

## CHAPTER ONE

*The Caribbean, 1809*

Valentine Burdette's last day on earth dawned brightly.

The ship's brig, on the windward side of His Majesty's frigate *Triumphant*, had a tiny porthole barely above the waterline. A glorious horizon beckoned. Val placed a palm flat on the porthole, but the fair day was, like most of the things he'd wanted in life, forever out of reach.

Depressed, he turned away and slumped in a corner. He was as ready as he'd ever be to face his hanging. At least they'd granted him a last decent meal and fresh water to bathe in. They'd stripped him of his dashing first officer's uniform, which bothered him not a whit because he'd long ago lost pride in wearing it. However, last night the bosun's mates had dived for his few remaining possessions, leaving him only a simple white shirt and black breeches in which to meet his maker.

That bothered him very much. Since he could take little pride in his birth, his name, or his lot in life, he'd turned his frustrated ideals to the one thing he could control--impeccable dress. Now even that was taken from him.

"Won't be needin' lace and velvet none where ye're goin', laddie," the boatswain who'd won had berated him with a nasty, black-toothed grin. The brawny fellow shrugged into Val's burgundy velvet jacket and preened before his prisoner. "Belike as not, ye'll be sweatin' soon enough."

To hide his anger, Val had blown his gaoler a mocking kiss. "And hugs and kisses to

you, too, my hearty. I'll be sure to put in a word for you with the devil when you join me-- hopefully sooner rather than later."

Amidst the cackling of his mates, the boatswain scowled. "Ye've still too much lip fer yer own good, but me cat'll make ye sing a different tune. Ye'll be bleedin' nice and proper when we throws ye to the sharks. After we hang ye, o' course. If ye arsk me, a hangin's too good fer a bloody mutineer like yerself--"

"If I have to go to a higher plane to get my just reward at last, so be it," Val retorted. "At least, thank God, I won't have to tolerate mealy-mouthed, scurvy dogs like you who'd rather kiss the king's ass than live like a man."

It had taken three mates to hold the boatswain back then, but finally he shoved them aside and wrapped Val's remaining possessions in a black silk jacket.

Val couldn't quell a wince as his mother's diamond locket, which he'd had made into a watch fob, was snatched in a dirty paw. At Val's expression, the boatswain recovered his swagger and boastfully swung the fob before his mates. "See this? It'll look right handsome on me Sunday jacket."

Pained, Val turned away. They could impugn his patriotism, his honor, and even his manhood and he wouldn't care. But the visual image of this last remnant of his mother bedecking a swabby like the boatswain almost overcame him. Val had to retreat to a dark corner of the tiny prison and mentally block out the taunts.

When, last evening, they finally grew tired of his lack of response and were called away to their duties, Val reclined on the hard planking to stare out the porthole at the stars.

They had been responsible for calling him to the sea. As a boy who lived without certainties, he'd been fascinated by their steadfastness. If one knew the trick, one could always

predict which constellation would rise first, where each would set, and even navigate a wide ocean by their heavenly light.

The knowledge that this would be the last time he'd see them gave their beauty a certain poignancy, but he refused to cry for what might have been. His destiny had been writ in those stars, just as his mother's had. Like her, he was fated to die young, for a truth he believed in.

Now, on the last day of a life well spent if not well conducted, he wondered if his father and brother would ever know that a Burdette had died ignominiously on a rope's end.

Like the Duke predicted when he cast them out....

While he waited for the pipes to signal his hanging, Val recalled, for the last time, the image he'd spent twenty years trying to forget. It was the defining memory of his childhood. On that bright May day, the vast Cumberland estates had swept away to the gurgling Avon river, past gardens, and fields, to a forest and beyond. As far as the eye could see from the hilltop where the mansion surveyed its domain, the Cumberland crest bedecked every fence, marker and gate.

In her blunt way, Val's mother Aurelia had told him tartly, "Your father likes to put his name on all his possessions. I daresay he'd brand my butt if I'd let him."

Val had giggled, but he'd noted that his mother didn't smile. With that intuitive sixth sense of the young, he'd known that trouble brewed between his parents. Ugly trouble. The very next day, Val had returned from swimming with the stable lads, avoiding his lessons yet again, to find his mother and father in another quarrel.

This time, the vast hall was empty of a servant to hurry him away, and he sneaked into the salon to hide behind a couch and listen.

"....not true, why will you not believe me?" his mother had cried, sobbing.

"Because you're a lying American whore, and I never should have married you," his father had said in that icy calm way that chilled Val to the marrow. "Scandal or not, I want you gone before nightfall. I have too much care for my name to have you continue to drag it into the mud."

"But divorce--"

"Is sometimes granted in extreme cases. The day you admit you've been unfaithful to me to the church, I will deposit five thousand pounds in your account. Now go. And take that spawn of hell with you."

Even at seven, Val had been hot-headed. He'd leaped up, standing as tall as his stifled tears would allow and shouted, "Don't talk to my mother that way! You're mean--"

The slap had knocked him halfway across the room. "And you're no son of mine, you disgusting, lying whelp. You'll end exactly where you belong--at a rope's end. But thank God you'll not take me or mine with you."

Cradling his bruised cheek, Val had stared up at his tall, dark, gaunt father. Val was blond, blue-eyed and sturdy. His older brother was a mirror image of his sire, and equally cold and malicious.

Aurelia Burdette, as blond and beautiful as Val, had given her husband a furious look and hurried over to help Val up. Dashing her tears away on her sleeve, she spat, "We'll go. I'd rather sell apples in Covent Garden than endure another day under your roof--"

The Duke had stalked to the door, sneering over his shoulder, "Apples? You've more expensive wares to market. For a few more years." And he'd slammed the door behind him.

Val had tried to comfort his mother, but she'd been a woman possessed. By nightfall, she had three trunks bulging with clothes and personal items, only to suffer the indignity of having

her trunks searched before she left. The sole piece of jewelry the Duke allowed her to take was the diamond locket that had been her mother's.

When that great door closed behind them, so did the only security Val had ever known.

The next ten years, before he went away to sea, had been lean and hungry. Aurelia had tried to support him honestly, but even after the divorce, in typical fashion, the Duke only gave her a thousand pounds. When the money ran out and she couldn't find respectable work, she returned to the stage and the life she'd known in America before the Duke, in a fit of passion on a trip to the colonies, had whisked her away to his domain.

It was almost a relief when the dreaded sound of the pipes whistling all hands on deck finally came. Val stood, brushed back his short, blond, curly hair with his hands and dusted off his clothes as best he could. When the boatswain, sneering a taunt to try anything, came down to open the iron cell, Val calmly let himself be shoved up the companionway onto the deck outside.

For a stolen instant, he turned his face up to the sun, taking a deep breath of the clean salt air that smelled so much better than bilge water and human waste. Far in the distance he could see the hazy outline of land, but he had no idea where they were. When the brigantine he'd taken control of had been cornered and boarded by the huge frigate, Val had heard one of the crew say they'd make short time to Jamaica with the winds so brisk. By now they should at least be entering the Caribbean. He spared a thought for his men, hoping that they, who'd been imprisoned on the brig and taken back to England, would have fairer trials than his.

As to why the Admiral had taken him aboard his own frigate to make a spectacle of him, well, that was easy for Val to deduce. In the middle of a war with France, and another brewing with the former colonies, discipline had never been so important to the navy. The admiral had ordered that Val be given four dozen lashes with the cat, enough to kill most men, and then be

hung from the highest yardarm, his body left there for avian carrion and, more importantly--for human caution.

A hard shove between his shoulder blades made Val reluctantly move along, past the glaring cordon of sailors.

