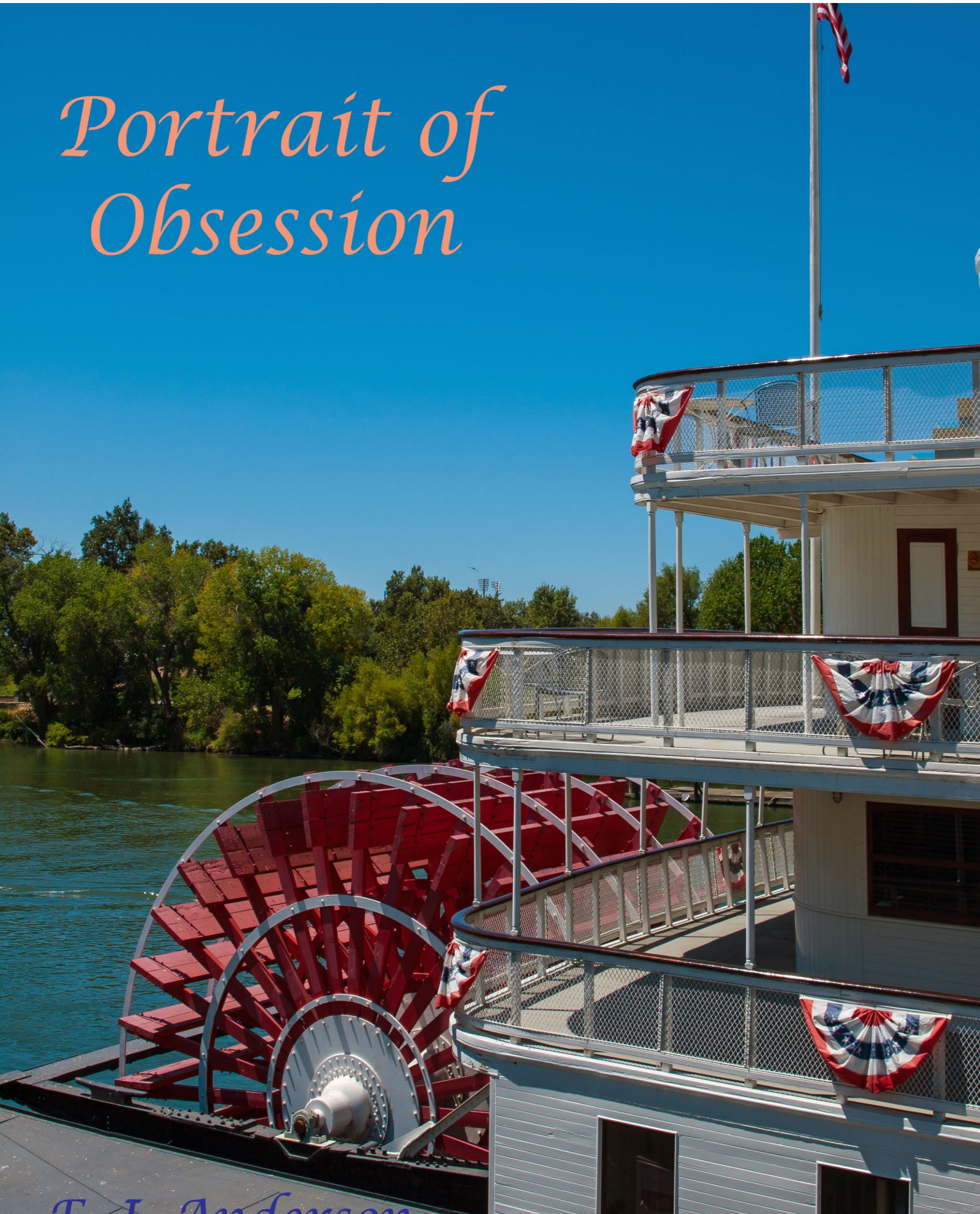


Portrait of Obsession



T. J. Anderson

PORTRAIT OF OBSESSION

BY
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PROLOGUE

He paused in the doorway to the gambling parlor to scrutinize the nine tables in turn. Each had five men seated around it; each had only one lantern hanging over it from the beamed ceiling. The lanterns swayed in rhythm with the choppy waves. The noisy steam engines of the sternwheeler, which he had heard on deck, scarcely registered in this room. The owner of the River Goddess had chosen the best location on the boat for the parlor—relative quiet for maximum concentration.

Moving toward the table to his left, he stood behind and between two players. After only two hands, he knew that none of the five were his caliber of poker player. Unless he was having a particularly bad night and needed to recoup his money, he would leave these gentlemen alone. No sense in taking money from poor players. He, Ethan Lucas, believed that was cheating and had never deprived a man of his money so easily unless he was desperate for money himself. He moved on to the next table.

One man folded and rolled some tobacco into a piece of paper about four inches long. Deciding to have a smoke himself, Ethan whipped a dark brown cigar from his inside jacket pocket and bit off the tip. Spitting it out, he strode to stand by the man with the cigarette. As soon as the man lit it with a match he struck on the edge of the table, Ethan grabbed the flaming stick before it went out.

All at the table stared up at him as he casually touched the flame to the end of his cigar and puffed on it several times. Smoke encircled his head like a cloud did a mountain top. Shaking the fire off the match, he dropped it into the ceramic ashtray and nodded once in acknowledgment toward the quintet.

Those men appeared afraid of him, and why wouldn't they? At about six feet two inches and muscular, most men found him imposing because most were six or more inches shorter. Ethan moved on to the next table. A dapper man in his forties sat across from him. When Ethan's shadow fell across his hand, Dapper Forties looked up. His mouth gaping, Dapper Forties folded on his turn, grabbed the money before him on the table, and knocked his chair over in his rush to leave.

Ethan smirked. He must have played against that man before since Dapper Forties left so abruptly. At least, there was an opening in the room now. The four others at the table gazed up at him but didn't appear intimidated. Good. They had some spunk, and they didn't let their feelings show. He wouldn't mind betting against them. He might come back to this table when he finished sizing up the competition.

He moved on to the fourth table. The dealer was shuffling the cards quickly. Ethan noticed the extreme efficiency with which the dealer passed out the cards. Ethan puffed on his cigar. There was no way in hell he would play at that table. The dealer was a slick shark, and the other four were too stupid to see it.

At the head table, Ethan stopped and stared at the portrait on the wall before him. That was the most attractive woman he'd ever seen. She wasn't the beauties he was used to, but she possessed a quality that made her much more pleasing to look at. Maybe it was the shy smile—or the innocent expression in her pale eyes. Whatever it was, he had to have that

painting. Then he had to find that woman to see if those attributes were real or merely a painter's vivid imagination.

"If you're not going to play," the man sitting adjacent to the portrait ordered in a heavy French accent, "get out from behind me. You're ruining my concentration."

Although taken aback that the Frenchman knew he was there, Ethan took another puff of his cigar as he moved off to one side. In the middle of the hand, the player slammed his cards face-down on the table. Rising abruptly, he glared up at Ethan.

"If you don't get away from me," he warned as he took in Ethan's size, "I'll have my four biggest men throw you overboard."

Ethan raised an eyebrow and puffed on his cigar again. When he spoke, his deep, clear voice boomed throughout the room, attracting everyone's attention. "You own this river-boat?"

"Yes. I'm Frank Bower. Now leave."

A quick thought flashed through Ethan's mind. Frank Bower didn't sound like a French name. Then again, many people changed their names when immigrating to America.

Instead of leaving, Ethan strode to the player sitting under the portrait and clamped his hand onto the player's shoulder. Nodding once toward the table Dapper Forties had vacated, he said, "Over there."

Without hesitating, the player grabbed the money before him and left. Ethan sank onto the now-empty chair. "I'm Ethan Lucas. Finish this hand then deal me in."

Bower sat down again, glowering at Ethan's audacity. He picked up his cards and placed his next bet while Ethan watched stone-faced, puffing on his cigar.

After several hours and two bottles of wine, Bower began betting recklessly. With the other men in the parlor long since gone, Ethan became ruthless. He was determined to outplay this drunken mark and teach him a lesson he would never forget—that poker and wine don't mix. He would win the portrait above him that Bower constantly glanced at.

By dawn Bower had downed another bottle of wine. About an hour after sunrise, Bower dealt the final hand. He had work to do and had to stop gambling whether he won this hand or lost it. As he always did, he fanned his cards out one by one. Five-card draw, deuces wild. The top card was the ace of spades; the next, the ace of diamonds. The following three he uncovered were the three of spades, the nine of spades and the four of spades. *What a hand!* he thought sarcastically. A pair of aces and three low cards, but he did have four spades—and a major decision to make. Did he turn in the three low cards and take three more in the hope of getting some higher cards to go with his aces? Or did he turn in the diamond and try his luck on one more spade for a flush?

He glanced across the table. Ethan puffed on his third cigar that night and absently blew a smoke ring, watching it rise toward the ceiling and dissipate. His expression gave no hint of how good or bad his hand was.

"How much to you want to bet, Lucas?" Bower demanded.

"Last hand, eh?" Lucas asked, rubbing the day growth of beard on his square jaw in contemplation.

"I have work to do."

"Stakes?"

Bower glanced at his cards again. It probably wasn't a very smart play, but he felt lucky. He had to see if it was real or imagined, so he said. "Whatever you can afford."

Lucas pushed all the money before him to the center of the table. "Twelve hundred dollars."

Bower stared at him in wide-eyed disbelief. "That's everything you have—to *open*."

Reaching into his pocket, Lucas pulled out a roll of bills and laid it on the table. "You in?"

Bower let his gaze drift to the portrait behind the man. What would she have said about this hand? She would have told him to stop gambling before he lost everything. But she didn't understand a man's lust for the danger of that happening. She only understood the other kind of lust. And she understood it very well!

With a sigh, Bower counted out twelve hundred dollars of the money before him and laid it on top of Lucas's. "What will it be, Lucas?"

"Stand pat," Ethan replied as streams of smoke drifted from his mouth and nostrils.

Bower grunted and shook his head. Three times during the night Lucas had refused any new cards, and three times he had lost the hand. Only a fool would try the same thing a fourth time. Making a quick decision, Bower laid three cards from his hand aside and announced, "Dealer takes three."

Bower stared at the three cards. Then he looked over at Lucas, whose expression remained unchanged, a good poker face. Could his cards beat the ones he had dealt to his opponent?

"Are you going to bet?" Bower asked. "Or are you going to sit there all day?"

Lucas picked up the roll of bills and dropped it on the pile. "Two thousand dollars."

"On a pat hand?" Bower asked in shock. But Lucas stared at him stone-faced through a cloud of smoke. Bower counted the money he had left. Two hundred seventy-five dollars, but he had plenty of property. He looked at his cards again—four aces and the five of clubs. It was a damned fine hand, because only two could beat it. Lucas couldn't have a royal flush, because *he* had the ace to make it. And the chances of Lucas having a straight flush were almost as slim. He himself had only had four in over twenty years of gambling.

"I have two-seventy-five here, Lucas," Bower asked. "Will you take property?"

"Only one thing," Lucas replied. "The portrait behind me."

Bower stared at him in shock. "You want my painting to be worth seventeen hundred twenty-five dollars?"

"Do you want to forfeit the money you've already bet?" Lucas prompted.

Again, Bower looked at his hand. Four aces and a five. Only one hand possibly higher. "All right, Lucas. The portrait plus my cash."

Without a word, Lucas laid his cards face-up on the table. Bower stared at them in shock. Ethan had the king, queen, jack, ten and nine of hearts. If he'd given up the nine, he would have drawn the ace. That would have made a royal flush. But even that didn't matter now. A straight flush beat his four of a kind. He had lost his beloved portrait.

Suddenly, panic set in. He had to get the painting back. He *had* to. He grabbed up the cards and shuffled them frantically. Slapping them down on the table, he said, "Cut the deck."

"Don't be a fool, Bower," Lucas advised. "You're a cold player now, and you know it."

"Cut the damned deck," Bower ordered.

Shaking his head, Ethan took the top part of the deck and set it to the right. Bower put the bottom stack on the top cards.

"We're going to draw one card," Bower announced. "High card takes all."

"All what?"

"If you lose, I get everything on the table and my portrait. If I lose, you get the River Goddess and everything on board."

"I'll give you one thing," Lucas said, picking up some of the cards, "you've got heart. But

you're a real dupe, too." He turned his cards over to reveal the top one. "Ten of diamonds exposed. You can go either way."

Bower took some cards and turned them over. The seven of clubs. He'd lost everything. Numb with shock, Bower rose and strode out of the gambling parlor.

"Idiot," Ethan grumbled as he stuffed the money into his pockets.

He rose and turned around to study the portrait more closely. Now that the early-morning light shone on it, he noticed that there was a sadness in those innocent eyes. His normally cold heart melted somewhat when he saw it.

"If I ever find you, ..." His gaze drifted to the name etched in the bottom of the frame. "... Angel, I'll turn your sorrow into happiness. I swear I'll find you and take you away from all of your sadness. I don't know why I feel this way, but I have a deep desire to fill your life with nothing but joy."

As it always did, his sexual appetite reached its peak when he won big, and he needed a woman more than he ever had. "I wish you were here right now, Angel. I'd show you a good time like you've never seen before. But that will have to wait until I find you—and by God, I will. For some reason I have a desperate need to have you in my life. Right now, though, I need to find a willing female partner to satisfy my desires."

After finding and spending three hours in the arms of a willing woman, Lucas took a slow tour of his newly acquired riverboat. At the end, he stopped back at the gambling parlor. Without paying attention to the poker players present, he strode purposefully to the portrait and stared at it. He felt almost as though it was calling to him, pulling him into its power without saying a word.

I don't know why you're doing this to me, Angel, he thought. I don't know why you want me so much. But I do know one thing. We're destined to meet some day, and I won't stop searching for you until we do.

ONE

On the gangplank, the breeze blew the young woman's bonnet from her head, and Naomi Carter saw the resemblance between the young woman boarding the steamboat and the portrait that used to hang in the owner's stateroom was uncanny. On the ramp, three young crewmen hurried to help with her four carpetbags. She bent her head as they took her valises; then smiling shyly, returned her gaze to them and spoke. Finally, all four went inside.

Naomi stood on the upper-most deck and leaned against the mahogany handrail. That strawberry blonde woman below could cause a lot of trouble for her simply by being on board. If Ethan Lucas noticed her—and he certainly would—he would undoubtedly see the likeness. Somehow she had to keep the two apart for as long as possible.

"And what are you doing up here, beautiful lady?" a deep, cheerful voice to her right asked. "I thought you were going to greet my passengers."

Facing the tall, darkly handsome man, Naomi accepted his brief kiss. "I don't feel very friendly today, Ethan. You didn't want me to alienate your passengers, did you?"

"It must be that time again," he said with a playful grin.

"I suppose," she agreed as she traced the pale scar under his left eye. He'd received the wound several months earlier, trying to break up a fight between one of his crew and a gambler. "I always found you handsome, darling, but your scar makes you even more desirable."

"What a nice compliment." Grasping her waist, Ethan pulled her against him and kissed her again. "And you're beautiful. You're very good for my image, too. Having you act as hostess was the best business move I've ever made."

"Is that all I am to you?" she asked with a pout. "Something to improve your business?"

"You know better than that, Naomi. I need you in a lot of ways—not just for my business or my image."

"In my heart, I know it. But sometimes ..."

"Correction. Once a month for about two days you doubt my sincerity, and you know the best way to remedy that. Go on up to the stateroom. I'll join you after we cast off."

"That won't solve anything."

"Solve, no, but it will show you how much I need you. Now go on. I'll be there as soon as I can."

The blue-eyed blonde strolled away, and Ethan sighed. As much as he liked Naomi, he hated her monthly accusations. They'd been together for well over a year, so she should know he wouldn't desert her. And he'd already done more for her than he had for any other woman he'd known. Besides giving her expensive jewelry and fashionable clothes, he'd removed the portrait of "Angel" from his quarters, simply because she was jealous—of a *painting*. But rather than dispose of it as she'd wanted, he'd hung it in his office. That was the only room on board from which she was absolutely barred.

Looking out over the Hudson River, he recalled the first time he saw the portrait. His

luck at the table had been good that weekend, and he still attributed his winnings to the portrait that had overlooked his hands. From that time on, the beautiful “Angel” with the strawberry-blond hair was his confidant, his hope for the future. As hard as he’d tried to learn the woman’s identity, all he’d found out was that the former owner of the riverboat had painted the portrait. If only he hadn’t left the boat before Ethan had connected the name on the portrait with the owner.

