down the rough planks to Alex's office. She entered the door the driver had indicated, finding an empty reception room filled with gleaming oak furniture. The carpet was a near match for her pelisse, which she

removed and draped over the coat rack in the corner after returning the scrap of lace to her reticule. “Hello?”

A few seconds after her tentative query, a young man emerged from a door off to the left. He was tall and burly, with the complexion and look of a farmer, but the morning suit of a man of status. He bowed his head. “May I help you, m'lady?”

“I am here to see Alex.”

He opened a leather bound book on the desk. “Do you have an appointment?”

She tilted her chin up another notch. “No.”

A frown marred his tanned brow. “I see. He is rather busy preparing for a voyage, m’lady—”

“So I have heard. You may tell him Lady Stan—” She shook her head. “Lady Hanover waits to see him.”

His mouth dropped open for a half-second before it closed with an audible click. “Begging your pardon, miss, er, madam. The captain said nothing about…” His cheeks had turned purple, and his hand seemed too large and awkward for the journal. “Congratulations.”

She gave him a brief smile and even briefer nod while she tapped her foot softly against the carpet. After he had disappeared through another door to the right, she turned her attention to the walls, focusing on the pictures.

Each was a miniature oil painting of a different ship. A schooner caught her eye, and she was squinting for the name when she felt Alex's breath on her neck.

"That is *Rebellious*. She helped me build my import company when I arrived in Boston after my half-brother sent me away."

She examined the two masts, searching for any sign of a Jolly Roger. "Was that your pirate ship?" she asked in a whisper.

He laughed. "Nay. She was *Fury*, the fastest little pinnace you could imagine."

"You sound melancholy. Do you miss the life of a buccaneer?"

Alex shrugged. "Piracy is dangerous business and has fallen out of favor. I shall admit I miss the excitement at times, but it was not worth the risks. There are too many eager sailors with too much authority waiting with cannons for the careless or unlucky to make it a worthwhile enterprise."

"So, tomorrow's voyage is not to plunder?" She held her breath.

He scowled at her. "I have told you I am reformed." His hand fell on her shoulder. "When did you learn of my trip?"

“Elizabeth paid a visit this morning. She is most distraught, m'lord.”

“Why?”

Rebecca turned from the picture to face him. “Rumors of my father's deal with Fenwick have surfaced in London. The creditors tore our fortunes asunder and displaced Mama and Clarise from their home. She is coming to Boston to live.”

He nodded. “Your sister is concerned about repercussions among society?”

“Yes.” Rebecca's lips trembled. “I fear them too. Already I would be the subject of rumor.” She touched her stomach. “Now it shall be unendurable.” To her surprise, he took her in his arms.

“I wish I could spare you the pain and shame, Rebecca, but I cannot.”

“Take me with you.”

He pulled away to look down at her. “Pardon?”

“May I come with you on your trip?”

“Nay.”

She glared up at him. “Why not? If you are doing nothing contrary to the law, why can I not accompany you?”

“It would be too dangerous.” His mouth firmed. “The waters are not safe from pirates even in this modern age, despite the risks to them—as you well know. I cannot needlessly endanger you or our child.”

She clutched a handful of his tan morning coat. “I do not wish to remain behind and face the wagging tongues.”

“They can only harm you if you allow them to. The blade of a villain does real damage.”

Rebecca toyed with the top self-covered button of his jacket, where the tails of his simple cravat disappeared. “You would protect me.”

“No, Rebecca. I cannot risk my most precious of treasures.”

She looked up at him with her eyes gleaming. “Truly?”

“Aye. You bear my son.” His expression closed. “Now, I shall see you home.”

She pulled away from him, desperate to hide her moist eyes. “There is no need to tear yourself away. Henry is waiting for me.” She hurried from the office, slamming the door behind her. She was glad he was leaving for—however long he would be gone. It would spare her the pain of his rejection for a few weeks. Perhaps it would even give her enough time to rein in her foolish heart and kill any feelings of affection for him once and for all.

Chapter 15

After a long day locked away in her room, crying her eyes to red pools, Rebecca found solace in a troubled sleep. She tossed and turned restlessly,

dreaming of long rows of her peers lined up and hurling insults at her. When Alex touched her shoulder, she first thought it was part of the dream and tried to throw off his hand.

"Shhh, Rebecca." His voice was a breath across her cheek as he leaned forward to kiss her.

Her eyes blinked open, but she felt trapped in the remnants of the nightmare. For a moment, she was certain they were back on the *Margaret*. Only the heavy weight of the ring on her finger reminded her of where she was and with whom. "Alex?"

"I am here."

Her eyes widened as she felt him pushing up her nightdress to stroke her thigh. "We must speak…" She trailed off, biting hard on her lip as he stroked the outside of her pussy.

"About what, wife?"

"Your trip." She sighed as he slipped a finger inside her, slowly tracing circles around her clitoris. Rebecca reached down to push his hand away so she could think, but he caught it with his other one and trapped it between their bodies. "You cannot seduce me into forgetting you are leaving."

He hovered above her, so close their lips were a breath away. "Of course not, love." He lowered his head, barely pressing their lips together as his finger

grew bolder. “Is it wrong to make love to my wife?” he asked as he lifted his head.

She bit back a yawn. “Alex, what will—?” His mouth stole the remainder of her question, as he reclaimed her lips. Rebecca's other hand moved from the bed to tangle in his hair. She tugged forcefully, hoping to induce him to lift his head. Instead, he retaliated by biting firmly on her tongue, making her cry out—more from shock than any real pain.

He ignored her garbled protests, swallowing them with his open mouth as his tongue swept across hers, before exploring deeper recesses. Another had joined his audacious finger, and they insistently pushed at her entrance, entering an inch or two before retreating, only to repeat the teasing process again.

Despite her resolve, Rebecca felt her limbs grow heavy as the tingling in her thighs rose higher to encompass her belly, then her breasts. Her hips arched, pushing her pussy more fully against his hand, and a moan tore from her lips as he pushed the palm of his hand firmly against her sex, causing her lower body to jerk. She gave one more feeble push against his shoulder before surrendering to his questing tongue and fingers.

A climax washed over her, making her legs tremble and her thighs close reflexively around his hand. She pushed her heels into the bed, thrusting

against him again and again, until her climax peaked, and her pounding heart slowed gradually.

Rebecca frowned as he moved away from her. She watched as he shed his clothes before rejoining her. To her surprise, he pressed a kiss to her forehead and pulled her close to him, securing her with an arm across her waist. "M'lord?"

"Yes, Rebecca?"

"Are you not—?" She licked her lips. "What of your pleasures?"

He sounded amused when he answered. "You are tired, as am I. I am content for now." He began to rub her back in slow, gentle circles. The warmth of his hand penetrated the thin linen of her nightdress. "You please me."

She struggled to find a shred of her earlier anger with him, going so far as to remind herself of his unthinkingly cruel words. Instead, all she felt was hurt at his lack of affection for her.

Rather than risk another storm of weeping, she forced her thoughts from their earlier encounter and his forthcoming trip. Once more, she drifted off to sleep, comforted by his arm around her. She felt cosseted in his embrace, and though she knew it was an illusion, it was comforting nonetheless.

* * * * *

Rebecca awoke to sunshine streaming through the windows, illuminating a scant amount of dust particles dancing through the air. She shivered and pulled the covers tighter around her. She made herself look at the spot beside her, unsurprised to find it empty. Once again, the imprint of his head was the only evidence he had lain with her last night.

Reluctantly, she forced herself to sit up, tucking the blanket to her neck. Perhaps Georgina had been lurking at the doorway, awaiting sounds of movement, for she knocked and entered before Rebecca had even settled into the pillows stacked against the headboard. “Good morning, Georgina.”

“M'lady.” She held up a silver salver laden with morning tea. “Cook included those biscuits you liked so much yesterday.”