Jeers and catcalls greeted him, but he ignored them, walking tall, walking proud, like his mother had the day the Duke cast her out. However, when one old tar had the temerity to spit on him, Val swiped the spittle away on his sleeve and snarled, "Save your juices, old one. You'll need it for love of a country that sucks a man dry and gives naught in return."

Angry mutterings accompanied the hate-filled glances. British tars were peculiarly loyal to their country. They often put Val in mind of husbands complaining bitterly about shrewish wives, but stand by her they would, through thick and thin. Val had never known anything, or anyone, save his mother, who deserved the kind of loyalty he reserved for his own right hand, the sweat of his brow, and the clarity of his thought.

"Ye ruddy traitor!" shouted a burly young able seaman. "England don't need yer kind!"

"Nor yours, neither," Val shot back. No reason to hold back his own festering resentment now. Might as well be hanged for a lion as a lamb. "Once your usefulness is done, try to get a pension or a living wage from the country you've given your youth to. England's as two-faced as Janus, save she offers a harlot's smirk on one lip and a death mask grin on the other. Believe her false promises and she'll kill you with her brand of justice." Val spat on the deck to punctuate his last word.

"Ye're nothing but a bloody mutineer!" roared an old tar. "At least keep yer yap shut and die like a man!"

Val whirled on him. "Aye, and a man I'd rather be, swinging from a yardarm, than fodder

for the crown's brutal bloodhounds. Three hours of sleep a night, our blessed captain allowed us. We were short-handed, but did we have decent food to eat? Nay, one portion of wormy hard tack a day, and a half pint of ale, when we licked his boots proper enough. I saw three men, too sick to leave their hammocks, die under his bullies' ideas of persuasion. Clubbed like sheep led to slaughter, they were, and then tossed overboard without so much as a proper burial. Well, if every manjack of you wants to follow scum like that, I say to the devil with you for you've got your due. No flag, no king, hell, no God of kindness nor retribution, deserves such blind loyalty. Die like a man, is it?" Val's voice softened, for he now had the acute attention of every man aboard. "Aye, that I shall. For if I can't live like a man, I'll die like one!"

When several furious tars surged toward him, it took five powerful bosun's mates to hold them back with clubs and belaying pins. The officers, with the blue-coated, epaulet bedecked admiral at their forefront, had watched silently from the quarterdeck. At this display of unruliness among his crew, the admiral stepped to the rail above the melee on the lower deck and shouted, "Silence! Get back or you'll *all* feel the cat!"

The mutterings and shouts slowly subsided.

The Admiral bent a stern glance on his prisoner. "I'll have no martyrs on my ship. I knew you'd condemn yourself out of your own mouth. Now, if you've vented spleen enough--"

"Give me a sword," Val said softly. "And I'll vent spleen aplenty, starting with that fat belly of yours."

The bulldog face under the foppish hat reddened further. "Seize him up! Administer the sentence!"

Brutal hands grabbed Val and flung him, face first, against the grating that had been lashed to the mizzenmast. Val's hands were snatched, despite his struggles, and lashed to the

grating. His feet were likewise secured until, spread-eagled, he couldn't move an inch. And then a bosun's mate used a knife to slice Val's shirt open up the back. Val stared stonily toward the quarterdeck, vowing that not one groan would pass his lips. Once, in his days of youthful folly, he'd tasted the cat. That had been only a dozen lashes, and he'd managed not to cry out, to the fury of the brutal captain who'd proclaimed Val's punishment for the crime of refusing to shine the captain's boots.

But four dozen? Val knew the admiral had deliberately placed him so that Val's agony would be writ large on his face for all to gawk at--and remember. Mentally girding himself, Val paid little heed to the hasty reading of *The Articles of War* and the droning pronouncement of the sentence for the heinous crime of mutiny.

Reason, that was the ticket. Like his heroes John Locke and Aristotle, Val knew that the mind could endure any physical torment with enough distraction and forbearance. Bracing himself, Val took several deep breaths as he heard the whistle of the cat. The nine knots on the end made the whip far more lethal than a mere bullwhip, for with every strike, nine wounds raked into the skin. As the first blow fell, Val kept up his analytical concourse with himself. The kiss of the many tails was almost gentle. Val counted the clouds in the sky.

But then came the second, and the third, the boatswain getting into his rhythm with every blow. Wounds began to crisscross wounds, giving Val no respite. Welts became cuts, and cuts, gashes. The clouds blurred, so he closed his eyes, reciting the alphabet backwards instead.

Fire licked the entire surface of his back, eating to his spine and beyond to his gut. He had to squelch a scream by biting his tongue so hard that he tasted blood. Still, even by the dozenth blow, he'd managed not to make a sound.

From a great distance, he heard admiring murmurs cut short when the admiral roared,



"Harder, man. Do your duty!"

The thirteenth blow came so hard that Val felt his flesh tearing open. A roaring in his ears blocked out everything save the need to scream. It built within him until it finally came with a blast that shook the ship.

Boom! Val blinked the liquid out of his eyes, not sure if it was sweat, tears or blood. The blows had stopped. Pandemonium erupted as the orderly witnesses scattered for cover. Val swallowed hard, and the popping in his ears cleared his hearing. Another blast shook the ship, and he blinked, stunned, as he realized what the sound meant.

They were under attack! The admiral had been so devoted to his autocratic notions of retribution that he neglected his own duty and even called the lookout down from the crow's nest. A ship had snuck up on them unawares while they all salivated over his blood.

Dizzy with relief, Val chuckled, but groaned when his back protested. Gingerly, he turned his head, trying to see. A large brigantine bore down on them, her gun ports flaring like fangs. As Val watched another puff came, and this time the shot struck them high, but squarely amidships. The mast Val was lashed to toppled backward, pulling the grating and Val with it.

He had time for one thought: *Whoever it is, they want their prize whole, for they're trying to geld us without killing us.* But then his arms were almost pulled from their sockets, and a cracking sound came as the tall mast crashed to the deck. Screams sounded and Val knew several sailors must have been crushed. The wooden grating popped as the mighty timber fell.

Face forward, tangled in a mess of sail and lattice work, Val managed to pull one leg free and stomp on the remains of the grating holding his other leg. Both legs loose, Val heaved backward with all the power of his strong legs and hips and managed to straighten, half of the broken grating still tied to his hands. Half bent, he flopped around like a great albatross, his

wingspread huge but his gait unwieldy, and ran against the mainmast.

Another jolt almost threw him to his feet, but he managed to straighten and run again into the mast. The grating cracked again, this time splintering into Val's right shoulder. Like a maddened dog in a cage scenting freedom, he rabidly smashed the remaining wood into kindling. Finally, his wrist bonds broke free.

Curses and grunts surrounded him. He blinked the blood and sweat away to take stock of his deliverers. Pirates in scanty garb fought hand to hand against the loyal British tars. Some used swords, some pistols, some knives, but all were vicious fighters, and Val saw more fallen defenders than aggressors.

The last jolt had been the two ships scraping together as they were boarded. Val debated hiding beneath the broken sail, but on a ship, there was nowhere to run. He'd be discovered eventually, and if the navy won, he'd be back where he started. On the other hand....As had so often been the case in his life, he had a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea.

With his usual verve, Val dived in head first. He grabbed a sword out of the hand of a dying pirate and turned it on the boatswain who'd lashed him. The huge fellow had just sliced a scrawny pirate almost in two and was looking for more meat when Val's sword clanged against his.

Rotten teeth showed in a macabre grin. "Damme, laddie, ye seems to want me tender mercies any way ye can get 'em. Slice ye open with me cat or me sword, t'is the saime to me."

Val parried a clumsy jab, his wrists pained from the splinters, his back afire from the lashes, both receding to a dull ache under the boost of deliverance. He let his sword do his talking and returned a thrusting cut that jarred the blade in the boatswain's hand. Clumsily, the Englishman managed to deflect the blade in time, but he had to back a step to avoid the thrust.

