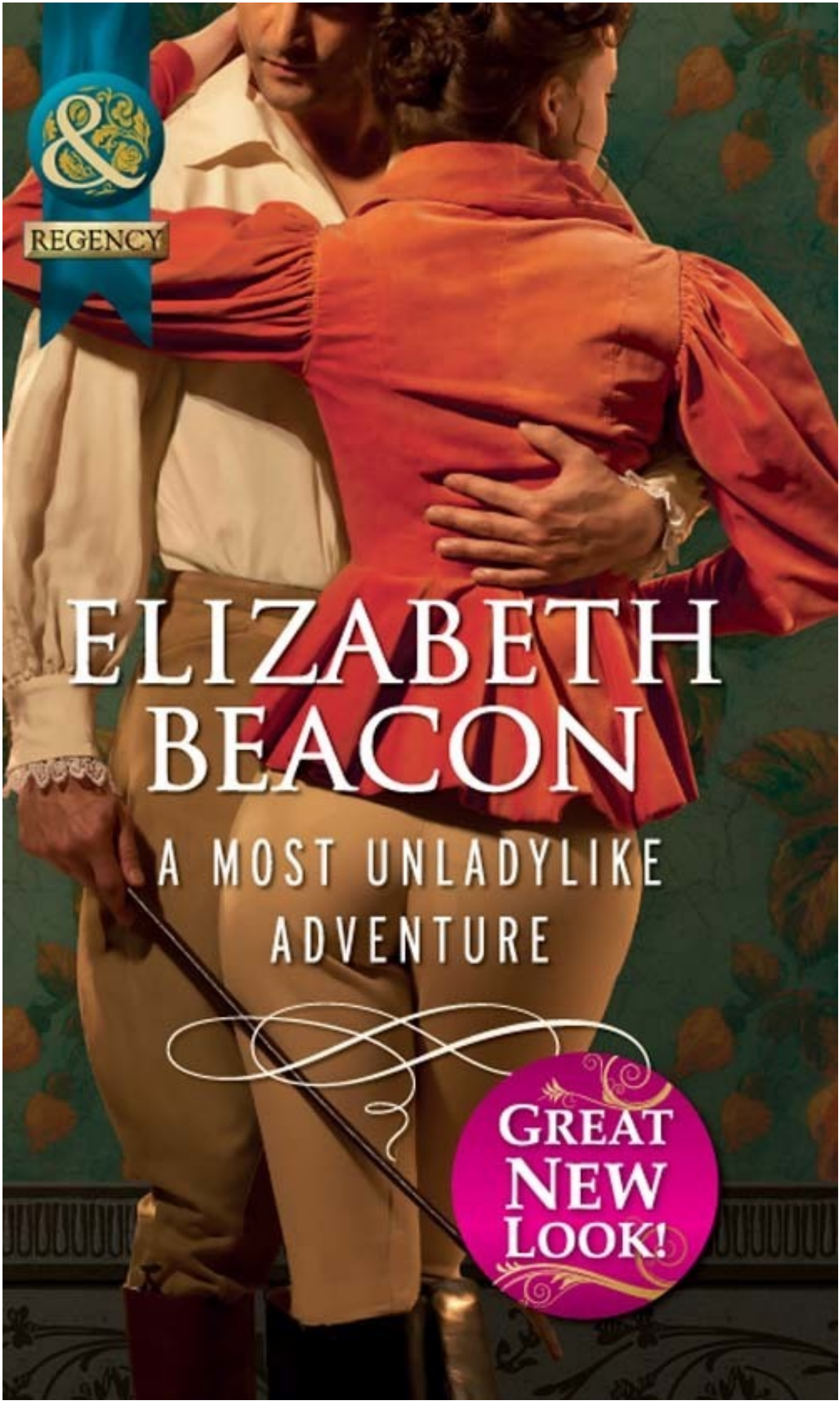
REGENCY
ELIZABETH BEACON
A MOST UNLADYLIKE ADVENTURE
GREAT NEW LOOK!

Elizabeth Beacon

A Most Unladylike Adventure

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IN DISGUISE – AS A SCARLET WOMAN!Lady Louisa Alstone, Ice Diamond of the Ton, has turned down numerous proposals from the best in society. Seeking refuge in her brother's house, she's shocked to find the scandalous Captain Darke already in residence.A man who certainly doesn't need the sinful temptation of a woman he presumes to be his friend's mistress. The misunderstanding could be Louisa's chance to cast off the strict dictates of her life as a Lady.And if she's already living in secret with the devilishly handsome Captain, what good is there in preserving an already compromised reputation…!

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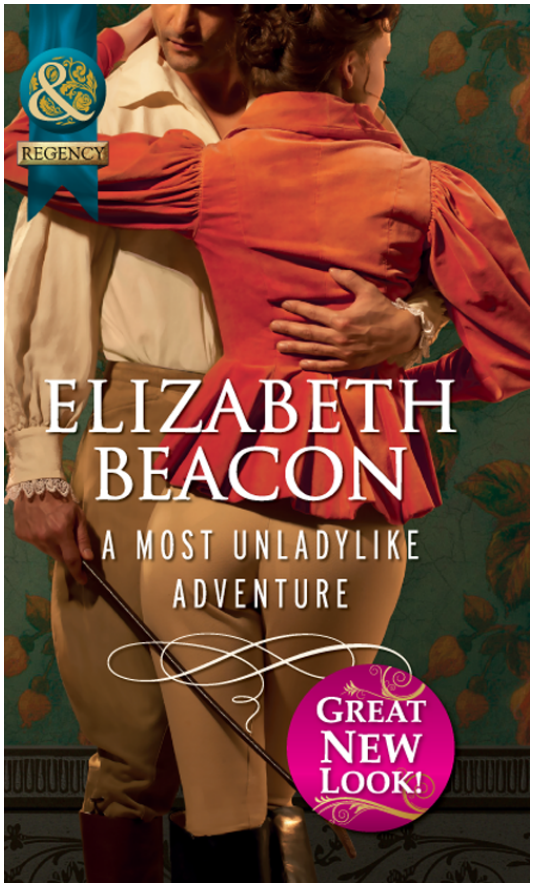

‘Men!’ she condemned impatiently. ‘You’re all the same.’

‘Now, there you’re almost certainly mistaken,’ he lazily informed her, making no attempt to disguise his wolfishly thorough appraisal of her well-displayed charms. ‘We’re all different, but we *think* alike when presented with nigh irresistible temptation such as you pose any red-blooded male by going about dressed like *that*. At the moment I’m too busy fantasising about the feel of your magnificent body writhing under me as you desperately beg me to take you to paradise to waste much of my energy on rational thought, my darling.’

‘I’m not your darling, and I’m prepared to bet you don’t know the first thing about what would truly transport a woman to paradise,’ Louisa snapped back.

‘Aren’t you willing to add me to your stable of lucrative lovers, then, my darling doxy?’ he suddenly asked, as if he had every right to insult her.

‘Firstly, I’m very particular whom I allow to even call me darling, Captain Darke, and secondly, even if I wasn’t, I certainly wouldn’t take a man like you to my bed!’

AUTHOR NOTE

Welcome to A MOST UNLADYLIKE ADVENTURE. While you might recognise one or two of the characters here from my other books, this one is a self-contained adventure and I've had a ball while telling Louisa Alstone's story. Louisa is passionate, unconventional and loyal, and survived a childhood that would drive most well-bred females of her time to despair. Then there's her flawed, embittered and utterly irresistible hero …

As soon as dark and brooding Captain Hugh stepped onto the page in a previous book, REBELLIOUS RAKE, INNOCENT GOVERNESS, I knew there had to be an intriguing adventure behind his wooing and winning of the Earl of Carnwood's little sister, and, now I've been lucky enough to have the chance to tell it. I hope you enjoy reading A MOST UNLADYLIKE ADVENTURE as much as I have loved writing it.

Somehow I had to revisit the Alstones one last time to tell Louisa and her piratical Captain's story, and the action of this novel takes place several years before my other Alstone books—A LESS THAN PERFECT LADY, REBELLIOUS RAKE, INNOCENT GOVERNESS and ONE LAST SEASON—begin. This book should have been at the start of it all, but I'm a less than perfect author who got beguiled along the way, so I really hope you enjoy Hugh and Louisa's love story and forgive me for leaving them until last!

About the Author

ELIZABETH BEACON lives in the beautiful English West Country, and is finally putting her insatiable curiosity about the past to good use. Over the years Elizabeth has worked in her family's horticultural business, became a mature student, qualified as an English teacher, worked as a secretary and briefly tried to be a civil servant. She is now happily ensconced behind her computer, when not trying to exhaust her bouncy rescue dog with as many walks as the inexhaustible Lurcher can finagle. Elizabeth can't bring herself to call researching the wonderfully diverse, scandalous Regency period and creating charismatic heroes and feisty heroines *work*, and she is waiting for someone to find out how much fun she is having and tell her to stop it.

Previous novels by the same author:

AN INNOCENT COURTESAN
HOUSEMAID HEIRESS
A LESS THAN PERFECT LADY
THE RAKE OF HOLLOWHURST CASTLE
REBELLIOUS RAKE, INNOCENT GOVERNESS
CAPTAIN LANGTHORNE'S PROPOSAL

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A Most Unladylike Adventure
Elizabeth Beacon

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I would like to dedicate this book to Margaret J, Amanda G, Katie, Melanie and most of all to Nicola—all selfless and dedicated supporters of the Romantic Novelists' Association, UK, and particularly of the wonderful New Writers' Scheme, which has given so many of us the self-discipline and hope to keep on trying. Without you I would definitely not be doing this now—so thank you for everything!

Chapter One

Wondering if she could still climb like a cat, Louisa Alstone swung her feet out of the window and eased into the spring night; considering the thought of marrying Charlton Hawberry was unendurable, she supposed she'd find out soon enough. His purloined breeches shifted about her lithely feminine legs as she flexed muscles she hadn't used properly in six years and did her best not to look down. She'd certainly changed since the last time she had chased through the London streets, or scampered across rooftops above them, but she fervently hoped she hadn't forgotten all her street-urchin skills.

She should be far too much of a lady to consider such a desperate escape now, but silently prayed her agility hadn't deserted her as she tried not to shake like a leaf in a high wind. Her brother, Christopher, or Kit Stone as he went by in business, was off with his best friend and business partner Ben Shaw, too busy having adventures on the high seas, so there was really no point waiting around for them to rescue her. Since she'd rather die than wed a man who would happily force her up the aisle after she had refused to marry him, she let go of the window mouldings and edged out along the parapet.

