



*B*RIANNA

LINDA ANDREWS



Daughters of Destiny

BRIANNA



Linda Andrews



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To all those who have fought unbeatable odds and won.

To my mother and father, who are cancer survivors.

To my sisters Bobbi and Joan, my daughter Jesse, my son Joseph and my daughter Krösta, who continue to fight their own medical battles.

And to Nick, whose love is worth living for.

CHAPTER I

November, 1892

Southhampton, England

Dear Diary,

I will soon be obliged to cross off one item on my list. Yes, Diary, I, sickly Anna, poor Anna, have embarked upon a quest. A quest that will rescue my family from certain tragedy, and prove to Da I will make the perfect Treasury agent.

Brianna Erin Grey stuffed another pillow under her torso. White teeth gnawed at the hard rubber top of her fountain pen. The sharp scent of new paper and fresh ink filled the cramped space.

She wiggled, nestling her hips into the soft mattress of her bed. She walked her stocking feet idly on the underside of her companion's bed above her. Her gaze shifted from the candle snug in its brass holder on the cabin wall to the curtains shutting her inside her bunk.

White-blond hair fluttered in the breeze of her sigh as she rolled to her side. Silk-encased fingers stuffed the short strands behind her ear and propped up her chin with her palm. Someone should enlighten Mr. Taylor of the true meaning of first-class accommodations.

Brianna tapped her pen against a front tooth. True luxury travel consisted of a cabin twice the size of her current quarters and a proper bed. One that enabled a body to stretch across its length without touching the walls. With little effort, her fingers reached the edge of her bunk.

This bed was smaller than some of the coffins she'd perused.

Panic raked her. Coffins. She knew too much about coffins. Hadn't she selected her own only nine months ago? Her teeth sank deeper into the pen. Brianna shuddered, gathered the frayed edges of her control.

Really, Anna, she chided. The discomfort was infinitesimal compared to the reward of helping her family.

She glared at the encroaching curtains. Da's ship and his empty, spacious cabin would prove more useful to her docked in London than ferrying her to the Near East.

Her pen nib returned to the journal page. Scratching filled the air as doodling spread in the margins. Even if she had managed to charm the *Freedom's* captain into sailing to Egypt, Da would have ordered the ship to return to London at the next port. Her decision to book passage with Taylor's Near Orient tours had been sound—even Da would not consider a shipping heiress would travel on a commercial steamer. Victory drummed through her. She would be well on her way to Egypt before her letter reached her family.

Unease slithered through her belly. Her pen stilled. She'd had to write the letter; she hadn't wanted them to worry. And they would worry.

Ink flowed along the rim of her journal. Eyes appeared. Worried. Angry. Da's eyes.

"You never would have allowed me to go." Dark brows hovered over the eyes. "I did ask. Both you and Uncle Andrew refused to even listen to me." She inked in the bridge of Da's nose. "And you didn't even bother to explain why not."

Brianna shifted her pen. A second pair of eyes gazed back at her.

"You explained why Gilly couldn't go to Arizona." Uncle Andrew's eyes showed more concern than anger. "Then you let her go chasing a murderer around the desert. And when you learned Fiona had sailed for England, you could have stopped her in New York, but you didn't. Uncle Andrew didn't stop her when he discovered she was in London."

She inked in her uncle's eyebrows.

"So, maybe they weren't alone. I'm not alone, either. I have Esmé." She glared at the eyes in the margins. "It's all in the letter. The letter will convince you." Her stomach cramped and uncertainty nibbled at her confidence. Two weeks of confrontations hadn't convinced them, but a single sheet of correspondence would trounce their trepidations?

She shrugged off her doubts. Her sisters had starred in their very own adventures. This was Brianna's turn. Her future.

She glared at the thick gray walls skirting her bed, sucked the stale air into her lungs. Didn't all heroines suffer some discomfort? Gilly endured sandstorms. Fiona had evaded Cousin Piers's repugnant advances.

Alarm jerked Brianna's limbs. She closed her eyes, focused her attention inside. *Calm. Inhale.* Hot air filled her lungs. The curtains hadn't moved. *Exhale.* Her bunk hadn't shrunk. *Inhale.* She was not suffocating. *Suffocating.* Panic dried the moisture from her mouth. Her eyes flew open.

Some discomfort was very different from *buried alive*. Shaky hands reached for the fabric walls. Esmé wouldn't mind if she opened the curtains just a bit. The candle wasn't that bright.

Wool cushioned Brianna's fingers. Metal scratched metal as she parted the curtains. Her heart jumped.

Eyes glistened in the darkness. The pungent scent of sandalwood infused the cool air flooding the bunk. Brianna blinked.

Light warmed the blue scarf draped over the woman's head, filled the outstretched hands and gilded the statue's halo. Esmé's shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe. Brianna's heart slowed. She clasped her hand over her mouth, catching the giggles tickling her throat. Nothing could disturb the Virgin's serene expression. The same could not be said of her traveling companion.

Brianna nibbled her bottom lip as her heart beat off the seconds. Soft snores trickled down from the top bunk. Tension released its grip on her shoulders.

The curtains could stay open so long as Esmé stayed asleep.

Brianna shoved the other curtains apart and tied them to the posts at the corners of her bunk. Air slipped easily in and out of her lungs. She snuggled under her warm covers and picked up her pen.

"I don't know why I didn't think of this sooner."

Wood creaked. Blankets rustled. She glanced at Esmé's bunk. A sharp snort chased lazy mumbles to the floor. A heartbeat later, snoring resumed.

Brianna smiled. *Where was I?* Tapping filled the air as she re-read her entry. Her adventure.

"As I am to record my adventure, I should include the reasons behind it." She bent over the journal. Ink dotted the paper before her pen moved.

Fiona is of the opinion that the necklace is evil. She fears a black fog of damned souls are attached to it. Mam refused to touch it, even while it was safely tucked in its box. Her reaction was what precipitated my adventure (Although I remain confident Da would have allowed me to return it to Egypt. Eventually).

She underlined the last word twice.

Mam actually suggested Da have the necklace reduced to molten gold and tossed overboard on Uncle Andrew's next trip abroad. I alone saw through the greed and lust tarnishing its beauty. No, Dear Diary, I do not wish to possess the necklace for myself. But I am determined to put it out of reach of those who would abuse it further. Portent provided the perfect solution. She suggested I return the necklace to its bed of sand and let Father Time uncover it when it is again needed.

"Meow."

Soft paws padded across Brianna's coverlet.

"Did you know I was writing about you?" Brianna twisted the cap on her pen, tied her journal closed and tucked both between her mattress and the wall.

"Meow."

“It isn’t as glorious as the dedication at Memphis, and it lacks the fluid grace of your hieroglyphs.”

She slid the candle onto the marble washstand and rolled onto her back. Despite her large bulk, Portent stepped lightly onto Brianna’s belly and stretched across her chest. She butted Brianna’s chin with her head.

The cat’s purring vibrated through her.

“But I believe you would approve. You receive proper credit for our adventure.” She buried her fingers in the silky, tawny fur. “I missed you dearly.”