“Excuse me, sir,” a man said from behind him.

Startled from his daydream, Ethan spun to face his tall, husky captain. “What is it, Jennings?”

“You asked me to let you know when we’re ready to cast off. I figure it’ll be another ten minutes.”

Taking his watch from his pocket, Ethan opened it. “Right on time. Did you and two other men check the boilers? I don’t want to kill my passengers because one of them explodes.”

“Aye, sir. I found a small problem, but I fixed it. Then I had three others check them to be safe.”

“And everything’s fine now?”

“Absolutely, sir.”

“Good.” Ethan paused to release a long, sorrowful sigh. “Cast off on schedule.”

“Is something wrong, Mr. Lucas?”

“Naomi’s in one of her moods again. Now I’ve got to prove how much I need her. Unfortunately, I’m not in the mood. How the hell is a man supposed to handle a wife if he can’t even understand her monthly moods.”

“Why do you think I travel so much?” Jennings replied with a chuckle. “I can’t. But when I am home, I love married life.”

“Have you ever been unfaithful?”

“Not once in twenty years. I’m lucky that she trusts me, or we’d probably have lots of arguments. She’s a wonderful woman, Mr. Lucas. She has to be to put up with an old seadog like me. That’s why I took on as a riverboat captain—so I could be home more often. I don’t have blood in my veins, sir. It’s water, and my wife knows it. That’s probably why we get along so well.”

“And that’s why I can discuss women with you. I’m thirty-three years old, but I feel like I’m ten when it comes to understanding women.”

“That will probably *never* happen, sir,” Jennings said, grinning. “I don’t think women want men to understand them. Understand that, and you don’t need to understand them.”

Frowning, Ethan gazed down at his captain. “Maybe you’re right. Thank you for talking to me, Jennings, but if I don’t let you go, we won’t cast off on time.”

Instead of joining Naomi, Ethan wandered absently to his office on the lowest of the three decks.

An involuntary shiver coursed through Blythe Bouvier at the sight of the foreboding man who passed as she exited her room. It might not have been so bad if he’d done more than grunt when she greeted him. Her first attempt at overcoming her shyness, and the person she chose to practice on acted like she didn’t even exist.

He was a handsome man, though, with neatly trimmed black hair and equally dark eyes that stared straight ahead as if unseeing. The thick black mustache seemed to be a solace

for him, and the short, dark beard added to his intimidating appearance. With his right hand, he toyed with a corner of his mustache, his left hand thrust deep into his trouser pocket. Even though she was attracted to his physical appearance, she dreaded the possibility of running across him in the dark. His imposing stature alone made her wonder how safe she would be.

Blythe tossed her wavy, waist-length locks over her shoulder then went in search of the stairs to the observation deck. Standing at the railing, she watched the steamboat begin its long trip up the Hudson River through the Erie Canal, along the Mohawk River to the Great Lakes. When she got to Chicago, though, she didn't know what she would do. Her passage, food, and lodging from France to this point had taken all but fifty dollars. And she needed that to live on until she could find a job to earn enough money for the final leg of her trip to New Orleans.

After she'd been in the chilly wind for twenty minutes, Blythe decided to return to her cabin. On the way, she met a blonde woman coming up the stairs. With renewed determination to overcome her shyness, Blythe smiled and greeted the woman.

The woman, a bit taller than Blythe, studied her with a suspicious look in her blue eyes. "Good afternoon."

"My name is Blythe Bouvier," she said. "Are you going far on this trip?"

"To the end of the line."

"So am I. Maybe we could become better acquainted. Having a friend on board would certainly pass a lot of time."

"Maybe," the woman said. "Would you please excuse me? I'm looking for someone."

"I'm sorry," Blythe apologized, stepping out of the woman's way. "I hope to see you again when we both have time to chat."

"Yes, of course. Good afternoon."

Disappointed that she'd been unsuccessful in beginning a friendship for the second time, Blythe pouted as she wandered to her cabin.

Ethan paced his office. Naomi was probably furious because he hadn't joined her, but he had to think of a new way to deal with her first. Unfortunately, dealing with women had never been his strong suit. They played games he considered demeaning to a man's mentality, and he would never understand how they could think a man didn't know what they were doing.

"What should I do, Angel?" he asked aloud as he wandered back to his desk. Sitting down behind it, he picked up a pen and drummed it on his paperweight while staring at the portrait across from him. "I need Naomi, but she doesn't seem to be happy with me—not completely happy, anyway. If I could read her as well as I can read another man's poker hand just by looking at his face, my problems would be over."

Stalking across the room to the credenza, he splashed some rye into a glass. He downed it quickly then poured more and returned to his desk. After taking a sip, he gazed up at the portrait. When he started to take another swig, he stopped short and stared at the painting. It looked more real than ever, as though "Angel" would walk right out of the picture, and her sunset-red hair seemed to bounce around her face. Closing his eyes, he jerked his head in an attempt to clear his mind then returned his gaze to the painting. Angel smiled down at him shyly as she always did.

Then a vague, unexpected memory flashed across his mind, and he dropped his glass to

the carpeted floor. Moving quickly, he cleaned up the spill with a towel by his wash basin. Now he understood why Angel's hair seemed to move. It had—on a young woman aboard his ship! He was sure of it. Where had he seen her, anyway?

It didn't really matter. If she was on board, he would find her. The steamboat wasn't so large that he could go throughout the entire trip without seeing her again. Sooner or later, he would run into her. In the meantime, he would search for her everywhere. He had to know what the face in the midst of those beautiful tresses looked like.

Going to the observation deck, Ethan looked for the redhead. When he didn't find her there, he started to leave but stopped at the sound of a woman's voice nearby.

"Where have you been, darling?" Naomi asked as she approached him. "You said you'd meet me, but you didn't."

"Something came up and I couldn't," he admitted. "Have you seen a red-haired woman aboard, Naomi? Not red red, but blonde red. It's very important that I find her."

"As a matter of fact, no. Should I relay a message if I do?"

"Have her wait for me outside my office then come find me."

"Your office?" she repeated.

In that instant, Ethan realized his error. Naomi knew he never let anyone other than the captain in the cabin. To cover his error, he said, "That's right. What I have to say is very important and a bit personal, and I don't want any interruptions. And I *don't* want anybody overhearing us."

"Do you know this woman?"

"She reminds me of somebody, and I want to see if they're related. I really am in a hurry, Naomi. If you see a redhead about so tall, ..." He held his hand level with his shoulder. "... have her wait for me by my office then come find me."

Blythe spent most of the next two days in her cabin. During this time, the riverboat was pulled through a series of locks by ropes attached to mules on land. It was a slow process, but one which gave her plenty of time to contemplate her life after reaching Chicago. It also meant that she could avoid the intimidating man she'd passed the first day aboard. He was quite a bit taller than the average man and she could tell by how his clothes fit him that he was quite muscular. His dark features didn't make him any less menacing.

Apparently, he'd been searching for her as long as she'd been hiding from him. One lady had even pointed him out from a distance and mentioned that he'd asked her if she knew where he could find a lovely redhead. After learning that, Blythe always tied back her hair, donned a bonnet, and hid her hair under her light-weight coat before she left the cabin for meals. And at every meal, she sat at a corner dining room table away from the crystal chandeliers so she wouldn't be noticed.

Her third evening on board, she almost panicked when the man entered with the blonde and neared her table. When the woman sat down facing her and the man took the chair across from the woman, Blythe sighed in relief. With his back to her, she could safely escape at the right time. All she had to do was keep her head bent as she left the dining room.

To her dismay, though, they sat not far from her, and she could hear their conversation.

"When are you coming back to our suite at night, Ethan?" Naomi asked.

They're suite? Blythe thought in shock. Were they married? At least, now she knew the man's name. Ethan.

"I've been playing poker the last couple of nights, and it's late by the time I'm done."

"You must be winning quite a bit. You always quit after three hands if you're losing."

"Actually, I blew a small fortune," he admitted, combing his fingers through his thick hair. "I can't seem to concentrate on the cards."

"How much is a small fortune?"

"Five hundred fifty dollars."

"You lost \$550 in two nights of gambling?" she shrieked.

The man glanced around, and Blythe bowed her head over her food so he wouldn't notice her. Ethan scolded the woman in a firm yet quiet tone. "Not so loud, Naomi. The whole damned boat doesn't have to know my business. Besides, that money is mine, not yours. You have no say in how I spend it. When I finished playing, I went to my office. I fell asleep there both nights, and I might do the same damned thing tonight."

"Why? Aren't you interested in sleeping with me anymore?"

The anger in his tone caused Blythe some concern. "At this point, I don't know *what* the hell I'm interested in. The only interest on my mind right now is finding that redhead—or I might lose my mind instead of my money."

"Are you positive that you didn't just imagine seeing her?"

Blythe could have sworn that Naomi was looking straight at her. Then Ethan looked in her direction again.

When he looked back to his companion, he said, "She's here, all right. I've talked to people who've seen her. I'm going to find her, Naomi, and I don't care if I die doing it. At least, I'll die knowing I tried like hell. I don't understand how she disappeared like that. After the night we cast off, nobody's even seen her. For God's sake, what'd she do? Jump overboard?"

Using all of her willpower, Blythe kept silent. He was undeniably looking for her, because a couple of other passengers said something about the owner of the boat wanting to meet her. Somehow she needed to get away from here as soon as she finished her meal.

"Maybe she's seasick," Naomi suggested. "Maybe she doesn't want to come out of her cabin."

"That's a possibility, I suppose," he agreed, his voice rising in excitement. "I'll go from cabin to cabin. When I find her, I'll see if I can do anything for her."

Oh, no! Now he was declaring that he would look in each cabin. How could she ever escape this intimidating man when he was so determined?

"You're acting like a little boy with his first case of puppy-love," Naomi said. "And you're fooling yourself if you don't think I know what this is all about. It's that portrait I made you get rid of. You were so attached to it that you've gone to unrealistic extremes just because you *think* you saw a woman with red hair."

"I definitely saw her, Naomi," he insisted. "She even spoke to me. I was so deep in thought, though, I didn't pay enough attention to her. If I had, I would have stopped her then and there."

"If that's the case, why haven't you found her?"

"I don't know what she looks like, except she's rather small and has golden red hair. I *know* she's here somewhere."

"I don't understand this. The woman's probably married. Why are you going to so much trouble to find her?"

"For God's sake, Naomi. All I want to do is meet her—to apologize for being so rude when she spoke to me."

At that moment, the waiter appeared with a large tray of food and set it on the edge of

the table.

Now was the time to leave. While the waiter set the plates before the couple, Blythe made sure her locks were hidden and tilted her head down as she passed them. Since they just now got their food, she could roam around the sternwheeler for a while without being noticed.

Deep in thought, Blythe wandered to the observation deck. Why had she ever boarded the River Goddess? The letter, of course. If it hadn't been buried in that old, decrepit trunk in her grandmother's attic, she wouldn't be here. She never would have taken the remainder of her inheritance. She never would have left France for the long journey to the United States just to see if the riverboat was still in existence.

But was it only the letter? All of her life she'd felt as though her past was incomplete. Her mother had told her all about her side of the family, but her father had said almost nothing. When they both died in a carriage accident, her entire world had crumbled around her.

A man had appeared at her grandmother Vincent's door about a month after Gertrude and Jack Bouvier's deaths. His name was Henri Bouvier, he had explained, Jack's uncle. He had come from France to collect his niece and nephews. At eleven, she hadn't wanted to leave Ferne Vincent. But the old woman was rapidly losing her sight and was unable to care for a young girl and two boys, nine and seven. Apparently, Ferne's sister had notified Blythe's French grandmother of Jack's death and Ferne's inability to care for the children. So, Blythe had gone without complaint, only to lose both of her brothers as well when she was seventeen. That was over three years ago, and she still missed them desperately. They'd been her last link to a country and time she had loved.

When she lifted her hand to brush away a tear, she knocked the bonnet from her head. It felt good to have the gentle April breeze kiss a loosened tendril. Releasing the yellow velvet ribbon, she tossed her hair around her shoulders.

"Good evening, miss," a man said from behind her.

Startled, she spun to face him. She let a shy smile play on her lips as she greeted him. "Hello."

"I hope you don't mind my saying so," he offered, returning her smile, "but you have beautiful hair."

"Thank you. My name is Blythe Bouvier." Extending her right hand for him to shake, she stiffened when he lifted it to kiss the back softly.

"Herbert Moody. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance. Are you the redhead the owner of the River Goddess is looking for?"

Blythe tensed even more at the mention of the large man from whom she'd been hiding. "Apparently. But I've been avoiding him, so I'm not sure."

"That must mean you don't want to meet him."

"I tried the first day on board," she replied, "and he was quite rude. I'd rather not encounter him again."

"Are you married?"

"No, Mr. Moody, I'm not. Why do you ask?"

"Because he followed me in this direction, and I think you've been found. If you'd like, I could help dissuade him from continuing his search."

Her heart skipped a beat, but she wasn't sure if it was because he'd followed her or because she had an ally to help her evade him. "I would appreciate that. But how?"

"Like this."

Before she could react, he embraced her and ground his lips against hers. Dropping her ribbon, Blythe tried to push him away, but her struggles only increased the demand of his embrace. This isn't what she wanted! In fact, she hated what was happening. She needed to stop this man. But he wouldn't release her no matter how much she struggled.

Enraged, Ethan rushed toward the couple. No man could treat a woman like that—not with him around. Without warning, he tore the man from the woman and spun him with such force that he revolved twice. Ethan balled his hand into a fist and caught the man squarely in the nose. Cartilage crunched beneath the blow; blood spurted in only a moment.

Herbert cried out and clasped his nose with both hands, but Ethan refused to let his defense of the woman's virtue end with a single, well-placed blow. Instead, he punched Herbert in the stomach. The smaller man doubled over as air gushed from his mouth. Pulling him upright by the hair, Ethan was about to strike again when he caught a flash of red out of the corner of his eye. Glancing around, he saw that she was gone again.

"Damn!" he exclaimed. "She disappeared. Is she your wife?"

"N-no," Herbert stammered.

"I thought not. You'd better at least know her name."

"I do."

When Herbert didn't continue, Ethan prompted irately, "What the hell is it?"

"I ... I don't remember. She introduced herself, but I don't remember."

"Go down to the lower deck and have the doctor check you. While you're doing that, you'd better remember her name. When the doc is done, come to my office. I'll be waiting for you. And don't forget again. By the way, what's your name?"

"Herbert Moody."

"If you don't meet me, Moody, I'll come and get you. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get the hell out of my sight—before I hit you again."

As the brown-haired man hurried away, Ethan glanced down at the deck to see if blood was on it. The bonnet the woman dropped was gone, but her ribbon lay on the deck. And there were red spots on the yellow material. Stooping down, he picked it up then rose and stroked the soft fabric with a tender touch. Naomi was wrong; he hadn't imagined the redhead. She was real—at least, the ribbon from her hair was. But where had she gone? He had to find her, but first he had to tell Moody to leave the riverboat when they docked the next morning. And Ethan would be standing at the gangplank to see that Moody got off, not to mention that the redhead stayed on.

TWO

Blythe lifted her skirts and ran down the steps, not glancing over her shoulder until she reached the bottom. To her relief, she was alone, although she could vaguely hear the large man's irate voice. Unable to understand the words, she raced toward her cabin.

When Herbert forced his kiss on her, Blythe thought she'd never been so frightened. But when she saw the rage in the large man's face, the violence he exhibited, she'd been so terrified that she fled. The last thing she wanted was to be on the receiving end of his physical outburst.

After only a couple seconds' delay, she hurried to her cabin, absently apologizing to the three people she bumped into on the way. As soon as she was in her room, she locked the door and collapsed against it.

Within seconds there was a knock, and she jerked away from the door. Her heart pounded. He had followed her! If she didn't answer, maybe he would go look for her somewhere else.

The person knocked again, this time followed by a woman's voice. "Are you all right in there?"

Sighing in relief, Blythe opened her door to admit the blonde then checked the hall. His face set in rage, Ethan strode in her direction as he stared at something in his hand. Blythe closed the door and slid the lock into place then leaned against it again. Her body weakened by the fear, Blythe turned toward her guest. To her surprise, the woman she'd admitted was the same one eating dinner with Ethan. Now she was concerned that Naomi would tell Ethan where to find her.

"What can I do for you, ma'am?" Blythe asked, struggling to regain her composure.

"From the looks of you," Naomi replied, "I should be asking that. You're white as a ghost. What happened?"

"It's nothing to bother you with," Blythe said as she moved to sit on her bed. "I'm just a little shaken."