Val pressed his advantage, his sword now a weaving wall of doom. The boatswain was a fair swordsman, but Val had studied under some of the masters of Europe, and never had the stakes been so high.

Vaguely, Val sensed the clang and curse of battle receding, but he didn't dare turn his head to see which side had won the day. Val lunged repeatedly, cutting and jabbing at the huge upper torso, knicking the boatswain several times as the bully barely parried in time.

The boatswain backed another step, braggadocio wheezing from him with his wind. He began to pant. With a series of feints, Val tapped from side to side, setting a false rhythm. And then the boatswain followed the path Val had set, wagering on the turn, falling straight into Val's trap. Val's blade insinuated under the straight-armed riposte of his opponent. He thrust upward from a crouch in an attack so powerful that nothing could deflect it, straight to the boatswain's heart. With a final gurgle, the fellow toppled to the deck.

Silently, Val watched blood spurt from the deep gash, thinking vaguely that the color should be black. And maybe himself black too, for taking the life of a fellow Englishman. He'd done many things he regretted, but he'd never stooped so low as to kill a crew mate. A former crew mate, he tried to tell himself. Kill or be killed. Yet the enormity of what he'd done finally struck home with the sword fight.

By the choices he'd made, he'd changed from a man without a home to a man without a country....

Someone groaned at his feet, bringing him back to an even grimmer prospect. The deck was covered with the dead and wounded. Val knelt to tie a torn shred from his shirt about a young British sailor's stub of an arm. The copious blood flow of the cut artery slowed to a trickle.

Someone far above Val's head roared a laugh. "Satan's backside, the pretty can't make up his mind whether to kill his fellows or save 'em." The pirate was so tall that he blocked the sun, but Val made out a broken nose, flaming locks tied back in a queue and numerous gashes on ham-like arms and tree-trunk legs trickling with blood. The pirate seemed bothered not a whit by the wounds. "But this I'll say fer ye--ye've a mean sword arm, laddie. Question is--be it fer us, or agin us?"

Having done all he could for the moaning boy at the moment, Val stood, uncertain what to answer. He'd chosen the right side, it seemed, and yet he felt no joy. "What do you think?" Val turned and showed the pirate his back.

The rascal roared even louder. "Methinks ye needs to see the cap'n forthwith. We've a brow new laddie to join us." The pirate reached out to clap Val on the back, apparently remembered the wounds, and brushed Val's shoulder instead.

Val still stumbled under the gentle strength. He collected himself, mentally and physically, and looked about the deck. The attack from the smaller ship had been so sudden and so savage that the celebrated members of the world's largest navy had been taken by surprise. Several pirates, literally armed to the teeth, where they clenched knives in their mouths, herded the tars who could still walk below.

Val peered about the deck for any of the officers, but their domain at the quarterdeck was so crowded that he couldn't glimpse them. Pirates were already searching the dead, but Val was surprised to see them scrupulously place their haul, usually no more than a few coins or a cheap watch, in a huge basket carried by a boy in a surprisingly clean suit such as a proper schoolboy would wear.

His unwanted new admirer obviously saw the surprise in his face. "Us what sails with

Alex don't cheat until the spoils be counted, else we'd lose a hand fust, a gullet next."

Under the circumstances, Val tamped down the urge to search the boatswain for his mother's locket. "When can I see this Captain Alex?" he asked instead.

The pirate shrugged and started lugging bodies to the tarpaulins spread out next to the rail. Val expected the bodies to be summarily dumped overboard, but instead they were placed in neat rows, one side pirates, the other sailors, almost tenderly.

Exhaustion began to overtake Val, and his wounds throbbed again. His own fate was uncertain at best, and he might well have traded an honorable hanging for a dishonorable death, but since he couldn't affect either outcome at the moment, he turned to what he could affect.

Pausing only to wash his hands in a bucket of sea water and to pick the worst of the splinters away, Val tore a reasonably clean jersey off a man who wouldn't need it any more. He knelt to tend to the wounded, both pirate and tar.

A commotion made him raise his head from the grisly task, his hands covered in blood.

On the quarterdeck, the tall, lithe first officer had apparently managed to break free from his captors. He snatched a rapier from a surprised pirate and sliced it at another tall figure in baggy pantaloons and a loose white shirt.

The latter ducked just in time and removed a long, wicked-looking rapier from a decorative sheath. The two blades clanged together. Two burly, angry pirates brandished huge knives, but the attacked pirate yelled, "Get back!"

The authoritative tone told Val that this must be Captain Alex. The pirates reluctantly eased aside to the railing, leaving the quarterdeck clear.

Standing, wiping his hands absently on his breeches, Val watched. He noted that the admiral, sandwiched between two pirates, clutched a wound in his side. That bulldog face was

fierce with more pride than fear as he, too, watched the combatants.

The rascal elbowed him in the ribs. "Watch this. Cain't no one, nowheres, defeat Alex in a fair fight."

Alex danced aside from another wicked jab, parrying but not returning a riposte. Those who were able, pirate and tar alike, paused to watch the duel. Silence was punctuated only by the hiss of steel against steel and the slap of waves against the hull.

The opponents had obviously both been born with blades in their hands. They circled one another, sword sliding down sword in a long, lethal kiss, testing the other's skill and strength. Slowly, the experimental taps quickened in tempo. Then Alex flexed long, lithe legs in a running lunge that culminated in such a skillful jab that the first officer could not repel it. He turned slightly aside just in time and the sword tip skimmed up his arm to his shoulder, ripping blue fabric and red flesh as it went.

Alex's sword lowered slightly, blood shiny on the end in the bright sunlight. "Do you yield?"

The first officer's sagging sword came up in reply, zeroing in on the pirate's unprotected side.

With a grace and smooth power all the more astonishing given the narrow shoulders, Alex lifted a rapier and deflected the jab with insulting ease. The duel was on again, but the first lieutenant's stamina could not match his courage. His sword began to sag, barely repelling each crafty dart and parry that read his weaknesses with fiendish skill.

Again, Alex offered, "Yield to me, and we can stop this nonsense."

There was something strange about the captain's voice, Val realized, but he was too awed at the captain's skill to debate the matter.

Again, the British blade raised up.

This time, Alex's sword was a wicked wall of steel that no amount of defiance or courage could repel. Still without apparent effort, not even breathing hard, Alex rotated a supple arm in a series of feints that the winded first lieutenant could barely follow. Val eyed every movement of the blade, but the coup de grace still surprised him when it came.

The pirate's rapier gently nudged the taller man's blade, inveigling it to one side. When the exhausted first lieutenant moved his sword right to catch the jab, the rapier stabbed left with lightning skill, into the lieutenant's shoulder. Crying out, the lieutenant jerked back.

Val wondered why the pirate hadn't gone for the heart, but the answer became quickly apparent.

Captain Alex pulled the blade free, saying admiringly, "The toothless British lion may roar, but he can still bite." The captain tilted the gilt-edged rapier to the sky in the universal sign of salute, sheathed the weapon and bowed slightly. Then, ordering the gnarled old pirate who approached, "See to his wounds, Billy. Secure the rest of the prisoners below, and get this vessel under weigh," the captain approached the quarterdeck rail to clench it between surprisingly small, gloved hands.

"Hearties, we've won the day again!" Alex's face was black with powder and soot, but the grin showed perfect, startlingly white teeth. "Another less vessel to prowl North America. Collect the spoils, treat the prisoners well, and there'll be a bonus for you all in it!" The admiral struggled as he was led below, but Alex didn't even spare him a glance.