She pressed her cheek against the cat’s and closed her eyes. Tingles raced across her skin, tightened her scalp. Gone was the rocking ship, the screech of gulls. A hot desert breeze filled her lungs. Sun-reddened flesh toiled in the brilliant light. The babble of voices swelled as workers labored to build monuments that were considered ancient almost two millennia ago.

Portent pulled away, breaking contact. In a heartbeat, Brianna returned to her cabin. Electricity crackled around her.

“I didn’t mean to pry.” She held up her gloved hands and swallowed the half-truth. She missed the flesh-to-flesh contact that allowed her to step into someone else’s experiences. “I hadn’t realized how much I missed the heat of the desert.”

The cat sat up and yawned, revealing a pink tongue between rows of sharp white teeth. Portent shook her head then turned her earless profile to Brianna, who reached to stroke the patchy fur.

A growl rumbled from Portent’s throat. Yellow eyes narrowed. Brianna crossed her arms over her chest, the weight heavy compared to the cat’s bulk.

“You encouraged me to practice. You said it would help me control the tide of knowledge. How much practice can I get if I always have to wear gloves and bring my own bedding everywhere I travel?”

Portent blinked.

“I did learn the chambermaid is secretly married to one of the porters.”

The cat’s remaining ear twitched.

“Apparently, she will be discharged without a recommendation if the captain learns the truth. Which he will soon enough, given that she is with child.”

Portent lay down, tucking her paws under her chest.

“Meow.”

“I don’t believe our help is needed in the situation, as she is planning to give notice on the return trip.”

Brianna’s fingers inched toward the cat. Portent’s eyes narrowed. Brianna stilled.

“I haven’t eavesdropped on anyone else. Meg cleans the room, touching everything, and I can’t be swathed in fabric every second.”

The cat studied a black speck on the wall.

“I can use the bath so long as I arrive just after the cleaning is finished. Even then, impressions linger. Rage. Confidence. Too many ladies use the room to decide who feels what. Although most feel either disapproval or curiosity about me. That I would know even without the Sight.”

Portent stretched and licked Brianna's fingers. She scratched behind the cat's remaining ear, smoothed her fur over the scarred bald patches.

"I *am* glad to see you."

The cat looked up.

"Esmé will be glad as well. She's purchased two new bottles of holy water and would have been very disappointed if she couldn't sprinkle it after you."

The cat closed her black-rimmed eyes.

"You *will* help me to focus the Sight, won't you? I can't help feeling there is a prodigious amount of mischief afoot. These next two weeks will be the perfect opportunity to help someone. I've even added it to my list."

"Meow." Portent chewed on her bared claws.

"I know, but now that I'm destined to live, I simply feel that twenty accomplishments are too little for the life I plan to lead, especially since I've finally joined my sisters in that space between two worlds."

Especially since four of those items involved a man who was thousands of miles away.

Fatigue flooded Brianna's limbs. Muscles relaxed. Her breathing deepened.

"I hope you don't mind that I called you Portent in my diary. I have difficulty thinking of you as Sekhmet, Egyptian goddess. No one knows you by that name, anyway. They only know you as Portent. I've never told Da I was saying *important*, not *portent*, that day." She snuggled farther into her bed. "I think Mam knows. She knows everything. She knew you had taken the brain fever from me. I don't remember seeing Da so shaken, except maybe the day after Mr. Stuart left and you came to visit."

She fought the sleep creeping over her.

"I suppose you are anxious to return home." She felt the smile curve her lips. If Portent had anything to say, she would appear in Brianna's dreams. "I certainly am. Dr. Taylor says much has changed since the time of the pharaohs, especially Memphis. You don't have to stay. You'll always be welcome in my home."

Yellow eyes blinked at her.

"You don't have to decide right away. We still have to reach Alexandria. From there, we travel by train to Cairo, where we spend several days basking in the luxury of the Shepherd Hotel. Dr. Taylor says we shouldn't miss the oriental splendor of the bazaars. Indeed, he suggests we start with the shops in Frank Square—that's oriental talk for European—and make brief forays into the native ones." She frowned at the brochure. "He says the shock of color and the exotic nature of the natives might prove too much for delicate sensibilities."

Delicate sensibilities. Gossamer words that bound tighter than the strongest chains. *Anna's failing health...Anna is too fragile...Once Anna is recovered...*

Brianna squeezed her eyes shut, wringing a single tear from the past.

"I am fully recovered now." She stuffed the paper back in its spot. "As for having delicate sensibilities..." She snorted.

A single touch revealed the blackest of souls, the darkest of secrets kept locked behind the doors of mansions and shacks.

Brianna shut down the thought.

“My sensibilities are not so delicate anymore. I will explore the bazaars and—”
Portent placed a paw over Brianna’s mouth. She patted the animal’s head, removed the paw.

“Yes. Sleep now.” She swiped her fingers along the edge of her tongue and snuffed the candle. The flame died with a hiss. Mam would not approve of her adopting Mr. Stuart’s habits.

Mr. Stuart.

Duncan Stuart.

Duncan.

His name settled inside her skull. Intimate. Elusive. Where was he now? What dangerous adventure had him in its clutches? Was it more dangerous than bringing the feared Mason gang to justice? Maybe he wasn’t chasing desperadoes around the West. Maybe he had accepted the job Da had pressured the president into offering him.

Did he ever think of her at all?

Portent curled into a ball. Seconds later, her purring stopped. Fatigue tugged Brianna towards sleep. Her eyes drifted closed. After her adventure in Egypt, she would find him. After all, she needed Mr. Stuart’s complicity to cross numbers two, four, nine and twelve off her list.

CHAPTER 2

London, England

Duncan Dubhglas Stuart loved women.

He loved the tall woman swaying to the tinkle of piano keys, the short one stroking the thigh of the pigeon-chested man lounging on the scarlet chaise, and the medium-sized woman fondling the bric-a-brac strewn across the ornate marble fireplace. Brown-, black-, or redheaded, thin, plump or somewhere in between, his palms itched to stroke their womanly flesh, he longed to bury himself in their yielding bodies.

French brandy swirled in the crystal snifter pinched between his calloused thumb and index finger. He lifted the glass, rolled it over his bottom lip then raised the stem. Roasted chestnuts flavored his palate, singed his sobriety.

He especially loved naked women.

He toasted the suggestive nude whose charms curved across the canvas above the mantel and set his glass on the inlaid table at his elbow. Heat poured through him, mingled with the lassitude imbuing his limbs.

Which woman would be naked with him tonight?

His gaze flicked to the redhead reclining on the plush sofa. Her stockinged foot slipped in and out of her slipper. In and out. In and out. The rhythm was neither slow nor fast. She slanted him a glance. White teeth strummed her full bottom lip. Her index finger danced along the rim of her low-cut bodice before dipping briefly into her cleavage.

Artfully seductive. His blood slogged through his veins. His pants remained too loose for his intent. Duncan propped his feet on the stool. Aye, perhaps he had overindulged his fondness for ginger-haired lasses. Although they'd been comely and erotically gifted, his interest had flagged after a mere four hours.