Rebecca waved to the bedside table. She watched as Georgina poured tea into the china cup and handed it to her. She stirred it in a desultory fashion, watching the swirls around the small silver spoon. “Has he gone?”

“Madam?”

“Has the master left for his trip?”

“Aye, m'lady. Lord Hanover left before dawn.”

She nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat before asking, “Do you know when he shall return?”

Georgina shook her head and reached into the pocket of her plain brown dress. “The master left this for you, mistress.”

“Thank you.” Rebecca set aside her teacup and saucer to accept the letter. She broke the wax seal with a trembling finger and unfolded the cream stationary to reveal his neat black lettering.

Rebecca,

I know you are angry at being left behind, but my business will take me to unsavory places. I shall return from Jamaica within a month, at the latest. Refuse any invitations in my absence. We will face the jackals of society together upon my return.

Yours,

Alex

She gave Georgina a shaky smile. “You may go now.”

“Will you be needing anything, m'lady? The coach, perhaps?”

“Nay, I shall stay in today. If I receive any visitors besides Elizabeth Gallow, you are to tell them I am indisposed. Take their cards and let them know I shall call on them when I feel stronger.”

Georgina curtsied. “Yes, m'lady.”

Once she had gone, Rebecca took the teacup from the table and sipped at the hot brew. She looked down at the letter in her hand and sighed. What was he doing in Jamaica, and why hadn't he told her more than his location? Was he telling her the truth, or was the casually imparted information a lie meant to pacify her?

Her gaze fell to the pillow beside her, and she sighed again. What would she do with herself for the next month? It would be a good time to cure herself of the persistent infatuation she had for her husband. She sighed once more, admitting to herself that it was more than infatuation, and would not be easily quashed.

Chapter 16

Rebecca looked up from the book of fashion plates at the sounds of commotion coming from the hallway. Within seconds, the study door burst open to reveal an excited Philip. His face was flushed, and he wore no cravat around his neck. It was well after midnight, so his visit could mean only one thing. "Is Elizabeth having the baby?"

"Yes. She is asking for you."

She nodded her head and followed him back to the entrance, not bothering to change from the yellow satin dinner dress she still wore. Bentley assisted her with a warm velvet cloak lined with wool, and she secured the white bonnet he

had thrust into her hands as they hurried into the night air to the waiting carriage.

Once seated, she eyed Philip carefully, noting his forehead was beaded with perspiration, and his hands shook. “How is Elizabeth?”

His smile was shaky, and he seemed to have forgotten how to lift the left side of his mouth. “She is enduring well. The physician sent me from the chambers because he said I was a nuisance.”

She patted his hand, noting he hadn't bothered with gloves on his way from the Gallow home. “The doctor is quite competent, Philip.”

He ran a hand through his dark hair, which looked as if he had done that more than once this evening. “I know, but I cannot help but worry.”

She nodded. “I too am worried.” Would it be awful? She knew nothing of childbirth, and had hoped to keep it that way until her own child arrived. “Elizabeth shall be fine, as will your babe.”

He sighed. “Yes.”

Rebecca searched for a means of diverting his thoughts. “Have you been overly burdened with gossip?”

His eyes slid from hers. “We have not gone out in three weeks.”

“How is it for you when dealing with your business affairs?”

Philip's gaze remained focused on the curtain covering the window. "The talk will fade." His mouth was firm. "When is Lord Hanover returning?"

Rebecca shook her head. "He said at most a month. It has not yet been that long." It had been precisely twenty days since his departure. Each one had crawled by so slowly that she thought she might go mad from waiting.

Once word of their marriage had spread, invitations flooded their home, but so far, she had refused each one, along with the explanation that her husband was away on business. "I am concerned."

"Do not be overly worried. I suspect he is having some troubles at his sugar plantation."

Rebecca's brow furrowed. "What sort of trouble?"

"The Maroons are raiding many of the local plantations, stealing supplies, recruiting the other slaves for their militia force, and, in general, being a bother."

"Who are the Maroons?"

"A band of freedom fighters." He snorted. "Mostly runaway slaves, chafing at the bit."

"I see. What has this to do with Alex?"

“There has been talk of emancipating the slaves of Jamaica. It has them riled up and resisting their masters.” Philip sighed. “The day of your marriage, Lord Hanover mentioned he would soon be forced to deal with the matter.”

Relief washed over Rebecca at the confirmation that her husband was not pirating, and he hadn’t lied to her. Rather, he was dealing with a rebellion which seemed just as dangerous, but unlikely to land him in prison or swinging from the gallows.

She looked out the window as the carriage swung around a corner. “We are here.”

Philip clambered from the carriage and rushed forward a few feet before spinning around to return to the carriage. He assisted Rebecca to the ground, blushing profusely. “Forgive my lapse of manners.”

She smiled. “I understand.”

When they entered the townhouse, Philip reluctantly closeted himself in the study while Rebecca made her way upstairs. She knocked on the door and was admitted by Nora. “How is Elizabeth?” she asked as she entered and removed her bonnet and cloak.

“Resting. The physician says she is near delivery and should sleep, if possible.”

Rebecca walked forward to touch her sister's sweaty brow. The doctor stood near the bed, wiping his hands on a white cloth. He appeared very

young, with curly, dark hair and buckteeth, but he wore a studious expression. “Doctor?”

“You are Lady Gallow's sister?”

“Yes.”

He nodded. “She wanted you here.” A chuckle came from him. “M'lady insisted I was not to deliver the baby until you arrived. She refused to accept I had no control over that.”

Rebecca gave him a small smile, but was too concerned over her sister's pallor to muster even a polite laugh. “How is she?”

“Doing well. She has been laboring since early afternoon, but her time draws near. I plan to wake her in a few minutes if a contraction does not do so beforehand.”

Rebecca sat in a straight chair by the bed, lifting her sister's hand. Elizabeth's eyes fluttered open, and she smiled down at her. “Soon you shall be a mother,” she said softly.

“About bloody time,” Elizabeth slurred.

Rebecca gasped at her sister's language. She sneaked a peek at the doctor, but he seemed unfazed. Nora had departed, so there was no one else to be outraged. With a small shrug, she shifted in the chair. “How do you feel?”

“Tired. Does this never end?”

The doctor lifted her other hand, feeling her wrist. “You are ready to give birth, m'lady. Do you feel up to the task?”

“Yes.”

Rebecca held her hand as Elizabeth grunted, pushed, and cursed her way through the next thirty minutes. The doctor remained calm, seeming to be accustomed to such language flowing from the mouths of ladies.

Rebecca got over her embarrassment as fear replaced it. She watched her sister endure each pain. Her face grew red, and her eyes bulged. Elizabeth looked like she was enduring every torture the fiery pits of Hell could throw at her.

How would she survive the preceding months before her child's birth, knowing what was to come? She should have refused Elizabeth's request, no matter how much it would have hurt her sister. She quickly pushed away that selfish thought.

“One more great push, m'lady.”

With a small scream, Elizabeth bore down and pushed her son out into the world. His cry was lusty as the doctor lifted him for their inspection. “Your husband will surely be pleased, Lady Gallow. A fine son.”

Tears streamed down Elizabeth's face as she reached for him. “Is he not beautiful, sister?”

Rebecca's nose wrinkled slightly. Young Master Gallow was covered with blood and slime. His head was oddly shaped, and he had a flat, bulbous nose. What skin she could see under the blood was bright red and grainy-looking. Beautiful was not her first choice of words, but she would never knowingly wipe that proud expression from Elizabeth's face. “Very much so. You are lucky.”

“Please tell Philip. Send him up.”

“M'lady,” the doctor protested. “I have not finished here yet.”

She waved her hand at him. “You shall do so while my sister fetches my husband. He has been too far from me for too long.”

The doctor sighed and returned to his work without comment as Rebecca went to tell her brother-in-law the happy news.