This would work; she refused to think of the swift death awaiting her if she fumbled. She boosted herself across the next window and blessed the builder of these narrow town houses for insisting every shutter fitted so neatly no hint of her passing outside would shadow the closely barred wood. She still breathed a little more easily when no one stirred within and felt for her next shallow grip on Charlton Hawberry's house.

If she managed this, then where was there to go next? No point asking Uncle William and Aunt Prudence for help when they were calluding with Charlton. Uncle William would sell his soul to the devil for a good enough price and Kit's growing wealth hadn't endeared him or his sisters to their uncle, especially since her brother made sure their uncle got as little of it as possible, which left only her sister and brother-in-law to turn to. Maria and Brandon Heathcote would be deeply shocked at Charlton's appalling behaviour and give her sanctuary, but how could she bring scandal down on their comfortable Kentish rectory when neither of them deserved such notoriety? Then there was Maria's ridiculous soft-heartedness to contend with and Louisa grimaced at the thought of her sister feeling sorry for lying, cheating, facilely good-looking Charlton Hawberry.

You must learn to be less extreme in your opinions, my dearest, Maria had written in reply to Louisa's last letter, in which she announced she'd rather die than marry the wretched man after his third proposal in as many weeks. *And why not consider Mr Hawberry's proposals a little more seriously?* she had continued. *For all you persist in believing you will never marry, he sounds well enough looking and genuinely devoted to you. Being wed is so much better than dwindling into spinsterhood, my love, and I really think you should try to find yourself an agreeable husband, rather than regretting becoming an old maid when it is too late to remedy.*

Louisa no more believed in that love of Charlton's than she did in her own ridiculous persona of lovely, impossibly fussy Miss Alstone, Ice Diamond of the *ton*, rumoured to have rejected more suitors than most débutantes imagined in their wildest dreams. Louisa knew her resistance to marriage would make her a curiosity to the bored gentlemen of the *ton*, so she'd made herself treat them coldly from the outset. Now her carefully cultivated aloofness was in ruins and, if she escaped Charlton, she'd be besieged by suitors and would-be seducers. In truth, neither Maria nor amiable, optimistic Brandon had it in them to stand up to Charlton for long and Uncle William and Aunt Prudence wouldn't even try, so her reputation was already gone—a lost cause she couldn't bring herself to mourn deeply. Perhaps it would persuade Kit to let her keep his house and help in his business, she decided, an old hope lightening her heart as she edged along the ledge, teeth gritted against the compulsion to look down into three-storeys' worth of shadowy space.

'I'd sooner starve,' she'd told Uncle William truthfully when Charlton brought him into the unappealingly luxurious bedchamber she was imprisoned in to show how compromised she was only an hour ago.

'As you please. I won't have a notorious woman under my roof, so you can go back to the streets we took you from as far as your aunt and I are concerned,' Uncle William had replied with a Judas shrug and added, 'If you don't want to wed Hawberry, you shouldn't have run off with him in the first place.'

'He abducted me from that wretched masked ball Aunt Prudence insisted on attending and you know very well I hate the man. Won't you send me to Chelsea to await my brother's return, even if you won't help me in any other way?'

'I'm done with you, madam. I wish I'd never taken you into my home when your return for my foolishness was to ruin your cousin's chance of making a good match by stealing all her suitors.'

'I couldn't do that if I tried. I've no idea where Sophia gets her looks or her sweet nature since it's clearly not from you. A normal brother would have helped us when Mama died out of compassion for your orphan nieces and love for your only sister, but *you* had to be paid a king's ransom to house us once Kit was at sea mending all our fortunes,' she told him bitterly as she saw the weasel look in his eyes and realised he'd known about this horrid scheme all along. 'Don't worry, Uncle William, I wouldn't spend five minutes under your roof now if the only alternative was the workhouse.'

Which seemed unlikely since her dowry was substantial, thanks to Kit's efforts; if she could escape Charlton she'd live on that if Kit wouldn't let her share his new bachelor home in Chelsea. A share of her fortune would fill Uncle William's coffers very nicely, of course, but while her uncle and aunt had clearly plotted against her, could her cousin Sophia have known what was afoot? Louisa shook her head very warily and decided to trust one of two certainties in this shifting world that she suddenly seemed to have stumbled into. Cousin Sophia was far too amiable and feather-headed to be party to such a plan. She wondered how Uncle William came to have a sister like her lion-hearted, stubborn mother, and such a sweet widgeon for a daughter. Deciding the mysteries of heredity were unaccountable, she crept on along the façade of the hired town house, still trying to block the killing drop to the flagged pavement three storeys below from her thoughts.

Louisa didn't intend to marry; now the man she didn't want to marry most of all was threatening her very soul, she wished she'd never agreed to give the marriage mart another try to appease her brother and sister. Her heart hammered against her breastbone as she took an unwary glance into the street below and fancied Death was creeping along the ledge behind her, his cold breath on her neck and bony fingers clutching a ghostly scythe. Since she'd rather die than wed Charlton, she crept on, keeping her thoughts busy with what came next.

Could she evade her uncle and Charlton until her brother came home to dismiss their antics as the farce they ought to be? Her brother's house would be the first place anyone would look for her and his minions lacked the authority or power to repel her enemies. Not quite true; one of Kit's employees had both and she recalled her encounter with Kit's most notorious captain as she ghosted past the empty rooms on this part of the third floor inch by heart-racing inch. Captain Hugh Darke had made a vivid impression on her, but he was one step from being a pirate and the rudest man she'd ever met, so little wonder if the image of him had lingered on her senses and her memory long after the man had left her alone in Kit's office.

Considering she'd spent mere seconds in Captain Darke's darkly brooding, offensively arrogant company, his abrupt insolence and the satirical glint in his silver-blue eyes shouldn't haunt her as they did. She fumbled her handhold on the neatly jointed stone at the very thought of explaining this latest misadventure to sternly indifferent Hugh Darke and had to swallow a very unladylike curse while she scrambled for another and terror threatened to ruin her escape in a very final way.

'Confoundedly inconvenient, ill-mannered, cocksure braggart of a man,' she muttered very softly to herself as she inched round the corner of the Portland Stone–faced building and finally

reached the drainpipe to cling onto until the rapid beat of her heart slowed while she thought out her next move.

Better with solid-feeling metal under her clutching hands, she decided to go upwards, since she'd got this far and risked being seen on the way down. Better to wait for solid ground under her feet after she had reached the last of this terrace of genteel houses, where there was less chance of being discovered clambering down from the rooftops of a stranger's house, than if she swarmed down this one like some large and very fearful fly. The idea of meeting Charlton's bullies again made her shudder with horror and she forced herself to forget their jeering comments and greedy eyes as she crept across the rooftops of Charlton's unsuspecting neighbours.

She reached the quiet and blissfully sleeping house on the end of the row and wasted a few precious moments debating whether to risk the roofs of the humbler mews that ran alongside the high town houses and reluctantly decided against it. Night had made courts and alleyways, relatively safe in daylight, into the haunts of the desperate and dangerous, but there were too many leaps into the unknown to spring across uncharted voids and risk the slightest miscalculation bringing her crashing down to earth.

Slipping very cautiously to the ground at last, Louisa blessed Charlton's love of the macabre for the ridiculous suit of black she'd found in a chest he'd thought safely locked. She grinned at the idea of him clumsily creeping about in the dark in some half-hearted imitation of Francis Dashwood's infamous Hell-Fire Club of the last century and refused to even consider what Charlton got up to in his other life. His dark clothes had helped her escape and made her hard to see in the dark, so she blessed his secret vices for once and crept on through the chilling night.

Kit's house was the only place that offered her immediate sanctuary and access to the store of money he'd once shown her, in case she was ever in dire need of it and he was away from home. How prophetic of him, she decided, and at least she would be safe until dawn. Apparently six years of dull respectability had taught her to fear her native streets, so she launched into the fuggy darkness with her heart beating like a war drum and prayed she'd find her way in the dark before she aroused the interest of the night-hawks.

Captain Hugh Darke woke very reluctantly from the nice little drunken stupor that he'd worked hard to achieve all the previous evening and peered at the ceiling above his head with only the faint, town-bred moonlight to help him work out whose it was and, more importantly, why some malicious elf was jumping about on his mysterious host's roof and waking him from the best sleep he'd had in weeks.

'And now I've got the devil of a head as well,' he muttered, much aggrieved at such a lack of consideration by whoever owned the bed he was currently occupying.

An insomniac clog dancer, perhaps? Or an iron master with a rush order his unfortunate founders must work all night to fulfil? Although that didn't work; even he knew no iron founder would carry out his sulphurous trade anywhere but on the ground floor and there'd be smoke, lots of smoke, and flaring furnaces belching out infernal heat, and, if anything, it was rather cool in here. In a moment of reluctant fairness, he forced himself to admit it was a very quiet racket, furtive even; he wondered uneasily what bad company he'd got himself into this time. He shrugged, decided he wasn't that good company himself and concluded there was no point trying to sleep through it, reminding himself he'd faced down far worse threats than an incompetent burglar before now.

Not being content to cower under the bedclothes and wait for this now almost-silent menace to pass him by—if only he'd bothered to get under them in the first place, of course—he decided to find whoever it was and silence them so he could get back to sleep. If he went about it briskly enough, perhaps he could avoid succumbing to the best cure for his various ills that he'd ever come across—a hair of the dog who'd bitten him—and spare himself an even worse hangover come morning. He'd long ago given up pretending everything about his life he didn't like would go away if he ignored it, so he swung his feet to the floor; even as his head left the pillow it thumped violently in protest, as

if the elf had gotten bored with dancing on the ceiling and come into his room to beat out a dance on the inside of his reeling skull instead.

'Confounded din,' he mumbled and, liking the sound of his own voice in the suddenly eerily quiet house, he roared out a challenge in his best hear-it-over-a-hurricane-at-sea bark. 'I *said* you're making a confounded din!' he bellowed as he stamped through the doorway into a stairwell that looked vaguely familiar.

'Not half as much of a one as you are,' a woman's voice snapped back as if he were the intruder and she had a perfect right to steal about in the dark.