Four hours. Half a night. Not nearly long enough. He needed a full night's respite. Eight bluidy hours should more than prove that—

Duncan truncated the thought. He had purged *her* memory nine months, one week and two days ago. He had nothing to prove.

Absolutely nothing.

Madame Patrice's turbaned servant sidled into the room. He replaced the gentleman's empty cup with a full one and slunk over with more brandy for Duncan, who shook his head. His hotel could provide brandy. He required a woman's companionship.

The Indian servant bowed discreetly out of the room as Duncan pushed to his feet. He hadn't enjoyed the ministrations of a black-haired lass since Edinburgh. He crooked his finger at a raven-haired beauty languishing in the corner. She sauntered towards him. Her pink tongue flicked over her bottom lip, tapered fingers twirled around the thick curl lying on her creamy shoulder.

"Mr. Stuart," she smiled coyly at him, "I was hoping to spend time in your company. Val has talked of nothing but your prowess and stamina this past week."

Duncan's gut clenched. Bitterness invaded his mouth. He glanced around the room. Val. Which one was Val? The auburn-haired lass with the pouty lips? Or the brunette whose lush attributes threatened to spill out of her gown?

His index finger traced the scar on his temple. He'd become dangerously lax in the last six months.—forgetting names, drawing attention to himself. Such lapses were hazardous to a United States Marshal, lethal to a Treasury agent.

Future Treasury agent. He hadn't been hired yet.

"You've quite spoiled her, you know." His choice draped her pale arm on his shoulders. Her perky breast pressed against his arm.

Pride stoked his waning lust. The women of 125 Circus Street had talked about his prowess in bed. His superiors might not find such traits as valuable as his skill with a gun or his dogged tenacity but...

Duncan shrugged. A man never knew when such assets might prove valuable.

He ran his hand over his jacket, felt the slight bulge of the French letter in his pocket. Men like him learned young the price of pleasure. He would sire no children. Ever.

"Is that a fact, Miss...?" He infused his words with an acquired Western twang.

"Table." She squeezed his bicep and shivered. "But please, call me Lizzie." Her sultry familiarity whispered past his ear.

Duncan's blood stirred. His newly tailored trousers shrank. The raven-haired beauty had been a good choice.

"Well, Miss Lizzie, would you be willing to be the object of my attention till morn'?"

Lizzie cocked an eyebrow. A smile flirted on her lips while her gaze lingered inches below his watch fob.

"Why, Mr. Stuart—"

"Duncan."

"Duncan." She slid her arm through his, guiding him towards the entry hall and the staircase beyond. Silk rustled. The hem of her skirt teased the polished tip of his boot. "I would be delighted."

Pounding filled the hall. Lizzie flashed him a smile. The footman opened the door.

“Someone is certainly in a hurry.”

“Not us.”

Duncan’s free hand dropped to his hip. His heart stilled. Damn. He’d left his Colt at his hotel. *No civilized man carries a gun in London*—the concierge’s disapproval rang in his mind’s ear. Warm metal pressed his ankle. He supposed carrying a knife made him half-civilized.

Tension rolled off his shoulders. Half-civilized was downright tame for a Scot.

“We have all night.”

A giggle slipped past Lizzie’s lush lips.

“I do like the way you think, Duncan.”

Two men shouldered through the open door and shoved the brothel’s burly butler against the creamy walls. Candlelight gilded the gun barrel rammed against the servant’s nose.

“Stuart. Duncan Stuart. Is he here?”

Duncan shoved Lizzie behind him. Adrenaline coaxed a staccato beat from his heart. *They know my name*. Muscle coiled. He relaxed his hands. Only a coward stabbed a man in the back.

The butler gurgled.

“You might wish to ease your grip.”

Educated boredom dripped from the command. Duncan straightened. The voice was familiar. Very familiar.

“Tell us, or forfeit your life,” the menacing growl sparked his memory for the elusive name.

Kingslea and Houseman, the newest branches of the Grey family tree. Dread and excitement knotted Duncan’s gut.

“I believe he’s trying to tell you to look behind you.”

A soft chuckle stirred the air behind Duncan. He spun on his heel, dipped and freed his knife.

Amusement pointed the corners of Everett Grey’s smile toward his white hair.

“We require a private room to discuss our business.”

Coins jingled in the bulging purse tossed at the butler. Sinew straining the seams of his livery, Patrice’s doorman tested the weight of coins, glanced at the assembled men and nodded.

“Top of the stairs. First door on the right.” After kicking the front door shut, he grabbed Lizzie by the shoulder and thrust her into the receiving room. “Don’t stain the carpet. It’s new.”

Stain the carpet. Irritation pricked Duncan. Did the daft mon actually believe a mere three fools could harm him? Kingslea was a noble, and Houseman his lackey. Their escapades resembled a horticultural debate at a garden party when compared to his experience. As for Grey...

“Shall we?” Grey tilted his head toward the staircase.

“Ye’re bluidy calm fer a mon wi’ a knife at his throat.”

Too calm. Duncan’s skin tightened. If even half the rumors were true, Everett Grey was more dangerous at fifty-odd years of age than he’d ever been during his espionage years in the last American war.

“If I’d wanted you dead, Stuart, you would have been rotting for these last...” Grey clicked open his watch. “...ten minutes or so.” He pocketed the timepiece. “And did you enjoy your brandy, sahib. Patrice serves only the finest.”

Disbelief stilled Duncan’s tongue. Grey had been the shambling Indian servant. Even now, his neck was four shades darker than his face.

Everyone knew the Silver Ghost recruited for the Treasury Department. Everyone knew they tested all prospective recruits. And he had failed miserably.

He returned his knife to his boot and trudged up the stairs.

“What do you want, Grey?”

“Obviously not the same thing as you.” The older man glided soundlessly across the marble floor. “Forty-six brothels in nine months. Maybe what you seek can’t be purchased.” He opened the door to the drawing room and sauntered through. “Or purged with the flesh arts.”

Duncan waited until Kingslea and Houseman entered before following. To a man, they ignored the crimson sofas and the buttery leather chairs. Grey stood by the intricate fireplace, flanked by his new son-in-law and the latter’s groom.

“I fail to see how my activities are of your concern.”

“A word of advice, Stuart—imbeciles don’t have a gleam of intelligence in their eyes.”

Carriage wheels clattered on the street. Houseman picked his way through the handful of ornate tables weighted with amorous statuary and pulled back the curtains.

“Business is picking up.”

Coarse laughter drifted through the leaded panes. Kingslea studied the black marble image in his hand. Legs and arms intertwined in a position only the most limber of women could achieve.

“We should conclude our business quickly. There is no telling what ideas are fomenting in Fiona’s brain.”

Grey’s eyes narrowed as he plucked the statue from Kingslea’s hands.

“You had better believe my very pregnant daughter has not even considered *this*.”

Duncan coughed the amusement from his throat as the older man pocketed the statue.

“But I have, and I believe Lizzie is just the woman for the position.”

Kingslea snorted. Grey glared. Houseman’s guffaw rattled the windowpane.