Her stomach knotted with anxiety as she remembered Elizabeth's harrowing ordeal. For the first time, she fervently wished there was no baby. That thought was fleeting, and she felt guilty for having it. Remembering her sister's expression when she first gazed at her baby told her it was worth any amount of pain.

* * * * *

Rebecca planned to take her leave several hours later. She was exhausted and longed only for her own bed. Elizabeth and Philip were curled together on the bed, basking in the glow of their son, who lay between them. They made an odd pair—her in a fresh nightdress, and he in knee breeches and a white shirt with billowing sleeves, minus the waistcoat and jacket.

She felt embarrassed to be around her brother-in-law in such a state of dishabille, and she carefully averted her eyes as she approached the bed. “I am leaving now.”

Elizabeth looked up from baby Andrew. “You should stay, Rebecca. It is quite late.”

“I would rather be in my own bed.” She touched her sister's foot. “I am sleepy and not in the best of moods.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Philip will see you home.”

She shook her head. “There is no need. You deserve some time together now.”

Her sister sighed. “Very well. We shall see you at the christening, in any event.”

“The christening?”

“Next week.”

“Is that not rather soon?”

Elizabeth sighed. “Yes, but the godparents have decided to return to England. Justin is Philip's dear friend and only agreed to wait until Andrew arrived before taking their leave. Helen is with child herself and wishes to be home with her family before their baby arrives.”

“Oh.” She squashed a dart of disappointment at not being asked to be Andrew's godmother. After all, she was his aunt and would see him all the time, while the godparents would obviously be far away. “I do hope Alex is back in time. I promised not to venture forth until he returned.”

A frown marred Elizabeth's features. “You cannot miss your nephew's christening and the garden party to follow.”

Rebecca sighed. “Will it not make things awkward?”

Elizabeth shrugged. “It will be a small gathering, sister. Only our true friends will be invited.”

“Very well.” There was no getting out of the event. She hoped Alex would understand why she had to face society without him. Surely, he would have returned home before the event.

Chapter 17

The day of the christening arrived without Alex's return. Rebecca's gray mood was in direct contrast to the brightly shining day. The October skies had

cooperated with Elizabeth's plans, shedding their clouds to bring sunshine for her little one's celebration.

She tried to muster a bit of enthusiasm for the event as Georgina assisted her into a white muslin afternoon dress covered with a mint-green Persian robe in lightweight satin. A deep-green train extended from the high-cut waist to the ankle, much to her annoyance. Rebecca would be grateful when they went out of fashion, since they were a bother to deal with. She shifted in the tight white shoes, trimmed with white ribbons. They had not been so tight when she first received them from Hardwick's. Nor had the bosom of the dress fit so snugly when Madam Brovay delivered it weeks ago. Small signs of her condition were making themselves known.

"How would you like your hair, m'lady?"

"Ringlets, I suppose." Rebecca sat as she fussed, creating ringlets, and swept the sides and top back with a gold comb. When Georgina finished, Rebecca pulled on long, tan gloves, wincing as she eased them into place high on her upper arms. Even they had grown tighter. Soon, she would have to order a maternity wardrobe, and everyone would know her secret.

"Henry is waiting for you, Lady Hanover."

With a nod, Rebecca rose from the seat and paused only to take a long cape and matching forest-green reticule from the dressing room before walking down the stairs. When she exited the townhouse, she shivered at the

unexpected nip in the air and draped the velvet cape over the dress, mindful not to snag the train. She climbed into the coach with Henry's assistance, then concentrated on remaining calm during the drive from their home to St. Mary's near the Gallows' home, knowing the only way to face any snide remarks was with equanimity.

When they drew up, she saw more than a dozen carriages and several people milling around the steps, basking in the sun. Most of the ladies wore afternoon dresses, but an occasional opera or evening gown could be spotted among the milieu.

After Henry handed her from the carriage, Rebecca made her way up the steps of the church, keeping her head held high. Few whispers followed her progress, and no eyes turned from her in shame or horror. Could they have not heard the news?

She entered the small church, scanning the rows of pews for her sister. She spotted Elizabeth seated beside Philip in the front row, near the font. She heard Andrew before she saw him as she moved toward them.

Rebecca halted when William Bradleaf stepped into her path. “Mr. Bradleaf.”

“Lady Stanhope.” His eyes narrowed. “Pardon me, Lady Hanover.” He gave a half bow. “Congratulations on your marriage.”

She inclined her head. “If you will excuse me—” She gasped when he lifted her hand.

“What is your hurry, m'lady? I have heard your groom abandoned you within days of your marriage, so where might you be rushing to?”

She pulled her hand from his tight grasp. “My sister is expecting me.”

He nodded, stepping out of her way. “Of course. Forgive me for delaying you.”

“Not at all.” She kept her spine stiff as she moved away from him, hoping he could not see the way her hands trembled. Did everyone truly believe Alex had left her so quickly? What would they think if he didn't return before her pregnancy became obvious? Would they imagine he had been forced into doing the honorable thing, and then dropped her as quickly as possible?

Elizabeth smiled up at her as she joined them. The yellow of her half dress brought out light tones in her golden-blond hair and accentuated her fair skin. She had lost the puffy look acquired during the last months of her pregnancy, and now glowed with a combination of health and pride. Philip looked just as proud. “Welcome, sister.”

“Good afternoon.” Rebecca moved to her sister's side and held out her arms for her nephew. She had held him during two visits to Elizabeth's in the past week, but couldn't seem to get enough of cuddling his tiny body in her arms.

His appearance had dramatically improved, until he truly was beautiful. Each time she held her nephew, it was that much easier to imagine what it would feel like to hold her own child, and to imagine what their baby might look like.

“Has Alex returned?”

“Nay, Philip. Nor have I had a missive from him.”

He nodded. “I do not expect you will. It takes as long for a letter to arrive as it would for him to do so.”

Rebecca handed Andrew back to Elizabeth. “I know, but still I hope.”

Elizabeth patted her leg. “He will return soon, Rebecca.”

She forced a confident smile for her sister before subsiding into silence. The church soon filled and Father Shaunessy appeared.

After a brief prayer, he waved Philip and Elizabeth forward, followed by Justin and Helen, who sat nearer the end of the pew. Justin put an arm around his petite wife, over the auburn hair sweeping down her back, as they took their position. Helen took the baby as the priest spoke another prayer and motioned them closer to the font.

Andrew screamed when Father Shaunessy sprinkled water over his thin brown hair and didn't stop until Helen handed him back to Elizabeth. With a final blessing, the priest dismissed the congregation. Rebecca slipped away

before the lingering guests disbursed and reached their conveyances, hoping to avoid the inevitable congestion.

She arrived at the Gallows a few minutes before the first guests and made her way to the room she had occupied during her stay, where she freshened up and regrouped.

The christening had been the easy part, since everyone was confined to the pews during the ceremony and did not have the opportunity to ask awkward questions. There would be no such restraints during the mingling in the gardens.

* * * * *

Rebecca counted herself fortunate to have been mostly overlooked by the assemblage. She had stolen away from the rows of roses and milling guests to a secluded stone bench with a marble lion serving as the base. She clutched a glass of lemonade in her hand. The chill had long since abated during the hour spent avoiding the questioning eyes.

She had lulled herself into a semi-trance by watching the water spilling gently over a wooden wheel into the reflecting pool near her feet. It took her a moment to realize the thunking sound wasn't in her head, but rather approaching her.

She contemplated hiding, but had nowhere to go, and no time to look for a new hiding place before her unwanted company arrived. She bit back a groan as William Bradleaf stepped out from behind a hedge.

"Lady Hanover. Whatever are you doing out here?" His lips curled. "Hiding, perhaps?"

She forced herself to laugh. "Hiding? From what, pray tell?"

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "The gossip mongers."

She firmed her shoulders. "They would find little to gossip about."