"Would you like to tell me about it?"

Filled with suspicion, Blythe stared at her. This woman had just been eating with the man who had rescued her from Herbert. Rescued her? Is that really what had happened? It didn't matter, though, because she had no desire to be around such a violent person.

"Maybe," the blonde said, "I should start by saying I'm sorry for the way I acted the other day. My name is Naomi Lucas. I'm afraid I don't remember yours."

"Blythe Bouvier."

"Do you want to tell me why you're so shaken, Blythe? Maybe I can help."

Although leery of the woman, Blythe wanted to explain. From the way Naomi talked to Ethan at dinner, maybe she wouldn't tell him. Maybe she preferred to have him all to herself.

Unable to resist, Blythe unburdened herself. "From what I understand, the owner of the steamboat has been looking for me. I avoided him for as long as I could, but he found me tonight. At least, I believe it was him. A man offered to help me when he heard my problem,

so I agreed. I didn't know he was going to kiss me."

"And you didn't want him to, so he forced his attentions on you. It must have scared you pretty badly from the way you were running through the boat."

Blythe shuddered at the memory. "It did, but I was more afraid of the man I think is the owner. He reacted so violently! I never want to see him again. I'm terrified that he'll attack *me* next."

"Are you sure it was the owner?"

Blythe bowed her head in shame at the idea that she could be unjustly accusing the man, "Well, not positive. He's much taller than most men and ... Wait a minute! It was the man you dined with tonight. Is he the owner?"

"Yes," Naomi mumbled.

"Do me a favor. Please?" Blythe asked, unable to keep the hysteria from her voice. "Tell him that I don't want him looking for me? Tell him to leave me alone."

"Actually, I've already tried, but he won't listen. And I don't think he'll rest until he meets you."

Panic rushed through her. She had to stop that from happening. But how? "You mean I'll have to spend the whole trip in here to avoid him?"

"I could try again if you want. Maybe if I tell him what we talked about, he'll change his mind."

"Do you think it will help?" Blythe asked.

"It can't hurt. Let me try."

What choice did she have? Blythe wondered. It was foolhardy to think she would stay in her cabin and not have him find her—especially after she'd heard him tell Naomi that he would go from cabin to cabin in search of her.

Ethan stared at the portrait while he stroked the ribbon laying on the desk before him. "I wish I'd gotten a look at her face, Angel, but I was so desperate to defend her virtue that I didn't have time before she disappeared again. That's why I told Moody to meet me here. I have to see his reaction to your portrait. Naomi could see right away how obsessed I am with you. That's why I couldn't get rid of you when she told me to. That woman's hair is so much like yours—the color, the length, the mass of curls. I have to know if her face looks like yours, too. I *have* to. It's the only way to get her out of my mind, out of my body. No, out of my *soul*."

"What am I going to do, Angel? Every time I look at your portrait now, you seem to come alive. I have a feeling it's because she's the image of you, but I can't be sure. I didn't pay that much attention to her that first time. Moody should give me some idea if ..."

Ethan nearly jumped from the chair at the solid knock on his door. Grabbing the blood-splattered ribbon, he stared at it anxiously. How would he react if Moody gave no sign of recognition?

"That must be him now. Oh, God, Angel. Can I really go through with this? Do I honestly want to know if she looks like you? She probably doesn't, and I'd be devastated. On second thought, ..."

The person outside his office knocked again, and Ethan strode to the door. When he reached for the handle, he stopped, stunned that his hand shook so badly. He knew he was nervous, but he didn't realize how much until that moment. Opening the door, he admitted the smaller man into the room. Apparently, he had broken Moody's nose, because the doc-

tor had covered it with a make-shift splint and both eyes were already discolored.

“Don’t bother to sit down, Moody,” Ethan said as he closed the door then wandered across to the porthole. Just outside the paddlewheel splashed in the water. He’d intentionally chosen that small, stern cabin for his office because of the wheel. Whenever he wanted to think, he would watch it go around. And it never failed to calm him—except this time. After a heavy sigh, he added, “You won’t be here long.”

Standing near the door, Herbert exclaimed, “Oh, my God! She told me she was trying to avoid you. She said she wasn’t married. I had no idea. I swear it!”

Ethan spun to face at the man. The expression of horror on Moody’s face showed that he thought the young woman was Ethan’s wife. But if he knew the painting had been won, he might be more willing to discuss her.

“She isn’t my wife,” Ethan admitted, “but ...”

“Then why do you have her painting here? Why did you break my nose? Is she your sister or something?”

“Yes.” The lie came easily. “My half-sister, really. My mother asked me to find her—because my step-father left a long time ago and took the child with. But first, I have to see if it’s the same person. What’s her name?”

“Miss Bouvier, but I couldn’t remember her first name. It’s unusual, one I’ve never heard before. That’s all I can tell you, mister. Honest.”

“Bouvier is good enough. She’s definitely my sister. If you run into her again before tomorrow morning, you’d sure as hell better apologize—sincerely. And if you do, don’t tell her why I’m looking for her. I should break the news myself. Don’t even mention my name.”

“That should be easy,” Herbert said sarcastically, “since you didn’t tell me it.”

Uncontrollable rage exploded in Ethan again, as it did every time somebody spoke to him in that tone—or if he didn’t get his way. “Shut up, Moody. Or I’ll break something else. The boat docks tomorrow at ten-thirty, and you’re getting off.”

“I am not! I won’t get off until Detroit. That’s how far I paid to travel.”

“Despite what you did to my sister, I’ll reimburse part of your fare. But you *will* get off because I’ll be at the gangplank to see that you do. Now get the hell out of my sight and stay away from my sister. I’ll ask her if you followed my orders as soon as I’m finally reunited with her.”

“Before I go, I want to ask you a question.”

“You’re in no position to ask me anything.”

“I’m going to, anyway. You say that she’s your sister—you have the same mother. But you said that her father took her away when she was a child. If that’s true, how did you get her portrait?”

Ethan stared at Moody. How could he say he got it? More important, how could he extricate himself from this blunder? Supposedly, he hadn’t seen the woman in the picture since she was a child, yet he had the painting displayed in his office. Hopefully, his second lie would be a plausible explanation.

“The woman in the painting is our mother. When I saw the red hair, I had to know if it was my sister. That’s why I was looking for her. Now that you’ve identified her for me, I can reunite with her even sooner.”

Someone knocked, and both men shot their startled gazes toward the door. Angered by the interruption, Ethan shouted, “Who the hell is it?”

“Naomi,” she replied. “I need to talk to you.”

“We’re coming out now,” Ethan announced, grabbing Moody’s arm and steering him to the door. Once in the hall, Ethan released the man then locked his office door, warning, “Be

ready at ten-thirty tomorrow, Moody. I'll be waiting with your money. Until then, you'd be smart to stay out of my sight. Come with me, Naomi. We'll talk on the observation deck."

Laying Naomi's hand in the crook of his elbow, Ethan escorted her toward the stairs. At the same time, he tucked the yellow ribbon into his jacket pocket. No matter how angry he became—and he was almost irate at the moment—he always treated women with respect and graciousness. But after his performance in front of Miss Bovier that night, she was probably afraid of him.

When they reached the deck, Ethan half-sat on the mahogany railing. His thigh rested on it while his left hand was stuffed into his jacket pocket. His thumb rubbed the soft velvet, occasionally hitting the hardened blood, as he spoke with Naomi. "What's on your mind?"

"Blythe," she answered.

"Blythe?" he repeated. "What are you talking about?"

"The woman you've been looking for. I talked to her a while ago and found out her first name was Blythe. I don't remember her last name, but it sounded French."

"Bouvier," he offered.

"That's it. How did you know?"

"The man in my office told me. What did she say when you told her that I want to meet her?"

"The feeling isn't mutual. She doesn't want you looking for her."

Startled, Ethan stared down at her. "Why not?"

"She's afraid of you."

"Why?" Shock replaced his anger. "I've never done anything to hurt her. I've only protected her, defended her honor. Surely, you told her that I could never hurt a woman."

"You weren't there, darling."

Naomi took his right hand in both of hers and studied at it. Ethan let his gaze follow hers and saw his bruised knuckles in the fading sunlight. Naomi kissed them lightly.

"You didn't see her, Ethan," she said. "She was terrified, as white as a sheet. I'm surprised she didn't swoon dead away. Even if I'd tried to explain, she never would have believed me—not in her condition. Maybe tomorrow or the next day. But tonight, she wouldn't have listened."

"Would you talk to her again tomorrow?" he asked in concern. "I don't want her to be afraid of me when I first approach her."

"I'll try, but I can't promise anything. You realize that, don't you?"

Bowing his head in shame, he considered what must be going through Blythe's mind and mumbled his reply. "Yes."

"Will you be coming to our cabin tonight, darling?"

"I don't see why not."

But when they got to the suite, discomfort consumed Ethan. He couldn't stay there. He couldn't bear to be alone with Naomi anymore, despite how attached to her he'd become in the past eighteen months. Not being able to meet Blythe Bouvier was harder to bear than he thought it would be. Somehow he had to meet that redhead before he lost his mind, then he could resume a normal relationship with Naomi.

Blythe spent a restless night, her pleasant dreams constantly disrupted by visions of the imposing man's violent outburst. At dawn she rose to wander the paddle-wheeler. The owner probably wouldn't be out that early.

To relax, she took a leisurely stroll on all three decks—until she caught a glimpse of a painting outside the public sitting room. She stopped abruptly to examine the picture. It depicted a flower garden with three couples enjoying a summer picnic. All were garbed in fashions from about fifty years previously, but one woman commanded her complete attention. That woman, smiling shyly, could have been herself if she had been alive at the time!

Was that painting the reason someone named Francois had written to her father about the River Goddess? What was the date on the letter again? She couldn't remember exactly, but it had been written before her birth.

That woman. The likeness was incredible! If this was some painter's imagination, he'd come remarkably close to reality. Curious, she glanced at the signature. Frank Bower. She didn't know anybody with that name, but that really didn't mean anything. She'd only been in the country for about a month, and she could only remember her best friend from her years before France.

As other passengers began to exit their cabins, Blythe returned to hers and opened a small box of her most prized possessions. First, she laid the antique gold locket on the bed then her mother's wedding ring. With a sorrowful sigh, she traced the title of her younger brother Dan's favorite book before laying it beside the locket and removing the pocket watch and fob that her other brother Ben had inherited from their father. Something represented every lost member of her family—as well as an unidentified member from years before her father's birth. Now for the letter, written in French, laying on the bottom of the metal box.

Dear Jacques,

Now that he is gone, I must tell you that the man who raised you is not your father. You were born in New Orleans, Louisiana in the U.S.A. I only learned the truth recently—in the same letter I received announcing my brother's death.

I must see you to explain everything and am praying you will come to America. I will be on a riverboat named the River Goddess.

Please come, Jack. (That is your Christian name, not Jacques as the woman who raised you calls you.) It's vitally important.

*Your true father,
Francois Bouvier*

To that day, Blythe didn't know if her father had found the River Goddess. Since he'd never mentioned a father other than Henri Bouvier, it was highly unlikely. In fact, she had been amazed that she'd found the riverboat so easily. After nearly a quarter of a century, the vessel should have been destroyed, since fires, explosions, and sinkings were so common. The River Goddess had survived, though, and she was aboard the same vessel where her phantom grandfather had worked.

As she toyed with her belongings, her mind reeled with questions about the painting. After replacing everything in the metal box, she took her diary, pen and ink from a bureau drawer and lay down on the bed. Once she found the next empty page, she lay her head on her arm and began to write in the small book:

APRIL 13. There's a painting on the River Goddess that has a woman in it who looks just like me. It's hard to believe she's from someone's imagination, because the resemblance is so close. The artist's name is Bower, though; and I don't know any-

body by that name. Who could this Frank Bower be? And did he know the woman in the picture? More importantly, who is she?

Blythe closed her eyes and sighed. She was so exhausted that she fell asleep almost instantly.

Shocked to awaken in a sun-brightened room, Blythe scrambled from her bed to check the time on the pocket watch. The ink bottle toppled over, and she grabbed it up to avoid a disaster on the quilt. With that averted, she opened the pocket watch. Almost noon! She'd slept away nearly the entire morning.

And she was ravenous. Between her concern that the man would notice her at dinner the previous night and her mind on the painting that morning, she'd had very little to eat in twenty-four hours. Leaving her bonnet behind, she locked the cabin and went to the dining room. As she started in, however, another painting caught her attention.

The woman was in this picture, too! This time she and several others walking along a path down the middle of a green lawn. But there was a subtle difference in the painting. Ah, yes. The woman had gained some weight—not enough so that her face and arms were meatier, but enough to show in her stomach. That meant the woman must be ...

"The likeness is incredible, isn't it, Miss Bouvier," a man with a deep voice said from behind her.

Startled, she spun to face him. Her eyes widened in horror when she saw the man who had assaulted Herbert. Struggling to maintain her composure, Blythe stepped to her left so she could pass him. He stepped to his right, blocking her retreat. Again, she tried to leave, and again, he prevented it.

She stared up at him, her heart racing with fear. Would he hurt her if she tried to get away from him again? Would he beat her like he had Herbert? It didn't matter. She couldn't stay here with this man. He was so much larger than she that he could probably carry her off without any difficulty—even if she kicked and screamed to get away.

Still, she forced the words from her mouth, her breathy voice cracking under her stress. "Excuse me please"

"Naomi said that you're afraid of me, Miss Bouvier," he admitted, ignoring her request, "and I don't fault you."

"*Fault* me?" she repeated in shock. "I'm not at fault—you are."

"You're right, of course. It was a bad choice of words. But I won't hurt you. I could never hurt any woman, no matter how foreboding I appear to someone your size."

Unable to respond, Blythe stared up at him. That was the second time he'd verbalized the same words she'd thought—first in connection with the incredible likeness between the woman in the painting and herself, and the second in describing his stature. But if her expression had changed, he gave no indication that he noticed.

"And I suppose the scar doesn't help much now that I'm getting tan again. All I want to do is talk, Miss Bouvier. In fact," he offered, thrusting his hands into his jacket pockets, "I'll keep my hands right here the whole time. Maybe that way you won't feel threatened."

She examined him, unsure what to do. This man was much larger than any other she'd run across. If she denied him then tried to leave, he could easily stop her. And she might even make him as angry as he had been last night. Dreading the possibility of again witnessing his fury, she reluctantly agreed.

"I suppose talking won't hurt. As long as you keep your hands in your pockets, you can't very well do anything to me."

“Thank you.” To her amazement, he gifted her with a crooked smile that melted her resolve in an instant. “Now about the painting. You yourself could have posed for it.”

Returning her gaze to the painting, she agreed. “I know, and there’s another one on board with the same woman in it.”

“If you look closely, you’ll find her in *every* picture—sometimes in the foreground and sometimes in the back, but always there.”

“I didn’t realize that,” she said. “Do you know who she is?”

“I have no idea. There’s one painting aboard that’s more detailed—a portrait of her. Would you like to see it?”

Excitement flooded through her, and she shot her gaze back to his face. “Oh, yes!”

Ethan smiled down at her. He seemed so nice right now that she found it difficult to stay angry with him. Nor did she feel any fear in this close proximity. Did she dare give him a chance to cajole her into liking him? No, she needed to remain wary.

“To be honest,” he said, “you might not be so eager when you hear that it’s hanging in my office, and I don’t allow others in there. Would you feel comfortable alone with me?”

Her lips dropped into a pout. “Probably not.” But she didn’t want him to see her vulnerability, so she drew up her courage to continue. Straightening her shoulders, she stood as tall and erect as she could. “I haven’t eaten much since this time yesterday, and I was on my way to the dining room. If you’ll excuse me ...”

“That’s where I was going, too,” he said. “Why don’t we eat together? That way you can see if you’ll be comfortable with me.”

“I don’t know, Mr. ...” she replied, leaving her sentence up in the air so he would realize that he hadn’t introduced himself.

“I’m sorry. Between Naomi and Moody I learned *your* name, but you still don’t know mine. It’s Ethan Lucas.”

An unexpected tug pulled at her heart, and she interrupted him. “Naomi?”

“Yes. She’s my ...” He paused before continuing. “... wife.”

“Why did you hesitate, Mr. Lucas?”

“I was afraid you’d turn down my invitation if I told you. But Naomi isn’t feeling well, so she won’t care if we eat together. What do you say? Will you join me?”