“If you gentlemen would get to the point?” Duncan squared his shoulders. He had enjoyed his time with the marshals. His job would be there when he wanted to return.

"I see my sources underestimated your hedonism." Grey's lean fingers stroked his freshly shaven chin. "I wonder how well they gauged your filial devotion."

Nails bit into Duncan's palm. Sweet blood mixed with the bitterness filling his mouth.

"What bastard feels anything but revulsion for his sire?"

"Hmmm." Grey stroked his chin. "So, you don't mind that I hold the title to the Douglas family seat? Brighid thinks Loch's Edge would make a lovely spa for the pampered elite of Europe. The men could amuse themselves hunting and fishing while the women and children scampered about."

Loch's Edge. Images shuffled through Duncan's memory. Gray stone walls. Verdant ivy. Bitter winds whistling through the glassless window of a mistress's cottage. Thorns poking from the twisted rosebush marking his mother's grave.

"That *is* why you returned to England, isn't it?" Grey pulled Duncan back to the London drawing room. "To save Loch's Edge from the gavel?"

Duncan shrugged. That's what he had told himself, but he hadn't screwed up his courage to offer his help to his father's legitimate family. Not after the way he'd left things.

Pain wrung his heart. Not after what he'd done.

Hope fluttered to his throat. Maybe he could help the Douglasses without their knowledge. Nothing could undo the damage his existence had wrought, but maybe...

Grey would know how to accomplish the impossible. No price was too great if it brought his father's family a modicum of peace.

"What do you want?"

"My daughter."

Duncan blinked. Thoughts spiraled to a halt.

"Your daughter?"

"Anna."

Anna. Her name blew images around his skull. Blood-speckled handkerchiefs and darkened rooms. Faded blue eyes daring him from behind a curtain of white-blond hair. His gut clenched. Brianna Grey would be dead by now. Consumption had staked its bloody claim to her thin body long before that winter's day by the creek.

"I'm nae a priest, Grey." Duncan stuffed his shaking hands in his pockets. What angel needed forgiveness from mere mortals?

"Priest?" Kingslea glanced at his father-in-law. "Why would Anna need a priest?"

Suspicion stilled Duncan's reminiscing. Kingslea and Houseman acted as if they knew Brianna. How could that be if she had been dead and buried these last nine months? The wild beat of his heart battered his breast. Unless...

Grey's eyes narrowed as he surveyed Duncan from head to foot.

"Anna's recovered." The older man fingered his pocket watch and cleared his throat. "Fully."

Houseman snorted.

“Run off.” The beefy coachman rocked back on his heels. “Sick that long’s bound to affect her brain.” He flushed under Grey’s glare and shuffled back to the window.

“Brianna has followed in her sisters’ footsteps, jaunting off to protect her family.”

Duncan’s fingers sank into the back of the velvet sofa. His knees shook under the burden of his weight.

“She’s alive?” The query gasped from his tight throat.

“And on her way to Egypt.”

Kingslea cast a questioning glance at his father-in-law.

“What!” Duncan shoved away from the couch. Frail, delicate Brianna. Alone. Weak. Vulnerable. He stalked his target. Fists pounded his thighs. “How could you let her—”

“Let her?” Grey snorted. “No one *lets* the Grey women do anything. They simply do as they like with no thought at all of the men in their family.” He rocked back on his heels and blew the hair off his forehead. “Ask Kingslea. His hair is already turning white, and Fiona’s been bedridden for the last four months.”

Kingslea’s hand flew to his head, swiped at the white stripe at his temple.

“I *am* thirty years old.”

“It wasn’t there twelve months ago.” Grey grinned.

Duncan ignored the undercurrents shifting between the two men. The Greys were a powerful family. Fiona’s advantageous marriage had stretched their reach across the Atlantic.

“What does this have to do with me?”

“Bring Anna back, and Loch’s Edge is yours.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that,” Grey agreed.

Duncan fingered the scar at his temple. Return a sickly heiress to her family. He had executed simpler tasks. His brain pulsed inside his skull. There was nothing simple about Brianna Grey.

“I need a decision, Stuart.” Everett Grey prodded, “Yes or no.”

Instinct urged him to refuse. Duncan nodded. He *would* refuse. He would get Loch’s Edge back without the Greys. Without the reminders their lives represented.

“Yes.”

Duncan blinked. Since when had his mouth stopped obeying his brain?

“Your bags are in the coach. Catch the eight-thirteen train to Southampton. The *Osiris* sails in the morning.” Grey pulled a packet out of his jacket and tossed it across the room. Duncan snatched it out of the air. Paper crinkled. Bills of all denominations, colors and countries padded the envelop. “Here’s money to see to your incidental expenses and a note to draw more funds at any bank in France or Egypt.”

Shaking fingers stuffed the packet in his jacket. Grey casually tossed around more money than an honest marshal made in his lifetime.

What trouble had Brianna found?

“All I have to do is find her and bring her back to England?”

“No.” Grey headed toward the door. He paused with his hand on the knob and faced Duncan. “You must return my daughter to me unwed.”

Duncan’s heart lurched.

“She ran away with someone.”

The edge of Grey’s lip curved upwards.

“My daughter hasn’t eloped, Stuart. And you better make damn certain she doesn’t.”

“I understand.”

Brianna Grey was a wealthy woman. Wealthy and unprotected. At least until he caught up with her. Excitement spiraled through Duncan. He was the perfect man for the job. He was intimately familiar with the consequences of flaunting society’s conventions.

“I’m depending upon it, and so is the president.”

His gaze flew to Grey’s back.

“He is determined to have you fill that job at Treasury.”

A jaunty whistle tripped from Duncan’s lips as he followed the trio outside. The reformers and Bible thumpers were wrong. Good actually could come from frequenting brothels.

CHAPTER 3

Apples. Duncan watched his hat and undigested dinner disappear in the blue water lapping at the Osiris's bow. On the Pacific Ocean, on the Atlantic Ocean and on every size river and channel in between, his seasickness always tasted of apples.

Decades had passed since he had last consumed the fruit. Decades more would be committed to memory before he could stomach looking at the foul ruby globes again.

He spat the bitterness from his mouth. At least his stomach had spasmed in the throes of luxury.

Guilt writhed inside his empty belly. Grey's money wasn't wasted—Duncan had never failed to deliver. He wouldn't start now. Not with Brianna's reputation at stake. His hands twisted around the railing; cable burned into his palm. What had possessed the woman to chance a life so recently wrestled from Death's grip?

His gaze drifted through the assortment of boats, ships and men-of-war clogging the harbor and fixed itself upon the shore. Land. He pressed his hand to his flat stomach. Soon, his torture would end. Soon, he would skim across the desert on horseback. Hell, he'd even brave a bluidy camel's hump if it kept him off the water.

He raised his spyglass to his eye. Flat-roofed buildings melted into a pink coastline dotted with rolling shadows and splattered with gray-green palms. Minarets pierced the blue horizon. Unease snaked down his spine. Brianna was out there, lost and alone on that exotically familiar landscape.