His expression was blatantly skeptical as he pushed his way down onto the bench beside her. He touched her hand. "I have heard the rumors circulating about your father. I am certain he was not an entirely selfish man, and he thought he was doing the best for your family."

"Your understanding overwhelms me." She couldn't quite keep the edge from her voice. "In any event, they are fabrications."

"And the rumors of his debts?" He arched a brow.

Rebecca sighed. "Father was not the most astute of businessmen."

He nodded. "It is difficult to balance familial responsibilities, business debts, and estate management with an over fondness of drink, gambling, and ladies of the night."

She gasped, lifting her hand to slap him before thinking better of it. They were too far from the other guests. She shivered, realizing just how isolated they were. “Your information is faulty,” she said in a cold voice. “If you will excuse me, I have shirked my duties long enough.”

He grasped her wrist. “What duties, Rebecca? Your sister is hostess, and a veritable army of servants is ensuring all flows smoothly. We have plenty of time to continue our chat.”

“I find the subject distasteful, and we are not on a first name basis, Mr. Bradleaf.” She tugged at her hand, succeeding only in chafing the skin. “Release me, sir.”

“Perhaps a change of subject is in order. Shall we discuss wagers?” He grimaced. “Have you any idea how much I lost when you married Lord Hanover?”

“I would say whatever the sum, it was not sufficient.”

His mouth tightened, but he forced a laugh. “No matter. I shall recoup my money.”

Something in his tone made her stomach clench. “How?”

“There are new wagers, m'lady.”

Her eyes widened. “What sort of wagers?”

“One is when Lord Hanover's first child will arrive.” His eyes sparkled. “I placed my bet for eight months after your marriage.”

“How dare you?” Rebecca pulled away from him easily that time, suspecting he let her.

“There are more, my dear. Another wager speculates whether Lord Hanover's heir will resemble him. I wagered heavily on that one being a nay.”

Her mouth fell open. “What are you implying?”

“My guess is your first child will closely resemble the rogue pirate who claimed your maidenhead during your voyage to America.”

Rebecca bit her tongue just in time to keep from blurting out anything incriminating. She turned her head from him. “Again, your source is misinformed.”

He turned her head back to him by grasping her chin. “This man, Stokes, claims he was first mate on the *Margaret*. That was the ship you arrived on, was it not, m'lady?” He sounded innocent, but his eyes gleamed with amusement.

“How do you know Stokes?”

“We became acquainted during one of my infrequent stops at the harbor taverns. The fellow was deep in his cups and quite angry with his former employer. It seems she turned him away without references and deprived him of his rightful position of captain.” He chuckled, a husky sound low in his

throat that held more cruelty than mirth. “For a few mugs of ale, he was more than happy to tell me his sad tale.”

Rebecca took a deep breath, struggling to keep her expression bland. “Stokes was on the ship, Mr. Bradleaf, but I know nothing of pirates. The voyage was uneventful, except for a lapse of duty on his part. That was the only reason he was dismissed.”

“Along with most of the crew?”

Her brow furrowed. “How I run Stanhope Shipping is none of your affair, sir. I have indulged your morbid curiosity to its exhaustion. I must return to the party.” Rebecca stood up and cried out when he pulled her back to her seat. “Unhand me, or I shall scream.”

“There is one more wager, m'lady.”

She swallowed. “Really? Have the gentlemen nothing better to do than bet on my personal life?”

“The last wager asks when Lord Hanover will become disenchanted with his bride.” His voice lowered. “Many placed bets coinciding with the birth of your first child, but not I.” He tapped his temple. “I am much too canny to share the profits from that pool.”

“I do not understand.”

“Smile, Rebecca. Your husband has returned.”

“What—?” The rest of her sentence was lost under the onslaught of his forceful mouth. She whimpered as he ground his lips against hers, raking her bottom lip with his teeth.

The glass fell from her hand and shattered against the stone walkway. Rebecca pushed against his chest, but couldn't dislodge him. When he grabbed her breast, she balled her hand into a fist and rammed it into his stomach.

He released her abruptly. Rebecca felt a surge of power before realizing his gaze was centered on something over her shoulder. There was no trace of pain on his face—only satisfaction. Her stomach clenched when she turned her head and saw Alex standing by the hedge with his arms crossed.

His expression was beyond angry. He took a single step forward and crooked his finger at her.

Rebecca hurried to obey his unspoken command. She left the glass where it had shattered and rushed to him. She didn't hesitate before throwing herself into his arms. She heard him grunt as she collided with him.

For a long moment, he remained stiff, and her heart stuttered with dread. Finally, his arms wrapped around her waist, and his stiff spine relaxed. She buried her face against his fawn-colored jacket. “Impeccable timing,” she whispered, and lifted her head.

His expression was no less angry. Alex's blue eyes remained focused on Bradleaf. “Explain yourself.” His tone was glacier.

Bradleaf shrugged, but his hands trembled. “You interrupted our assignation.”

Alex snorted. “Any fool can see Rebecca loves only me. Try again.”

His eyes widened. “You saw for yourself—”

“I saw a carefully staged scene. Now, I suggest you give me an explanation, or I shan't wait for the dawn and seconds to end your miserable life.”

“What?” Bradleaf's mouth opened and closed a few times. “You would call me out over this?”

“I would kill you for looking at my wife in any way other than respectful. For forcing your attentions on her, I would rip you apart with my bare hands.” Despite the tender way he held Rebecca against him, there was no mistaking his resolve. Alex's feet were spread wide, and his shoulders were thrown back. In direct contrast to his fierce words and tone, his hands were gentle as they patted her back. “Speak.”

“It was to win the wager, and nothing more.”

“What wager?”

“The one speculating about when you will lose interest in your new bride.”

“Let me answer that for you now, Bradleaf.” His voice dropped lower, and he turned to look down at Rebecca. “Never.”

“Even when she delivers the bastard child of a pirate and passes it off as your heir?” Bradleaf's voice shook, but he had regained most of his composure. “I wager you had no knowledge of her deflowering when you wed her.”

Alex's head turned back to Bradleaf so quickly his neck popped. “Rebecca was pure when she came to me. I will suffer no more speculation otherwise.” His lips curled into a feral smile. “After our dawn appointment, your tales will not be heard by anyone. Dead men do not spread rumors.”

Bradleaf's shoulders squared. “If you wish to meet over pistols, it will culminate in your death, Lord Hanover. Three men have met their ends at my hand over the years.”

“It is indeed time to end your reign of terror.” Alex gave him a mocking bow while managing not to lose his hold on Rebecca. “My second shall call on yours. Name him.”

“Barnard Fowler.”

“Edward Robbins.”

Rebecca blinked as Alex rushed her through the gardens. She tried to stop, but his momentum carried them forward. He was practically carrying her as they neared the party. “What just happened, Alex?”

“We have an appointment.”

“You are going to duel with him?”

He nodded, finally slowing as they reentered the melee.

“You cannot.”

“Lower your voice, love,” he said from the corner of his mouth. “We must maintain appearances.”

“I wish to leave.”

He shrugged. “Very well.” Alex steered them in the direction of Elizabeth and Andrew. As they neared, guests moved out of his way without so much as a “pardon” crossing his lips. “Rebecca does not feel well.”

Elizabeth looked up from her squirming infant. “Oh, dear. Would you like to rest upstairs?”

Rebecca shook her head. “I should like to go home, Elizabeth.”

Her sister nodded. “Of course.” She lifted a hand, grasping Rebecca's. “We shall see you soon.”

“Congratulations on your son,” Alex said as he steered her toward the open doors, not waiting for a response. He was equally quick to hustle her into the carriage.

As Henry got them underway, Rebecca opened her mouth to protest the duel, but blinked as he claimed her mouth in a hungry kiss.