Her voice was as low and throaty as it was distinctive, so Hugh wondered if she was more afraid of drawing attention to her peculiar nocturnal activities than she was willing to admit. Yet the very sound of her husky tones roused fantasies he'd been trying to forget for days. Her voice reminded him of honey and mid-summer, and the response of his fool body to her presence made him groan out loud, before he reminded himself the witch was Kit Stone's woman and would never be his.

He cursed the day he'd first laid eyes on the expensive-looking houri in his friend's fine new offices dressed in an excellent imitation of a lady's restrained finery, with an outrageous bonnet whose curling feathers had been dyed to try to match the apparently matchless dark eyes she had stared so boldly at him with. Such a speculative, unladylike deep-blue gaze it had been as well, wide and curious and fathomless as the Mediterranean, and he'd felt his body respond like a warhorse to the drum without permission from his furious brain. It had seemed more urgent that Kit never discover his notorious captain lusted after his mistress than handing over the report of his latest voyage his employer had demanded as soon as he'd docked in person, so Hugh had left the expensive high-stepper alone in Kit's office with a gauchely mumbled excuse and a loud sigh of relief.

She'd responded to his gaucherie with a few cool words and a dismissive glance that made him feel like an overgrown schoolboy, instead of a seasoned captain of eight and twenty with an adventurous naval career behind him and one in front as master of a fine ship of the merchant marine. Since he was done with reckless adventures, he did his best to avoid the enemy nowadays, as well as his old naval brothers-in-arms, who thought it quite legitimate to hunt down ships like his in order to steal his crew of experienced mariners and press them into the navy. It was a second chance that Hugh valued, so somehow he'd kept his eager hands off his employer's whore and returned to his ship and the relative peace of his cabin to await Kit Stone's summons to discuss this last voyage and plan the next one.

Now Kit had gone off on some mysterious mission known only to himself; and the other half of Stone & Shaw was probably in the Caribbean by now, while Hugh Darke was drunk, in charge of Kit Stone's house and business and fantasising over his doxy. There'd be hell to pay if Kit heard so much as a whisper of them being here in the middle of the night together, him stale drunk and her … What exactly was the high-and-mighty little light-skirt doing here when her lover was absent, and in the stilly watches of the night to make bad worse as well?

'Did you hear me?' she demanded from far too close for comfort.

He swayed a little, then corrected himself impatiently as he wished the annoying witch would stop nagging and let him think. 'How the devil could I avoid it, woman? You're yelling in my ear like a fishwife.'

'I'm not yelling, you are,' she informed him haughtily, 'and where's my b …?' She seemed to hesitate for a long moment.

Which, even still half-drunk as he was, Hugh thought very unlike the headlong siren who'd so tempted him with her ultramarine come-hither gaze that day in the city. Confound the witchy creature, but he'd had to drink out of the island to get a decent night's sleep all these weeks later because she had haunted his dreams with the most heated and unattainably alluring fantasies any female had ever troubled him with in an eventful life. He couldn't have her, had told himself time and time again that he didn't really want her and it was just a normal lust-driven urge that drove him

to dream about her, given he was a normal lusty male and she was very definitely a desirable and perhaps equally lusty female, given her profession. Then he'd gone on to reassure himself that she was nothing like the almost mythically sensuous creature he was fantasising her to be.

In reality, the rackety female was probably coarse and calculating under all that lovely outer glamour and fine packaging. Far too often he'd reassured himself she was just a Cyprian, told himself he'd only have to know her to learn to despise her for selling all that boldness and beauty to the highest bidder. Somehow, now she was so close to him again and he was so lightly in control of his senses after all that cognac, the sensible voice of reason was in danger of being drowned out by the hard, primitive demand of his body for hers, as the very sound of her husky feminine tones rendered him powerfully, uncomfortably erect the instant they loomed out of the night and wrapped her toils round him. He fervently hoped her night eyes and well-developed instincts weren't honed enough to tell her what a parlous state he was in and he bit down on a string of invectives that might have shocked even such an experienced night-stalker as her.

'Where's my bad, bold Kit?' she finally managed, secretly horrified at what her very correct and stern brother would have to say about her various deceits, if he ever found out about them, of course.

'No idea, he's his own man and goes his own way,' he told her absently, wondering why she wasn't much-better informed about Kit's whereabouts than he was, considering her supposedly special status in his life.

If she were his woman, he wouldn't let her out of his sight long enough to even look elsewhere, let alone allow her to roam about in a dark and virtually deserted house in the middle of the night, tormenting a poor devil like him who didn't much care whether he lived or died at the best of times. Yet with her here, the scent and elusive shadows of a playful moon and its lightly concealing clouds playing with her face and form, and the night cool and silent all around them, suddenly the threat of Kit's wrath wasn't the deterrent it ought to be. When they had first met, his youthful employer had sobered Hugh up from a far worse carouse than this one before recklessly trusting him with the command of one of his best ships when nobody else would risk a rowboat to his sole charge, for how could a captain control his ship when he couldn't control himself, or even care that he'd fallen from master of nearly all he surveyed headlong into the gutter?

Until this dratted woman sparked all these unwanted urges and one or two wickedly tempting fantasies that made him recall his other life and all the bitter betrayals it had contained, he'd been doing so splendidly at sobriety as well. He'd almost been in danger of becoming a useful member of society, until something occurred to remind him how useless he actually was; but, he decided with a cynical twist of his lips that might have passed for a smile in a dim light, it would have been a fine joke on society if he'd only managed to bring it off.

'Drat him for not telling me, then,' the major cause of his latest downfall muttered at his gruff disclaimer and there wasn't light enough to see if she looked as defeated and desperate as she sounded, before she seemed to recall another option and asked in a brighter voice, 'Has Ben gone too?'

'I dare say Captain Shaw will be in the West Indies or even Virginia by now. So at least *he*'s out there earning us all some money, whilst I'm stuck on shore sailing nothing better than a desk and your Kit's off on some wild goose chase all of his own that I would have expected you to know about far better than I do.'

'Aye, Ben's proving himself the best of us all as usual,' she said, affection very evident in her husky voice, and Hugh frowned fleetingly at hearing her so neatly avoid his implication she wasn't as close to her protector as she hoped she was.

Then he forgot his doubts about that position himself as he pondered the possibility of her maintaining intimate relations with Kit's business partner as well as Kit himself. He silently cursed the blond giant for apparently taking shares in his best friend's doxy, especially when Kit could have shared her with him instead.

‘So why are *you* still here? You could easily have gone to sea in Ben’s stead, and I doubt very much anyone would have missed you,’ she informed him irritably.

Which was perfectly correct, he allowed fairly, even if it was brutally frank and deliberately tactless. Once upon a time, when he’d gone by another name and still possessed a relatively innocent soul, a number of good people had cared what became of him and some had even claimed to miss him sadly whilst he was away at sea. The few who were left to recall the blithe young idiot he’d once been probably welcomed the disappearance of the cynical sot he’d become from their lives with unalloyed relief, when he finally had the good manners to remove himself from polite society and the place he’d once thought of as home.

He reminded himself sourly that the past was dead and gone and he’d resolved to live for the day when he became Hugh Darke, a man who congratulated himself on caring for nobody, just as nobody cared for him, except somewhere along the way he’d come to value the good opinion of his rescuers. Still, at least he’d been able to tell himself that he’d never again be the gullible, arrogant young fool he’d been back then, before his world fell apart and everything he’d thought solid and safe melted away like mist.

Memory of the wanton havoc a careless and selfish woman could create in the life of a so-called gentleman should make him turn away from this one and barricade himself into his borrowed chamber until she gave up on him and went back into the night as swiftly and silently as she’d come. Unfortunately, she fascinated him far too much, even when he was sober and responsible; now he was three-parts’ castaway, he was much too forgetful that whatever sort of woman she was, she certainly wasn’t his, for all his driven wanting of her.

‘I’ve been ordered to stay ashore and run things here while they’re both busy playing on the high seas, or wherever Kit Stone happens to be hiding himself just now,’ he admitted gruffly at last.

His ruffled feelings about his part of their current mission were too apparent in his aggrieved tone and he hated to hear that faint whine of discontent in his own voice. From what he could see of his unexpected visitor’s face through the shadowed gloom, she looked quite tempted to push him down the stairs and have done with him for good. A part of himself he’d almost managed to smother in drink and duty would almost be glad if she could put a period to his worthless existence as well, but he shook off the deep sense of melancholy he suspected had a lot to do with returning sobriety and wondered how soon he could drown it in brandy again. The sooner he got rid of the confounded woman and got back to this useless excuse for a life the better, he decided bitterly, then frowned fiercely at the intruder, which made it a crying shame she probably couldn’t see in the dark how very little he wanted her here.

Chapter Two

'So you're playing at being in charge of Kit and Ben's business ashore, whenever you manage to stay sober enough to care if it sinks or swims for the odd half-hour you can spare it, whilst they're both busy risking their lives to make your fortune for you?' the intrusive female asked Hugh, condemnation heavy in otherwise dulcet tones.

How irresistible her voice might be if she ever found anything to like about him, he mused foolishly. As it was, her question echoed about his head like knife blades and he wondered if she'd been sent to torture him with her nagging questions and the haunting scent of her, the ridiculous sensuality of her very presence in the same room with him when it was too dark for him to see the outline of her superb body. A vital, unignorable here-and-now allure that somehow reminded him with every breath that she was a very human woman and not a haughty goddess after all. A woman well used to satisfying a man's every fantasy on her back—as long as that man had enough gold in his pockets to pay for the privilege. And, thanks to Kit Stone and Ben Shaw, he had more than enough gelt to buy a lovely woman for their mutual pleasure nowadays, and keep her in comfort while he did so. How unfortunate that the one he wanted at the moment belonged to a friend he already owed so much to that he must leave her as untouched as a vestal virgin.

'I mind my own business—would I could say the same for you, madam,' he informed her sharply, in the hope she couldn't read his bitter frustration at her unavailability or discern his ridiculous state in this gloom.

'Kit and Ben *are* my business,' she informed him impatiently and confirmed every conclusion he'd already reached about her, which really shouldn't disappoint him as bitterly as it did somehow, especially considering he already expected the worst of her and most of her gender.

'Not at the moment they're not, since there's a few hundred leagues of ocean between you and their moneybags, so you'll just have to ply your trade elsewhere until they return,' he drawled as insultingly as he could manage.

'That's it! Out you; go on, you get out of this house right now, you verminous toad!' she ordered as if she had every right to evict him from the house Kit had told him to treat as his own while he was away.