The spyglass collapsed with a thunk. Muscles shuddered against bone. Sweat beaded his forehead, dribbled down his forehead in rivulets that stung his eyes. Wood creaked as he collapsed onto the deck chair. Cursed weakness.

The day's quarantine should be sufficient to rebuild the strength eroded during the two weeks at sea. His stomach pitched bile onto his tongue. He pressed

the heels of his hands into his eyes. The bluidy ship was anchored; the sea settled. Why couldna his belly follow suit?

Because 'tis as stubborn as the rest o' ye, his late mother's retort rang in his memory.

Aye, he was stubborn. He was a Scotsman. The score of years in America hadn't changed that. He shoved off the chair. The deck bucked, sending him staggering to the rail. His stomach heaved. Merciful Heaven, if he pitched overboard, at least he'd find land under the water. He squeezed his eyes closed as the world settled onto an even keel.

He clung to the post, metal sweat-slick beneath his grip. The sun combed his hair with its warm rays. Damn sickness had cost him his favorite Stetson, his back-up hat and his bowler. He shrugged off the annoyance. He would purchase another on shore. A frown tugged at his mouth. Did they sell Stetsons in Alexandria? Surely, someone sold a respectable hat. He'd die of heat madness before he wrapped his head in yards of cotton.

"I simply find it odd, Papa."

Duncan slowly turned his head. A petite blonde strolled past, white lace frothing around her trim frame. Amusement trickled through him. Had not Brianna told him of a woman born of sea foam who dwelled in the Mediterranean?

"Judge not, that ye be not judged. Matthew seven-two." The elderly man at her side punctuated his scripture with a cane rap on the deck. The duo stopped. The mahogany-and-glass doors swished closed behind them.

Duncan shuddered. Missionaries, undoubtedly, sent to enlighten the Dark Continent. Had he at last found a blessing to his weakness? His stomach pitched. Not bluidy likely. On a ship this size, he would have been able to avoid the preacher and his daughter. He couldn't avoid the vomiting.

"Yes, Papa." Embarrassment colored her pale cheeks, and she turned her face to the white boots peeping from under her skirt.

"I did not mean to be so harsh, child." Gnarled hands tucked a youthful one into the crook of his arm and patted it reassuringly.

Duncan's skin squirmed over his bones. Public remonstrations. Familiar territory. *Family discord should no' be witnessed by outsiders.* He closed his eyes, focused on the sound of lapping water.

"I will endeavor to befriend her."

His eyes opened at the tone of silk-encased steel. The young lady's chin inched up. Her shoulders squared between her puffy sleeves. Duncan shoved away from the railing. Righteous Christian charity. Wobbly legs carried him forward. He preferred the seasickness.

"You are truly a pearl, child."

Duncan swallowed the sourness invading his mouth. A pearl, raised in the protective jaws of an oyster. Brianna had no one to protect her. His hands balled into fists at his side. She would, once he found her.

"Oh, Papa." The fringe trimming her parasol fanned out as she spun the handle in her gloved hand.

“Ah, Miss Phillips.”

Hard-soled shoes tapped on the planking. Duncan glared at the newcomer. Another body to barricade the door. The only door on this side of the deck that led to the deck saloon and the staircase descending to the passenger’s rooms. Damn first-class travel. If he were anywhere else, he’d smash through the knot of gentry and step inside.

Frustration rattled up his throat. Manners dictated he circle the saloon and enter through the other set of doors. His brain calculated the distance. Fifty feet to the corner. Double the length for the other side and...

His legs trembled. A cramp seized his stomach. He lowered himself onto the nearest lounging chair. A wise man ne’er let an opportunity to sharpen his skills pass. Miss Phillips, her papa and her swain presented the perfect opportunity to observe without seeming to observe. Duncan hoisted his feet onto the chair, leaned back and closed his eyes.

“Mr. Van Sargent.”

A breathless welcome. The lad’s arrival was agreeable to the lass and perhaps even coyly anticipated. Duncan laced his fingers over his burbling belly.

“Enjoying our fine weather, I see.”

Banal, yet practiced. The man was an accomplished rake. But was he also a cad? A tap and scuff reached Duncan’s ears. He swore under his breath. If only he had his hat, he could observe them from the shadow of the brim.

“Indeed, sir.” Silk rustled. “I persuaded Papa that it was too fine a day to spend indoors.”

Duncan stilled the grin jerking at his composed features. The preacher’s daughter was also well-versed in the art of flirtation.

Heavy footsteps knocked on the deck. Duncan opened his eyes the merest of slits. A matron’s large bosoms carried her forward like sails full of wind. Color dotted her flaccid cheeks, displeasure compressed her lips. Someone’s mama was unhappy at the fortuitous meeting. But which child sprang from her sweeping girth?

“Indeed, Miss Phillips. We were having a most delightful conversation...” The mad mama flashed a glance at Mr. Van Sargent. “...when Charles popped up from his chair and declared he needed a stroll.”

Charles Van Sargent. The name rattled around Duncan’s memory. American money. Naturally, money—this *was* First Class. The nasal accent was northern US, probably New York. He shuffled the information. There was something else. Something nagging at the rim of remembrance.

“Youth needs exercise. This quarantine will be the death of us. Bah. Death of us.” Air ballooned the bushy white hairs sprouting from Phillips’s top lip and twitched the tips of his handlebar mustache.

“You are such a wit, Sir Reginald.” Dimpled hands hid Mrs. Van Sargent’s smile.

The older man executed a courtly bow.

“I believe the young fellow has the right of it. Three constitutionals every day keep me fit.” He thumped on his protruding belly.

Duncan gagged. He needed to return to his room and empty his stomach in private. He shoved to his feet. He would have to make the long route. And he would have to do it at a flat-out run if he was to reach the ship's toilets before he disgraced himself.

He pushed off the chair and glared at the human impediment. For a group who professed to be walking they certainly stood about a great deal.

"Miss Phillips, your effervescent sparkle was all the afternoon required to make this a most perfect day."

"You are too kind."

"I speak only the truth." The swain pressed his plea to the back of her gloved hand. "Please say you'll join me."

Yes, Duncan encouraged, join him for a walk 'round the promenade deck. Join him for a jump o'er the side of the boat. Just move away fro' the bluidy door.

"Oh, but, my dear papa..."

Nausea roared at the back of Duncan's throat. *Take yer sire and yer lover's mother.* His palm burned from his fingernails' bite. He stumbled forward two steps. Unspoken commands shouted inside his skull. *Just move yer arses. Now!*

"Nonsense, child." Dear Papa set his daughter's hand on Van Sargent's arm. "I will be shuffling along behind you. That is, if Mrs. Van Sargent will agree to a partner swap."

By sheer force of will, Duncan ignored his roiling innards. Ten more steps. The older couple still blocked his chosen point of entry. Nine more steps. In eight steps, he would decide *for* the woman. Duncan nodded, then groaned. His decisiveness wasn't required. Mrs. Van Sargent's pleasurable agreement threatened to eject all the buttons from her bodice.

"Your daughter is such a treasure."