Alex’s lips pressed against hers, no less insistently than Bradleaf's had, but with a degree of tenderness the other man’s kiss had lacked. She met his tongue

eagerly when it swept into her mouth, caressing it with her own, and pushing against his. Their battle of wills continued until he broke free and lifted his head.

"How I have missed you."

Her eyes widened. "Truly?"

"Aye." He pushed her back against her seat and settled on top of her. His mouth found hers again as his hands pushed up her afternoon dress and slip.

Rebecca gasped when he pressed his groin against her lawn drawers. His cock was hard when he thrust it against her. If not for the barrier of his tan breeches between them, he could have entered her through the slit in the crotch.

She pushed back against him just as eagerly, moaning softly as he slipped his hand inside the opening and pushed firmly on her clit with his thumb. She tried to pull away from him. "We are in a carriage."

He nodded, but did not stop massaging her pussy.

"Alex!"

He ignored her protest and continued to manipulate her clitoris. As he did so, his other hand tangled in her hair and pulled her mouth back to his for another deep kiss.

She forgot about their location when he pushed a finger into her slick pussy, as his tongue darted into her mouth. She tried to capture it with her own

and pin it between her teeth. He evaded her, sweeping his tongue along the roof of her mouth. He maintained rhythm with the rocking carriage as he thrust his finger in and out of her.

Rebecca pushed down against his hand, grinding her pussy against his palm. She sobbed with pleasure when he pushed firmly against her swollen lips. She was so close to coming that she tried to capture his hand when he withdrew. "Please, Alex—"

"We are nearly home, love." He pressed a kiss to her forehead and reluctantly pulled away from her, taking time to restore her chemise and skirt before settling across from her once more. His eyes burned a darker blue.

She ran a hand through her hair, surprised to find it only slightly out of place. She touched her hot cheeks, imagining they were red from embarrassment. What if Harry knew what they had been doing in the back of the carriage? Rebecca tried to gather her thoughts, and she cleared her throat several times. "About this duel—"

"You do not need to concern yourself with such matters."

Her mouth fell open. "You cannot mean that."

Alex shrugged. "I will handle it. You shall not interfere."

"What will I do when he kills you?"

The corner of his mouth quirked. “Your confidence shall sustain me,” he said in a mocking tone.

“Do not jest about this, husband. I do not want you to undertake this nonsense.”

He scowled. “Defending your honor is not nonsense.”

“The talk will die. There is no need to endanger yourself…” Rebecca trailed off as the carriage turned onto their street. “We have not finished this discussion.”

Alex shrugged again, but didn't speak. When Henry drew the horses to a halt, Alex opened the door and stepped down before he lifted her out.

Her feet barely touched the ground as he hurried up the walk and into the townhouse.

Bentley raised an eyebrow as they went hurrying by. “Welcome home, sir.”

“Thank you, Bentley. Please send up a dinner tray in a while.”

“Of course, sir.”

Rebecca stumbled up the stairs, then gasped as he lifted her. “What are you doing?” she whispered.

“Hurrying you along.” He pushed open the door to his chambers and slammed it behind them with his foot. Alex didn't let go of her until they

reached the bed. She landed with a bounce and stared up at him. He shed his clothes in one quick motion before he returned to her.

Rebecca tried to push his hands away as he pulled at her dress. “Alex.”

He ignored her, not pausing until she was down to her chemise, drawers, and stockings. “Yes, Rebecca?”

“I want you to promise me you shall not duel with Bradleaf.”

He sighed. “There is nothing to worry about.” In one quick movement, he had stripped her of a stocking. The other quickly followed before he moved his hands to the hem of the chemise and pushed it up and over her head.

“It will not work.”

He lifted a brow. “I assure you it will.” Alex chuckled. “You should know that by now, love.”

She pushed herself into a semi-sitting position. “You cannot seduce me into forgetting this.”

Alex bit back a curse. “Very well.” He sat beside her on the bed without a stitch of clothing. He put his arm around her and lay back, taking her with him. “I promise you everything will be fine, my dear. Bradleaf is unlikely to keep our appointment, regardless of his ridiculous boasts.”

She glared at him. “Promise you shall not indulge in this madness, Alex, or you will not touch me again.”

He lost his indulgent expression. “What?”

“I will not lie with you until I have your word.”

Alex's mouth tightened. “You are lying with me now, *wife*.” His face drew level with hers. “You would do well to remember your role.”

“As your wife?” A hard laugh escaped her. “I am not your wife. You never have time for me. You do not mention your business to me, or share any of your worries with me.” She slapped his shoulder. “You do not even listen to me. What kind of wife am I?”

“Disobedient,” he growled.

Tears slipped down her cheeks. “I see now that our marriage was a mistake. I cannot live like this.” She rolled away from him.

“What are you doing?”

“I am returning to my sister's home.”

Before she was off the bed his hand fell on her waist, rolling her back to him. Alex cupped her slightly rounded stomach. “Have your forgotten our reasons for marrying? You are not leaving with my son growing in your belly.” His touch softened, as did his eyes. “You have no idea how it pleases me to see evidence of our child.”

She sniffed. “Why? Did you think I lied to you?”

He did curse then. “Why can I say nothing that pleases you, Rebecca?”

Rebecca wiped at her cheeks. “You do not say the right thing, m'lord.”

His eyes widened. “If you would tell me what to say—”

She turned her head from him, pressing her right ear into the mattress. “It means nothing if I must tell you the words to say.”

Alex groaned. “Fine.” He cupped her chin and turned her face back to him. “Must we argue? I thought of naught but making love to you during my voyage. Will you give me what I have longed for?”

Her lips trembled. She wanted to pull away and run from the room, but her traitorous heart responded to the naked yearning in his eyes. Rather than assert herself, she ended up melting against him. She wanted him with equal fervor, and it was too much of an effort to deny both their longings.

Alex's head dipped lower to claim one of her aching nipples. His tongue was a light stroke against the engorged peak, and he slid his hand down her stomach to her pussy.

Rebecca parted her legs wider to allow him entry and squirmed against his gently probing fingers. She took hold of his cock, tracing the veins bulging beneath the skin as they pulsed in time with each beat of his heart.

A tiny drop of moisture spilled from the tip, hanging for a moment before dropping to land on her stomach. Rebecca touched it with the index finger of her free hand, surprised to find it so warm and thick. Her eyes widened as he guided the finger to her lips.

She obeyed his unspoken instructions and touched the liquid to her tongue. There was a fleeting taste of saltiness and something else, and then it was gone.

Alex removed his hand from between her thighs and slid up the bed until his cock was within inches of her face. Rebecca moved forward and flicked her tongue across the tip. She immediately drew back when he groaned. “Have I hurt you?”

Alex shook his head. “Nay. I might die from the pleasure, but never pain.”

He looked as if he was in pain, but he arched forward for more. Despite her reservations, Rebecca lowered her head and once more licked away the dew collecting on the head of his cock.

Cautiously, she swirled her tongue around his cock, pausing when more of his gism filled her mouth. The taste wasn't unpleasant, and he seemed to enjoy her licking it away. Rebecca focused her attention on the tip, keeping vigilant watch for moisture, and sweeping it away with a flick of her tongue each time.

Her hand was on his arm, and she could feel the muscles bunching under her fingers. The faster she licked, the more he trembled. He arched his back and cried out, and his face went scarlet. She grew frightened and pulled away again. “Are you certain you are not in pain?”

Alex sighed. “You have not hurt me.” He shifted until he lay flat on his back. “However, if I do not feel you around me soon, I will be in agony.”

She nodded, preparing to stretch out beside him. Rebecca frowned when he rolled her on top of him and positioned her into a sitting position across his thighs. “What are you doing?”

“Claiming you.”

She frowned. “My drawers.”

“No time,” he grunted. Alex pushed the opening as wide as it would go and plunged two of his fingers deep inside her still-wet pussy.