Deafening huzzahs shook the timbers of the former British ship. Val, however, squinted against the bright sunlight, trying to get a better look at the captain's face. That voice was too high, those legs too slim. Could it be....

Alex scratched at the kerchief bound about a high, proud forehead, and then, with an impatient jerk, whisked it off.

Val had been half expecting it, but even so, he blinked in shock. A woman?

A brilliant tumble of deep auburn curls fell to the captain's shoulders. The rich waves caught the sunlight in graduated shades from reddish-brown to gold. It became obvious why the captain's shoulders were so narrow, legs so well-shaped.

From the shape of the balanced cheekbones, the small nose and wide eyes, a beautiful woman to boot! Val had heard rumors of a female pirate captain preying on ships in the Caribbean, but he'd dismissed them as tall tales.

As his captain strode below, the rascal roared with laughter at Val's shock. "What a lassie, aye, matey? Does ye think ye kin takes orders from a woman? Guess we'll see right quick enough."

Indeed, Val was hustled to the captain's cabin so quickly that he didn't have time to clean up. With a perfunctory knock, the big brigand ushered Val inside. Even captains, in times of war, had to make do with cramped quarters, but Val was too busy appraising this astounding woman to heed his surroundings.

His wrists full of slivers, swiping away what blood he could on the tattered remains of his shirt, Val stared at the woman who held his fate. She was busy tallying a long sheet of figures. She amazed him yet again as she did so in her head, counting silently to herself, ignoring him.

The window behind her cast a roseate halo about that glorious head of hair. Her face was still dirty, but the boy he'd observed earlier brought her a bowl of warm water and a clean towel.

"*Merci, mon fils,*" she said absently, dipping the towel into the water while she still added figures.



The boy was her son? Why, she scarcely looked old enough to have a son of about...Val appraised the child. Eleven or so. The child had dark brown hair with red highlights and deep blue eyes that watched him suspiciously. But he retreated at his mother's shooing gesture and sat down on the padded bench against the bulkhead. To Val's amusement, the boy had a brace of pistols resting on the bench beside him, and his gaze never wavered from the new intruder.

However, as the pirate captain cleansed her face, all the while ignoring him, Val's amusement, maneuvers and even his blessed joy in freedom, scattered from his head. The features revealed were even more lovely than he'd expected, not only perfectly balanced, but blessed with a vitality and strength he'd seldom witnessed on a female face. The eyes, surprisingly, were umber, and probably changed color with her moods. They were framed in long, curling dark lashes that matched the perfectly-shaped eyebrows on the wide, cerebral brow. Her skin was creamy gold, again, a surprise in a redhead, and her freckles from her continual sun exposure formed winsome half moons on her well-shaped cheekbones.

Finally, she tossed the towel back in the bowl, wrote down a total at the end of the column and circled it with flair. She leaned back in her chair, the movement pressing full breasts against her loose white shirt, and looked up at the visitors.

Keen brown eyes appraised Val from head to toe with an intelligence that, by now, did not surprise him. For a lovely woman to run a crew of scoundrels, she had to be both smart and brave. He could read nothing of her thoughts in the impassive stare, but her full mouth curved slightly as she surveyed his bloodied form. "Damme," she said in a mocking tone, "I like my meat rare, but methinks this pretty portion either needs cleaning, or cooking."

Val blinked. The comment about meat made him wonder, especially when her gaze fixed on his groin. To his consternation, he felt himself growing. He cleared his throat. "Ah, my lady,

ma'am, uh, mistress Alex--"

She let him flail for a moment before she snapped, "Captain will do. Now what do you want and why are you not with the rest of the prisoners?" That stern gaze fixed on the pirate who'd waited silently for her to recognize him. "Chucky? Explain this."

Val almost choked. This great lummoX was named Chucky? He had to quell a smile as Chucky hastened into words.

"He killed that great bosun whut killed so many o' me mates, with a skill I ain't seen afore save in ye. And by the looks o' his back, he and that there admiral don't share no love fer t'other."

When that perfect eyebrow arched, Val turned so the woman could see his back.

"Hmm, well, the fact that he's the admiral's enemy does not make him our friend," Alex said.

"True enough," Val inserted. "But how would you feel about my motivations if I told you your attack stopped the admiral from hanging what was left of me after four dozen lashes? I have reason to be both grateful and loyal to you, ma'am."

Those lovely brown eyes narrowed. "For what crime?"

"Mutiny."

Her eyes opened wide, raking over him with apparent curiosity. "Now you interest me. England's enemy is my friend." Her nose wrinkled as she sniffed. "Since I can't tell which of us smells more foul, I suggest we both get cleaned up. Chucky will show you where to go. Return to my cabin at seven, and we shall sup together and talk more." She waved them away. "Send Arturo to captain the *Melody* back to Jamaica, Chucky. I'll helm this vessel. And keep a sharp eye out. I'll not be caught with my pants down like our illustrious late enemy was. Where there's

one frigate, there could be a convoy."

"Not this time, Captain," Val said. "This ship was on course for America, for what, I do not know, but she sailed alone."

She reviewed this information judiciously, and finally seemed to take Val at his word.

"Good. We'll see what other....skills you have to offer. Later."

Val exited, her words ringing in his ears. He told himself not to read too much into them, but Chucky was scowling as he showed Val to the forward head, where a make-shift sluice had been set up with a siphon from the sea.

"Don't see why she favors ye, laddie, when she sends me about me business day in, day out. She don't give her affections lightly. The men won't be pleased, rape me if else."

Val shrugged. "Doubtless she didn't mean what she implied. She's tired."

Chucky snorted, stripping his own clothes off. He revealed a warrior's muscular, battle-scarred form, absently washing the blood and grime away. "Tired? Alexandra Mandalay h'aint ne'er been tired a day in her life. She kin outlast every manjack aboard, in cards, drinkin' and blades."

Val didn't argue, but by the time he'd dressed in the full-sleeved white shirt, tight black breeches and colorful vest Chucky gave him, his heart beat a bit faster. He'd not had a woman in months. Seldom given a thought to one, in fact. Val had a knack for compartmentalizing the vicissitudes of life. When he was hungry, he played hardest. When he was sad, he laughed loudest. And when he awoke hard and needful of a woman, he worked longest.

Still, if he could win his freedom by bedding the pirate wench, he wasn't about to reject her. He knew little about Alexandra Mandalay, but it was quite apparent that she made a better friend than an enemy. Besides, she was a beautiful woman, and after the painful but healing salt

bath, his wounds felt better. No doubt he could perform with his usual stamina and skill.

He only hoped he didn't awaken with the pox....

Clean again, he went back to ministering to the injured, mixing a poultice he'd learned on a previous sailing, and spreading it on various wounds. The pirates accepted his help warily, but without comment. Apparently the word had passed that the captain was reserving judgment on this captive-cum-mutineer-cum-pirate. As was his wont, while Val worked, he listened. He'd long ago learned that the best way to mark a man's measure was not by word, or even by deed. A man's face, by a flicker of an eyelash, a smirk or a grimace, could speak volumes about character and intent. But by either measure, Val found no treachery or ill will in the men he doctored.

Again, he was struck by the crew's total loyalty to their odd captain. Several of them expressed a fear that they'd be overtaken before they reached Jamaica. The grizzled old mate, missing front teeth, an ear and an eye, but making up for his physical ugliness with a wisdom both beautiful and salutary, shook his head in disagreement.

"Alex'll get us 'ome, saife and sound, lads. She allus does. And ye knows she won't cheat us none on the booty, neither, not like the rest o' them rascals I served under." Billy spat on the deck in disgust before wagging a gnarled finger at his mates. "And we kin sell this 'ere ship fer a pretty penny at auction, if the cap'n don't decide to keep 'er and sell the *Melody* instead. We'll have another tidy fortune to add to our winnins'. Keep yer faith in Alex, me 'earties, and she'll do right by us."