A treasure that was even now a score of paces out of his way. At five steps from the door, the couple finally budged. Duncan locked his gaze on the door. Four more steps. And how many more to the staircase? Five or six?

"Claire has been such a gift to me." They strolled to the rim of Duncan's peripheral vision. "I thought I would have to give up my work after my poor wife died, but the Lord provided."

"I must say, your devotion to finding the holy sites of the Bible is precious comfort to all good Christians."

The son had obviously learned his skill at the hands of a master. Of course, Van Sargent's compliments were refined compared to his mother's blunt praise, each being tailored to its intended recipient. Duncan reached for the glass handle. The Phillipses weren't missionaries. Not that it mattered. He would never see them again after tomorrow.

"Yes, well..."

Duncan paused. He could almost feel the praise inflating the man's space on deck.

"So many young ladies could find no better example of womanhood than your daughter."

"We must make allowances for those lacking a mother's guidance."

"Naturally," Mrs. Van Sargent trilled. "Unfortunately, not everyone has such an excuse."

Duncan rolled his eyes. Seasickness wasn't the root of his nausea now.

He wrenched open the door; well-modulated chatter bubbled around him. Four paces to the staircase. Two flights of stairs. A left turn and a quick sprint to the toilets. He could make it. He *would* make it.

"Indeed. Indeed. My Claire has offered to take Miss Grey in hand."

Duncan's stomach turned to stone. Grey. Miss Grey. *His* Miss Grey? Could he really have spent the last two weeks on the same exact ship as his quarry?

It was possible. His train had arrived in Southampton a scant hour before the *Osiris* was to sail. His hand twisted around the doorknob. It would have been easy for a man like Everett Grey to make discreet inquiries regarding passengers. Hell, the damned newspaper printed the names of folks arriving and departing.

"How very thoughtful she is."

Thoughtful? Everett Grey was downright manipulative. Hadn't he lured Duncan's best friend into escorting his daughter around the desert, all the while knowing the woman was hunting a murderer?

Duncan released the door. Stale air washed over his heated flesh. He'd gotten beaten to a pulp, drugged and nearly shot for his part in that little junket.

He reached for the door handle again. Everett Grey could find another lackey.

And Loch's Edge? his conscience chided. His life would repay only a small part of his debt. *An eye for an eye.* The devil take it, the mon had him quoting scripture.

His hand abandoned the door handle in favor of his watch. At least, he was in the correct mindset to speak with Sir Reginald. He sauntered after his quarry and reached them just as they turned the corner.

"Pardon me, you wouldn't happen to have the correct time?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Phillips chuffed as his thick fingers crawled across his belly. Light winked off the gold surface as he opened the massive timepiece. "It is four-thirty p.m."

"Thank you." Duncan pretended to set his watch then wound the stem. "It is difficult to keep track of the changing time while one is confined to the cabin." He offered them a limp smile, prayed he looked as miserable as he had felt.

"Are you ill?" Lilac perfumed the air as Mrs. Van Sargent pressed her handkerchief to her nose.

Duncan tucked his watch into his pocket. He was definitely out of practice. Only a green novice would admit to sickness on a bluidy quarantined ship. His hand smoothed his wool vest.

"Nothing a little dry land won't fix."

"*Mal de mer*, eh?" Sir Reginald rocked back on his heels.

Smug bastard. Duncan clasped his fists behind his back. *Ye've dealt with worse, mon. Think o' Brianna. Think o' Loch's Edge.*

"Yes."

"Never suffer from it myself." Phillips chugged onward like a train picking up steam. "My daughter succumbed once. It was on a trip to the Americas. Nasty

weather. Rain and thunder. Thirty-foot-high swells. God's magnificent wrath. Not like today's calm seas." He tsked. "Gave her a dose of cod liver oil mixed with brandy. Settled her right down."

Duncan stomach threatened to secede from his body.

"Cod liver oil?"

"Indeed, sir." Mrs. Van Sargent stepped out from behind her pudgy protector. "It is one of the essentials listed in Mr. Taylor's travel brochures."

"A definite must for all travelers to the Near Orient." Sir Reginald's head bobbed in unison with his companion's.

"Ahh." Duncan relaxed his hands. He was familiar with the rules of this game. *Such wise souls need a lost one to tend.* He sighed heavily and blinked at his saviors. "I suppose I should have done a bit of reading before setting off on the advice of my physician."

"Physician?" Mrs. Van Sargent abandoned her recently acquired ground. Her white handkerchief waved in the breeze. Sir Reginald shuffled back a step, right onto the good lady's hem.

"He said the change of scenery would help to mend..." Duncan lowered his voice and leaned closer to his audience. They quickly reciprocated. "...my jilted heart."

Mrs. Van Sargent gasped, pressed her handkerchief to her mouth. Phillips's eyes swelled in his ruddy face. Fresh gossip. The perfect bait. Now to discover if their Miss Grey was *his* Miss Grey.

"San Francisco Society is rather select, and seeing..." Duncan cleared his throat and adjusted the cuffs of his new white shirt. "Dr. Pippin prescribed a tour of the Near Orient."

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course." Mrs. Van Sargent stepped forward. Fabric ripped. She glared at Sir Reginald, shoved him off her skirt and sailed towards Duncan. Concern and interest deepened the creases on her face. "My dear, dear, Mr..." She blinked as if only just aware of their lack of introduction.

"Stuart, ma'am. Sir." He bowed to each in turn. "Duncan Stuart, recently of Nob Hill, San Francisco, and currently world traveler." The deception slipped easily off his lips. His network of acquaintances would verify any inquiries into his supposed address. His lie would also explain his familiarity with Brianna. If she was on board.

"Mr. Stuart." Mrs. Van Sargent smacked his hand with stinging comfort. "You mustn't be alone during such turbulent times."

"I wouldn't want to impose, Miss..."

"Mrs. Van Sargent." She switched from pounding his flesh to wringing the blood from his fingers.

"You are too kind." Duncan refused to wince as his bones ground against each other. If Brianna was on board, she could spend the next few hours setting the bones in his hand back into their proper place.

"No imposition. None at all." Phillips punctuated his denial with a wallop.

Duncan staggered after his breath. Pain burned down his back. Hellfire and damnation, the pair were liable to beat him to a jelly. Salty air stung his lungs as he extricated himself from the injurious duo.

"It does my heart good to meet such fine folks so far from home."

"Then please join us for supper." Phillips's nod seconded Mrs. Van Sargent's offer. "We will introduce you to the others. There are quite a few Americans in our group."

"Papa." Miss Phillips stepped around her father and skidded to a halt. "My apologies. Father, Mrs. Van Sargent. I had not realized you were otherwise engaged."

Cobalt-blue eyes swept over Duncan. Interest flared in their depths before she turned her gaze toward the deck.

The older man cleared his throat.

"Mr. Stuart, allow me to present my daughter and her escort, Mr. Charles Van Sargent. Claire, Mr. Van Sargent, this gentleman is Mr. Stuart, recently of San Francisco."

Duncan matched the lady's curtsy with a bow then offered his hand to the dandy fuming at her side.