The smile he graced on her melted her heart a little further, and she returned it shyly while his faded away. Then, as though he had a complete change of thought, Ethan grinned as he held his jacket out toward her, his hands still in the pockets. “You realize, don’t you, that I’ll have to take my hands out of these to eat.”

“All right,” she agreed, dipping her head demurely, “as long as you just eat.”

“I promise.” With his hand still in his pocket, he extended his elbow. As she laid her shaking hand on his forearm, he smiled. “I also promise that the only thing I’ll bite is my food—not my lovely companion—so relax and get to know me a little.”

THREE

During the meal, Blythe learned that Ethan was very friendly and offered her several shy smiles while he charmed her with his wit. Although she enjoyed his company, she was still leery. She had a feeling that he was only being pleasant to get what he wanted—for her to go alone with him to his office. Yet for some reason, she felt drawn to him.

This Ethan was a complete contrast to the one she had passed in the corridor the first day, and he only remotely resembled the violent man on the observation deck. This Ethan Lucas had a ready smile and gracious manner; his dark eyes sparkled mischievously whenever he spoke. Blythe often couldn't tell if he was serious or joking. He was obviously a complex man who enjoyed life to the fullest. If only she could find some enjoyment in her own life! Maybe then she wouldn't be so desperate to find the past that her father had lost. But was it wise to look for something she had no proof ever existed?

What a ridiculous thought! Of course, there was proof—tangible proof that had brought her to the River Goddess in the first place. The letter to her father had proclaimed that a man named Francois Bouvier was her grandfather, and she had to find him. There was more proof now, too. Ethan had told her that he had a painting of a woman who looked exactly like her hanging in his office. Either Ethan or that painting might give her yet another clue to her missing past.

"I thought you were hungry, Miss Bouvier," he observed, drawing her from her thoughts. "You hardly touched your food."

"I guess I wasn't as hungry as I thought," she admitted.

"Or you lost your appetite. I hope the waiter didn't embarrass you too much by staring at you like you were the other woman in my life. The news that we're dining together is probably at least halfway around my ship by now, too."

"Won't Mrs. Lucas be angry?"

"Mrs. Lucas?" he repeated. "Ah, yes, Mrs. Lucas. If you're worried, I can assure you that she won't mind."

"That surprises me. Most women would be furious."

"Why? We haven't done anything but eat and talk. If I'd taken you to my suite for dinner, she'd have every reason to be angry. But I didn't. We're in public with a number of people watching us."

Blythe flashed a quick, nervous smile as she glanced around the dining room. "One can never tell who will start a rumor."

"Does that mean you changed your mind about coming to my office?"

"People could misconstrue your intentions," she admitted, "and mine."

"I promise that my intentions are completely honorable," he insisted while raised his hand as though taking an oath. "You really must see the portrait, Miss Bouvier. The likeness is so uncanny that you could have posed for it yourself. She even has the same shy smile."

"Honest?" she asked in a breathy, amazed tone.

"Absolutely. And I find it a most enchanting smile. Please come down with me. I'll even leave the door open if it will make you more comfortable."

"All right then," she agreed, "if you leave the door open. Besides, you've piqued my curiosity."

"Should I still keep my hands in my pockets?" he asked with a grin.

Blythe bowed her head in a vain attempt to conceal her smile. Now she was self-conscious about it. Whenever he smiled at her, though, she felt a warm rush, as if someone had injected a hot liquid into her veins and her increased heart rate sped it through her body. It was a sensation she had never before experienced but one she loved already. It was exciting and exhilarating—and a little frightening because she didn't know what it meant.

"Are you all right, Blythe?" Ethan asked in a soft, deep voice. "I didn't say something to offend you, did I?"

"No." Her eyes met his when she lifted her head. With an inner gasp, she discovered she couldn't divert her gaze. Her eyes locked onto his dark brown stare, like a tick locked onto skin. The thought caused her to giggle. Here she was, sitting across from an attractive, charming man, and she likened something she sensed was very special to a very dull event. How unromantic!

"That's a lovely sound," he said, again breaking into her thoughts.

"What is?"

"Your laugh. It's as marvelous as your smile. They compliment each other perfectly."

"Do you know what my mother would call a statement like that, Mr. Lucas? Blarney. But I'll admit that you deliver it well—almost as well as my father."

Rounding the table, Ethan extended his bent arm toward her, and she grasped his elbow to rise. Once they were out of the dining room, he smiled down at her again. "I'm afraid, Miss Bouvier, that blarney gives the impression that I was telling a tall tale. But I wasn't. I honestly believe what I said. Your laugh and smile are both enchanting."

"That's very kind of you to say, especially since you're married," she said pointedly to remind him of his status.

"Does that bother you as much as it sounds?" he asked.

"I'm not accustomed to married men seeking me out," she admitted softly. "I find it very ... disconcerting."

"I had a good reason. And once we get to my office, you'll understand."

"The likeness is that close?"

"Like I said, uncanny," he insisted as they started down the steps to the lower decks. "But you've seen other paintings. You know how close the resemblance is."

Keeping her gaze on the stairs, Blythe remained silent until they got to the bottom then lifted her head to look up at Ethan. Instead of him returning her stare, he appeared to be in deep concentration as he escorted her down the corridor to his office.

When he reached out to unlock the door, an overwhelming confusion swept through her. How could she even consider going into the room with a married man, especially unchaperoned? Yet she desperately wanted to, and not only because of the portrait. She wanted to be with Ethan Lucas. Even though her upbringing told her it was wrong, her heart insisted that there was no harm in looking at the painting.

A hand on the small of her back startled her from her introspection. She shot her gaze to Ethan's face and took two steps backward. "I can't, Mr. Lucas."

"Why not?" he asked, disappointment evident in his expression.

"I'm afraid."

"Not of me, I hope."

Unable to admit that he had only a minor part in her fear, Blythe bowed her head. How could she tell Ethan that she was more afraid of her overwhelming desire to be with him,

something she'd never before experienced.

"Oh, my God," he groaned. Then his voice began to rise in anger. "It's because of last night, isn't it. You're afraid of me because I could have beaten the ..." He stopped then changed his wording in a calmer tone. "... up Moody. I was only protecting your virtue, Miss Bouvier. I swear it."

"I understand that, Mr. Lucas, but ..."

"Please don't be afraid of me. I swear I'd never do anything to hurt you—or any other woman. Won't you trust me long enough to at least see the portrait? It truly is very important to me."

Her heart went out to the man, who suddenly looked like a hurt little boy. Without a word, she passed him and went into the room, her eyes instantly searching for the portrait he claimed to be there. And it was, in a very prominent place. Staring at it in awe, she approached the painting in a daze. He hadn't lied about its existence, nor had he exaggerated about the extent of the likeness. The hair color, the almond-shaped green eyes, the shy smile, even the four-pointed, lop-sided, star-shaped birthmark on the collarbone were all identical to her own. Tentatively reaching out, she touched the pink mark with her index finger.

"Do you have a birthmark, too?" His voice was so low and soothing that it dragged rather than startled her from her thoughts.

"Yes," she replied, "in the same spot. Who is she?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. Could she be your mother?"

"My mother died several years ago, and she looked nothing like this. My father didn't look too much like her, either."

"But he did somewhat?" Ethan questioned.

"Somewhat. The color of his eyes, the shape of his lips and nose—but that's about all." Turning to face him, Blythe gazed up into Ethan's dark eyes. "Where did you get this portrait? And the other paintings, of course."

"I won them in a poker game."

"From whom?"

"The man who painted them."

"Did he know the woman?"

"He didn't say, and I didn't ask."

"Where did he live?"

"Right here," Ethan explained. "He owned the River Goddess at the time. Why are you so interested?"

"Wouldn't you be if you looked exactly like someone in a painting?" she asked.

"Probably, but you act like you have a personal interest in this woman."

"I'm a curious person."

"You know the woman, don't you," he declared, his voice taking on an angry tone. "You just won't tell me."

"I have no idea who she is," Blythe replied. "And quite obviously, *you* also have more than a passing interest in her."

"We're here for *your* reaction to this portrait," he reminded her, his deep voice gruff in his frustration. "You know her, but you're too damned stubborn to tell me."

Blythe's breath caught, and she stared up at him in shock. How had he known that she would stubbornly refuse to tell him the woman's name—if she knew it—unless he answered her questions first? Then she noticed it. His expression, soft and gentle while he charmed her into his office during lunch, had turned cold and hard in the face of her obsti-

nance. This was the man she had spent days hiding from, and she suddenly wished she was still safe in her cabin.

"Answer me, damn it!" he raged as he stuffed his fists into his pockets.

"I don't know." Her voice was heavy with defiance. No one spoke to her like that. While she stood her ground in the middle of the room, Ethan stalked around her. "And even if I did, I wouldn't tell you."

His face told her everything. He was sizing her up. For battle? If not a physical one, then at least a verbal one. After one revolution around her, he backed toward the door, his eyes not leaving hers, and kicked it shut.

Infuriated, she shouted at him. "You said you'd leave that open! You lied."

"I changed my mind," he corrected. "Sit down."

Blythe's temper bristled further. Nobody got away with ordering her around, no matter how much bigger than she they were. And Ethan Lucas was no exception. Unmoving, she kept her stare riveted on his eyes, which blinked three times while he approached her again.

"I said to sit down."

"No," she returned.

"Do you know what I have in my pockets?" He jerked his fists from his jacket to hold them before her in a boxing stance. "These." But Blythe didn't even flinch at the sight of his balled hands. Instead, her eyes remained fixed on his in mute defiance. His voice, though, relayed his discomfort despite the ire in it as he continued. "If you were a man, you'd be flat on your back right now—with me sitting on you, throttling you good. In fact, I have half a notion to take you over my knee and spank some of that defiance out of you."

"Go ahead," she intoned.

Ethan's expression showed that some of the fight in him drain away under her dare. That was exactly what it had been, too—a dare. She had expressed it in the sound of her voice.

Good, Blythe thought when he dropped his hands, she had disarmed him. Unfortunately, now she could feel the old fear creeping into her. But the worst of it was over. She had shown him that he couldn't intimidate her simply because she was small—although five-three wasn't *that* small. Ethan Lucas was just tall. Either way, she was no physical match for him, and she couldn't let him see fear in her ever again.

"Damn!" he exclaimed as he strode to a bottle on a nearby shelf. "I need a drink."

Moving only her head, Blythe watched him splash some amber liquid into a glass and down it in one gulp. He poured himself more and stalked to his desk.

"Are you going to sit down or not?" he asked irritably.

"Not," she replied, worried that further words might give away her fear.

"Suit yourself, but don't expect me to be a gentleman and stand with you." He collapsed into his desk chair then sipped on his drink.

"That stuff isn't good for you," she stated. "I hear it kills your brain, as well as your insides."

"I'll worry about my own insides, thank you," he chided. "Now what are you doing on my boat?"

"I don't see why that concerns you," she replied, "since I paid for my passage."

"Damn it! You're not going to tell me anything, are you."

"Why should I? You aren't much of a ..." Blythe cut off her words. If she finished her insulting statement, he would only become enraged again. And he might actually spank her. She certainly didn't want that.

"I'm a better man than you'll run across in *your* circle of friends," he proclaimed.

Blythe's eyes widened in horror. Ethan hadn't needed to hear the word; he had read her mind. The mere idea of what he could do to her made her shudder. Instead of the rage she anticipated, however, he laughed—a rich, full sound that made her wonder if his singing voice was equally beautiful.

An unexpected scene of Ethan whirling her around a ballroom floor, humming above her head, flashed across her mind. Most of her female friends were attracted to a man's eyes, a few were attracted to a man's smile, and one—her closest friend Solange—was attracted to the only portion of a man's anatomy that Blythe refused to consider. If Ethan weren't sitting behind his desk, she would probably glance to his trousers like Solange would have.

He laughed again, and her eyes shot to meet his. Oh, no! Without even realizing it, her gaze had dropped to the desk concealing his lap. Apparently, he could tell what she was thinking again.

"A man's eyes don't mean much to you, do they. It's a man's voice—or maybe it's merely his laugh—that brings out the ..." Ethan paused to sip his drink. "... *passion* in you."

"I'm not a passionate person, Mr. Lucas." She sank onto the chair before his desk with a casualness she hoped hid the fact that her knees had suddenly gone weak. "In fact, I rarely even let a man kiss me."

Finishing his drink, he put down the glass and toyed with his mustache.

"There are many different types of passion, Blythe," he told her. "There's passion for learning and passion for life. There's passion in striving for something you want more than anything else."

"I see that as an obsession. It engrosses the mind."

"Ah, but there's passion in obsession, too. There has to be, or it wouldn't be anything more than a dream." Pausing, he opened his desk drawer, and Blythe wondered what he had hidden in it. He appeared to be toying with something that he didn't want her to see. "There's also passion in defiance, in stubbornness—and most of all in anger. Yes, ma'am. There's passion in you, all right. You just don't recognize it."

He was right, but she had no intention of admitting it. Determined to turn their conversation back to the original topic, she said, "I thought we were going to discuss the portrait. I need some answers, Mr. Lucas. I *have* to have them."

Again, he laughed. "Such passion about a painting from someone who claims to be dispassionate."

"Don't taunt me! Just answer my questions."

"I can't. In fact, I was hoping you could answer mine."

Blythe stared over at him. "What possible questions could *you* have?"

"Only one—who is she?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"She's a beautiful lady, so I'm curious."

"So curious that you went to all of that trouble simply to meet me? That's quite an obsession to have for a portrait."

"A *passionate* obsession," he agreed with a grin.

Tired of his constant references to passion, Blythe rose and started toward the door. She should have listened to her common sense and stayed away from him. The only reason she hadn't was because she thought he might be able to give her a piece to put in the puzzle of her background. Instead, he'd given her a difficult time, and she had no intention of ever being with him again, no matter how much she adored his laugh.

A breeze made her stop, and she stared up at Ethan as he blocked the door, ordering, "Don't leave yet."

Her fury rose, and she blistered, "You can force me to stay, but you *can't* force me to talk. So, what good would it do?"

"I'd be happy just to look at you."

"Look at your painting," she countered.

"She doesn't have a personality. You do." When he spoke again, his voice was husky; his eyes carried an expression of longing she'd seen in several suitors' eyes. "She's a painting, Blythe. You're real."

The moment he spoke Blythe wanted to run. She knew what would follow, but she didn't expect the surge of excitement that shot through her when his hands caught her upper arms. She couldn't have anticipated that her heartbeat would speed up as he crushed her upper torso against his. Her toes barely touched the floor. She couldn't have even imagined the power behind his kiss when his lips captured hers for the first time. Above all, she couldn't have foreseen that the contact would block all thought from her mind and replace it with nothing but feeling.

She should struggle to free herself, should show him that she wouldn't tolerate his treatment. But she couldn't move. She could scarcely even think. Somehow Ethan Lucas had bewitched her. Otherwise, she would never allow a married man to kiss her. That's right! He was a married man, so she had no choice but to put an end to the embrace.

Before she could react, he released her, not touching her anywhere. When he stared down at her, his mouth gaped slightly in astonishment. Unexpected tears stung her eyes, and she fought to control them. From the sound of his sigh, he regretted his actions. But why did she care if he was disappointed in her kiss? It was better this way—since he was married.

"I should go," she announced in a low voice.

"I suppose you should."

"Thank you for showing me the portrait."

"You're welcome." Opening the door, he let her pass. "Please come look at it whenever you feel the urge. I'll even leave so you won't be uncomfortable."

"Thank you, but I doubt I'll feel the urge. Good-bye, Mr. Lucas."

As Blythe strolled toward the stairs, Ethan closed the door. He wanted to watch her move away, her hips swaying seductively, but that would make matters worse. Stroking the velvet ribbon in his drawer while she stood before him had done nothing to relieve his desire to hold her, and he had acted instinctively. And she might never forgive him for that. The only way to rid himself of the taste left by her lips was to drown himself in another woman. And that woman had to be Naomi, because he hadn't met any others on board, other than to ask if they'd seen Blythe.

Striding purposefully to his stateroom he entered to find Naomi sleeping soundly. In his desperation to purge himself of Blythe, he'd forgotten that Naomi wasn't feeling well. As he stood at her bedside, he realized with a start that he couldn't have satisfied his need for Blythe, anyway. Naomi wasn't the woman he wanted anymore—Blythe was, and someday he would have to have her.

FOUR

Although Blythe no longer feared Ethan, she was embarrassed that she hadn't at least chastised him after he'd kissed her. For two days, she avoided being where he might be, her efforts much less concerted than before. At first she couldn't understand why, then reality replaced confusion. She wasn't trying because, in her heart, she wanted him to find her.