From the way the others listened respectfully, it was obvious old Billy's counsel was often heeded. Nodding, the pirates went about their business, cleaning the decks of blood and grime, and sending crews aloft to man the huge sails as the breeze stiffened. Their efficiency put

Val in mind of the strictest Royal Navy ship. Left to his own devices, Val stood at the rail, watching the spectacle of light and dark as night fell in a glorious finale of red, orange and blue.

Slowly, the sun's aging passion burned itself out over the velvet bosom of the fickle sea. Most sailors of his acquaintance called the sea a bitch, an appraisal he'd all too often agreed with. God knew, she'd introduced him to a life of toil and worry. Yet now, as Val watched the crisp sails carry him ever westward, blessedly farther from the old ways and the old world, the sea was both calm and beautiful. Val knew how quickly she could change, but in this quiet, pensive moment, she made him wistful. Her velvet mantle spread as far as he could see, bidding him rest and be peaceful, as if just over the horizon he would at last find hearth and home.

Since his mother died when he was seventeen, he'd spent the rest of his life just surviving, and, ultimately, thriving. On his own terms; in his own way. But he was almost thirty and weary of wandering. He had few friends, many lovers, and no ties. This was the way he'd always wanted it, since life had brought him naught but grief every time he loved. He'd had more than one rejected lover rail at him for his flightiness.

A certain Cockney ballet dancer had stomped a tiny foot at him when he kissed her and told her good-bye. "Aye, ye rakehell, storm out on the same ill wind what brought ye!" She slapped him away, tears in her lovely dark eyes. "But know this: them what sows the wind reaps the whirlwind. Not get out!" She shoved him out of her dressing room and slammed the door.

Val had felt nothing more than a momentary pang of guilt, for he'd not been her first lover and would certainly not be her last. And yet, now her words came back to haunt him. He tilted his head and looked at the canvas snapping in the stiff breeze, but he shrugged away the unease and looked at the sea again.

He told himself he was only being maudlin because of his exhaustion. Besides, he was not one to brood over the past. The present had always been problematical enough.

What challenge would the woman below offer him? In some ways, she reminded him of the sea, for she was equally changeable and dangerous. She had to be, merely to survive her post without challenge. Val shrugged. She was still a woman, with the same weaknesses and the same vanities of her kind. He could pander to both and win his freedom.

A soft hand touched his shoulder. He started, but it was the boy, beckoning him below. Val followed. The boy knocked thrice, gave Val a warning glare, and shoved open the captain's door. Val entered, aware that the boy slumped down outside the door, a pistol over his knees, to stand guard.

The cabin was lit only by candles. At first he couldn't see the woman, but then he spied her, sitting before a small table under the windows before a mirror, combing her hair. Breath left his lungs in a whoosh, taking with it his careful schemes and stratagems.

She wore a black silk dressing gown cinched about a small waist. An embroidered dragon wound a trail of fire over her back past her shoulder. Her head was bent to the side as she combed her thick red hair over and over until it crackled. Even in the dim candleglow, the fire of those riotous curls made him long to bury his hands, and anything else she'd allow, in her warmth. In the mirror, he could see her cleavage, a lighter shade than her exposed skin areas. The twin mounds lifting the silk at her bodice proved his practiced eye had not failed him from ill use.

She was blessed, physically and mentally. So what had made a woman of such beauty and wit turn to a life of piracy? Curiosity grew apace with the size of his manhood, but when she stood, cinched her belt tighter, and turned to face him, it was obvious she was the one who'd ask

the questions.

She nodded at the linen-covered dining table. Silver, crystal and gold-rimmed china glittered. She lifted the covers off of roasted chicken, potatoes speckled with bacon and onions, and dried apples and raisins stewed in rum and raw sugar.

Stunned, Val sat down opposite, where she indicated. "But....we've been eating hard tack for weeks. Where did the chicken come from?"

She shrugged. "Men are better led, and follow with more loyalty, when they're well fed. I keep my galleys well-stocked. It's easy enough to bring a chicken coop along, and even keep a small greenhouse of potted plants, if one uses space wisely."

Val swallowed a delicious piece of chicken to say, "Would that the Royal Navy could figure that out."

She held a teasing, shushing finger to her lips. "Don't tell them. They'd wipe out piracy, like as not."

After they shared a laugh, Val ate quickly. He'd not had a decent meal in months. He noted that she ate daintily, like a lady, using her silverware in the proper manner. But curiously, when a rap sounded at the door and Chucky entered, she dropped her fork, picked up her knife and speared a chunk of meat.

She tore the meat off with her teeth, chewing with her mouth half open, and asked, "Are the hatches secure? I want no escaping prisoners."

"Aye, cap'n," Chucky said, his gaze hungry on her bodice.

She pretended not to notice and stabbed a juicy apple with her knife. When a bit of juice trickled down her lips, she licked it away instead of using her napkin. "Who's mate of the second dog watch?"

"Billy, cap'n."

"You spell him, Chucky. We're stretched to the limit manning two vessels this size, and I want no mistakes. I'll spell you next."

"Won't ye be....busy, cap'n?"

Slowly, the knife lowered. Alexandra Mandalay sat a bit straighter and said quietly, "If you've a gripe, spit it out."

Chucky opened his mouth, clamped it shut, shook his head and stomped toward the door.

As he went, Alex said, "And see I'm not disturbed for a few hours."

That broad back stiffened, but then Chucky left, slamming the door behind him.

Alex covered her mouth, her shoulders shaking.

Val blinked, surprised she was so afraid, but then it struck him. The wench was laughing! She played these men like a master violinist, letting them believe she was as crude as they by eating with her knife, but he'd wager that when she was alone she ate with the same manners she'd used with him. The words were out before he could call them back. "How do you keep them at arm's length?"

Those slim shoulders quit shaking. She lowered the napkin, glaring at him. "That is none of your concern. Don't strut too pretty, my banty little cock. Crow all you want, but I rule the roost here, and unless you want to be thrown out of the coop, you'd best crow softly. I've spent three years getting these men to accept me as their captain, and I'll not have you ruin my discipline in one day."

Slowly, Val folded his napkin and set it aside. "Then why did you invite me here? Didn't you know they'd be jealous?"

Sighing, she shoved back her own half full plate. "That, I admit, is more complicated.



But if you'll answer a few questions, I'll get to the point."

He nodded, equally fascinated and repelled by this woman's boldness. He'd always favored feminine, simpering creatures himself. Women who knew how to cling to a man when and where it counted, and who appreciated the differences between the sexes. This woman was an Amazon, and he couldn't help feeling that if he bedded her, his life would never be the same.

"If you cannot go back to England, what are your plans?"

He shrugged. "To get farther away from that cursed isle. My mother was American, and I admit a hankering to see that vast land."

"So you do not wish to join my crew?" She tensed, but tried to hide it by playing with the folds of her robe.

Propping his elbows on the table, he considered that. Finally, he shook his head. "No. I've lived all my adult life without land beneath my feet. I've had enough of it for now."

She relaxed. "I thought not. However, since you fought with my crew, you deserve some of the bounty. We will put you ashore in Jamaica with enough money for a new start. And I will give you even more if you agree to my....bargain."

"Which is?" It was his turn to stiffen slightly.

For the first time, she seemed at a loss for words. "I....there's someone....that is...." She took a deep breath and said rapidly, "If you will bed me for this one night, gently, kindly, stopping if I say so, I will give you a thousand pounds before you leave."