"Haven't seen you around." Van Sargent's feral smile couldn't compensate for his weak grip.

Duncan let his gaze travel to the beautiful Miss Phillips. Slim yet soft in all the right places, she was a fine bit of blood and breeding. Van Sargent's grasp tightened. With a final squeeze, Duncan broke the handshake. Van Sargent should have saved his strength. Duncan Stuart preferred experience to virginity.

"I've kept close to my cabin."

"Mr. Stuart's sea legs needed a bit of shoring up." Phillips's encouraging thumps sprayed pain across Duncan's back.

"I've invited him to join us for supper."

Mother and son exchanged looks. Deep undercurrents eddied between them.

"How delicious." Claire Phillips shuddered. "Now we will have an even number in our party."

And another admirer for yourself, Duncan added for her. Was her party made of trolls or other beauties with whom she was in competition? What did it matter? He would accept the invitation. If Brianna was on the ship, the dining salon was the perfect place to "accidentally" meet her. Brianna Grey was too well bred to cause a scene.

He grinned. "I was afraid I would be the odd man out."

"Oh, no." Wisps of honey-blond hair curled around Miss Phillips's oval face. "Besides the four of us, there is His Grace the Duke of August, and Miss Grey and her companion, Mrs. Peralta."

Anger slammed into Duncan. Brianna *was* aboard the *Osiris*. At least she had Esmé Ceron y Peralta with her. But why was she exchanging pleasantries with August? The man had tried to kill her sister. Had Grey known?

Not bluidy likely. If he had, he'd have ordered Duncan to toss the obnoxious noble overboard before they reached port.

He focused on keeping an expression of bland interest on his face.

"Miss Grey?"

"Yes—Miss Brianna Grey." Mrs. Van Sargent's eyes narrowed, "You may know her. I believe she has ties to San Francisco."

Duncan stroked his chin. The undercurrents were back. Obviously, the good lady doubted the truth of his lies.

“She might be one of the mercantile Greys. They have three daughters, I believe. Not much to do with society, especially after the scandals.”

“Scandals?” Claire Phillips ran her pink tongue over her lush lips. The other three snapped to attention.

Duncan rocked back on his heels. Such an interesting reaction to a simple word. Were they afraid they’d been duped into allowing a viper into their select group? Or was it something else entirely?

“Oh, nothing concerning her directly, you understand.” He smiled at his audience. “I believe there was something unfit about the fiancés of her sisters.”

As one, the quartet relaxed.

Very interesting, Duncan mused. Brianna obviously shared the Grey penchant for finding trouble.

CHAPTER 4

“Chica, you must get out of this cabin.” Esmé tossed her blue-black braid over her shoulder. Slim tan fingers reached for the set of turquoise-and-ivory combs on the washstand. “Already the color is fading from your cheeks.” Deft hands swirled the plaits around her head then pinned them in place with the combs.

“A lady isn’t supposed to have color.” Brianna plucked at her loose bodice. Rainbows flickered in the mother-of-pearl buttons. Soft wool slicked against her skin. A bag of kittens would have graced Monsieur Worth’s creation better than her bony frame. She cleared her throat. “A true lady is supposed to be pale, due no doubt to the head-to-toe swathing.”

Black eyes glittered in the looking glass. Esmé’s arched stare ricocheted to Brianna.

*“You have been listening to *that* one again.”*

That one. Esmé’s most benign reference to the poised and erudite Miss Claire Phillips. The other titles suited the moralizing Miss much better.

Brianna wiggled into her boots. She had wrestled the devil for her soul and come out the victor. Who was Miss Milksop to preach when etiquette was nothing but a tool to help a select few feel superior to those who haven’t the time to waste on such taradiddle?

“It is hard not to. She is determined that we become bosom chums.” Tingles raced up Brianna’s shin as she yanked her laces tight.

“Ai-yi-yi.” Esmé crossed herself. “She is the asp nurtured in the breast of the faithful.”

“She is the thorns in one’s flesh after hugging a saguaro.”

Esmé’s full red lips curved into a smile

*“You should not embrace a cactus, *chica*.”*

“And you should not be nurturing asps.” Brianna felt the grin lift her cheeks. Memories flipped through her mind. “Do you remember the time Mr. Stuart was searching for that calf and walked right into that patch of teddy bear cactus?” Giggles tickled her tongue. “You could see them jumping from their perches

onto his chaps and vest." Embarrassment had crinkled the corners of his gray eyes. "He offered their behavior as proof that only cattle found him unattractive."

"That man." Esmé chuckled, draping her shawl over her slim shoulders. "You have talked of him every day since we sailed from England."

"I can't seem to help myself." Brianna stilled her tongue. Every rail on this level of the ship echoed with visions of him. Months had passed since thoughts of him filled hours of her day. What had resurrected his memories?

She brushed her shorn locks and pinned them away from her face. Could the onset of her adventure have forged such a bond?

"It is almost as if he were with me."

"Ah, *chica*." Esmé set her gloved hand on Brianna's shoulder. "He is thousands of miles from here, chasing *banditos* to keep *gringas* such as you safe from harm."

Safe. A conjurer's illusion spoon-fed to the daughters of fortune. Brianna locked her muscles against the shudder. Disease, hunger and misfortune ignored human safeguards. None knew that so intimately as she.

She saw the truth in Mr. Stuart's reckless vitality and her protected wretchedness.

Brianna slid the pearl earrings in place. Upon her life's breath, she would not wish it different. Especially when she was on the eve of testing her theory.

"Do you think he is well?"

"The devil is particularly fond of Señor Stuart." Glass clinked as Esmé removed her beads from the marble washstand and dropped them into her purse. "If you would like, we will say a special rosary for his safety tonight."

"That makes the sixth time this week."

"Sí." Esmé handed Brianna her boater. The straw hat rasped against her palm. "The prayer, it relaxes that pinched look about your face and gives me a clean soul each morning."

"I can't help but worry that he is ill." Brianna stuffed the ends of her hair under her hat and speared it in place with the pearl-tipped hat pin. *Ill or eating apples*. She formed her gloves around her fingers. Neither scenario made sense.

Still, the impression overwhelmed her every time she left her room. She wished Portent would help her interpret these visions.

"It is you that will be ill if you do not get out of this room." Esmé tsked. "Did you not preach to me the power of your constitutionals while you were sick?"

Guilt itched Brianna's pride. The recovery of her health had never been the goal of her desert treks. She shrugged off her unease. Her reasons were irrelevant. She had to concentrate on discerning the impetus behind the duke's behavior. Fiona claimed he was willing to kill for the necklace. A necklace that was tucked in Brianna's unused corsets. How had he known it was here?

"I am not sick."

"And I think it was Señor Stuart's company that you were seeking those many days, not health."

"Esmé!" Shock laced Brianna's voice. Chilled fingers bumped over her lace collar. "How could you say such things?" *And how much more do you know and not say?* Her gaze held her friend's. The black orbs were as fathomless as space

and, hopefully, as capable as keeping secrets. Shame burned her cheeks. She was wiser than February's besotted chit. She was embroiled in her own adventure.