Both nights she had dreamed of his laugh and his kiss so many times that it became a recurring nightmare of passion. The most interesting man she'd ever met was married! Maybe she would get over these feelings if she confronted him about the embrace. Maybe she would tell him that her lack of decorum didn't mean she condoned what he'd done. And maybe she wouldn't. Ethan Lucas was a dark, foreboding man of mystery, possessing an equally mysterious power over her. That was what she should fear—not the man but the spell he could cast on her with a single, rich-toned laugh.

Her best defense against him was to learn to hate him, to force herself to dislike the man. Arguing with him had brought on dislike, so all she had to do was prompt a disagreement if they spoke again. That would fuel her antipathy. A sardonic smile played at her lips. Staring him down would give her the advantage—just as it had in his office. Since Ethan was most dangerous to her heart, she needed to use every shield she could find to protect herself. So far that advantage was the only shield she'd found.

With renewed determination, Blythe returned to the observation deck.

Ethan started at the loud knock on his office door and automatically told the person to enter. Facing the door instead of the portrait he'd been staring at, a bright smile lit his face. Maybe Blythe had finally come to see it again. But his lips turned into a severe frown when he saw the red-and-gray-haired captain.

"You all right, Mr. Lucas?" Jennings asked as he closed the door. "You look tired."

"I am," he admitted, watching his left thumb stroke the soft, yellow ribbon he held. "I haven't gotten more than three hours of sleep a night since this trip started."

"Why not?"

"Blythe Bouvier."

"What?" Jennings asked.

"Angel's look-alike," Ethan explained. "Blythe's as much under my skin as Angel ever was. No, *more* than Angel ever was. I can't sleep, I can't eat, and I sure as hell can't work—all because I can't stop thinking about her."

"I didn't think you knew who she was."

"I finally found her a couple of days ago." Ethan sighed and turned his gaze to his captain. "What the hell am I going to do?"

"If you know who she is," Jennings suggested, "why don't you go talk to her? She spends a lot of time on the observation deck. I can see her from the helm. In fact, she's there right now."

Shaking his head, Ethan explained, "I can't. I want to see her again—God only knows how much—but I can't do it."

"That doesn't sound like you."

"I know, but I made some mistakes. One, which will probably become something good in the end, was telling her that I have a wife. Now she thinks Naomi and I are married. How can I pursue her when she thinks that?"

"Why would you tell her such a thing?" Jennings asked.

"I couldn't very well tell her the *truth*. She's probably too innocent to understand it. You know I've never understood women, and Blythe's different than any other woman I've ever known. She knows how to handle men, and that scares me. She doesn't do it in an obvious way like other women, either. She doesn't try to cajole or manipulate; she takes a stand against men. I sure as hell didn't expect her to be like that. I thought she'd be sweet and innocent because she has such a shy smile."

"Isn't she innocent?" Jennings asked.

"Of course, she is. That's one reason I told her that I was married. I didn't think she could understand how I live. You know, always looking for a better woman. But there's a hell of a lot more behind that sweet exterior of hers. She has fire in her, too. I never liked women like that before."

"I know *one* thing about her," Jennings told him. "She loves the water. In the last couple days, she's spent hours on end at the railing. Sometimes she watches the scenery, but mostly she just stares at the canal."

Ethan chuckled at the recollection of their interaction. "She likes to stare. You should have seen her stare me down when I lost my temper the other day. I couldn't believe it. She didn't blink a long, beautiful eyelash for several minutes. At least, that's how long it seemed." Then a frown returned to his lips. "I didn't like it at all."

"Sounds to me like ..."

"Don't say it!" Ethan ordered. "I know what the hell it sounds like. It sounds like she has some sort of power over me, and I don't like *that*, either."

"Then talk to her. Tell her how you feel. That's probably the only way you'll get her out of your mind."

"You're right. I think I will."

"Good. Now that we've found a solution to your problem, could we get down to business? I need some money to get supplies when we dock this afternoon."

Blythe loved the feel of the wind blowing her hair as she stood at the bow of the observation deck, and the crisp spring air seemed to clear her mind. In the open, she could think of Ethan rationally, could see him for the volatile man he was. If only she could see him that way alone in her room—or even in the dining room. Unfortunately, that didn't seem possible.

In the dining room, she remembered the charming, witty man who had delighted her over lunch. In her cabin, she could imagine his hands on her arms, her breasts crushed against his hard body, his powerful kiss. On the deck, though, she could vividly envision his attack on that man—Herbert Moody. But the memory didn't produce fear now. Instead, she felt the same pleasant, secure sensation she had when her brother had defended her honor.

But where Ethan had succeeded, Ben had failed and lost his life in the process. She'd wanted to stay with Ben and help, but he had insisted that Dan take her home. As she'd left

with Dan, she glanced over her shoulder, making her last image of Ben clutching his chest, and her unwanted suitor running down the alley. When the brother and sister learned of Ben's death, they were devastated, then ...

An unexpected thought came to her. She'd been wearing a ribbon the night Ethan had protected her. What had happened to that ribbon, anyway? she wondered as she glanced around the deck. Since it was nowhere in sight, it must have blown away or somebody threw it away. After all, a ribbon wasn't something anybody would consider important. It wasn't important to her, either, but she was curious as to where it had gone.

"Are you looking for something?" a woman asked.

Straightening up, Blythe smiled when she saw Naomi. "Hello, Mrs. Lucas. I lost a ribbon the other day and wondered if it was here."

"What color was it? Maybe I've seen it."

"Yellow velvet."

"I didn't see if, but if I do, I'll give it back to you."

"Don't bother. It's only a ribbon—nothing to get excited about. By the way, Mr. Lucas told me that you were ill. Are you feeling better?"

"A little, thank you." Naomi grasped Blythe's wrist and led her away from several people standing nearby. "Could I confide in you? Living on a riverboat, I don't have any close friends, and I need to talk to somebody. Can you keep a secret?"

"Of course."

"You can't tell anybody, especially not Ethan."

"You don't need to worry about that, Mrs. Lucas. I've only spoken to him once, and I doubt I will again."

"Call me Naomi. Anyway, I'm not positive yet. Not enough time's passed to be sure. But I think I'm going to have a baby."

"Oh, Naomi," Blythe said excitedly, "you must be thrilled."

Naomi shook her head. "I've been too sick to be thrilled. Ethan and I have been married a year and a half, and this is the first time I've had the symptoms. I'm a little afraid to believe it."

Unable to contain her enthusiasm, Blythe hurried on. "I hope you are. Babies are wonderful, and every time they learn something new as they grow up it will open your eyes, too. You'll feel like you're learning all over again."

"Do you have children?" Naomi asked.

"No, but I remember watching my brothers grow."

"I see. You won't tell Ethan, will you? I want to be sure before I say anything."

"Heavens no! I couldn't steal such a precious moment from a husband and wife. The joy of realizing that your love created a new person is something only you and he should share. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll extend my slightly early congratulations and leave. I have a few things to do in my cabin."

The emotional strength she needed to walk rather than run away from Naomi hurt. Blythe was happy for Naomi and Ethan, but the tightness in her chest was excruciating. It wasn't fair! Other women didn't seem to have trouble finding men to love, but she had never experienced the emotion. At this rate, she would never know the joy of motherhood.

At the bottom of the stairs, Blythe stopped short, shocked by the thought that came to her mind. She'd known many other women who had been with child and never hurt like she did at Naomi's announcement. But it was even harder to admit that she wished she were the one carrying Naomi's child. She didn't want just *any* baby. She desperately wanted *that* one!

Down the corridor she saw the baby's father leaning against the wall. His left foot was planted against it, and his knee extended about a third of the way into the hall. Obviously, he was deep in thought again. He was toying with his mustache and his left hand was in his trouser pocket. Drawing in a deep breath to gather the courage to face him, she continued her stroll to her cabin.

"Blythe," he worded mutely as he rubbed the ribbon with his thumb, "I'm very sorry about the other day. I can't tell you how sorry I am about the other day, Blythe. Miss Bouvier ... I'm sorry for everything. Please accept my most humble apologies, Miss Bouvier."

Nothing was right—not one phrase. Ethan knew he should apologize for his actions in his office, but he didn't know how. Blythe was the first woman he'd ever felt he should apologize to, yet he knew he couldn't do it. And why? Because he wasn't sorry. He was *glad* that he'd kissed her. Actually, he should probably apologize to himself. After all, *he* was the one he'd hurt.

Even before their lips met that first time, he'd admitted that she would have a dangerous effect on his mind. And he'd been right. If he'd been obsessed with finding her, he only grew more so with the memory of their embrace. He could still taste the sweetness of her lips, feel the suppleness of her body, hear his excited blood rushing through his ears.

Maybe she was right. Maybe liquor could kill his brain. That was apparently the only explanation for the lunacy he felt lately.

Glancing down the hall, he saw her approaching. Her light hair hardly moved as she sauntered toward him. For several seconds, he watched her hips as they flowed seductively from side to side with effortless ease, her skirts swishing around her. No other woman he knew walked like that, and he wondered if there was *any* other who did. Leaving the ribbon in his pocket, he withdrew a key and turned to face her.

"Good morning, Blythe," he greeted with fraudulent cheer. "How are you today?"

"Fine, thank you," she replied. "And you?"

"Absolutely wonderful."

"Absolutely terrible, you mean."

He gasped in shock. "How did you know?"

"I don't know, Mr. Lucas. I suppose I sensed it. That, and you didn't sound very sincere when you said it. What's bothering you?"

"Nothing important. I just want to talk to you again. I got the impression you weren't telling me everything the other day, so I came to see if you'd be willing to continue our conversation." While he spoke, Ethan unlocked and opened her door then looked down to watch her pass. But at the sight of her irritated expression, he found himself unable to continue.

"How did you get a key to my cabin?" she demanded.

"I have one to *all* of the cabins, in case of an emergency."

"Obviously, your idea of an emergency and mine are quite different."

"I didn't say this was an emergency."

"Then why do you have that key?"

"Let's go in, and I'll explain. It's too public here." Grasping her elbow, Ethan steered her into the room but left the door open. When he glanced down at her, he saw that she stared directly into his eyes.

She was doing it to him again. That green-eyed stare of defiance which he had hoped to avoid was already working its effect on him. He wanted her. Oh, how he wanted her! Struggling to control his almost instantaneous arousal, he spoke in a crisp voice. "I was going to

wait for you in here because I didn't think you'd want to see me again."

"At least, you're not a *completely* ignorant," she snapped.

"I'm not ignorant at all!" he raged. "You just turn me into a blithering idiot whenever you act this way."

Blythe sighed, causing Ethan to wonder why. Surely, it wasn't because he approached her again. After all, he'd been a complete gentleman—until she became angry.

"I didn't wait in your room, you know," he said. "I waited outside because I respect your privacy. But I'll quit respecting it and go through your belongings if you don't tell me why you're on my boat."

"You wouldn't go through my things," she declared, "so stop threatening me."

Shaking his head, he sighed at length. "You're wrong this time, Blythe. I'd tear this cabin apart to find the information I want if I had to. So why don't you save us both a lot of fuss and answer my questions."

Blythe wandered to the bed and sank down onto the edge of it. To be close to her, he sat down beside her. He watched her reaction as she turned her sorrowful gaze to his eyes. Something was bothering her, but he didn't think it had to do with him being in her room because he hadn't closed the door.

"Is something bothering you?" he asked after a moment of silence.

"I keep thinking about that portrait, Mr. Lucas. Shortly before I left France, I found a letter in an old trunk. My friend Solange and I were exploring the attic when we found it. The letter is twenty-five years old and was addressed to my father. It said that Jean Bouvier wasn't my father's real father. Francois, the man who wrote the letter, claimed he was. The woman I call *grand-mere* said the man who raised my father was actually his father's brother. Francois wanted to meet *Päpa* and told him that he would be on the River Goddess. *That's* why I'm here. And that portrait just makes me wonder if she's the reason for the letter."

"Why didn't your father come?"

"He may have tried to at the time. I can't say for sure because he's dead, but it makes sense. He left France and came to America. He married my mother twenty-four years ago; they had a son but lost him before he was a year old. I was born two years after that. As far as I know, *Päpa* never found his father. He never told us much about his background, either, even though *Mäma* did hers."

"So now you're trying to find your grandfather. What does your mother think of this?"

"I told you before. She's gone, too. So are both of my younger brothers."

Ethan's heart went out to her. This poor young woman was alone in her life, just like in her travels. "Your family's non-existent then. How did you lose your younger brothers? Or is it too painful to talk about?"

"I was seventeen, and Ben had just turned fifteen. *Grand-mere* Bouvier gave him a birthday ball that year. My escort got too amorous; and Ben, like you, intervened to defend my honor. I tried to stop him, but he insisted that our brother Dan take me home so I wouldn't witness their fight. Ben never came home. My escort stabbed and killed him. Dan was like my older brother who died. He had heart trouble all of his life. He felt so guilty for not trying to stop Ben that he was gone within four months. He was only thirteen."

"So only you and your grandmother are left."

"She isn't my grandmother, Mr. Lucas—not technically. She told me that she raised my father as her son, but there was no direct blood tie to her and no adoption. She had just been married to *Päpa's* uncle, who died shortly after he came to live with them. *Grand-mere* never had children of her own and raised *Päpa* as her own. That's all I know about it."

"Who's your real grandmother?"

"I don't know, and neither does *Grand-mere* Bouvier."

"Did you ever stop to think that the woman in the portrait might be your real grandmother?"

Blythe gasped. Scrambling from the bed, she gazed down at him, her wide eyes filled with excitement. "Oh, Ethan! Do you think that's possible?"

Rising slowly, he studied the young woman before him. Although there were no tears in her eyes, there had been passion in the sorrowful tone of her voice when she'd explained her brothers' deaths and her father's background. And there was an equal amount of passion in her excitement now. But when she said his name, so easily, so naturally, he couldn't control his actions. Tenderly grasping her shoulders, he ordered in a near-whisper, "Say it again."

"I don't understand," she returned, staring up at him. To Ethan's surprise, another kind of excitement gleamed in her eyes as she asked, "Say what?"

"My name. Say it."

"Mr. Lucas?"

"No. Ethan. Say it!"

As Blythe stared up at him, Ethan saw the confusion in her expression. "Why?"

"Damn it, Blythe!" He shook her once and watched her long, baby-fine hair settle around her face and shoulders as she stared up at him in shock. "Say my name! Now!"

She opened her mouth slightly to comply, but nothing came out. For the first time in her life, she was speechless. In a way, he sounded angry, but in a different way, he sounded almost desperate. Never before had a man spoken to her like that. She tried again, but the words stuck in her throat. Resigned that she couldn't do as he asked, she released a long sigh from deep within her chest.

To her surprise, he dropped back onto the bed. His hands caressed her shoulders, and he drew her against him. Then his arms slid around her, his fingers tangling in her hair. This was an embrace she knew she would never forget!

While she stared down at him, he lifted his head toward hers. His hands cupped the back of her head, bringing it down toward his face. Then their lips connected. His tongue taunted her lips until it passed into her mouth, searching for her tongue. At first she didn't respond, but then ... Oh, yes! Then came the fire! The flame of his embrace engulfed her. When his tongue connected with hers, she gave over to these new, unexpected sensations he sent through her.

Blythe loved these feelings coursing through her. She wanted to feel forever, but she was also afraid to. What about Naomi and the baby? Oh, no! How had she forgotten about her new friend? No matter how mind-boggling his kiss was, no matter how much she enjoyed the moment, she had to end it.

Struggling to free herself proved hopeless. Ethan repositioned his arms and held her against him. Standing between his legs, she could feel that he was excited. How could she be doing this to Naomi? This wasn't the kind of woman she was, but she couldn't bring herself to push away from him. His mouth moved against hers, compelling her acceptance with his spell until she believed she would faint from all the wonderful new sensations sweeping through her body.

She wanted to collapse, to quit fighting against him. But his kiss demanded her response. She had no choice except to give it in the only way she knew how. Oh, no! Her heart! It was beating so fast. Was she having a heart attack? Was the same fate that her

brothers met going to happen to her? No, it couldn't! She didn't want to die—not in the middle of what had to be ecstasy. The only way to stop it was to calm down and quit fighting.

The fire died without warning, and Ethan broke the kiss. But when he relaxed his hold on her, she started to fall. His large hands encircled her ribcage, and he set her on his lap before moving her to sit on the bed. Finally, he got off the bed and knelt before her. Her face was hot after having had such a thorough kiss.

"Are you all right now?" he asked.

"Uh-huh," she replied, afraid to say more.