Val's mouth dropped open. Of all the proposals he'd considered, this one never crossed his mind. Temptation struggled with outrage. If she'd wanted to lay him in a fit of passion, he'd have obliged, gladly, but this cold bargain made him feel....well, there was no other way to put it. Like a male whore. On the other hand, the sum was a fortune, more money than he'd ever had at

one time in his life.

Apparently she read his emotions, for she held her hands up, palms out. "Whoa! I have not explained myself well. Do you really think me so desperate for a man that I have to buy one? Any one of my crew would gladly perform the service, I assure you."

That relieved him of one reservation. She wasn't promiscuous, at least not often, with her entire crew. Then what? "By the rood, ma'am, I admit you both intrigue me and tempt me. But do you not have the hind end first? It's more normal for the gentlemen to pay for services rendered, is it not?"

She slapped the table with her open palm, making the dishes clatter. "Bah! I don't beg, and I don't take unless it's a ship at sea helmed by an enemy. I can't ask any of my men to do this. Number one, I'd lose all discipline, for I cannot favor one and not the others. Number two, I do not trust them to stop, if asked. And number three, I suspect none of them are half as skilled in the art as you."

Ridiculously, he felt himself blush. He had his mother's face and perfect shape, but he'd never realized that others viewed him as such salacious material. Women fell over themselves to bed him, that was true, but he was used to doing the pursuing. He had to collect his scattered wits to muster the overriding question. "But why? Why do you ask this?"

She nibbled that full lower lip, but when his blue eyes dropped to her mouth and fixated there, she stopped and blurted, "I have not had sex since I was fifteen, and then it was forced. My son Christopher is the product of that night. I am twenty and seven now, and I have not had sex in twelve years."

He started back so hard that his chair teetered until he leaned forward again and righted it. "But how have you kept your, uh, that is, stopped men from ...."

She smiled at his bumbling. Her response was wordless but quite emphatic. She picked up the sharp knife by her plate and flipped it at the small oil portrait on the wall that depicted the admiral's wife. The knife stabbed between the prudish woman's eyes and quivered with the force and skill with which it was thrown. "I'm tired of the bitch's disapproving eyes, anyway. And you've already seen me fence."

Most men would think twice before trying to force such a woman, he agreed mentally. And yet....What a waste. "But why have you waited this long?"

She stood and began to pace. Her strides were so long and graceful that her robe kicked open with every step, baring a shapely leg past the knee. Val's heart began to thud against his ribs. Her bouncing breasts, thrusting high against the thin silk, and the supple sway of her hips shortened his breath--and his lengthy list of why's.

They were rapidly becoming--why not's?

Still turned away from him, she muttered, "A gentleman, son of a duke as a matter of fact, wishes to marry me. He owns one of the largest plantations in Jamaica. He is very kind to me and to Christopher, and since I've already amassed a fortune in this calling, I want to quit while I still can. I want my son to know some of the security and respectability I've never known. But...." She whirled to face him. "I have not been able to bear more than kisses from my beau. It was a long time ago, but I always remember those brutal hands, and that, that, thing...."

Val crossed his legs, wishing his own 'thing' wasn't quite so eager to stand up and be recognized. He cleared his throat. "All men are built the same, and they want to place it in the same place in a woman's body. I would be no different."

"But you will stop, won't you? If I cannot continue?"

Those eyes drew him to his feet, soft brown pools he wanted to drown in. She was like no woman he had ever known, and he would no longer question his good fortune in being selected as the one to 'know' her best. He walked over to join her. In her bare feet, she was still only a few inches shorter, and he was tall. Hoping he could keep the promise, he reached out a gentle hand and caught the nape of her neck under that sensuous sweep of hair. "I will stop if you ask me."

When he lowered his head, she drew back and covered his mouth with one hand. "Wait. One more thing. No ties, no promises, no future. Tonight, and tonight alone, and then we go our separate ways. I am not wrong about you, am I? You are not married, have never really loved a woman?"

For some reason, this pirate woman-girl shamed him. His throat was choked with emotion, but he managed to shake his head and agree, "Love's the sweetest nectar of all, but only in dollops. No, I will never marry. You have my word that I will leave you when we reach Jamaica. No promises, and no future."

"Good." She closed her eyes, lifted her face and puckered her lips, rather like a child who expects a dose of bad-tasting medicine.

Val's mouth quirked at the absurdity of the situation. She need not fear he would carry tales, for not a man alive would believe the truth. But then his lips knew the softness of hers, and t'wixt one breath and the next, amusement fled.

Her lips didn't move at first. He felt her stiffness, so he kept one hand on her neck, the other about her waist, barely touching. She could have pushed him away at any time. His mouth was butterfly gentle upon hers, brushing her with the dewy wings of passion.

*Follow me, he urged. Dance in the meadow with me and let me taste your golden flower.*

With a shuddery sigh, she opened her mouth and kissed him back. He didn't press his advantage, luxuriating in the trembling warmth of her mouth, stroking its tender surface as if she were fragile and important to him.

His lips still glued to hers, he swept her up into his arms. And somewhere, on that long trek to the wide bed under the stern windows, she became both. When his passion deepened, delving hungrily into her mouth, she stiffened slightly again. He raised his head to gaze down at her, his eyes dark blue, his breathing ragged.

"You don't like losing control, do you?"

She bit her lip and reluctantly shook her head.

"Do you want me to put you down and leave?"

More emphatically this time, she shook her head.

He heaved a sigh of relief and gave her the smile that turned female heads whenever he entered a room. "Good."

She stared up at him, her own eyes dark. And then she smiled back, teasing huskily, "Good? I should say we are about to be very bad."

He tossed back his golden mane and roared with laughter. "A pirate wench with a sense of humor." But he was still gentle when he laid her on the bed. He lowered his smiling mouth over hers and paused only when their uneven breaths mingled. "Bad doesn't cover it. Wicked, evil and thoroughly..." He placed a gentle palm over her breast, "decadent."

Her breath sucked in quickly at the intimate touch. He started to pull away, but she caught his wrist and kept his hand in place. He stayed like that, sitting beside her supine form, one hand on her breast, the other supporting his torso, and let her body movements tell him when to continue.

For a long moment, she lay there, learning the touch and feel of a male hand on the quintessentially feminine part of her body. And then, with an air of curiosity, she pulled her gaping robe wide, lifted his hand while she shimmied the silk off her shoulders, baring her breasts, and then put his hand back in place.

He bit back a groan, but when she pressed his palm flat and rotated it on the plump flesh overflowing his hand, he almost strangled on the need to shove her robe open and bury himself deep. It had been a long time....Instead, he closed his eyes and reviewed the various types of sailor knots he knew.

*Half hitch, square knot*, the nipple hardened and stabbed into his palm, *sheet bend, bowline, oh shit, forget it*. He opened his eyes and caught both of her breasts in his hands, staring down at what he held. They were firm, and round, and capped with beautiful roseate aureoles, so generous that he felt he could feast on them for a century and still not be satisfied. However, when he bent his head to learn the shape and texture of her with his hungry mouth, she squirmed beneath him.

Immediately, he drew back. "I'm sorry. You're a very beautiful woman."

The panic receded from her eyes. She stared at him suspiciously.

He shook his head. "Do you truly not know?"

"I don't think about it. Beauty is not an advantage in my job." She sat up, drawing her robe back over her luscious breasts. "Your turn."

He was confused for a moment until she pointed a demanding finger several feet away. Feeling awkward, as he'd never felt before, he stood and began to remove his own clothes. When his torso was bare, he stopped, but she quirked an eyebrow. He was afraid of frightening her off. For the first time in his life, he wished he hadn't been born so well endowed, but she had

to see him sometime. He shimmied out of the tight breeches and kicked them aside.

A choking sound came from the bed. A flush tinged her high cheekbones, and he could not tell from her expression whether she was fascinated or afraid. Probably a bit of both. But she sat up with her back against the headboard, gulped, and twirled her finger in the air, indicating that he turn slowly.