"Because you do not lie..." A smile curled Esmé's lips. "...you evade the question."

Evade the question. Ignore the truth. Brianna massaged her temples. The sting of Esmé's words refused to fade.

"You cannot deny that the walks were responsible for the restoration of my health."

"Sí." Esmé's black boots tapped the rich Persian rug. "This I cannot deny."

"And I continued my rambles after Mr. Stuart's departure." Brianna nudged her lie closer to the truth. Her walks had continued, but only as a ploy to dispel the rumors and to find privacy before the tears spilled.

"Yet you do not take so many now."

"I've been around the ship three times this morning."

"Sneaking about." Esmé shook her finger. "Like a thief looking to snatch the morning tortillas."

Brianna's sigh unknotted the tension gripping her shoulders.

"I *like* tortillas." She strode the two steps to her bunk and pushed aside her pillow. "I might even pilfer some if we happen to cross paths."

Esmé's eyes narrowed.

"The morning is cold, but the sun is shining. You crave the heat in your lungs." She plucked her half-empty bottle of holy water from the basin and dropped it into her purse. "It is what you tell the creature when you think I am sleeping."

"I find the salt air can be as bracing as the Arizona heat." Brianna yanked her purse off her bed and jerked open the drawstring. Metal glinted in the streaming light. Her heart raced. Moisture left her mouth. The derringer was still there.

"Can be..." Esmé shook her head. "...but is not."

Brianna closed the purse and looped the strings around her wrist. Staying in their cabin was impossible—already the walls pressed into the cramped room. She plucked her parasol from its hook. Danger lurked outside. Were a gun and umbrella sufficient weapons? They would be if she had company.

"You will be joining me then?"

"Servants are not allowed on the deck unless in the service of their masters." Esmé shook her head.

"You are not my servant." Fear amplified the anger in Brianna's voice. "You are my friend. And I have the two first-class tickets to prove it."

"They see only the color of my skin and hear only my broken English."

They. The ubiquitous Phillippses and Van Sargents. They were almost as trying as the duke.

"They are horrible."

"Sí."

"Haughty." Brianna pressed her advantage.

"Sí."

"So, you will accompany me?"

"No." Esmé shook her head.

Exasperation shook Brianna. Esmé always hid behind her heritage yet refused to shield Brianna. If actions had not proven their friendship, she might suspect...

"If those in first class are so horrible, then why do you keep pressing me to spend more time in their company?"

"You will never capture a husband with a servant along."

"I did not recover my health simply to put my life into a man's keeping." Irritation raged through Brianna. She was tired of someone taking care of her. This trip would prove to everyone she was capable of looking after her own welfare.

"It is what you were born for, *chica*."

"It is what *you* were born for." Resentment and anger hissed beyond Brianna's control. "Isn't that what you said? Marrying?" Her parasol stabbed the air with each of her queries. "Were you happy with Don Peralta? A man twice your age who only wanted a son, not a wife? A man whose grown daughters resented you and tried to have you killed?"

Red flared under Esmé's dusky skin. A lone tear left a glistening trail down her cheek.

Brianna slapped her hand over her mouth. Pain burned as she pinched her lips closed.

"I am sorry. I had no right to say such hurtful things."

"You are right." Esmé sniffed into her lace handkerchief. "But I think American marriages may be different from those of my people. Your sisters and mother are very happy, *sí*? And the men, they are not like my father or my brothers."

"It is the people that make a marriage different, not the nationality." Brianna squeezed her friend's hand. Wistful sadness buffeted her. "Have you forgiven me my harsh words?"

"If you take your walk."

Brianna stared at the beam running across the ceiling. One day, she, too, would be able to turn contrition into capitulation. Unfortunately, today wasn't that day.

"And what will you do?"

"I will join the rest of the servants where we will talk much about our betters." Esmé checked her reflection. "When I return, you will learn how Mr. Van Sargent's courtship of Miss Phillips fares. Her servant has recently hinted at intrigues." She frowned. "Her tales of hand-holding and reckless squeezing grow tiresome. The others, they are more interested in Señor Lord August's courtship of you."

The parasol slipped from Brianna's grasp and thumped to the floor. Perhaps she should not have shared her plans. A future Treasury agent's best weapon was discretion.

"Esmé, what have you told them?"

"Nothing that would not be true if you were interested. Your intrigue has made me the reigning belle of the drawing room. Many a maid marvels at his ..." She snapped open her fan. Waves of cool stirred the ebony curls at her temples. "Ay, caramba. The English has few words that are sufficient."

“On that we are agreed.” Cold. Manipulative. Determined. Brianna had gleaned those from their first meeting. *Arrogant* and *charming*, from their second. She’d exhausted her supply of respectable epithets after a week.

“Ai-yi-yi.” Cotton whispered as Esmé strolled to the door. She paused with her hand on the knob. “You are planning mischief.”

“He tried to kill my sister.” Brianna flicked her wrist. Her purse slapped her palm. The weight of the gun complemented the tingling flesh. Her finger flirted with the trigger. The bag was bigger than fashionable but would enable her to fire the weapon without removing it. Da would be proud.

“It was the grief, yes. His man speaks of it often.” Esmé crossed herself. The fringe of her shawl quivered. “I have heard of many men driven mad by the loss.”

“Yes, grief.” Brianna agreed, soothing her friend. “He explained everything, and he has been nothing but charming since we were introduced.” Charming and convincing. She almost believed her sister Fiona had been mistaken.

“He has the face of an angel.”

“And the heart of a devil.”

A darkness eddied beneath the duke’s gilded veneer. Powerful. Regulated. Lethal. Not many challenged the duke and lived to rue the day.

“Then you will set the creature upon him or, perhaps, his man?”

Brianna stilled. Esmé had volunteered to flirt with the duke’s man to help discern the nobleman’s motives. If the increase in devotionals were any indication, things had progressed well.

“Has he done something?”

Esmé glanced at the Virgin Mary.

“Our Lady protects the faithful. Perhaps she even sent the creature to you.”

Brianna smiled. Half the time, Esmé thought Portent was a demon from hell, the other half a guardian angel. Today, her good mood shown benignly on the cat.

“The duke should suffer for what he did.”

“It is a waste of a man.” Esmé opened the door and stepped into the hall.

Their muffled footsteps bounced ahead of them, announced their impending arrival. Dread threatened her control. He was there, waiting, like a hunter in a forest.

“Are you certain you don’t wish to accompany me?” she asked Esmé one last time.

“I will go where I belong. You are better than all of them pasted together, *chica*.” With a wave, Esmé stepped onto the stairs leading down to the second-class cabins.

Brianna hovered by the staircase as her friend disappeared. Her gloved hand slid along the mahogany banister. Dust danced in the rays of light filling the passageway. Wind moaned in air funnels, echoed in the bowels of the ship. Emotion crackled along her nerves. Anticipation/alarm. Longing/loathing. Was she draining her emotions into the ship or vice versa?

She released the banister and turned right. A long soak in the tub should relieve some of her anxiety.

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