'Firstly, you'll cease your screeching, my girl,' he ordered as he grasped her arms in a steely hold, in case she started scratching and biting in retaliation for being thwarted as was the habit of her type—bred in the gutter and inclined to revert to it at the slightest provocation he decided unfairly, considering he'd long ago concluded nobody could help where they were born, mansion or hovel, and that he preferred hovel dwellers over their better-off neighbours nine times out of ten.

'Damn you, I'll screech as long and as loud as I choose to,' she snapped back and he shook her in the hope it would rob her of breath. Her noise and her closeness and the elusive, womanly scent of her as she fought his grip with a determination he secretly admired was making his head pound again.

'Secondly, you'll get out of my room,' he went on doggedly.

'We're not in a room; even if we were, it wouldn't be yours.'

'Irrelevant,' he dismissed and felt something strange under the controlling grip he couldn't bring himself to make a punishing one, despite his disillusionment with her sex and the urgent need he felt to be rid of her before disaster struck, something besides warm, soft, tempting woman. 'And what the devil are you doing running wild about the place dressed in a man's shirt and breeches and not just asking for trouble but begging for it, you idiot woman?' he demanded harshly, quite put off his list of demands by that shocking discovery.

At least he wished fervently he really did find her unconventional attire shocking, instead of far too sensually appealing for comfort or safety as his exploring hand on her neat *derrière* made her

squirm even more determinedly against him and curse him with an impressive, if far from ladylike, fluency while she was doing so.

'How I choose to dress is none of your business and never will be,' she informed him sharply at last, but if she could still blush he was almost sure she was doing so from the sudden increase in body heat under his exploring fingers.

'No, it's clearly Kit Stone's or Ben Shaw's business, and therefore mine in their absence,' he asserted, senses sharpening despite the brandy, as he felt a terrible threat to his jealously guarded aloofness in that demand for more information and carried on all the same. 'Come on,' he urged recklessly, making her obedience irrelevant by tugging her after him all the way downstairs and into the kitchen, where at least a fire was still burning faintly, even if the manservant Kit employed was snoring in the porter's chair in the hall, more drunk than Hugh had managed to become so far despite all his efforts before this confounded woman came along and spoilt his chance of a decent night's stupor.

Now, he supposed bitterly, he'd have to endure his usual nightmare-haunted sleep replaying a past he'd so much rather forget, if he was to be allowed any rest this night at all, which currently seemed doubtful with Kit Stone's woman actually here in the flesh rather than in spirit for once and making sure he had no chance of resting, even when he wasn't dreaming about her writhing under him, moaning out her desire and then her lusty pleasure as he satisfied every single one.

Setting a taper to the dying fire, Hugh lit a candle, decided he didn't believe his eyes and lit a whole branch of them. He wasn't often rendered speechless nowadays, but he couldn't think of a single word to say as his eyes roved over this extraordinary night visitor with numb astonishment. Numb because all the blood and feeling he still had left in him rushed straight to his loins and stopped there to torture him with the mere sight of such blatant allure. It should definitely be a crime for any woman to go about dressed like that, he decided bitterly. A felony carrying with it some sort of severe but not deadly punishment that would put her off taunting poor devils like him with her goddess's body and those endless, neatly feminine legs. An amateurish attempt at binding her breasts had only made them seem all the more worthy of a sensual exploration and as for that sweetly rounded *derrière* of hers … If she didn't realise what a temptation it posed to any red-blooded male who set eyes on her, then she ought to be locked up for her own safety until he'd taught her to know better.

'What the devil are you doing strutting the streets at night dressed like a female resurrectionist or an undertaker's apprentice?' he finally managed, faintly surprised, until they came out of his mouth, that he'd got that many words left in him.

'It's nothing to do with you what I choose to do, or where I decide to go while I'm doing it,' she told him and wrenched her arm out of his slackened grip at last so she could fold it belligerently across her body, trying her best to look as if she'd every right to go about dressed in black breeches and a dark shirt with a black cravat knotted about her slender neck. Her crow's-wing dark locks suddenly cascaded down her back, like the wickedest promise he'd seen in a long time, when she shook her head defiantly at him and her neat black-velvet cap finally gave up trying to contain so much dusky luxuriance.

'You just made it a lot to do with me, Witch,' he informed her hoarsely and let his eyes rove as they pleased over the very feminine body he'd reluctantly fantasised over since the black day he'd found her waiting in Kit's office, looking as if she had every right to be there and he was the intruder.

'Men!' she condemned impatiently, as if his sudden fascination with her long slender legs and those neatly rounded, womanly curves, so blatantly on show, was entirely his fault and nothing to do with her unconventional garb or extraordinary behaviour at all. 'You're all the same.'

'Now there you're almost certainly mistaken,' he lazily informed her, making no attempt to disguise his wolfishly thorough appraisal of her well-displayed charms, for if she aspired to meet some impossibly gallant chevalier who'd be so overwhelmed by her sensual beauty that he'd offer her anything she demanded of him during her peculiar night wanderings, she should never have embarked

on a career of selling herself to the highest bidder in the first place. 'We're all different, but we *think* alike when presented with nigh-irresistible temptation, such as you pose any red-blooded male by going about dressed like that.'

'On the contrary, it seems to me that you don't think at all,' she muttered darkly and frowned at him as if she had the right to find his blatantly sexual scrutiny of her outrageously displayed body ill-mannered at best and deeply insulting at worst.

Hugh wondered how she expected any red-blooded male to actually *think* while she was standing there displaying her assets so generously that he'd soon only function on pure, or impure, instinct alone if she wasn't very careful.

'You could be right,' he told her with a wickedly unrepentant grin as he forgot his headache and began to enjoy himself by living down to her expectations. 'At the moment I'm too busy fantasising about the feel of your magnificent body writhing under me as you desperately beg me to take you to paradise to waste much of my energy on rational thought, my darling.'

'I'm not your darling and I'm prepared to bet you don't know the first thing about what would truly transport a woman to paradise,' Louisa snapped back, wishing she felt as cool as she sounded as she stood in front of this outrageous, drunken and dissipated man in her shirt sleeves with everything going wrong with her wonderful plan of escape, even now she'd finally got away from Charlton.

She'd shed her jacket and been forced to leave it behind when it had been caught on a spike put there by an inconsiderate neighbour of Kit's to prevent the stealthy and desperate using their roof for nefarious purposes such as hers. Doing her best not to remember how terrified she'd been then, swinging between safety and a forty-foot drop to her death by one hand as she had wrestled the inextricably trapped coat undone so that she could finally wriggle out of it and haul herself to safety, she shivered in the unreliable light of those untrimmed candle wicks this sot had lit to inspect her by.

Until her brother or Ben came back to put the world right for her, she might still be discovered and marched up the aisle so fast the vicar wouldn't have time to ask what she'd been up to that she deserved this and why she was protesting every step of the way. She reassured herself that could only happen if she was caught and resolved to stay in this scandalous disguise for the rest of her life if she had to, rather than endure such a fate. So she did her best to glare defiance at the wretched man while she convinced herself even his company was preferable to roaming the streets now she was grown up and vulnerable, open to the use and abuse such a reckless female might attract from rogues like this one, if she wandered about even more freely dressed in what was left of Charlton's fantasy disguise.

'Aren't you willing to add me to your stable of lucrative lovers then, my darling doxy?' he suddenly asked as if he had every right to insult her.

He'd only set eyes on her twice in his life, for goodness' sake, and she doubted he even remembered their first encounter now, given the reek of brandy on his breath whenever he came near her. Not knowing her at all, he somehow thought he had every right to eye her like a starving dog slavering over a juicy bone—surely he couldn't know a visceral, wayward part of her was inclined to look at him the same way and only made the rest more furious.

'Firstly, I'm very particular whom I allow to even call me darling, Captain Darke, and secondly, I certainly wouldn't take a man like you to my bed, even if I wasn't,' she informed him haughtily, kicking herself for letting him know she'd been fascinated enough to find out what his name was after that first sight of him in Kit's office.

'You put such a high price on your charms, then?' he asked as if he was surprised.

She had to bless his consumption of brandy for fogging his wits that he hadn't even noticed her *faux pas*, even if it fuddled him into mistaking her for Kit's mistress rather than his sister. After all, she didn't want him to think of her as his employer's close kin, did she? No, of course she didn't. If he knew who she really was, he might ruin everything by handing her back to her temporary guardians, so it was far better if he thought her no better than she should be and let her stop here for the night.

'A very high one indeed,' she assured him with a toss of her head, which she hoped told him it was beyond anything he could pay, if he had anything left of his share of the last cargo after buying enough brandy to inebriate even him.

'How's a man supposed to know if a woman's price is worth the paying when he's not even been permitted to check the quality of the goods? Strikes me you're asking a man to buy a pig in a poke, my dear.'

Good heavens! The appalling man really thought she was a streetwalker, casually selling her body for a bed and food in her belly as well as the clothes on her back. More of a roof-walker, her sense of the ridiculous reminded her, and the past years of suffocating respectability threatened to fall away under the liberty of his wild conclusions about Miss Alstone, spinster of impeccable birth, if not exactly unimpeachable upbringing. Maybe Aunt Prudence was right and she'd never be the proper lady she should have been since birth, if only said birth hadn't taken place in a rundown lodging-house, so perilously close to the rookeries of St Giles it was almost a part of them.

She'd never know now how differently she might have felt about the world if she'd come into it at lofty Wychwood Court, a vast Tudor mansion in the county of Derbyshire that was the Alstones' ancestral home. A house she'd never been invited to visit and doubtless never would be now, since her Alstone cousins seemed intent on ignoring any relations low enough to run the streets for most of their childhood and then lower the family name still more by taking to trade in order to make up their lamentable lack of the proverbial penny to bless themselves with. Reminded how little she'd enjoyed a life of cramping propriety, she made herself meet this monster of depravity's sceptical gaze and match his cynical scrutiny with one she hoped he'd find just as difficult to meet.

'The customer always has the choice not to buy,' she said boldly, as if she fended off such outrageous provocation every day of the week and reminded herself that, if not for Kit and Ben, she'd probably be exactly what this poor apology for a gentleman thought her right now. 'And I can take my pick of those who want to do so whenever I like.'

'The most readily caught fish doesn't always taste sweetest.'