Flushing like a virgin himself, he reluctantly did so. What was it about this Amazon that stripped him of the suave control that had charmed so many women? He felt like a monkey performing on a chain, and he didn't like it, not one bit.

She seemed to sense his discomfort. "You're a handsome figure of a man, Lieutenant Burdette."

At her formal address, the sense of unreality deepened. It was almost as if, even as they prepared for the greatest intimacy men and women can experience together, she wanted to keep him at arms' length. Impossible. As this situation was impossible. Only pride kept him from grabbing his clothes and stumbling out. They'd made a bargain, and he'd keep it. But the spark of outrage grew to determination. By her own admission, she wanted to maintain control. Well, he'd just see about that.

He strode over to her, feeling his erect manhood swaying like a flagpole at full mast. Her gaze centered there. She swallowed.

He sat down beside her and placed his hands flat on the headboard, on either side of her head, trapping her within his arms but not touching her. "My fine figure is at your full disposal, Madam Pirate. Do with your captive as you will."

Nibbling her lip, she tentatively placed her hands on his shoulders. Tracking her movement with her gaze, she drifted her hands down over his bulging biceps, past his elbows to

his sturdy wrists. Next she rested her palms flat on his chest, rotating them over the fine sprinkling of golden hair.

"Your skin looks like it's been misted with gold dust," she whispered. Curious, she twirled a forefinger over one of his nipples, looking surprised when it hardened at her touch. He made a strangled sound. Her gaze darted back up to his. "This pleases you?"

"Very much."

Emboldened, she rimmed her tongue over her upper lip, bent her head and sucked delicately at his nipple. His manhood grew tauter still, catching her eye. She jerked back like a filly startled by the size of the stallion about to mount her, but when he stayed stone still, letting her set the pace, she took a deep breath and curled her fingers around him.

Now his groan came deep from his gut, where she tied him in knots no sailor could ever devise. He managed not to move, though her tentative, curious touch made him leap in her hand in a reflex he could not control.

"So soft, but so hard, all at once," she whispered to herself. She slipped her hand up and down about him. "And wickedly formed to do the job nature intended. Astounding that I, or any woman, could hold all of this."

Her analytical appraisal almost undid him, and when she pushed him gently away to remove her robe and lie back, closing her eyes and opening her legs, he was stunned.

"Come, do the job. Let us get it over with. It won't hurt that much. I've had worse wounds."

Abruptly, his unease, his sense of unreality were banished with a laugh. It surged deep from his belly, rumbling from his chest with such a pleasing sound that her eyes popped open again.



She scowled. "I amuse you?"

He shook his head. "You delight me. But child, I am not a battle to be won or a lesson to be learned. I am only a man. You are a woman..." He stood beside the bed to eat her with his eyes. "One of the loveliest women I've ever seen." Her waist was tiny, her stomach flat, her hips gently flaring. Her legs were long and well-shaped, but her muscles were well defined, as were the muscles of her arms. She bore the marks of her calling--literally. He nudged a scar on her hip with his fingertip. "A sword?"

She nodded.

He trailed his hand down from her hip to her ankle, and then barely scraped his fingertips back up the same path. He was pleased to see gooseflesh trail his touch. Her nipples hardened. Pulling her upright, he drew her forward until her hips were on the edge of the bed, and then he shoved her legs open and knelt between them, grinding his teeth together at the lovely auburn triangle of hair put so blatantly on display for him.

She tensed, but he only caught her breasts in both his hands and toyed with them, running his thumbs over their tips until her nipples hardened. He felt her heart leap to his hand and hid a smile. Scooting forward on his knees, he pressed his torso against her and scraped his chest back and forth over her nipples.

Her eyes grew wide at the sensation of flesh to flesh. Then, beginning under the tender spot below her ear, he kissed her. His lips barely moved at first, brushing down the throbbing column of her neck to rest in the hollow of her throat. He inhaled deeply. "Sandalwood. Unusual scent for a woman."

"It....was all...I had--" She ended on a gasp when he darted his tongue between her breasts. He lifted the two heavy globes to his mouth. For a good two minutes, he kissed them

tenderly, working his way around each, ever closer to the nipples, but not quite touching them.

She was breathing heavily now, squirming against him. "Not enough. Kiss me there." Her fingers buried in his thick golden hair as she drew his head to her breast.

Smiling in triumph, he gave in to their mutual need. She groaned as he suckled her strongly, one nipple, then the other, wrapping his tongue about the sweet taste of her. She arched into his mouth. He caught her back with one arm, holding the bow of her body taut before him, and finally, gently, touched her where she needed it most, tugging at her breast all the while.

She jerked reflexively when his fingers slid over her own throbbing need. From the erect state of the little nub, he knew she was almost ready. But first....He slipped a forefinger inside her, testing her tightness, easing his way. His careful seduction, the need for control, all recriminations, even all thoughts, fled at the velvety warmth enveloping his finger. One primitive need overrode all else. Drawing his finger out, he inched forward enough to place his distended member at the gate to her body.

Little shudders shook her now, and when he tentatively inserted the hard head into her, she didn't ease away. Instead, she caught him about the waist and tried to pull him forward.

A throaty laugh swirled about their heads, an elemental sound that drew them both into a whirlwind of desire. Need blinded Val, but even when she squirmed to draw him deeper, he gave her a slow, careful thrust that measured him well. Inch by inch he marked new territory, feeling her tight flesh slowly stretching as he explored the depths of her body. He kissed her, an open-mouthed, flaming kiss that she met with full bore aggressiveness.

He chuckled into her mouth, but then she wriggled her hips closer to the edge of the bed, lifted her strong legs and clasped them about his waist. At the same time she thrust forward with all the strength of her fencer's body.

Val slid deep, deeper than he'd ever been in any woman. She was so tight, so moist and warm about him that he had to tighten his hands on her hips to control his need to fill her with the elemental fluid he felt bubbling at his groin. Not yet.

From some dark horizon beyond the swirling fire between them, he recalled a voice saying, "Be gentle," and still, he tried. The terms of their bargain had clouded in his smoldering mind, but one resolve stood vivid against the licking flames. This woman, this amazing, indomitable woman who needed nothing and no one, needed a man who'd spent a lifetime learning the same painful lesson. Somewhere, in this deep bonding, they would forge memories together that mocked their vows of "no ties, no promises." Even if they never saw one another again, she would never forget this night--or the man who gave it to her.

Slowly, luxuriously, he pulled out of her, letting her feel each sensitized nerve on the long, slow path to joy. Joy? Or ruin? Even in the midst of the greatest passion he'd ever felt, Val couldn't quiet the niggling voice that warned him this night would mark him, too, ever after. He thrust the thought away even as he thrust himself back between her legs, a little harder.

She kept squirming to get closer, bring him deeper, and finally he stood, clasping her hips to arch her upward to his downward thrusts.

At the deeper insertion, she sighed her relief, flexing and unflexing her legs to meet his thrusts. Slowly the cadence built. With every famished plunge deep inside her, he felt the tingling build to a burning need that must find relief. She tossed her head, her thick auburn hair whipping about, reflecting back the fiery passion that was becoming a conflagration. Their thrusting hips danced in perfect unison, a man-woman symmetry that was more than two strong bodies, or even two proud desires.

Something rare, something precious, built between them, a gift many squandered before

knowing the pain of its loss....

Even as he tossed his head back like a stallion in full rut, somewhere in the fevered corners of his brain, Val sensed that something wonderful was happening here. Many women, in the final throes of passion, became naught but supple vessels to him, but this Amazon was so wild and free that she carried him away with her to a destiny he reckoned not, but it beckoned him to....something he'd never known.