She threw her head back, unable to repress the instinct to push against his appendages. A murmur of protest escaped her when he removed them.

“You are ready.” Alex lifted her hips and guided her pussy over his cock. Slowly, he pulled her down on top of him.

Rebecca's eyes widened as the full length of him filled her. He didn't stop until she had taken all of him. She could feel his testicles under her buttocks, and his pubic bone pressing into the soft flesh of her pussy. Somehow, he seemed to have grown thicker during their time apart. Perhaps she had just forgotten how wonderful it felt to be filled by him. She wriggled against him, giggling when he groaned.

“Do you like this position, love?”

“I did not know—” She lifted herself off him a few inches and slid down his cock again. “Aye,” she said with a sigh.

Alex maintained his hold on her hips, initially setting the tempo of their thrusts. Even when she took over, flexing and contracting around him as she bucked against his cock, he kept his hands there.

Rebecca continued to ride him, moaning each time she slid down his cock. When he moved a hand to lightly stroke her pussy, she tensed around him, finding it almost painful to continue thrusting. Her hips refused to obey her command to stop, and she renewed her efforts, alternately accepting and rejecting him with increased vigor.

Rebecca screamed as an orgasm swept over her, radiating from between her thighs and outward. She leaned forward to grasp his shoulders and bit down on her tongue to hold back another verbal expression of pleasure.

As she tensed around him again, she felt his cock spasm as he released his seed inside her. He too had given voice to his pleasure in the form of a muted shout. The fingers of his hand on her hip bit into the soft flesh, but right now, there was no pain.

She felt too much pleasure to notice anything besides the sensation of his erection slowly softening inside her, while the remnants of the climax washed over her and subsided. Finally, she collapsed on him in a boneless heap, breathing heavily, and listening to his heart thump against her ear.

They stayed joined together without speaking for several minutes, until a knock at the door roused them. Rebecca pulled away with reluctance and

stepped into the dressing room as Alex threw on a robe and took the tray from Bentley.

After she heard the chamber door close, Rebecca pulled a dressing gown from a hook and slipped it in on before rejoining her husband. He had set the tray on the table by the fireplace and sat waiting for her. She slid into the free chair, inexplicably feeling shy about meeting his eyes.

He touched her hand. “Madeira?”

She shook her head. “Just tea.”

Alex poured a cup for her before he lifted the cover from the salver of baked eggs and strips of bacon. “Cook prepared something light.”

She nodded, but did not reach for a plate.

With a sigh, he replaced the lid. “What is wrong?”

Rebecca bit her lip and shook her head, trying to force back the tears in her eyes.

“I cannot help if I do not know.”

“You use passion to manipulate me.” Rebecca lifted her gaze to meet his eyes. “When I tried to speak to you of your trip, you swept me off to bed. This afternoon, you tried to divert my attention from your foolishness by seducing me.”

Alex scowled. “Obviously it did not work, so what is the problem?”

“You should treat me as more than your bed partner, Alex. I am your wife.”

“You would not be if not for our ridiculous bargain and the unforeseen consequences.” He tossed down his napkin.

A breath hissed through her teeth, and she recoiled from him. Rebecca pushed away from the table. “Excuse me,” she said in a voice thick with tears. “I will retire now.”

“Rebecca,” he called after her.

She ignored him as she swept through the doorway and closed the door behind her with a gentle click. She had no intention of revealing how upset she was. As Mama said, a lady did not show her emotions.

Once she was through the dressing room and in her bedroom, she threw herself down and wept, free to give into her emotions away from prying eyes. For the first time in hours, the wagers circulating among the gentlemen's clubs entered her mind again.

How long would it take before Alex lost interest in her? His only attachment seemed to be sexual, so what would happen to them when that tenuous connection inevitably faded and died?

She lifted her head when the door to her room opened. Alex stood there, looking pale. With a stifled sob, she turned away from him again. She tried to pretend he wasn't there as his weight caused the bed to dip. She resisted his gentle hands as he tried to lift her, but somehow ended up in his arms anyway.

“I am sorry,” he said into her hair. “That was cruel.”

Rebecca's wet eyes widened. An apology? “That makes everything alright, does it?” she snapped. “My lord husband has apologized, so I shall be docile and pretend it does not matter that you do not want to be married to me?” She pulled away to look up at him. “Do you think *I* wished to marry *you*? You forced me—“

He put his fingers to her lips, stifling her words. “I do not know what to do with you, Rebecca. I had not thought to take a wife anytime soon. When I thought of it—which was seldom—I vaguely pictured a shadowy woman who would bear my children and keep to herself.”

“Is that what you want from me?” The tears in her throat caused her voice to emerge as a hoarse croak. “I will not be that kind of wife.”

Alex shook his head. “I do not yet know what I want from you. What do you need from me?”

She rubbed her cheek against his arm. “Love me,” she whispered.

He did not verbally respond as he shifted their position so they were lying side by side. His touch was gentle, as was his kiss, when he gathered her in his arms.

Rebecca accepted his caresses even as her heart broke a little more. She wanted to scream at him, to tell him she wanted more than physical love. Yet, if she rejected that from him—all he could offer—she would risk ruining any

future they might have. As she melted into his embrace, she tried to tell herself having his body love her was a start to getting his heart to love her too.

Alex's lips coaxed hers open with teasing flutters, as he licked the outline of her lower lip. His arms were around her, holding her close to his body. His robe had parted, and the hairs on his chest tickled against the fine lawn of her dressing gown.

She wanted to resist his determined seduction, knowing he sought once again to divert her thoughts. She wanted to believe he was showing his emotions for her in the only way he knew how, but her heart didn't believe it.

She let her mouth soften under his, and she touched her tongue against his when it entered her mouth. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, careful not to hold to him too tightly. Alex didn't want to be lavished with displays of her affection. He wanted only her body, at his convenience.

Tears slipped from her eyes, despite her efforts to suppress them. She felt Alex stiffen, and then his mouth moved from hers. She looked up at him, but he was too close for her to read his expression. She gasped when he pressed his mouth against her cheek, and his tongue flicked out to catch her tears. He brought a hand to the other side of her face to wipe away her tears.

"Do not cry, love," he whispered, sounding anguished. "It was not my wish to hurt you. I would never do so deliberately. Forgive my hasty words."

His gentle tone made the tears come faster, and she couldn't seem to staunch the flow. A tiny hiccup escaped her, and she squeezed her eyes shut, unable to bear the pity she knew must be reflected in his expression.

Alex's lips drifted higher, and he pressed a soft kiss to her eyelid, and then the other one. "Please tell me how to fix it, Rebecca."

She wanted to tell him nothing would ease her pain, except his love, but she couldn't find the words. Instead, Rebecca buried her hands in his hair and pulled his mouth to hers. She needed the comfort of contact with him, even if it came from his desire instead of his love.

He seemed reluctant at first, but when Rebecca forced her tongue inside his mouth, he ardently responded. He thrust his hips, pushing his cock against her leg.

Rebecca parted her thighs, and he settled on top of her. She removed her hands from his hair when she felt him fumbling with the opening of her gown. When he had untied the ribbons, he pushed open the gown and nestled his head between her breasts. He remained in that position without moving.

As the seconds passed, Rebecca's eyes flooded with fresh tears. She could feel his remorse, and she was moved to comfort him, though he had been the one to hurt her so terribly. She stroked his hair with her left hand, and gripped his bicep with her right.

“I need you.” The admission cost her a great deal of pride, but she needed him to hold her. She needed to be joined with him. She would beg if she had to. Her pride was worth nothing when compared to how much she loved him, and how much he needed her—whether he realized it or not. “Make love to me, Alex.”

He lifted his head to meet her eyes. Their gazes locked and held, and she could see vulnerability reflected in his shimmering orbs. Her breath caught in her throat as she struggled to identify the other emotion she saw there. Could it be love? Before she could determine what it was, he broke the gaze and lowered his head to her breast.