'But if you throw them back, I've found the little ones often live to grow up and learn a lot more, which makes catching them again into much better sport.'

'I'll have to be the one that got away, then, for hooking me would prove a challenge even to the most cunning enchantress, let alone an amateur angler like yourself, Miss … Confound it, whatever is your name, woman?'

'Miss Confoundit? Now why didn't I think of that?'

'I'll just make one up to call you by then, shall I?'

'No, it's …' Louisa racked her brains for something suitably exotic, something an aspiring Cyprian might use to intrigue ardent gentlemen with plenty of gold in their pockets, if not rude and probably impoverished sea captains. 'Eloise La Rochelle,' she invented on the spur of the moment and decided she rather liked it.

Nobody would dare drive Eloise La Rochelle to such desperation that she'd risk climbing out of a second-floor window to escape her uncle's machinations and her importunate suitor, she decided whimsically. Indeed, Eloise would doubtless have far less respectable gentlemen than even this one climbing up the creepers to her scented balcony in their droves of a night-time to beg for her nigh-on legendary favours instead.

Would she accept any of them? she wondered, as she slipped deeper into the dangerous fantasy of being a very different female from the one she was in reality, or make them climb back into the night? Charlton could go back the way he came as fast as gravity could take him and she hoped it would teach him a salutary lesson, but Hugh Darke? Daring, dashing Eloise La Rochelle might just let him stay for a while, because he amused and intrigued her, of course, and to enchant him into parting with the dark secrets that lurked in those ironic grey-blue eyes of his, until he finally laid even his cynical heart at her feet. Then he could take his brooding gaze and his warrior's body down the

stairs when he left, to scandalise and intrigue passing dowager duchesses with his disreputable looks and piratical charm and make them long to be as young, bold, stunningly beautiful and irresistibly seductive as the notorious Eloise La Rochelle of such scandalous fame even they couldn't pretend never to have heard of her.

No, she revised her story, he wouldn't be *able* to leave. He'd demand, then beg, then sell his soul to stay with her, if he still had one. Infamous Eloise La Rochelle would spoil him for every other female he ever met and in return he'd satisfy her as extravagantly as she would him, or be banished to decline and fall alone as a punishment for his sensual failure.

'And I'm the Queen of Sheba,' he responded sceptically to her exotic *nom de plume*, bringing her back to here and now with an unpleasant jolt, as she struggled with the uneasy certainty that he wouldn't fail to pleasure her in such an encounter, even if she was a little foggy about what such sensual satisfaction would involve.

A very uncomfortable present it was as well, where he didn't look at all enchanted by her assumed name or shockingly displayed charms and probably wouldn't beg aught but peace from the likes of her, so he could broach another bottle and swinishly lose himself in drink once more.

'I suggest you act a little more regally from now on, then,' she told him crossly, turning her back on that ridiculous fantasy of him falling at her feet, tortured by passion and his searing, insatiable need for her as she searched the Spartan-looking kitchen for something to eat instead.

'Make yourself at home, why don't you?' he muttered ungraciously.

'Certainly I shall and you can build up the fire whilst I do so,' she demanded, wishing she could find something more appealing than a hunk of hard and cracked cheese and some pickled onions along with, of all things, a naval officer's dress sword, in Kit's larder.

'Coste sends out for food whenever we're hungry,' Hugh told her as if that explained everything and, since they were both men, it probably did.

'On the rare occasions either of you forsake the brandy bottle long enough to bother to eat at all, I suppose?' she asked sweetly.

'Whatever our domestic arrangements may or may not be, we certainly didn't invite you here in the middle of the night to see if they were up to scratch,' he mumbled gruffly as he bent to stoke the fire.

'Which is just as well, considering you clearly don't have any,' she informed him disgustedly as she chewed valiantly on the hunk of cheese and wondered if even she was hungry enough to indulge in a pickled onion or two to force it down with, as she could see no sign of anything else remotely edible or drinkable.

'We don't need them,' he informed her defensively, looking endearingly sheepish even as he did so. 'Neither of us wanted a female nagging and criticising and poking her nose in everywhere it wasn't wanted when we can manage very well for ourselves.'

'No, you can't. I can assure you that you and Coste really, really can't manage anything more refined than a sty, Captain Darke,' she told him fervently, as she finally gave up on finding anything else remotely edible in the dusty larder and purloined his branch of almost-gutted candles to make a more thorough tour round the dusty, dirty, unused room and the once-pristine scullery on the other side of the kitchen that turned out to be piled with every glass, tankard and mug Kit's house possessed. All were dirty and looked as if they'd been so for too long. 'And wherever have Mrs Calhoun and Midge gone off to?' she asked at last.

'Kit's housekeeper wouldn't stay once he'd been gone awhile, nor let Midge stop here without her. She said we lived like swine and she'd no mind to go on mucking out a pigsty every morning, so you two obviously have a lot in common.'

'How very sensible of her, but wherever did they go?' she asked and when he didn't reply, she walked back into the kitchen to find him watching her as if he wished she'd conveniently disappear as well.

Oddly hurt by his clear preference for her room over her company, she frowned and tapped an impatient foot as if waiting for his answer, when she suspected both women would be at Brandon and Maria's rectory in Kent, awaiting the return of their master before they deigned to come back.

'She just said Kit would know where to find her when he wanted his house made civilised again,' he drawled unrepentantly.

'How insightful of her,' she said with a scornful glance round the room.

'I'll borrow a few deckhands to clean up next time we unload a ship.'

'In the meantime you intend to go on treating my br … brave Kit's house worse than a stable? At least a well-run stable is mucked out every day, but this place has obviously been going to rack and ruin ever since he left.'

Was Captain Darke actually blushing? Louisa wondered. Her half-guttered candles were flickering annoyingly and refused to illuminate him properly, but she was surprised he'd even heard it could be done, let alone learnt how to do it himself.

'He said I was to treat the place as my own,' he excused himself gruffly.

'And you truly think so little of yourself, Captain?'

'Yes, Miss Eloise so-called Rochelle, I do, and this is all I want or need of any place I lay my head nowadays,' he rasped harshly, as if she'd stepped on to forbidden ground by even asking that question.

'Why?' she asked, biting back a ladylike apology for intruding on his private thoughts and opinions.

'Because … Devil fly away with it all, woman, what right have you to break in here and interrogate me like some long-nosed inquisitor? While we're on the subject of the devil, where's Coste hidden the rest of the brandy, so I can get back to my previous occupation when you leave us or at least stop your infernal nagging?'

'Inside himself from the look of it,' she answered impatiently and watched him with an implacable look Kit called her I'll-find-out-if-it-kills-us-both stare.

'Selfish bastard,' he grated in a much-tried voice and tried to look as if he didn't know he was being inspected by his unwanted night visitor and found wanting.

'You probably have enough left in your system to inebriate a goat.'

'I never saw a drunken goat, but what an interesting life you must have lived to have done so, Miss Le Havre.'

'Yes, I have,' she informed him truthfully, or at least she had until she'd been hauled off to learn respectability at the age of thirteen, much against her will. 'And it's not Miss Le Havre, but Miss La Rochelle, if you're capable of remembering your own name, of course, let alone mine, which I sincerely doubt just at the moment.'

'I know that too well, but I dare say you could tell a tale or two about that life, could you not?'

'I could, but I won't.'

'Yet you expect me to tell you my entire life story, whilst you reveal nothing of your own? You're an implacably demanding, as well as an insensitive and intrusive, female footpad, are you not, Miss Rockyshore?'

'You really have no idea, Captain Darke.'

'So, *is* that how you keep your lovers under your slender little thumb?' he drawled in his velvet-rubbed-the-wrong-way voice. 'By dragging their darkest secrets out of them when they're drunk, then holding them over the unfortunate idiots?'

'Nothing about me is so very little, sir, I'm above average height for a woman,' she parried coolly, ignoring the urge to counter the rest of his accusations as beneath her notice.

Trust him to take her words as an open invitation to let his silver-blue eyes rove over her boldly. He was good at defending his privacy, she mused, as he let his gaze track over her until those eyes had all but stripped her bare. Then the renegade let that blatant stare of his rest explicitly on the secret

centre of her and she had to fight not to press her legs together and visibly, physically clamp down on the fiery demand suddenly all too alive and wildly curious for more under his outrageous scrutiny. Kit and Ben hadn't fought battle after battle to preserve her honour in their youth so she could be secretly tempted to throw it away on a ne'er-do-well like this.

Yet that fully-formed temptation stopped her thundering scold and sharp exit in its tracks. If she let him take her virginity, then she'd lose all her value on the marriage mart the instant he did so. Not even a Charlton Hawberry would take another man's leavings, so deeply ingrained as it was in a gentleman's psyche that he must marry a virgin, or at the very least a virtuous widow—she would certainly be neither after a night in the ungallant captain's bed. It might be a desperate idea, almost as reckless as climbing out of a second-floor window at midnight, but she wasn't in a position to discard any possibility just now.

'So I see,' he said with a pantomime leer she almost applauded, but there was something deeper and darker than simple lust in his eyes as well. It suddenly occurred to her that the real Captain Darke, whoever he might be under all this dark and dangerous front he faced the world behind, could break her heart if she had one. Luckily she didn't and stared boldly back at him.

'That could change,' she warned, 'if you don't stop staring at me.'

'Me, Miss Rockisle?' he said, and his silvery-blue eyes were beginning to lose the haze of brandy and world-weariness that had clouded them until now. She dare not look lower to find out if his body was as blatantly aroused as his cocky smile and intent gaze argued it must be.

'Yes, you—we were discussing your total lack of ambition and self-respect rather than my height and frame, if you remember?' she said coldly.

'You can talk as much as you like, my lovely, if you have the breath left for it after I've finished with you,' he mocked as he sauntered confidently towards her.

'I know when a man is determined to shut me up at any price,' she blustered.

Suddenly it was very quiet in the house, echoingly empty but for the unconscious Coste, who she would have to swear to keep her identity from Hugh Darke, and two almost-adversaries, each determined to give no quarter. Louisa was too much a child of the streets to yield an inch in the eternal battle to make every choice her own, however wrongheaded and contrary it might be, and stood her ground while she wondered what that next choice would be.

'And I know just as surely when a woman wants me as much as I do her, my dear,' he said and stepped closer, silvery-blue eyes full of sensual challenge.

'I'm not your dear,' she argued and tried to tell herself it didn't matter.