Tenderly, wanting to please her so that she'd never forget him, he softened his strokes, lingering high on the upthrust, but pushing deep on the down thrust. Her open eyes, which had remained fixed on his flushed face, became unfocussed. A wheezing breath escaped her lips, and then her body tensed, flexing upon him. She arched upward, her nipples becoming rock-hard. She rode the crest of the whirlwind with an exultant, primitive cry that called to everything wild and vital in him.

He crested with her, riding, riding, and then....flight. He pressed deep, reaching for the tip of her womb, and trumpeted his triumph in passionate bursts. Her eyes opened wide at the sensation, and for a full minute he splashed into her, jerking with the incredible spasms. Little tremors shook them for several minutes afterwards. Slowly, they drifted back to earth.

Her legs sagged down. "Holy Mary, Mother of God. I....didn't know."

Exhausted, he slumped against her, his weight half on the bed, half on his wilted knees, but he mustered a tired laugh. "It gets better with practice."

She stared at him in disbelief.

"With the right partner," he amended. Biting her lip, she turned her face away.

Sighing softly, he withdrew, feeling the loss of her even more acutely. But he said nothing. He gently dried her off on a small towel beside the bed, pulled the covers back and

climbed into the bed with her. He drew her head to his chest. "Sleep." And then, too tired to think about tomorrow, or even how little he wanted to think about tomorrow, he slept.

Twice in the night she woke him. Once by kissing her way up from his ankles, working his stiffening manhood between her soft hands as if she couldn't wait to milk him. Pressing him flat, she climbed atop him and sheathed herself in one plunge. The second time, dawn brushed the cabin with luminous strokes of light. A knock came.

"Cap'n, ye said ye wanted to spell me," came Chucky's voice.

Sleepy brown eyes blinked open. Her movements shook Val awake.

Oddly, he felt guilty. He moved to leap out of bed, for he didn't want to cause problems for her with her men, but she caught his thigh and shook her head. "I'm tired, Chucky. Get someone else to do it. This close to Jamaica we should be safe enough."

Angry footsteps stomped away.

Val lay back, clasping his hands behind his head to stare at the rosy glow on the decking above. When a soft hand began tracing the whorls of hair on his chest, he didn't move. Even when her hand slipped down to close about him, he stayed wooden.

"What's wrong?" She shoved the covers down to their knees so she could see him.

He slapped her hand away. "Haven't I performed well enough?"

She frowned at him in the half light. "Do I not please you any more?"

He turned on his side to look at her. She was half propped on an elbow, that luscious bosom that had nurtured him, only to make him hunger more, on full display. Sighing a soft denial, he caught a breast in his hand, cupping her gently. A bargain was a bargain. The hours were slipping past. He'd never repined them before, and he wouldn't start now.

She fell down beside him, opening her arms. The third time, incredibly, was best....

The next time they awoke, land could be seen outside the portholes. Alex gave a yip of joy and clambered out of bed. She took one step, gasped, and stopped, cupping herself between the legs.

He hid a smile. Sore, was she? That was hardly surprising. He reached to put his own feet on the deck and groaned. His stomach muscles were stiff, and he couldn't remember the last time he'd spent so much, so well, in such a short time. But he didn't feel relaxed. Tired, yes, but never had he awakened from such a passionate night--not that he'd ever known one like last night--so full of resentment.

As Alex whistled while she dressed, his anger grew. Most women, after a night of passion, blushed in the cold light of day at their unseemly behavior. Alexandra looked into the mirror at her swollen mouth, the love bites on her neck and shoulders, and preened as if she wore badges of honor. She'd slipped into her silk dressing gown while she performed a spit bath, and since she was turned away from him, the dragon seemed to sneer at him with her movements.

Pulling his own clothes on with jerky movements, he said, "The dragon lady, I presume."

She glanced over her shoulder at him, and then tossed the rag back in the bowl of fresh water. "What's got your dander up?"

He shrugged. "What will you do with the admiral and his crew?"

"Release them here to the authorities. I have a....deal, shall we say, with the governor. I return any English crew I take captive unharmed, and he leaves me be. I also give him a take of every vessel we sell."

Val was relieved. The thought of that bulldog admiral and his men hanged or imprisoned had troubled him. His last concern dashed, he really had no reason to stay here in this torture chamber.

Ignoring his capriciousness, she let the gown fall while she dressed.

The sight of that lush body in the full light of day gave him a headache. Turning aside from her, he gathered his things and stumbled out of the cabin. Damn her, he seethed, stalking to the rail to clench it between his hands. He was used to doing the loving and leaving, and her blithe good spirits after their night together infuriated him. He'd serviced her well, and she was glad to send him about his business with nary a second thought.

Now he knew how a whore felt. Never again would he pay a woman for services rendered.

Val went below to search out his things. He found them in a pile with the rest of the booty, even his mother's locket. He was reaching out to it when Chucky came upon him and slapped his hand away.

"Ye's used enough 'round here fer a day, me handsome buck."

The nasty tone of voice grated on Val, for he was none too thrilled with the way he'd been used, either. "This was my mother's. I can pay for it if I have to. The bosun stole it from me."

"If ye wants it fer yer share, ye can ask the cap'n," Chucky said. "And wait like the rest o' us."

Surreptitious glances followed Alex when she came above, walking slower than was her wont. The pirates were busy making the frigate ready to dock, and she supervised with her usual efficiency. Alex wore a leather belt about her waist. She sported a red silk shirt with full sleeves, and had tied her hair back off her forehead with a red silk band. Her breeches were leather, and they molded lovingly to her supple lower body but still allowed her freedom of movement. Tall boots gloved her calves to the knee.

Even as he felt punched in the stomach by her unique combination of strength and femininity, Val ignored her, watching the white beach get closer and closer. Exotic flowers and greenery of every type lined the streets of the port, making Jamaica a true jewel of the Carribean. However, Val was blind to the beauty.

When the ship docked, they took time to divide the spoils according to rank and seniority. Alex nodded when Val selected his belongings. When the plank was put down for them to go ashore, Val hefted his bag over one shoulder and turned to leave.

Alex said, "Wait!" She drew him behind a sheltered corner and pulled a heavy purse from her pocket, extending it to him on her palm. "How could you forget this?"

Val longed to toss the gold back in her teeth, but he didn't want her to know how much she'd hurt him. He snatched it and stuck it in his bag.

She offered her hand. "Thank you. I owe you a great debt. I will always remember you kindly."

Kindly? The milksop definition literally made him see red. Val dropped his bag, shoved the bold wench against the rail and kissed her. She stiffened at first, but when he tugged at her lower lip with his teeth and thrust his tongue into her mouth, she went limp against him, kissing him back.

He shoved her away, sneering, "You're not so different to other women after all. You don't know what the hell you want, do you?"

She stood straight, hissing back, "Yesss. You--out of my sight!"

"Glad to oblige." Giving her a mocking bow, Val shouldered his bag and stalked down the boarding ramp to the docks.

A few questions garnered the information he needed. Val strode down the docks. He felt



eyes on him and turned around.

He could still see the frigate. A bold figurehead more compelling than any wood carver could devise was silhouetted at the prow of the ship against the azure sky. One boot propped on the rail, her hair tossing over her shoulders in the stiff breeze, Alexandra stared down the street, looking for something.

Her cursed fiance, no doubt. Val straightened his shoulders under the stab of pain and walked away. But the image of her standing, challenging a future that did not include him, her lovely face and strong chin in profile, would be forever burned on his brain.

Sighing softly, with a wistful longing he could neither acknowledge nor squelch, he resolutely turned away toward the shipping office where he could book passage to America. Toward a past he longed to forget and a future he didn't relish....