"Good." Ethan sat back on his feet and took her hands in his with a tenderness she hadn't believed possible from such a large man. "Are you going to try and find your grandparents?"

"That's why I came back to America," she declared. "But first, I have to get a job and earn more money. I only have fifty dollars left."

Ethan stared straight at her and toyed with his mustache. "Do you know how long it will take you to earn the kind of money you'll need?"

With a frown, she admitted, "Years probably."

"That's right. I, on the other hand, could teach you to earn up to a hundred *times* that by the end of your trip."

"You could?" she asked, shocked by his declaration. "How?"

"Poker."

Reluctant to accept his suggestion, Blythe shook her head. "I don't know, Mr. Lucas. I don't believe in gambling."

"With a stare like yours, you could make a bundle. Want to try it?"

"What if I lost my money?" she asked, hesitant to agree.

His dark eyes took on an excited glow at the prospect. "First, I'll teach you to play, then I'll stake you a hundred. If you blow it all, I'll take the loss—I can afford it. If you win, you can pay me back."

"That would mean we'd have to spend a lot of time together."

"Are you afraid that I'll ..." Ethan paused then added, "Of course, you are, and I don't blame you. Don't worry, Blythe. I promise not to ... force my attentions on you again."

"I hope you can keep that promise. Naomi would be devastated if she ever found out."

"Then you'll let me teach you?" he asked, his voice filled with hope.

Although her reluctance was faltering, she still had concerns. "What will people think if the married owner of the River Goddess spends so much time with a single woman?"

"We can tell them that you're my long-lost half-sister. That's how I explained my actions to Moody. Please, Blythe. Will you try it?"

Blythe hesitated another moment. Then, unable to resist the prospect of spending so much time with him, she said, "All right. If I can earn some money that fast, I'll trust you to keep your promise. I'd like nothing more than to find my grandparents before they die, too."

"Wonderful! There's only one more thing. My half-sister wouldn't call me Mr. Lucas. Why don't you practice saying my Christian name again."

She took a deep breath and obliged him in a whispery voice that surprised her. When he made a speedy exit, Blythe giggled. For such a large man, he had a lot of weak spots on which she could play her own hand.

FIVE

Late that afternoon Ethan sent a note to Blythe via one of his crew and requested that she join him and Naomi for dinner. Although his message explained that he wanted to set the stage for announcing that she was his sister, she had reservations. How could she dine with the couple after Ethan had kissed her and Naomi had confided in her? More importantly, how could she hide the pain in her heart at seeing them together when it hurt so bad just thinking about them?

After reading the note, Blythe told the messenger, "Thank Mr. Lucas for me, please, but tell him I can't accept his invitation. He'll understand."

Despite her expectation that he would, the crewman didn't return. Blythe also half-expected Ethan to try and convince her to join him for dinner, but that didn't happen, either. Instead, she sat in her room for a while then decided to go to the observation deck. As she stood at the rail watching the water, Naomi joined her.

"Are you really Ethan's half-sister?" Naomi asked.

"That's what he claims," Blythe said, wording her answer so she didn't get caught in a lie.

"Then that lady in all the paintings is your mother. You must have been shocked when you saw them."

"I was."

"Ethan told me that he showed you the portrait. I imagine that one shocked you more than the others. It's been a long time since I told him to throw it away, so I didn't recognize you that first day. I didn't know he kept it in his office until he told me this afternoon. He'd told me he threw it away like I asked him. But I didn't know it was his mother. Ethan doesn't talk much about his family."

"I can understand that," Blythe admitted. "My father didn't talk much about his, either."

"Maybe men don't like to discuss things like that. He didn't tell me about *any* of his family until today. I can't imagine what it must have been like to have your father take you from your mother so early in life. And to have him tell you that she was dead! That was terrible. He must have been an awful man."

"No, he wasn't," Blythe denied, unable to mask the insult she felt for her deceased father. "He was a wonderful, witty man who adored me as much as I did him."

"I suppose he did. After all, he took you with when he left her. Ethan would never do anything like that. That's one reason I love him so much. And to think that you didn't have any idea Ethan was your brother when you first introduced yourself to me."

"That's true."

"You don't like Ethan very much, do you." When Blythe shook her head, Naomi continued in a concerned tone. "You should give him a chance. He won't hurt you like you think. I know I should have told you that before, but I was afraid I might lose him. He's always had a craving for pretty ladies. I thought he might leave me, even though I'm probably going to have his baby."

"Surely, you don't see me as a threat, Mrs. Lucas."

“Call me Naomi.” The woman paused and sank onto a chair against the side of the riverboat. “I don’t see you as a threat now, but I did when we first met. Like I said, he’s always had an eye for pretty ladies. And he was trying so hard to find you! He’s never done that before. I thought he was losing interest in me, because I’m not as pretty as I used to be.”

“How can you say that?” Blythe exclaimed. “You’re beautiful.”

“I don’t *feel* beautiful, and that’s not going to change for months. In fact, it will probably get worse the bigger I get.”

“But women with child get more beautiful. The closer they come to term, the more radiant they grow.” Blythe’s pale green eyes lit in excitement, and she sat down in the chair beside Naomi. “You have no idea how I envy you. I’ve always dreamed of a husband and lots of children.”

“You won’t feel that way when your stomach won’t stop churning,” Naomi advised. “You won’t want to be pregnant when the mere *thought* of food makes you nauseous.”

“I suppose you’re right. But that passes in time.”

“I know, but that doesn’t make it any easier.”

“How are you feeling today?”

“Well enough to have some soup while you and Ethan have a meal.” Naomi rose and smiled at her. “Won’t you reconsider and join us for dinner?”

“I’d like to,” Blythe admitted, desperate to think of an excuse to decline her offer.

“Then do it. I’d like to get to know you better—and so would Ethan. He told me that he wants to spend as much time with you as he can. He even told me that he’s missed you all these years.”

Blythe gazed at Naomi. How could she respond in a calm tone after what had happened with Ethan? Looking at the other woman was hard enough, because her mind was filled with the vivid memory of his kiss. As badly as she wanted to forget, she couldn’t. She could still feel herself crushed against him, hear the sound of his labored breathing, taste his lips upon hers. Her heart skipped a beat then raced on at the mere thought of the embraces.

“Do you think he really wants me to dine with you?” Blythe asked. “Maybe he’s only being polite because he feels like he has to.”

“Of course, he wants you to. And so do I. Are you going to join us or not?”

It took all her strength to answer in a calm voice. “All right, but I want to go to my cabin and freshen up first. What time should I meet you?”

When Naomi suggested seven, Blythe agreed then excused herself, scarcely able to keep from running. How could she have been so stupid to have given in to Naomi’s pleas? Now she would be forced to see the couple together, and she wasn’t sure she could bear that.

By the time she met them in the dining room, Blythe had worked herself into such a frenzy that her stomach ached. It wasn’t nausea, but the sharp pain of nervousness she got on occasion. When she ordered a bowl of soup after Naomi did, Ethan flashed her a smile.

“Don’t you think you should have more than that, Blythe?” he asked.

“Not at the moment, thank you,” she replied. “I’m not very hungry.”

“I realize you aren’t very big, but you can still eat more than soup.” He chuckled as he raised his head to look at the waiter. “Bring the lady steak, potatoes and corn.” Turning his gaze back to Blythe, he added, “Can’t have my little sister wasting away on my watch. Ma

would have my head on a platter.”

Instead of writing down the order, the waiter, one of the men who had helped with her luggage when she boarded, stared at her in amazement. “Your sister?”

“Half-sister,” Naomi corrected. “Have you two met?”

“Not officially,” Blythe said, glad that the young brown-haired man appeared interested in her. Maybe he could take her mind off Ethan, Naomi, and their child.

“Blythe Bouvier, this is Tom Travers.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Blythe saw Ethan’s mouth set in rage as she and Tom exchanged pleasantries. Was it possible that he didn’t like her meeting other men? If so, that was too bad. He was a married man, and she was free to visit with any man she chose. And there was no reason that couldn’t be Tom.

After he finished taking their orders, Tom headed toward the kitchen while Naomi spoke in Blythe’s defense. “Don’t be so protective, Ethan. She has a right to make some male friends.”

“That’s right,” he agreed, stipulating, “but only if *I* think they’re suitable for her. We’re the only family we have now. At least, until I get her back to Ma. I spent years looking for Blythe, and now that I’ve found her I’m going to see that she’s taken care of. She’s not struggling on her own anymore, Naomi. She has me.”

Blythe stared at him. The same man who had accused her of having great passion was exhibiting the same amount. And he sounded so determined when he said “She has me” that Blythe knew he meant the words. She also knew that he would never turn his back on her until one of them died. He seemed determined to remain her surrogate brother forever. However, she didn’t know if she liked the idea or not.

“Blythe,” Ethan said. “Would you please pay attention?”

“What?” she asked, jerking her head to look at him. Was it her imagination or did Ethan have the same look in his eyes that he’d had when he’d kissed her? That was nonsense. He wouldn’t entertain such thoughts with his wife sitting next to him.

Ethan battled the unexpected desire to taste her lips again. As much as he wanted to be with her, to hold her close as he had earlier, he couldn’t let his feelings show. He had to act calm and collected, to act like the protective brother he claimed to be.

To avoid his thoughts, he took a deep breath and repeated his words. “I won’t have you associating with my crew. Is that clear?”

Glaring at him, she said, “As a matter of fact, it *isn’t* clear. What makes you think that you can tell me with whom I may or may not associate? Your being my half-brother doesn’t give you the right to dictate which people I can have as friends—especially since you weren’t there when I was growing up.”

Ethan’s heart ached. From the sound of her voice, she was taking this half-blood relationship seriously, not as a fabrication so they could be together. She looked so beautiful that night, even more beautiful than she had before. The mere sight of her caused him to grow with desire. How would he ever eat when he could hardly sit still on his chair! Then her words echoed in his mind—my half-brother.

The lie he had perpetrated to spare Naomi was hardest on *him*. It was even harder than the lie that Naomi was his wife he had told to spare Blythe. How he had ever gotten himself into this situation was beyond his comprehension. But he had, and he could see no way out.

“I don’t want you to get hurt,” he explained after only a moment’s pause. “Is that really so bad?”

“I’ve already been hurt once. That’s how I know I can live with the pain that can come.”

Ethan couldn't help but wonder if she was referring to the kisses he'd stolen from her. But he couldn't ask her. He couldn't even take her aside and talk to her so she would understand that he felt nothing but regret for what he'd done. No, not regret. He could *never* regret those moments. But he was sorry that he had forced himself on her, and he needed to tell her that—sometime.

"Blythe's right, darling," Naomi said, bringing his mind back to the present. "Every woman has to suffer her share of hurt—every man, too."

How well he knew! Without even realizing it, Blythe caused him more pain than he ever believed he could endure. Not only did he have emotional pain, he had physical and mental pain, too. In fact, his desire and frustration felt as though it would send him to the nearest insane asylum.

"Can you two blame me for wanting to protect my sister?" he asked.

"Nobody's blaming you, darling. Blythe would probably be thrilled to have you protect her if it's necessary. But it isn't, and you can't keep her from making friends—female *and* male."

Ethan studied Blythe for a moment. Her innocent beauty caught his attention. He would never be able to explain how much he wanted to be with her. Yet two lies kept him from showing the world how attracted to her he was.

With a sigh, he returned his gaze to Naomi. "I suppose you're right. Let's talk about something less serious. Blythe?" Facing her again, he noticed that she was still staring at him and grinned. "How would you like to hear some of the funnier escapades I've had at the gambling tables?"

"Oh, yes!" she exclaimed.

Dinner progressed pleasantly, with Ethan often drawing shy giggles from Blythe and laughing when he did. She would get a look in her eyes, which often dropped to the table before him. What was she expecting to see? Maybe that he was excited by his banter? If it was, he needed to stay seated or she would learn the truth.

Why was she doing this to him? he wondered. Why did she giggle in that enchanting way when she knew what it did to him? Or did she know? Given how innocent she appeared, she might have no inkling. If only he could think of a way to extricate this self-torturing mess he'd made without hurting either woman—especially Blythe. If only he hadn't lied to them!

What was it his father had told him about lies? *A lie begets more lies until, all of a sudden, your life is a mess.* At the time, Ethan had laughed at the notion. But now, all of a sudden, his life was a mess. For the first time, he understood what his father had been trying to tell him when he'd lied about gambling with his friends at fourteen. Although he'd started lying long before that, it was the only time he'd been caught. That was why he'd never regretted his fabrications. Until now!

"What's wrong, darling?" Naomi asked to bring him from his introspection.

Glancing first at Naomi then at Blythe, he noticed that they both appeared concerned about him. To ease their minds, he grinned and winked at Blythe. "I'm wondering how I'll ever adjust to my little sister being grown up. I still have that protective instinct in me, so I hope you'll bear with me—at least, for a while."

"Don't worry, Ethan," Naomi said. "Your wanting to be protective is very natural. You missed most of her childhood. Besides, between the two of us, we can make you toe the line. Right, Blythe?"

"Right," she mumbled.

"Unfortunately, I think you will," he admitted, gazing at Blythe fondly. "She apparently

has a knack for managing men, but right now I could manage a huge piece of apple pie. Would either of you like some?"

Blythe's voice grew animated as the conversation shifted topics. "I love apple pie. It's always been my favorite."

"There, you see? It's in our blood."

When they'd all finished eating, Ethan announced that he needed to do some work in his office. With Blythe and Naomi flanking him, he escorted Naomi back to his suite. Then he gazed down at Blythe and suggested that they take a stroll around the boat.

Blythe stared up at him, confused. "I thought you said you have work to do."

"It was an excuse so I could spend some time alone with you," he explained as they strolled away from his cabin door. "Now what do you say about that walk?"

Although she would have loved spending more time with him, Blythe recognized the inadvisability of doing so. But she didn't want him to avoid her because she'd rejected him, either, so she needed to decline his offer gracefully. "I don't think that's wise, Ethan. Too many people could see us together. Besides, I'm tired."

"But I thought I'd start teaching you poker tonight," he said.

Blythe giggled then taunted him again. "During a pleasant stroll along the decks? I've heard that you're very good at the game, but I doubt even you could teach someone while strolling the decks."

"If I were you, Blythe Bouvier," he warned in a serious tone, "I'd limit my giggles to when we're together publicly. I would have suggested it at dinner if Naomi hadn't been there."

"I'll giggle or laugh whenever I please," she snapped, "and there's nothing you can do to stop me."

"For such a pretty little thing, you certainly have a strong defiant streak in you. Where did you get it from?"

Again, he stunned her with his question and took all the irritation from her. "What do you mean?"

"Were your mother or father defiant?" he asked with a grin.

"Neither was. Solange used to tell me that I was defiant, too, so I gave it a lot of thought. I don't remember being defiant while my parents were alive. I must have acquired the trait when a stranger who said he was my uncle took me away from the grandmother and the country I loved."

"That would probably make anybody defiant. Why don't we go to my office and start your lessons?"

"Are you positive you want to do this?" she asked. "It isn't necessary. I have no doubt that I can find a governess position at the end of your route."

"I'm sure you can find a job like that in Chicago," he agreed, "but it'll be years before you find your grandfather if you do it that way. He could be dead by then. My way you can start the second you're off the boat."

"I suppose you're right."

"Of course, I am. Big brothers are always right." He extended his bent left elbow toward her. "Shall we go?"

Blythe frowned as she wandered down the hall with her arm linked in Ethan's. Although he chatted beside her, she heard nothing but a distant voice. Apparently, he truly thought of her as a little sister. But how could he when he'd kissed her like he had? Or had she misinterpreted her own reaction to those kisses? Impossible! The feelings she'd had in

his arms were unlike any other she'd ever experienced. And, quite frankly, they frightened her.

On second thought, her feelings meant nothing. What Ethan felt was all that mattered to him, and she had no inkling of what was going through his mind. Nor did she know how he reacted to kissing her. That wasn't exactly true. She had felt his desire through her skirts that time. What other indication did she need?

When they reached his office, Ethan unlocked and opened the door, allowing her to precede him into the cabin. Her gaze went to the portrait of Angel. She wandered to it, her stare not leaving the picture until Ethan's voice startled her from behind.

"You're fascinated by Angel, too, aren't you," he observed, caressing her waist.

"It's difficult to believe that there's someone in this world who could be my identical twin."

"I doubt she's that anymore, Blythe."

"No, probably not, but she was at one time. Somewhere out there must be a woman who would be as surprised as I am at the resemblance."