'And if you're not, what do you care? In a profession where "affection" is traded for expensive jewellery, fine gowns and a rich man's protection, you can't afford emotions, can you?'

Chapter Three

Temper had always been her undoing, Louisa decided as she lost it spectacularly and did her best to punch him in the gut. The wretched, ungentlemanly Captain Darke countered her onslaught by engulfing her in such a tight hold there wasn't even a tissue of air to shield them from each other and it sparked a heat set burning weeks ago, when they had first laid eyes on each other and wondered 'what if?'. It was like a force of nature, fuelled by some terrible need she hadn't known could come so urgent it might tear into her very soul in order to make them indivisible.

She moaned at the shock of wanting more so desperately and should have been shaken instead of fascinated by the novel hardness of his rampant male member nudging explicitly, demandingly against her very core. Logic, scruples, reality—they could all wait. She needed to indulge, to learn, to luxuriate. His mouth took hers in an open-mouthed kiss that stole her breath and sent her straight into sensual arousal no real lady would feel for a lover, at least until he'd chipped away at her scruples and guarded heart for weeks, or maybe even months.

Louisa's heart kicked with a shameless thrill at being so easily seduced, so starkly introduced to rampant sexual hunger, to the merciless drive of one achingly aroused body for another. She was all too ready to lose herself in the heat and novelty, and didn't that prove her uncle and aunt had been right all along and she'd never make a proper lady?

Unable to resist the urge to explore him with every sense as he amply demonstrated his skills as a lover of passionate women, she lazily let the tips of her fingers take a census of his features. His chin felt as firm as if he chewed nails for a pastime, when not seducing very unlikely maidens, and it was intriguingly shadowed with fine, dark whiskers.

'I'd have barbered myself if I'd known you were coming,' he told her wryly in a brief moment of respite, then ran his index finger over her tingling lips as if they fascinated him as much as his did her, before kissing her again as if he couldn't help himself test their softness and their welcome.

The small part of her brain not occupied with kissing him back went on with her sensual exploration of his intriguing features. He'd broken his nose once upon a time, as she felt a slight twist in his regally aquiline nose, and she decided it made his wickedly handsome face more human. His mouth was all sensuality just now; his firm lips on her softer ones were a balm, the impudent exploration of his tongue an arousing, teasing echo of something deeper and darker at the core of her that throbbed and ground with need in shameless response.

Her breath sobbed when he raised his mouth enough to lick along the cushiony softness he'd made of her lush lips, to tease and tantalise their moist arousal with his tongue as if he couldn't get enough of her. Then it was his turn to groan as she darted her tongue inside his mouth, to chase and tease and put into practice all he'd just taught her.

Now wouldn't he be surprised if he knew I was only as adept in the amorous arts as he's just shown me how to be? she mocked herself silently.

He was a drunkard, a hardened cynic, and now she could add accomplished seducer of women to the slate against him. And he thought her barely one step away from a doxy touting for custom in the Haymarket. Even under the addictive spell of his kiss, Louisa managed to sigh. To him she was a willing mouth and an eager body and suddenly that was insulting everything there should be between lovers. If she were what he thought, she'd still have a heart and soul, however broken and damaged, and she wanted to be more than a reluctant itch to be scratched then added to a list of women he'd taken, then all but forgotten. He was more than that as well, for all he looked as if he didn't care to be.

There was a depth of sadness under all that to hell-with-you manner, what suddenly seemed almost a wasteland of loss behind his cynical self-mockery. If letting him take her to their mutual satisfaction meant no more than a quick tumble in the hay, then she couldn't do it even to evade a legion

of Charltons. *No*, a mocking internal voice said, *because you want too much from this conundrum of a man for that, don't you, Louisa?*

The question taunted her as his large hands cupped her shamefully aroused breasts and threatened to incinerate other wants with the sheer sensual need for more. Her eager nipples pebbled under the wicked stimulation of his suddenly very sensitive fingers and she felt as if she might burst into spontaneous flames. Temptation tore into her at the very thought of learning more, of letting him take her and render her unmarriageable between one moment and the next, but she fought it. Those who loved her might hope she wavered because of proper, belated, maidenly shrinking at the irrevocable step between virgin and woman, but that was nothing to do with it. It was because he was too embittered to wake up next to her in the morning and make the loss of her maidenhead feel right to either of them that she couldn't take that step and walk him over a precipice.

It would solve so much, but then he'd know Eloise La Rochelle was as big a lie as the brilliant and icy Miss Alstone was to the *ton*. Perhaps she was the biggest fool in London to pass on seduction by such a master of the amorous arts, but she met Captain Darke's clearing gaze and knew her instincts were right. He could be all her tomorrows and her sensual fate, or just a regretted possibility, but she wanted more than a brief but blazing seduction that would probably haunt her for a lifetime. Did she hope for protracted and lingering seductions to come, perhaps? Not marriage—to her that was as impossible as fairy dust—but she couldn't kill whatever held her back by melting into his kisses and solving one problem with an even greater one.

'I see how you hook in your prey now, Miss La Rochelle,' he said with a shake of need in his deep voice that spoilt the steeliness of his would-be taunt.

'I don't hook them, as you so elegantly put it—they catch themselves, Captain, then I take my pick,' she lied.

'If you think to net me, then you've rarely been more wrong,' he grated out in a fine, frustrated fury.

'I'm a woman, Mr Darke, and therefore very rarely wrong at all,' she taunted him with a sidelong look at his still-heaving chest and the flush of hard colour burning on his high cheekbones. She wriggled her hips and boldly abraded his impressive manhood with her lithe body to prove it.

'In this instance you're so glaringly mistaken I'm surprised you can't find the good sense to admit it,' he informed her stiffly and snapped the spell their bodies were slower to relinquish than their minds by pushing her roughly away. Turning his back on the wanton sight of her, draped against the hard edge of the kitchen table, he groaned in unmistakable self-disgust.

Louisa stayed where she was, mainly because her legs were still shaking so much from want and shock that she doubted they'd hold her up if she tried to move. 'Yet you'll remember me, Captain Darke. Even if I was about to let you put me outside like a stray cat, you'd still take the fire we've just lit between us back to bed with you and burn mercilessly for me all night long, deny it as you might,' she taunted dangerously, recklessly prodding at his temper for some reason she couldn't even put into words for her own satisfaction.

Maybe part of her still wanted to goad him into seducing her until she forgot anything else. She wondered uneasily at her own folly and tried to look as if his revulsion at the very idea of ever touching her again couldn't possibly hurt her.

'I might well, but why draw back from a promising new keeper when you seem to be without one while my youthful employer is at sea, Eloise?'

'To make you more eager, of course,' she explained, as if it was perfectly obvious to any masculine idiot who hadn't pickled his intellect in brandy.

'Just how eager do you expect your lovers to be? Is seeing me so burnt up by the lure of paradise between your finely displayed legs that I'd have promised you everything I have, short of a soul I long ago sold to the devil, not desperate enough for you?'

'Obviously not,' she parried, doing her best not to blush at the thought of what they would probably be doing right now if she hadn't drawn back.

She imagined they'd somehow be striving for a fulfilment her body ached for with a merciless, hard knot of frustration at the centre of her that felt as if it might never relax on being denied what was natural and right between lovers. 'Lovers'—that was the key. It was what they didn't have—not one sliver of love flowed between them, so none of it would be right, however hot and needy they were for each other. Although she would never marry, she wouldn't let herself fully love a man outside it unless she really did love him. That seemed about as unlikely as Captain Darke falling at her feet and swearing undying, unswerving devotion to a woman he despised, for all he claimed to want her so hotly.

'What else *do* you expect of a man, then, if that's not enough?' he asked.

'Affection,' she told him rather forlornly, knowing she'd probably never gain it from this guarded, isolated man. 'And a little respect.'

'Very hard qualities for a female in your profession to find, I would have thought,' he mocked her almost angrily, as if no woman had a right to demand so much of a man she was thinking of taking to her bed, always supposing they managed to get that far.

'Hard ones to seek anywhere, Captain Darke, let alone on the streets,' she said, with what she knew would look like too much knowledge in her dark-blue eyes as she met his hard gaze.

'Aye, I'll grant you that much bravery, or should that be impudence rather?' he said reluctantly and she didn't know whether to feel smug or guilty.

She reminded herself he was so drunk she could probably have pushed him over with one hand when he first staggered across the open door of that bedchamber and made her jump nigh out of her skin. If she'd pushed him away hard enough at any time during this surreal encounter, he would very likely have fallen in a heap and gone back to sleep as sweetly as Kit's watchman, and nothing they'd done in the last half-hour had caused a stutter in Coste's impressive snoring. The world ticked on and she and Captain Darke ticked with it and suddenly it felt as if their bittersweet interlude had been little more than a wicked daydream. She put a hand out as if to grasp it, but a picture of him ardent and wholeheartedly wanting her with every sense evaporated under her touch. Such fantasies weren't for the likes of them; she knew too much and he'd learnt too much for that sweet pipe dream to ever come true.

'I'd curtsy to acknowledge your extraordinary graciousness,' she told him in the hard, cynical voice she thought Eloise would use to protect herself from her enemies, 'but somehow I've forgotten to be suitably servile these last few years.'

'Aye, it's easy to grow accustomed to luxury and money. Harder than I hope you'll ever know to manage without them when they've become such a part of your life you can't imagine losing everything,' he said and she wasn't fool enough to think he was worrying about her future.

'I started out with nothing more than the clothes I stood up in, Captain, but you fell a lot further, I think?'

'You may think what you wish, but don't expect me to confirm or deny your fantasies,' he told her abruptly, the story of his sorry downfall obviously forbidden ground.

'I can pick out the nob in a crowd any day of the week, so don't try to pretend you're not one, Captain.'

'Then be content with being right and leave it at that, my dear.'

'Again, I'm not dear to you in any way, Captain Darke. Let's stick to the truth as often as we may.'

'And if that's as often as usual, it won't be heard much.'

She shrugged and reminded herself how little she wanted him to know her true self, even if she would dearly love to know his. 'So be it,' she said carelessly.

'Not much point in me asking what you're really doing here then, I suppose?'

'Not much,' she confirmed with a nonchalance she hoped masked her shudder at the thought of what she'd escaped tonight—and how she'd done it.

'Well, I suppose we're done with each other for now then, at least until morning.'

'Yes, I really suppose that we must be, Captain.'