He took possession of her nipple, rolling his tongue around it in small circles. He flicked his tongue across the rigid peak until it was a hardened bead. Then he put his mouth around her breast and suckled the nipple.

She groaned as he applied careful pressure, while his hands traveled down her body to part her thighs. She assisted their quest by parting her legs even more. She gasped when Alex parted her pussy lips and held them open. He continued to lave the sensitive nipple in his mouth as his finger stroked down her slit. His finger entered her passage, and he rotated it slowly, lubricating his finger with the essence of her arousal.

She whimpered when he withdrew the digit, but she relaxed when he traced his finger up the wall of her pussy, until he was touching her clitoris. She

arched her hips when he circled it around the swollen nub. “Umm…” she moaned.

He moved his mouth from her breast and lifted his head. “You are so pleasing to me, love.”

“Why?” she managed to ask, as one of his fingers worked her clit, while two others slipped inside her pussy.

“You delight in everything we do. You are like touching fire.” He pushed his fingers deep inside her. “I do not mind getting burned when I am near you.”

She writhed against his hands, unable to respond to his whispered fancies. All thoughts and emotions seemed centered in her pussy, and she was on the brink of exploding.

“So beautiful,” Alex said, as he lowered his head to her other breast and took the pebbled nipple into his mouth. As he did so, he pushed firmly against her clit and thrust his fingers inside her pussy again.

She managed to make a sound of protest when Alex withdrew his hands from between her thighs. She watched with wide eyes as he rose above her and positioned his cock against her pussy. He waited, and she could hear her heart pounding furiously in her ears—or was it his heart?

His cheeks were bright red, and he was breathing heavily. She dismissed the silly notion of hearing his heartbeat from so far away and tilted her hips forward, taking the head of his cock into her wet pussy.

With a groan, Alex buried the full length of his cock inside her. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead as he braced his hands on either side of her head. “I want to make it last,” he said with obvious effort. “But you are so tight, love. I could die sheltered in your pussy, and none would convince me I was not in Heaven.”

She arched her hips as she cupped his buttocks with her hands, striving to push him more deeply into her pussy. She didn’t want the torture to last. She wanted him to fill her with his gism, and push her past the brink, until she was a mindless creature, consumed with passion. “Make me burn.”

Alex withdrew enough to thrust into her again, and then once more. He paused, panting. “Are you near coming, love?”

She nodded, unable to speak. Her body hovered on the brink of climax, waiting for him to complete her. Her nerves were stretched taut, and an ache had formed in the pit of her stomach. Her nipples ached unbearably, and her pussy was spasming, as if begging his cock to release its control.

He withdrew once more, and then slid into her with a slow, torturous thrust. He rotated his hips, causing his cock to push against her clit through the thin walls of her pussy.

As she felt the first spurts of his satisfaction filling her, Rebecca gave into her body’s demands with a cry. The orgasm rushed over her, causing her pussy to repeatedly clench around his cock. She looked up and saw how the veins in

his temple throbbed. His lips were skinned back over his teeth, and he seemed to be suffering from the sensations coursing through him. If he felt as she did, he was experiencing an overwhelming amount of pleasure. It felt so good it almost caused her pain.

A sense of weightlessness overwhelmed her, as her body shook from the aftermath of her shattering climax. Her eyes locked with his. They had darkened with passion, into deep pools, and the pleasure of her release was so exquisite she was certain she was drowning in his eyes. A tiny gasp escaped her as his arched back relaxed, and he pressed her into the mattress.

His chest was against her face, and she turned her head, pressing her ear against his hot skin. His cock remained inside her, even as it softened. He was too heavy, but she was reluctant to break contact with him. At that moment, they were joined as one, as a husband and wife should be.

He had been so gentle with his lovemaking, and she knew he must care about her. He had affection for her, and she dared to hope even love. For the first time, she was optimistic about their future. Tomorrow, they would have to talk about what that future might hold, but for now, she was too tired to give it proper attention. She fell asleep to the pleasant sound of her husband's steady heartbeat against her ear.

Chapter 18

Rebecca awoke alone. She sat up in her bed and turned her head to look out the window. Heavy drapes blocked her view, so she slid out of bed and padded naked across the room. She pulled on the cord, and the drapes opened to reveal a deep-gray sky. Dawn was less than an hour away, and he was gone. She had no doubt to where her errant groom had hurried off. Any discussion of the future she had been so optimistic about would have to wait.

"Damn him," she whispered. Rebecca hurried to her dressing room and threw on a gray and pink morning gown. She didn't bother with her hair or morning ablutions. After slipping her feet into slippers and grabbing a shawl, Rebecca hurried from the chambers. She surprised Bentley as she came down the stairs. "Where has he gone?"

The butler's eyes slid from hers. "Lord Hanover will return later in the morning, madam."

"Bentley, tell me where he has gone."

"I do not know."

She snorted. "Where do men do their dueling?"

His brow furrowed. "I was instructed—"

She stamped her foot. "Tell me, Bentley." Tears streamed down her face, and she let them, seeing his concerned expression.

He sighed. "Plouder's Field is where these things usually happen."

“Fetch Henry.”

“Yes, m'lady.” He bowed and hurried to the servants' quarters. It was close to ten minutes before he reappeared.

Rebecca paused in her frantic pacing. “Well?”

“The coach awaits you.”

She pulled a pelisse from the rack on her way out the door and ran to the coach. Henry clambered down from his perch and opened the door for her, tipping his hat. “Plouder's Field,” she said in a rush.

“Yes, Lady Hanover.”

“And quickly. You will be handsomely rewarded if we arrive before dawn. I shall see to it personally when we return home.”

His tone was more energetic this time. “Yes, ma'am.”

* * * * *

Henry must have driven the horses close to their breaking point, for they arrived at Plouder's Field less than fifteen minutes later. He climbed down and opened the door for her. “This journey usually takes thirty minutes, m'lady.”

She nodded, unable to speak because of the nausea churning in her stomach. Their hell-bent ride over rough streets and rougher paths had left her feeling close to death. She stepped down from the carriage to scan the field.

It was more a glen than a field. A lush growth of mature trees surrounded a cleared area of squelching mud and thin grass. Birds chirped from their perches, unaware of the feel of death surrounding the place.

Her eyes fell on a coach and its horse beside two saddled horses tied to a tree nearby. Rebecca lifted the skirt of her morning dress and rushed across the clearing. The mud sucked at her slippers, but she pulled her way through.

As she approached, she saw four men, divided into pairs, standing several yards apart. An older gentleman, wearing a dark suit, stood off to the side. He held a black bag. Rebecca watched as Alex and the young man from his office lifted what appeared to be a box from the ground. Alex took something from inside, and then turned to face the other two men, who were engaged in something she couldn't see from this angle.

“Alex,” she called out as she ran toward him. His head whipped around, and even from the distance between them, she could see the anger in his eyes. She ignored a shiver of trepidation and hurled herself forward. She would have fallen into the mud if Alex's arms hadn't been there to catch her. She touched his face. “Oh, Alex. Please do not do this.”

He pushed her away, causing her arm to return to her side. “I have issued a challenge. I cannot back down, Rebecca. You should not be here.”

She shook her head. “I beg you not to do this.”

Alex's brow furrowed. “Why is it so important to you? Do you know what will be said if I do not uphold my honor?”

Rebecca twisted the ruby ring on her finger. “I would rather have them call you a thousand names while you live than have them admire your bravery while you molder in the ground.”

He sighed. “I shall be fine. You will return home now.”

She shook her head. “I shan't leave without you.”

“Do not defy me, wife.”

“Do not widow me, husband,” she retorted in an equally angry tone. Tears came to her eyes. “I could not bear to lose you.”

His expression softened. “What?”

Rebecca bowed her head. “I love you, Alex. Please come home with me.”