"And Angel might be related to you," Ethan reminded her. "It's likely, you know, especially if this Francois who wrote to your father is your grandfather."

Blythe considered his words. Was it too much to hope for that this woman was related to her? Was it unrealistic to even think such a thing? She inhaled at length then released a long, slow sigh. This wasn't something she wanted to contemplate at the moment—maybe later when she was alone in her cabin.

She sighed again and tried to tear her gaze from the painting before she spoke. "I'd rather not think about that right now, Ethan."

"Then let's get busy with your lessons," he suggested. "The first one is teaching you to shuffle the cards, and they're over in my desk."

Steering her from the painting by her waist, he directed her to the chair before his desk. As she sat down, he sank onto his large chair on the opposite side. He withdrew a deck from a drawer and slid the cards from the wooden box, decorated with small, clear stones in the shape of a spade. Blythe reached across the desk to touch the container.

"Would you like to look at it closer?" he asked, laying his hand over hers and pushing it across the desk.

Picking up the red-tinged wooden box, she opened it and inhaled. Cedar! A flood of memories raced through her mind. She could vividly see her mother's hope chest and them sorting through the belongings that she would one day inherit. The same chest was in her grandmother Bouvier's house now, and Blythe wondered if she would ever see it again. Closing the lid, she traced the spade with her index finger.

"Those are really shiny glass pieces," she observed.

"Because they're not glass. They're diamonds."

"Diamonds!" She jerked her hand away. "Real ones?"

He laughed heartily, drawing her attention to his face. "Of course, real ones. And touching them won't hurt them. Diamonds are the strongest rocks on earth. Hell, they can cut through glass."

"I didn't know that," she replied, staring at the box in awe. "I've never touched one before. My grandparents in France were wealthy, but *Grand-mere* said jewels were a waste of money."

"She was too ... frugal. If she'd been wise, she would have known that jewels are an investment—not merely something that makes a pretty woman look beautiful. Now, on with the lesson."

Blythe tried to concentrate on his demonstration and her own feeble attempts to duplicate his example. But she found it impossible to keep from looking at the portrait. Finally, Ethan put the cards back in their cedar case.

"What are you doing?" she asked in amazement.

"Giving up for the evening," he explained. "Having lessons in here isn't going to work."

"Why not?"

"You're as obsessed with Angel as I am."

"Then where should we go?"

"Nowhere tonight. From now on, though, we'll have to do this in your cabin. I wouldn't suggest it under normal circumstances—because of what I did to you the first two times we were alone together—but we can't do it in public or people will know that I'm teaching you. Then you'll never get into a game because the gamblers are sure to hear of it."

Blythe bowed her head at the memory of his embraces and said, "I imagine you're right."

"Like I said before, big brothers are always right." Rounding the desk, he grasped her hands and pulled her to her feet. Then he picked up the card box and put it in her hand, folding her fingers around it. "Take these back to your cabin and practice."

"All right. Good night," she said, hurrying toward the door before he could kiss her again. But his voice stopped her.

"I'm sorry, Blythe," he apologized, his voice cracking with emotion.

Turning to stare at him, she noticed the disappointed expression in his dark eyes. "For what?"

"For the way I acted around you the first two times we were alone. I know it was abominable, and I promise not to force my attentions on you again."

"All right," she replied as she fled from his office.

To her amazement, she was distressed because he no longer wanted intimate contact with her. So what if it was better that way? She wanted a repeat of those moments—*many* repeats.

SIX

Outside Ethan's office, Blythe collapsed against the wall. She'd never been one to cry, except when her family members had died, but tears stung her eyes. No matter how frightened she was that she would have heart failure in his arms, his words still hurt. He was sorry that he'd kissed her; he'd promised never to do it again. One minute she was afraid when he held her; the next, she was upset because he'd rejected her.

It was probably better this way, though. He wasn't only married; he was going to be a father. She shouldn't have agreed to his charade so they could be together, but she didn't have a choice. He was so determined that he never would have listened to reason if she'd tried to dissuade him.

Sliding the cedar box into her skirt pocket, she wandered toward her room, leisurely running her thumb over the diamonds.

"Blythe!" a man called as she reached her cabin.

Glancing up, she saw the brown-haired waiter approaching. His long legs stretched out in his hurry to catch up with her. He was quite attractive, but not as attractive as Ethan. And he was tall, but not nearly as tall as Ethan. She gave her head a quick shake to rid herself of Ethan. She needed to stop comparing other men to a man in whom she had no business finding an interest.

She took her key from her pocket as she waited beside her door until he arrived. "Hello, Mr. Travers."

"Tom," he said with a bright smile.

"All right. What can I do for you?"

His nervous rush of words brought a smile to her lips. "I wanted to see if you'd mind me courting you while you're on the riverboat. What I mean is I wanted to say hello before I went to see your brother. I don't think Mr. Lucas wants the crew courting his sister, so I thought I should talk to him before I said anything to you. Then again, I already said something to you, didn't I?"

The smile disappeared as she replied, "Ethan has no say in the matter. If I want to be with one of his crew, I'll do it. There's nothing he can do to stop me."

"There certainly is. He could fire me—or any other man. Then we'd have to leave ship. You couldn't do anything about that."

"Would he honestly fire you because you wanted to court me?" she asked, unable to believe somebody would do such a thing.

"You *bet* he would. That's why I want to talk to him first."

Furious that Ethan would go to such lengths to keep other men away from her, Blythe interrogated Tom with a barrage of questions. "What if he tells you that he won't allow it? Are you going to agree? Why wouldn't you stand up for yourself? Why not demand what you want to do?"

"I won't have a choice but to agree. I need the job."

"But what if I *want* you to court me? If I did everything I could to be in your company, would he do the same thing?"

"It's been an awfully long time since you've been with your brother if you don't know the answer to that. He absolutely would! In fact, he'd probably throw me overboard in some rapids to set an example. And I'm not going to tangle with a man his size and physique. I've seen him without a shirt, and I don't want to fight with a man of his stature. If he says no to a courtship, I'll abide by his wishes."

"He can't tell me with whom I can associate," she fumed, "and I won't *let* him. Just because he claims to be my big brother, doesn't mean that I'll let him bully me. I won't—and you shouldn't, either."

"What do you mean by claims to be your brother?" Tom asked with a suspicious tone in his voice. "Do you doubt that he is?"

"I don't remember him being my brother," she said to conceal her mistake. "And I don't remember the woman in the portrait in his office, even if the likeness is uncanny."

"I'm still not taking any chances. I'm going to ask him if he'll let me court you."

"I wish you wouldn't. I'm perfectly capable of picking my own suitors. Besides, he hasn't been involved in my life for years. Why should he care now?"

"He had no control over your separation, Blythe. I have four younger sisters, and I know how he feels. I didn't like the way some men looked at them, and I do everything I can to protect them whenever I'm home. If I explain that to Mr. Lucas, he might not be so dead set against me courting you. And I'd honestly like to do that."

"I'd like it, too," she replied. "You seem like a nice man, and I'd love to get to know you better."

"Then I'm going to talk to Mr. Lucas."

When he started to leave, Blythe caught his arm to stop him. "Wait a minute, Tom. I don't care what he says. If I want you to court me, I'll let you—with or without his blessing. You talking to Ethan is only a formality because I won't listen if he doesn't agree. I'll spend time with you, anyway. You wouldn't mind, would you?"

"Not if I don't get caught."

She studied his expression for a moment then asked, "Are you that afraid of Ethan?"

"There's not a man on board who doesn't know his temper. And he can be violent when he loses it. When I said he'd throw me into the rapids to set an example, I meant it."

"Don't worry. I can handle him."

Tom chuckled. "All he'd have to do is step on you, and you'd be squished. I've heard that he has a way with women. I've seen him with plenty, too. But I've never heard that women have a way with him."

"That was probably before Mrs. Lucas."

"Mrs. Lucas?" he repeated. "Oh, Naomi. Before *and* after is more like it. If he sets his sights on a woman, he gets her. I haven't seen him fail yet."

"He spends time with women other than Naomi?" she asked, unable to believe he would do such a thing. Then again, he'd shown her that he would be with her and not think twice about it. Without thinking, she asked, "How could he *do* such a thing?"

"He'd probably do it with you, too—if you weren't his sister. Only in your case, I wouldn't blame him. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go see if I can get his permission to court you. I'd prefer it if we don't have to do it behind his back. That would make him madder than if we courted openly against his wishes. Good night, Blythe."

"Good night," she replied, watching him stroll down the hall toward Ethan's office.

As she went into her cabin and closed the door behind her, Blythe contemplated Tom's words. Was Ethan honestly that mean? Would he actually throw someone into the rapids simply because they wanted to court a woman he didn't even know? Worse yet, would he

seek out women even though he was married to Naomi? All the answers were obvious and could be answered in one word—yes.

The first time she'd spoken to him Ethan had only grunted in response. The night Herbert Moody kissed her he'd been violent enough to throw the man into the rapids. And he'd sought her out even though he was married, so he would other women, too. But Tom was wrong about one thing. If anybody could handle Ethan Lucas, it was Blythe Bouvier. She'd done it twice before, and she firmly believed that she would have no trouble doing it again. If Tom told her that Ethan hadn't agreed to their courtship, she would go to Ethan and demand that he change his mind so Tom wouldn't be afraid.

Her decision made, she started disrobing for bed.

When someone knocked on his office door as he poured himself a drink, Ethan glanced over his shoulder. "Who is it?"

"Tom Travers, sir," he replied. "May I talk to you?"

"About what?"

"Your sister."

"Wait a minute." After he put the ribbon back in the desk drawer, Ethan wandered to the door and opened it. "Come in—but only for a couple of minutes. I'm going to the tables soon."

Passing his employer, Tom glanced around the room. "I didn't think you'd let me in. Mr. Jennings said he's the only person allowed in here."

"I'm sure as hell not going to discuss Blythe in the damned hallway," Ethan responded. "Now what do you want?"

"She said the likeness was uncanny," Tom observed looked over at the painting. "She *must* be your sister if that's your mother."

"Get to the point, Travers."

"Right." Tom faced his employer. "I want your permission to court Blythe."

"You don't have it," Ethan declared. "Now get the hell out."

"You gave me a couple of minutes, sir. I hope you'll let me take it. I understand how you feel, Mr. Lucas. I have four sisters of my own, and I'm very protective of them. I don't want them to make the wrong choices. But I'm not the wrong choice for Blythe. I'm not going to hurt her, and I'm not going to do anything she doesn't want. I only want to get to know her better. I can't do that if we don't court."

"And if I don't trust you?" Ethan asked.

"Then you don't trust me. I still deserve a chance, and Blythe agrees."

Ethan stared down at him. "You've already discussed this with her?"

"I wasn't going to, but I saw her in the hall. There's something you should know, too. I don't think your disapproval will stop her. I won't do anything I shouldn't, and I won't go against your wishes. I like working for you, and I don't want to jeopardize my job. But Blythe doesn't have anything to lose. She doesn't give a damn how you feel about our courtship. She wants it no matter what you say. She says she'll do it, too."

"She probably will. I've never met such a defiant woman. In fact, if I say no, that's probably the only reason she'll accept your courtship."

"I don't think so. She said she wants to get to know me better. That doesn't sound like defiance, sir. It sounds like she's interested in me—as interested as I am in her. Won't you at least give me a chance to prove that I won't hurt her?"

"I don't know." Ethan took two swallows of rye and studied Angel's portrait, wishing she would tell him what to do. Then he continued. "I honestly don't know. Let me talk to Blythe first. I'll give you my decision in the morning. Your couple of minutes are up now, so you'd better go."

"Yes, sir," Tom said as he left the room. "Thanks for listening to me."

"Thanks for coming," Ethan returned. "I'm not very good at being a big brother yet, and I don't know what I'd do if you go against my orders."

"That's why I came. I don't want to get thrown into the rapids somewhere along the way."

When the door closed behind Tom, Ethan finished his rye then set the glass on the credenza. Now all he had to do was convince Blythe not to let Tom court her. If he couldn't have her, no man could. But she would only rebel if she thought he was telling her that. To get her cooperation, he had to choose his words carefully, so she didn't realize what he was trying to do. He had to play the same games that women were so good at.

Stealing himself for their encounter, Ethan rapped three times on the door.

"Who is it?" Blythe asked.

"Your doting brother!" he replied.

"I'll be there in a minute."

In only moments, she pulled back the door with a bright smile. He stared down at her, his mouth gaping slightly, his gaze drifting from her face to her breasts.

"Get dressed," he ordered before closing the door.

Giggling, she opened the door again. "Would you please come in?"

As she sauntered toward the bed, the red in her hair became more prominent in the lantern light. Determined to talk to her in private, he entered the cabin and closed the door. Ethan couldn't believe that his manipulation had worked. He didn't want her to get dressed, so he had told her to do it. And she was so defiant that she'd reacted exactly as he'd expected. If he could get her to take off her robe, maybe he could get what he wanted from her more than anything else—something no respectable brother would want.

To his amazement, she sat down on the edge of the bed. In an instant, his mind returned to their embraces, and he began to swell in excitement. All he had to do was push her back; all he needed to do was move the material out of his way and cover her with his body. Then she would be his—just like all the others.

"Well, big brother?" she asked. "What did you want?"

His gaze moved to her face, where he saw her eyes riveted on his crotch. Embarrassed, he crossed his hands in front of his arousal.

"We need to talk," he announced. Given how she spoke, she thought of him as a big brother, and that meant he would never be able to have her. Then again, she did appear attracted to what he could give her. No! He couldn't think like that. He needed to play the role of big brother whether he liked it or not. With a heavy sigh, he collapsed onto the bed beside her. "One of these days somebody's going to question us about each other. We need to decide what our story will be."

Blythe frowned. "*Must* we continue this charade? I don't like playing games, and that's exactly this lie we're telling is."

"If we don't, the passengers who saw me outside will think I'm here to seduce the most beautiful woman aboard my ship."

Blythe giggled. "And you're *not*? I've got good vision, Ethan. I can see what you want."

"I know, but that doesn't mean I'm going to *get* what I want this time."

"I'm glad you realize that. I won't have to fight you off all the time if you do."

Although her laugh told him that she was teasing again, he spoke seriously. "Don't taunt me, Blythe. I'm here for a reason, and I don't particularly like it. We have to keep lying—at least, for now. People saw me come in here, and I don't want them to think badly of you. I need to know a few things about you. How old are you?"

"Twenty. Or I will be soon."

"Soon? When's your birthday?"

"April 21."

Excitement coursed through him. This was the perfect opportunity to impress her. "That's only six days away. We'll have a party—a big one. That way everybody will believe you're that my sister. I'm going to have to tell Jennings that, too, but I don't know how I'm going to convince him. I've already told him that I don't know who you are."

"Who's Jennings?" she asked.

"My captain. *And* my best friend."

"How can you change your story and make it seem real?"

"I've been lying to people all of my life, and I've only been caught once. I'll think of something that will convince him."

"At least, you've been honest with me," she said. "You could have told me that you were a bachelor, and I never would have questioned you. I would have thought Naomi was your sister. I hate people who lie to me."

His mind raced with unexpressed apologies and regrets. If he were a smart man, he would tell her the truth now, but he didn't have the courage to risk her rejection. And if she hated liars, she would *loathe* him, because he rarely told the truth. To avoid her statement, he said, "By the time I'm done, Jennings will believe me. Where did you live in France?"

"It probably sounds too convenient, but it's true. I lived in Paris."

"When did you move there?"

"When I was eleven."

"You said you had two younger brothers. How much younger?"

"Ben was two years younger, and Dan was four. Why?"

"Because we have to decide how old you were when your father took you away from my mother. Let's say you were ten months. That way he could have remarried and fathered a child without any problem."

"Fathered a child?"

"Of course, fathered a child," he said. "How else are you going to explain it if people learn about Ben and Dan? We don't have to say anything, but we do have to keep in mind that rumors spread. Somebody might hear something in passing."

"You think of everything," she said.

"How else can I be a successful liar? Besides, that's one thing you do in poker. You have to read all of the other hands. Otherwise, you'll lose almost every time. How old were your brothers when they died?"

"Fifteen and thirteen. I told you this before, Ethan. Don't you remember?"

Grinning mischievously to lighten the mood, he winked at her. "Obviously not. Now about Tom Travers. Do you really want him to court you? Or are you only saying that you do to defy me again?"

Her expression masked with shock, Blythe stared at him. "How did Tom get into the conversation?"

"Answer me!" he demanded. "I didn't say that he couldn't court you, but I sure as hell didn't say that he *could*, either. I told him that I wanted to talk to you first."