'For good, if I had my way, Miss La Rochelle,' he informed her gruffly enough for her to know he still wanted her and bitterly resented her for it.

'Now your way would be downright boring and I make it a rule never to be so tedious that gentlemen of my acquaintance truly prefer my room to my company,' she fantasised cheerfully.

Perhaps from now on she would be herself, as she'd seldom dared to be while she had tried to move amongst his true kind as if she belonged—and blatantly did not. Whatever it cost her to be the girl who'd belonged nowhere in particular once again, that girl was who she was. And to be that person she had to sleep. At least she'd be safe from the predators who stalked the night-time streets, so until it was too early for Charlton and his ilk to be abroad, she could allow herself the luxury of sleep and hope she'd have resolve enough to take up her new life come morning.

She took the candles he carefully didn't offer her and lit a new one off them, after fetching some from Kit's dusty and unused drawing room, handing the guttering ones back to him and giving him a significant look she recalled her mother darting at her when she wanted her to go to bed and saw no reason to tell such a grown-up girl to actually go there. By saving herself the fact and almost the feel of his all-too masculine gaze on her nether regions, outrageously outlined as they were by Charlton's breeches, she had to watch his lithely masculine legs, narrow hips and lean body as he effortlessly scaled the stairs ahead of her instead.

She decided she was turning into some sort of female satyr and felt herself flush at the wicked thoughts the sight of his muscular form roused in her rebellious body. Tonight she'd felt powerfully male limbs so intimately against her own and not even wanted to flinch away; she'd known the astonishing novelty of actually yearning for the thrust and rhythm of that very particular man deep inside her, to show her what no words could ever tell her about the wild, sweet potential of it all. Never mind her unwanted success among the polite world, tonight she'd gone from schoolgirl to woman and never mind the physical fact of her virginity, still exactly as it had always been.

Tonight Captain Darke had taught her to truly want; even now part of her did so as she undressed in Kit's second-best spare bedchamber, did her best to perform a brief *toilette*, then blew out her candle and slid between cool linen sheets. She shifted in protest against that unfulfilled need as she stretched luxuriously on the feather mattress and decided her terrifying climb to freedom had been worth every precarious step. Tonight she'd found out exactly why Charlton Hawberry wouldn't do as her husband, even if she wanted one. Now all she had to do was find out the Captain's quirks and qualities if she was to take him to her bed and maybe even her heart. That thought sobered her, as she considered the impossibility of Captain Darke ever returning so huge and compelling an emotion as love, even if she had no more desire to be trapped into marriage than he did.

Could any woman reach the last traces of gentleness and vulnerability that must still exist under all that armour of indifference and cynicism, or why would that armour need to be so strong? A colder, less ardent soul than the one he'd sought to bury under layers of pack-ice, or drown in a brandy bottle, would survive without the embittered shell Captain Darke had grown to survive, but could she get inside it if all she found out when she got there was how much he refused to trust his emotions? And how on earth would she ever persuade him she was worthy of his trust if he found out when he took her to his bed that Eloise La Rochelle was as big a lie as hard, embittered and dangerous Captain Darke?

Hugh woke reluctantly and groped for his pocket watch even as he bit back a loud moan at the brightness of a new spring day and the lying promise of a London sky washed clean of all its sins, until it besmirched itself again with the smoke and stink of a great city. He might be less cynical about the day, he supposed, if the sharp sunlight wasn't falling across his eyes unveiled by shutters or curtains,

just as he'd so often fooled himself he liked it. Might be, but he doubted it, as full memory of the night before kicked in again and another shot of agony tore across his aching forehead at the very thought of Miss Eloise La Rochelle, who was very likely waiting to torture him over the breakfast table at this very moment. If she could find it under all the detritus he and Coste had deposited there, of course.

Rubbing an exploring hand over his villainously rough chin, he winced at the idea of having kissed even that intrusive and annoying gadfly of a woman in such an ungentlemanly state, even though he'd been drunk and driven by some unholy need he still couldn't fully comprehend by the light of day. She might not be a lady, might not have been accustomed to respect and good manners from her seducers before she encountered his friend Kit and decided to hang on to him with both hands, but Hugh had once been a gentleman so it was a matter of honour not to harm a woman of any stamp. He should have taken a second shave of the day to insure that he didn't hurt her soft skin, if only he'd known he'd be kissing such a wanton siren last night. 'Failed again, Hugh,' he scolded himself cynically. 'Proved yourself a rogue once more, as per expectations.'

Not bothering to even make the effort to cling to well-bred restraint in the face of so many failures, he hauled himself out of bed and gave vent to a heartfelt groan as his own heartbeat pounded fists of pain into his suffering brain at the sudden movement. Reaching blindly for the water jug, he gulped a lukewarm draught directly from it and groaned as he waited for the thundering in his ears to abate and the pain in his temples to dull to a bearable throb, then splashed water on to his face to try to relieve the ache behind his eyes.

'Damned petticoat-led idiot,' he castigated himself as he glared at his bleary-eyed reflection in the fine mirror his friend had furnished this guest bedchamber with, as he dried his face on the fine towel provided for more appreciative visitors than he was proving to be. 'And just what would you think of me if you could see me right now, my friend?' he speculated as he contemplated Kit Stone's outspoken disgust at the spectre he'd made of himself.

And that was before Kit could even begin on the subject of kept women and which of them was keeping her. Hugh shook his head, despite the fierce clash of pain it cause, frowned fiercely at his reflection, then realised he didn't even want to meet his own eyes in the mirror any more, let alone imagine holding his friend's dark and yet somehow steely gaze when he finally came home and took back his empire and his woman from such faulty hands as Hugh Darke's had proved to be.

'Abel Coste! Where the devil are you?' he went to the door and bellowed, in the hope his drinking companion of last night was in a better state of preservation than he was himself this morning, which would hardly be difficult, given that he felt as if he'd been trampled half to death by a herd of wild horses.

'Whatever is it?' his unwelcome visitor demanded impatiently from below.

'I want Coste,' he snapped back.

'Well, you can't have him, he's busy.'

'Since you certainly don't need a shave, I can't imagine how,' he mumbled disagreeably, but she obviously possessed hearing a cat would have been proud of.

'And if you were planning to let him shave you, then you must be even more addled than I thought, considering the sorry state he's in this morning,' she told him, as if she was some sort of stern maiden aunt rather than a brazen hussy.

She was still looking like a barbarian princess in her ill-fitting breeches and that ridiculous black shirt, her silken mass of dark chestnut hair falling down her back like a promise of all kinds of sensual delights. He knew she was no better than she should be, yet she made him ache to feel the luxurious wonder of her against his naked skin while he played idly with that wanton hair as they lay, momentarily sated, in each other's arms. The last thing he needed was this burning desire to make her scream with desire and passion such as she'd never known before, and now he came to think about it, a mild shout of satisfaction might well blast the top of his head off and do permanent damage to his feeble brain just now.

Damnation take it, he shouldn't even think of her *in extremis* like that. Not only was he in no state to pleasure even the most undemanding of houris, but he was also an ungrateful bastard who suddenly really wanted to at least try to drive her wild with mutual lust and see if such exquisite gratification could cure his hangover.

How could he even think of turning on the man who'd rescued him when everyone else had left him to rot in the gutter by trying to steal his woman? He'd better convince his baser self he didn't want the confounded woman as a matter of urgency, then at least he'd be ready to conduct Kit's business for the day instead of standing here fantasising about seducing his mistress.

'I wasn't planning on letting Abel or anyone else near my throat with a razor,' he drawled in a deliberate echo of the insufferably cocky aristocrat he'd once been, 'but to shave myself properly I need hot water and Coste is much better at lighting the range than I am.'

'You must be atrocious at it then, since he made such a sad business out of it with all his moaning and groaning and constant "oh deary, deary me, but I don't feel at all well," that I found it a good deal quicker to deal with it myself,' Miss La Rochelle told him so disapprovingly he was reminded of his sister's steely-backboned governess in a particularly formidable frame of mind. He made the mistake of grinning over an image of his gadfly in breeches, instructing the daughters of the nobility in good manners and proper behaviour. 'It wasn't in the least bit funny to be expected to light your confounded fires for you as well as sober up the only help you seem to have left in the house in order to get some breakfast,' she snapped.

She then subjected him to a hostile glare that should reduce him to abject penitence. Wise enough to know it would be counterproductive to tell her that her ire was a boon rather than a bane to his aching head, he kept a grin from his lips with a mighty effort and did his best to look crushed. In his experience, the only way to deal with a female on the rampage was to agree with whatever she said and go his own way when her back was turned.

'Of course not,' he agreed. 'It's probably a disgrace as well—did you forget to tell me that or have my aching ears left out some listening?'

'Men have a very peculiar sense of the ridiculous,' she informed him with regal contempt, obviously not inclined to gratify him by rising to his baiting.

'And most women don't have one at all,' he let slip, then corrected himself. 'Except for the odd honourable exception, of course,' he told her with a would-be placating smile that must have come out as a mocking grin since she glared at him, before marching back to the domestic regions. He didn't even have time to muse on feminine unpredictability before she was back with a steaming jug.

'Here's your hot water and don't scald yourself,' she ordered him as she thrust it into his hands. 'I suggest you make yourself decent before you come downstairs, if that's not too much to ask of a man with trembling hands and a brandy-addled constitution like yours,' she told him before she rounded on her heel and strode towards the kitchen while he gazed owlishly after her.

'Managing female,' he muttered darkly to himself.

'I heard that!' she shouted back improbably and he amended her hearing up to bat-like sensitivity and resolved to tell the truth about her only when he was safely on the opposite side of London in future.

He kept trying not to smile as he shaved more deftly than he could have believed possible when he woke up this morning, and had to force a suitable blandness on to his reflected features in order not to cut himself. Usually the sight of his own face froze any inclination he might have to smile, but this morning even that didn't seem as bitter a spectacle as expected. Last night he met a ladybird in the dark and now he was grinning to himself about her like a lunatic, despite a painful state he would prefer to deny existed that ought to be beyond a man in his condition. He reminded himself he couldn't have her, even if she wanted him to, and poured his cooling shaving water with its unattractive bloom of shorn whiskers and used soap back into the can.