Alex sighed again. “I cannot.”

She lifted her head, swallowing the lump in her throat. “I see.” Rebecca turned from him to walk toward the doctor.

“Wait.”

She turned around, quirking a brow.

“Where are you going?”

“To watch your duel.” She tilted her chin. “Although it is evident your honor means more to you than I do, I cannot leave until I know the outcome.” She turned her back on him again, walking with her spine stiff. She jumped with surprise when his hand fell on her arm. She stopped walking and looked up at him through the veil of her ebony lashes.

“Very well.” Alex took her in his arms. “If it truly means that much to you—”

She threw herself against him, burying her face against the scratchy wool of his brown jacket. “It does, m'lord.”

“Bradleaf,” Alex called across the field. “I will not fight you.”

He snickered—a cruel sound that carried across the distance, sending shivers down Rebecca's spine.

“Have you turned to a coward as well as a fool, Hanover?”

She felt Alex stiffen, and she clutched handfuls of his coat. “Walk away, darling.”

He relaxed a bit. “I have promised my wife not to partake of this foolishness.”

“What will they say of you?” Bradleaf and his companion laughed harder.

“I care not.” Alex looked down at her, smiling. He brushed a lock of hair off her face. “I have made my choice,” he shouted back.

Rebecca heard footsteps behind them and turned partially to see Bradleaf approaching. He held a pistol, but at his side, with the barrel pointed toward the muddy ground. She glared at him as he stopped a few feet from them.

"If she is that important to you, of course I release you." He bent forward slightly at the waist. When he straightened, he turned and started back to his companion.

Rebecca turned back to Alex, cupping her hands around his face. "Thank you, m'lord." She frowned as she realized his tender expression was vulnerable, plainly revealing his emotions. "Alex?" Could it be true? Was she reading love in his eyes?

"Do you love me, Rebecca? Truly?"

"Aye, I have since I found the necklace."

His mouth twisted into a strained smile. "I lied to you, dearest. Your father's debts exceeded the value of the cargo by several thousand dollars. I was within my rights to claim your heirloom too."

She frowned up at him. "Why did you not, husband?"

His arms tightened around her, and he dropped the pistol on the ground. "I had already claimed the most valuable prize onboard the *Margaret*." He lowered his head to kiss her, whispering against her lips, "You."

Rebecca melted against him, returning his kiss passionately. A loud bang rang through the early morning air, interrupting their embrace. Suddenly, she stiffened and cried out. “Alex?” She frowned at him in confusion as a terrible pain in her shoulder swept through her body. Her head spun, and her legs refused to support her.

“Rebecca?” He sounded frantic as he spun her around in his arm. A choked sound emerged from his throat.

“What is it?” She felt light-headed and numb. If not for the aching in her arm and shoulder, she might have thought it was all a dream.

“He shot you,” Alex said in a thick voice.

She felt him lower her to the ground and saw him reach for the pistol lying near his shoe. Her mouth formed the words to ask him not to, but she lost consciousness before she could speak them.

Chapter 19

When she first awoke, Rebecca felt as though a heavy weight was pressing down on her. Her mouth was thick and dry, as if she had been chewing on a feather pillow throughout the night.

She struggled to recall how she had gotten in bed, but couldn't focus on any of the disjointed images running through her mind. She tried to sit up, and a

groan escaped her as a white-hot flash of pain seared its way through her neck and down her back.

"Rebecca?"

She felt the bed dip, followed by his hands on her arm. "Alex?" She turned her head in the direction of his voice and saw his worried expression. "What troubles you, my love?"

"Nothing now." He smoothed the lank strands of hair off her brow. "You are back with me. I must fetch the physician."

She reached for his hand, but was barely able to grasp it. "Nay, stay with me awhile yet."

He shook his head, but looked regretful. "Dr. Harris insisted I wake him if you regained consciousness during his rest."

"Regained consciousness?" Her brow furrowed as she tried to recall her last memory before waking at home. She remembered standing with Alex in a field, confessing her love. Something about the diamond necklace…then pain as she had never known. "What happened with Bradleaf?"

Alex's eyes burned almost black with rage. "He shot you, but he will not trouble anyone again."

Her eyes widened as she realized what he meant. His foreboding expression didn't invite discussion of that topic yet. Her lips trembled as she squeezed his hand. “The babe?”

Alex squeezed her hand in return. “He is fine. The bullet did not come near him.”

“Or her,” she whispered.

He laughed. “Now, I must get the doctor.”

She tightened her grip, not wanting to be alone. “Why did he shoot me, Alex?”

“Because he realized how important you are to me, and it was his chance to hurt me.”

Rebecca shook her head and winced as pain traveled up her neck. “You are wrong, Alex. It was me he wanted to punish. I cost him a great deal of money when he did not win the wager.”

A small smile curved his lips. “I am certain he was displeased with you, but Bradleaf hated me, dearest.”

“Why?”

“Years ago, we were partners, until I discovered he was embezzling from our fledgling company.” Alex's mouth tightened. “Bradleaf wormed his way out of trouble with help of his father, leaving me holding the bag.” His voice

lowered. “It was he who forced me into pirating to pay off the debts. I do not understand it, but he grew to hate me when I rescued the company and made it a success—all without the aid of him or his father's money.”

She gasped. “I thought it was your brother rejecting you and sending you off penniless that turned you to piracy.”

Alex shrugged. “The Earl did turn me out without a dime, but I had some money, which I used as capital for the shipping venture with Bradleaf. However, it was not enough to cover everything when he used our meager profits to buy the silence of a young lady's family after he seduced her and left her with a child.”

Rebecca blinked, seeing the similarities in their situation. “Did you marry me so you would not be like your ex-partner?”

He sighed. “I must fetch the doctor.”

She put a trembling hand on his thigh. “Is that what our marriage is about? Proving you had more honor than he did?”

“Marrying you was partly a matter of honor, but not entirely.” Alex shifted his weight. “You have raged with fever and infection for three days. The doctor must see you.”

“Fine.” She sniffed back tears.

He froze. “Are you crying?”

“No,” she said in a wet voice, even as she collapsed against his chest. “Why would I be crying?”

“I do not know.”

She drew in a ragged breath. “I had hoped I meant more to you than, well…I obviously do.” Her voice was muffled against his waistcoat.

Alex had the audacity to laugh as he eased her away from him. He tilted up her chin and looked into her eyes. “You mean the world to me, my love.”

She sniffed again. “I do?”

“I love you, wife.”

Rebecca's mouth dropped open into an O. “You do?”

“Aye. I have since the day I claimed you as my own.”

“Oh.” She snuggled against him once more.

“Oh?” He sounded annoyed. “That is all you have to say?”

“I love you too.” She sighed. “You may have claimed me, but I tamed you.”

He growled low in his throat, and the sound vibrated through his chest. “You have not tamed me, Rebecca.”

She giggled, not bothering to refute his statement. After all, his honor would not allow him to admit the maiden had tamed the pirate, just as she would not willingly admit how quickly he had claimed her for his own.

Rebecca blinked when she abruptly realized she was lying in her husband's bed, not her own. "Alex?"

"Yes, love?"

"Why am I in your room?" Rebecca shook her head. "My presence must have disturbed your rest these past few nights."

"All that disturbed me was worry for your health. I had you placed where you belong, Rebecca. We have no need for separate rooms…unless you prefer your own quarters?" He sounded uncertain.

She turned her head to meet see his expression. He looked anxious. "I should like to have a sitting room attached to our room."

He sagged against her. "I will have it seen to immediately."

"There is no rush, love. We have all we need in this room."

He chuckled. "Aye, my love, we do."

She closed her eyes as Alex lowered his head to kiss her. He moved carefully, so she felt barely a twinge of pain as the mattress shifted. She pressed herself closer to him as she relished in the feel of his arms around her. She did have everything she needed, right there with him.

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