Hugh set the jug by the door to take downstairs once he was dressed for a morning in the City, spent attending to his employers' business affairs and grimaced at the thought of the hours of checking tallies and reviewing accounts lying ahead of him. Somehow even the thorny task ahead of him couldn't blot out the dangerous sense of anticipation he felt at tangling with the woman downstairs one last time. He even caught himself whistling, before realising she would hear him. Eyeing himself —cravat decently tied and stockings and knee-breeches unwrinkled—he shrugged into a very sober waistcoat and gave himself a mocking bow. Today he was almost unrecognisable as the renegade captain of the *Jezebel* and resolved to avoid the haunts of the *ton* on his way to the City, lest someone recognise him even got up like a respectable cit. He shrugged off the prospect of being known for someone far less worthy, decided breakfast took precedence over old sins and let the smell of Miss La Rochelle's cooking lure him downstairs once more.

Chapter Four

'My guess is that you're a better cook than Coste or I will ever be,' Hugh observed as he strolled through the propped-open kitchen door.

'Which wouldn't be difficult, given the state of the saucepans and skillets left in the scullery,' the most unusual cook in England muttered irritably in reply.

'We never claimed to be domesticated,' he admitted with a casual shrug.

'You'd be arrested for fraud if you did.'

'Very likely, but where did you get all this?' he asked with a wave of his hand at the largesse spread over the end of the long deal table nearest to the closed stove.

Her self-imposed task had put an attractive flush of colour on her cheeks and he noted the surprisingly seductive scent of warm woman and the faint suggestion of a gloss of perspiration on her fine, creamy skin. Never having been the sort of man who preyed on his servants, he'd not subjected kitchenmaids to lecherous scrutiny in the past, but the sight of his employer's exotic mistress, dressed in her scandalous dark breeches with that absurd black shirt clinging to her all the more because of the light bloom of perspiration on her delectable body, was enough to make a monk ache with frustration, and he wasn't a monk. Wrenching his eyes from the spectacle of all he couldn't have, he made himself listen to her reply to his question through the thunder of his own blood in his ears and sought refuge behind the table until he had his body in a fit state not to betray him.

'I dragged your fellow debauchee out of his chair and pushed him under the pump until he stopped screaming like a stuck pig, then told him if he didn't find me the makings of a very hearty breakfast, I'd tell Kit what a useless excuse for a man he still is, then hope he was sent straight back to the gutter where Kit found him,' she explained, mercifully all without turning round to turn those shrewd dark eyes of hers on yet another faulty male.

Yet Hugh doubted she'd carry out her threat against his brother-in-iniquity; her shoulders were hunched against his scrutiny, but her very defensiveness argued against her. 'Where's Coste hiding himself now, then?' he asked, as he dared to come out from behind his barricade and pick up a slice of just-crisp-enough bacon from the stack keeping warm on the side of the hob.

'He's probably still trying to find a couple of scrubbing women willing to muck out the pigsty you two have made out of this room and the scullery, and another couple to dust and make good the rooms you haven't yet got around to spoiling. He insisted that he wasn't ready to eat yet,' she said gruffly.

'He won't know where to start.'

'I told him where to find a reliable domestic agency and sent a note along with him for the manageress setting out my requirements,' she said, turning about at last to sharply forbid him to take one more bite until it was all ready, otherwise mercifully keeping her eyes on what she was doing rather than on him. His more-obvious state of arousal had mercifully subsided, but it was his body and he knew very well it was only waiting for the flimsiest excuse to lust after hers once more. 'I expected I'd have to force you into eating anything this morning,' she said with an ambiguous twist of the lips that might have been a smile and something told him she'd been looking forward to it.

'Sorry to disappoint you, Miss La Rochelle, but I have a very hard head.'

'Evidently,' she replied coldly, as if he didn't deserve such a mercy.

He strolled into the scullery to leave his used shaving water and was astonished to find that she had washed all the crockery and glassware he and Coste had left scattered about the kitchen. Such an excess of energy made him wonder if she'd slept at all and whether she had embarked on this whirlwind of activity to put whatever came next for her out of her mind for a while. What was bold, bad Eloise La Rochelle afraid of? he wondered, and why did he hate to think of her facing problems so insurmountable that they might leave her cowed and fearful instead of her usual bold and brazen self?

Given her daring method of arrival last night, she certainly wasn't naturally timid and many things that would make even a bolder-than-average female quake seemed to leave her unmoved. So had she got herself tangled up in something dangerous as soon as Kit's back was turned and should he be making it his business to find out just what she'd been up to? He eyed the racks of dishes draining over the sink with a preoccupied frown and went back into the kitchen for his breakfast and a more sober and detached assessment of his uninvited guest than any he'd managed to make so far.

'You've been very busy indeed,' he said on returning to the kitchen.

'I don't like to be idle,' she admitted and he thought he saw a shadow darken her deep-blue eyes, then it was gone and she was glaring at him as if he might eat with his knife unless sternly watched once more.

'There seems very little risk of that,' he said and tried not to fall on the food she'd cooked like a ravening beast. 'Can I pour you coffee?' he asked, reaching for the pot at the same time as she did, flinching as what felt like a shock of lightning jagged up his arm as their fingers met fleetingly, then fell away.

He took a deep breath and stared at his hands, unaware until he saw his knuckles whiten that he'd clenched them into fists to stop himself gripping her slender fingers as if they were his lifeline. He loosened his fists and made himself glance at the bright morning outside the window, still gallantly promising something more than the usual London haze. Today he could enjoy the blessing of a fine morning, a useful occupation and a full belly—what more could a man ask of life? Sighing at the thought of all he *could* ask for, but no longer dared risk wanting, he turned back to watch her with raised eyebrows and a cynical half-smile.

'I am perfectly capable of lifting a coffee pot for myself, thank you,' she said sharply and he wondered if she'd been as disturbed by that startling bolt of connection between them as he had.

'I don't doubt it, after viewing the evidence of your industry,' he said mildly and ate his way through a delicious meal as the headache he knew very well he richly deserved began to drum at his temples once more.

It was probably caused by the tension of wanting her so urgently, but not being able to have her, he assured himself. An old familiar and purely physical burn that, as a captain used to months without female company, he knew all too well and had learnt to endure. This time, however, he somehow doubted that reading Shakespeare or studying his charts and plotting a series of possible courses to fanciful places would distract him from it, but at least experience had taught him that the sharpness of it would dull if he could find a sufficiently absorbing occupation. Yet could any distraction blot Eloise La Rochelle from a man's mind for very long?

'Thank you,' she said unexpectedly and sat and sipped her fragrant brew with what he guessed was feminine satisfaction in producing something edible when two supposedly strong men had been unable to do so between them. 'It's good to be busy once more,' she added and he wondered if a life of silken idleness had palled on such an unusual Cyprian.

'I'd be an ingrate if I failed to appreciate the fruits of your labour, even so,' he said as he laid down his knife and fork to pour coffee and add sugar to it.

'Should I pass you the cream?' she asked.

'No, thank you, I became used to going without it on board ship.'

'Don't most captains take a cow with them on long voyages?' she asked and he wondered if she'd studied the life of a sea captain because her lover often lived that life without her. The shock of pure venomous jealousy at the very idea of her pining for her lover brought him up short and made him glare at his own hand stirring his coffee as if it had mortally offended him.

'Sometimes there isn't enough room for luxuries,' he managed fairly normally.

'Oh, yes, merchantmen are carefully designed to make use of every available inch of space for cargo, are they not?' she replied, setting off that demon of envy in him once more and making him even more silently furious with himself.

‘Men-of-war are just as niggardly with every spare inch they can gain, having a goodly quantity of ammunition and unstable gunpowder to stow, as well as a vastly greater crew to accommodate,’ he explained.

‘It must be strange for you to go to sea as captain of a merchantman after commanding in the Royal Navy,’ she mused, blasting his attempt at replacing the general with the personal out of the water. He sighed as he lay back in his chair to sip his coffee and met her eyes warily.

‘I never said I’d been a navy man,’ he argued, almost groaning aloud at the defensiveness in his voice. It was still a wound he hated to have probed, which seemed foolish in the extreme compared to everything else he’d lost.

‘How else to account for the naval officer’s sword in the larder, I wonder?’ she said with a pretence at scratching her head. ‘Was Coste a dashing captain at Trafalgar, I wonder? Or perhaps he’s really an admiral on half-pay, when not pretending to be Kit’s hall porter and supposed watchman? No, I think the sword must be yours, Captain. I doubt Coste rose above able seaman in his entire career at sea and neither Kit nor Ben have served in the Royal Navy.’

‘It’s not so very different,’ he admitted because it was easier than arguing. ‘The sea can only be read or even guessed at by good navigation and a weather eye on her contrary moods. It’s still my job to decide if it’s wiser to sail before the wind or ride out a storm in safe anchorage. And at least I have a sound, fast ship that isn’t an easy target for any enterprising French frigate captain, eager to build a fine and romantic reputation as a triumphant sea wolf.’

‘And did you once roam the seas looking for such prey yourself?’

‘Of course, that’s what the Admiralty expects of flag officers not on blockade.’

‘And were you good at it?’

‘Naval captains must prove worthy of their rank if they expect to stay at sea,’ he said carefully.

‘And some do so more easily than others, I dare say,’ she said blandly, so why didn’t he trust her smile?

‘Perhaps,’ he replied tersely.

‘And you were one of them,’ she said and he cursed himself for giving her a clue if she ever wanted to track him down.

At least the Admiralty hadn’t ordered the breaking of the sword now resting in Kit’s larder, or his speedy expulsion from the Service. He almost wished they had, so it couldn’t follow him like a symbol of all he no longer was, but couldn’t quite discard.

‘Don’t bother visiting the Admiralty to find out how and when they lost or mislaid one of their junior officers, will you? Their lordships don’t encourage idle curiosity.’

‘Who says it would be idle? And you’re very defensive about a career you pretend not to care a fig for, Captain Darke,’ she said shrewdly.

‘Perhaps I hate having my life picked over for the amusement of others?’

‘And I don’t have time or inclination for idle gossip, Captain Darke.’

‘Then you must be the most unusual female I have ever met.’

‘Please don’t think me artless enough to mistake that for a compliment,’ she countered smoothly, yet he felt he’d annoyed her by lumping her with the more curious of her kind and tried to be glad of it.

‘I don’t think you in the least bit artless, I assure you, Miss La Rochelle,’ he said with a cynical almost-smile she didn’t bother to return.

‘Clearly,’ she told him, but he thought he saw a shadow of pain in her blue eyes before she gathered up their dirty crockery and bore it off to the scullery.

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