"I don't need your permission to court a man, be it Tom or someone else."

"Then you *are* being defiant again."

"I didn't say that. I like Tom—at least, I think I would if I had a chance to get to know him."

"Then you want him to court you. Is that right? I need you to be honest, because it will make a difference in what answer I give him. If you're only doing it to defy me, I'll tell him that. If you're doing it because you want him to court you, I'll begrudgingly give him my blessing."

Rising, she glared down at him. "I don't need your blessing, and I *don't* need your permission. Neither does Tom. And don't you dare throw him into the rapids."

Ethan laughed as he also rose. "I see Tom talked to you about this like he said. I've heard the rumors, too, angel; but, contrary to what people say, I've never thrown anybody overboard—not even into calm waters."

"Why don't you tell your crew that?"

"And have them lose their fear of me? That wouldn't be very wise. Besides, there've been plenty of times I've been tempted to do just that. Maybe someday I will, and then the rumors will be true. In the meantime, I have a little control over a sometimes unruly crew. After all, nobody wants to go out of life being battered around on a bunch of rocks."

"If you've never thrown anybody overboard," she asked in concern, "what happened to Herbert Moody?"

Her sudden change of mood caused Ethan to reach out and slide his large hands over her hair. It was so soft, so silky, almost like the texture of the ribbon he stroked when they were separated. Without touching her anywhere else, his hands slipped down her back to the end of her wavy tresses near her waist. But when he felt the material of her robe under his little finger, he stopped.

"Where is he, Ethan?" she demanded, her voice as soft and silky as her hair.

When he gazed down at her, he saw that she stared up at him. Her eyes were filled with a cautious trust so powerful that he drew her against him. To his surprise, she didn't protest. Instead, she slid her arms around him.

The way he treated her was incredible! So tender and gentle. She realized in that moment that she'd wanted him to hold her like this since the moment he entered the room. She shouldn't allow the caress, but she was powerless to stop it, powerless to do anything but return it. The same power he held over his crew with violence, he held over her with tenderness. Would Tom's words prove right? Would he get any woman he ever wanted—including her?

"Don't worry, angel," he said in a near whisper. "He's alive—not very well, but alive."

"What did you do to him?"

"I broke his nose and blackened his eyes."

"Why?"

"He was forcing himself on you, and I was protecting your virtue. I told you that."

"Oh."

After a few moments of silence, Ethan said, "I'd never do anything to hurt a woman, Blythe. Do you believe that?"

"I don't know," she admitted, even though she knew her words could hurt his feelings.

"This ought to prove it."

Before she could protest, his lips met hers again, with that tenderness she couldn't resist. She still felt as though she would die in his arms. Her heartbeat quickened; her breathing became labored. Again, she experienced the mixture of fear and excitement in his arms. Oh, how she hated this feeling. Oh, how she loved it! What was wrong with her? How could she love and hate at the same time?

As her heart constricted, she tightened her hold on him. She didn't want to die! Not this way. If she had to go, she wanted it to be fast—not with the slow excitement that inflamed her every time they kissed. Then he tightened his embrace, moving one large hand to her rounded buttocks so he could press her against his body. She felt his masculine hardness against her stomach; she tasted his tongue as it collided with hers during its languid probe of her mouth.

Suddenly, his other hand moved to her barely covered breast and massaged it. Oh, no! What was happening to her now? The tip hardened almost on contact, just like it did when she was cold. But she wasn't cold—not in the least. In fact, she'd never felt so warm in her life, especially on the inside. As the fear began to subside, Ethan released her mouth and breast but continued his secure embrace.

"You have my permission on one condition," he whispered.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, hoping her voice didn't reveal her disappointment that he had stopped.

"You and Tom. He can court you, but I want you to promise me one thing."

"What?"

"Remember that I'm not your brother."

"I don't think I'll ever forget," she replied, "but I am going to try. You're married, Ethan. We shouldn't be doing this."

"What if I told you that I'm not really married?"

"I wouldn't believe you. Men lie about being single—not about being married."

"I suppose they do," he said. "I'd better go back to Naomi now. I need ... a woman."

"You mean you need your wife."

Ethan strode to the door, opened it, and stood on the threshold.

"Good night," he mumbled as he closed the door behind him.

The minute it was shut Blythe flopped down on the bed. Why hadn't Solange come with her? Why had she insisted that they meet in Chicago? She needed Solange now, because her friend knew how to deal with men. Solange would know what Ethan was thinking and why he treated her like he did. Solange would also know why she felt like she was having a heart attack whenever Ethan kissed her.

THREE

During the meal, Blythe learned that Ethan was very friendly and offered her several shy smiles while he charmed her with his wit. Although she enjoyed his company, she was still leery. She had a feeling that he was only being pleasant to get what he wanted—for her to go alone with him to his office. Yet for some reason, she felt drawn to him.

This Ethan was a complete contrast to the one she had passed in the corridor the first day, and he only remotely resembled the violent man on the observation deck. This Ethan Lucas had a ready smile and gracious manner; his dark eyes sparkled mischievously whenever he spoke. Blythe often couldn't tell if he was serious or joking. He was obviously a complex man who enjoyed life to the fullest. If only she could find some enjoyment in her own life! Maybe then she wouldn't be so desperate to find the past that her father had lost. But was it wise to look for something she had no proof ever existed?

What a ridiculous thought! Of course, there was proof—tangible proof that had brought her to the River Goddess in the first place. The letter to her father had proclaimed that a man named Francois Bouvier was her grandfather, and she had to find him. There was more proof now, too. Ethan had told her that he had a painting of a woman who looked exactly like her hanging in his office. Either Ethan or that painting might give her yet another clue to her missing past.

"I thought you were hungry, Miss Bouvier," he observed, drawing her from her thoughts. "You hardly touched your food."

"I guess I wasn't as hungry as I thought," she admitted.

"Or you lost your appetite. I hope the waiter didn't embarrass you too much by staring at you like you were the other woman in my life. The news that we're dining together is probably at least halfway around my ship by now, too."

"Won't Mrs. Lucas be angry?"

"Mrs. Lucas?" he repeated. "Ah, yes, Mrs. Lucas. If you're worried, I can assure you that she won't mind."

"That surprises me. Most women would be furious."

"Why? We haven't done anything but eat and talk. If I'd taken you to my suite for dinner, she'd have every reason to be angry. But I didn't. We're in public with a number of people watching us."

Blythe flashed a quick, nervous smile as she glanced around the dining room. "One can never tell who will start a rumor."

"Does that mean you changed your mind about coming to my office?"

"People could misconstrue your intentions," she admitted, "and mine."

"I promise that my intentions are completely honorable," he insisted while raised his hand as though taking an oath. "You really must see the portrait, Miss Bouvier. The likeness is so uncanny that you could have posed for it yourself. She even has the same shy smile."

"Honest?" she asked in a breathy, amazed tone.

"Absolutely. And I find it a most enchanting smile. Please come down with me. I'll even leave the door open if it will make you more comfortable."

“All right then,” she agreed, “if you leave the door open. Besides, you’ve piqued my curiosity.”

“Should I still keep my hands in my pockets?” he asked with a grin.

Blythe bowed her head in a vain attempt to conceal her smile. Now she was self-conscious about it. Whenever he smiled at her, though, she felt a warm rush, as if someone had injected a hot liquid into her veins and her increased heart rate sped it through her body. It was a sensation she had never before experienced but one she loved already. It was exciting and exhilarating—and a little frightening because she didn’t know what it meant.

“Are you all right, Blythe?” Ethan asked in a soft, deep voice. “I didn’t say something to offend you, did I?”

“No.” Her eyes met his when she lifted her head. With an inner gasp, she discovered she couldn’t divert her gaze. Her eyes locked onto his dark brown stare, like a tick locked onto skin. The thought caused her to giggle. Here she was, sitting across from an attractive, charming man, and she likened something she sensed was very special to a very dull event. How unromantic!

“That’s a lovely sound,” he said, again breaking into her thoughts.

“What is?”

“Your laugh. It’s as marvelous as your smile. They complement each other perfectly.”

“Do you know what my mother would call a statement like that, Mr. Lucas? Blarney. But I’ll admit that you deliver it well—almost as well as my father.”

Rounding the table, Ethan extended his bent arm toward her, and she grasped his elbow to rise. Once they were out of the dining room, he smiled down at her again and linked their elbows. Her hand rested on his forearm. Even with that light touch, she could feel his muscles and she wondered what he looked like shirtless. Did he look as nice as her father while he split wood in the summer?

“I’m afraid, Miss Bouvier,” he said, “that blarney gives the impression that I was telling a tall tale. But I wasn’t. I honestly believe what I said. Your laugh and smile are both enchanting.”

“That’s very kind of you to say, especially since you’re married,” she said pointedly to remind him of his status.

“Does that bother you as much as it sounds?” he asked.

“I’m not accustomed to married men seeking me out,” she admitted. “I find it very ... disconcerting.”

“I had a good reason. And once we get to my office, you’ll understand.”

“The likeness is that close?”

“Like I said, uncanny,” he insisted as they started down the steps to the lower decks. “But you’ve seen other paintings. You know how close the resemblance is.”

Keeping her gaze on the stairs, Blythe remained silent until they got to the bottom then lifted her head to look up at Ethan. Instead of him returning her stare, he appeared to be in deep concentration as he escorted her down the corridor to his office.

When he reached out to unlock the door, an overwhelming confusion swept through her. How could she even consider going into the room with a married man, especially unchaperoned? Yet she desperately wanted to, and not only because of the portrait. She wanted to be with Ethan Lucas. Even though her upbringing told her it was wrong, her heart insisted that there was no harm in looking at the painting.

A hand on the small of her back startled her from her introspection. She shot her gaze to Ethan’s face and took two steps backward. “I can’t, Mr. Lucas.”

“Why not?” he asked, disappointment evident in his expression.

"I'm afraid."

"Not of me, I hope."

Unable to admit that he had only a minor part in her fear, Blythe bowed her head. How could she tell Ethan that she was more afraid of her overwhelming desire to be with him, something she'd never before experienced.

"Oh, my God," he groaned. Then his voice began to rise in anger. "It's because of last night, isn't it. You're afraid of me because I could have beaten the ..." He stopped then changed his wording in a calmer tone. "... up Moody. I was only protecting your virtue, Miss Bouvier. I swear it."

"I understand that, Mr. Lucas, but ..."

"Please don't be afraid of me. I swear I'd never do anything to hurt you—or any other woman. Won't you trust me long enough to at least see the portrait? It truly is very important to me."

Her heart went out to the man, who suddenly looked like a hurt little boy. Without a word, she passed him and went into the room, her eyes searching for the portrait he claimed to be there. And it was, in a very prominent place. Staring at it in awe, she approached the painting. He hadn't lied about its existence, nor had he exaggerated about the extent of the likeness. The hair color, the almond-shaped green eyes, the shy smile, even the four-pointed, lop-sided, star-shaped birthmark on the collarbone were all identical to her own. Tentatively reaching out, she touched the pink mark with her index finger.

"Do you have a birthmark, too?" His voice was so low and soothing that it dragged rather than startled her from her thoughts.

"Yes," she replied, "in the same spot. Who is she?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. Could she be your mother?"

"My mother died several years ago, and she looked nothing like this. My father didn't look too much like her, either."

"But he did somewhat?" Ethan questioned.

"Somewhat. The color of his eyes, the shape of his lips and nose—but that's about all." Turning to face him, Blythe gazed up into Ethan's dark eyes. "Where did you get this portrait? And the other paintings, of course."

"I won them in a poker game."

"From whom?"

"The man who painted them."

"Did he know the woman?"

"He didn't say, and I didn't ask."

"Where did he live?"

"Right here," Ethan explained. "He owned the River Goddess at the time. Why are you so interested?"

"Wouldn't you be if you looked exactly like someone in a painting?" she asked.

"Probably, but you act like you have a personal interest in this woman."

"I'm a curious person."

"You know the woman, don't you," he declared, his voice taking on an angry tone. "You just won't tell me."

"I have no idea who she is," Blythe replied. "And quite obviously, *you* also have more than a passing interest in her."

"We're here for *your* reaction to this portrait," he reminded her, his deep voice gruff in his frustration. "You know her, but you're too damned stubborn to tell me."

Blythe's breath caught, and she stared up at him in shock. How had he known that she

would stubbornly refuse to tell him the woman's name—if she knew it—unless he answered her questions first? Then she noticed it. His expression, soft and gentle while he charmed her into his office during lunch, had turned cold and hard in the face of her obstinance. This was the man she had spent days hiding from, and she suddenly wished she was still safe in her cabin.

"Answer me, damn it!" he raged as he stuffed his fists into his pockets.

"I don't know." Her voice was heavy with defiance. No one spoke to her like that. While she stood her ground in the middle of the room, Ethan stalked around her. "And even if I did, I wouldn't tell you."

His face told her everything. He was sizing her up. For battle? If not a physical one, then at least a verbal one. After one revolution around her, he backed toward the door, his eyes not leaving hers, and kicked it shut.

Infuriated, she shouted at him. "You said you'd leave that open! You lied."

"I changed my mind," he corrected. "Sit down."

Blythe's temper bristled further. Nobody got away with ordering her around, no matter how much bigger than she they were. And Ethan Lucas was no exception. Unmoving, she kept her stare riveted on his eyes, which blinked three times while he approached her again.

"I said to sit down."

"No," she returned.

"Do you know what I have in my pockets?" He jerked his fists from his jacket to hold them before her in a boxing stance. "These." But Blythe didn't even flinch at the sight of his balled hands. Instead, her eyes remained fixed on his in mute defiance. His voice, though, relayed his discomfort despite the ire in it as he continued. "If you were a man, you'd be flat on your back right now—with me sitting on you, throttling you good. In fact, I have half a notion to take you over my knee and spank some of that defiance out of you."

"Go ahead," she intoned.

Ethan's expression showed that some of the fight in him drain away under her dare. That was exactly what it had been, too—a dare. She had expressed it in the sound of her voice.

Good, Blythe thought when he dropped his hands, she had disarmed him. Unfortunately, now she could feel the old fear creeping into her. But the worst of it was over. She had shown him that he couldn't intimidate her simply because she was small—although five-three wasn't *that* small. Ethan Lucas was just tall. Either way, she was no physical match for him, and she couldn't let him see fear in her ever again.

"Damn!" he exclaimed as he strode to a bottle on a nearby shelf. "I need a drink."

Moving only her head, Blythe watched him splash some amber liquid into a glass and down it in one gulp. He poured himself more and stalked to his desk.

"Are you going to sit down or not?" he asked irritably.

"Not," she replied, worried that further words might give away her fear.

"Suit yourself, but don't expect me to be a gentleman and stand with you." He collapsed into his desk chair then sipped on his drink.

"That stuff isn't good for you," she stated. "I hear it kills your brain, as well as your insides."

"I'll worry about my own insides, thank you," he chided. "Now what are you doing on my boat?"

"I don't see why that concerns you," she replied, "since I paid for my passage."

"Damn it! You're not going to tell me anything, are you."

"Why should I? You aren't much of a ..." Blythe cut off her words. If she finished her insulting statement, he would only become enraged again. And he might actually spank her. She certainly didn't want that, not considering that his stylish loose-armed shirt sleeves still clung to his biceps.

"I'm a better man than you'll run across in *your* circle of friends," he proclaimed.

Blythe's eyes widened in horror. Ethan hadn't needed to hear the word; he had read her mind. The mere idea of what he could do to her made her shudder. Instead of the rage she anticipated, however, he laughed—a rich, full sound that made her wonder if his singing voice was equally beautiful.

An unexpected scene of Ethan whirling her around a ballroom floor, humming above her head, flashed across her mind. Most of her female friends were attracted to a man's eyes, a few were attracted to a man's smile, and one—her closest friend Solange—was attracted to the only portion of a man's anatomy that Blythe refused to consider. If Ethan weren't sitting behind his desk, she would probably glance to his trousers like Solange would have.

He laughed again, and her eyes shot to meet his. Oh, no! Without even realizing it, her gaze had dropped to the desk concealing his lap. Apparently, he could tell what she was thinking again.

"A man's eyes don't mean much to you, do they. It's a man's voice—or maybe it's merely his laugh—that brings out the ..." Ethan paused to sip his drink. "... *passion* in you."

"I'm not a passionate person, Mr. Lucas." She sank onto the chair before his desk with a casualness she hoped hid the fact that her knees had suddenly gone weak. "In fact, I rarely even let a man kiss me."

Finishing his drink, he put down the glass and toyed with his mustache.

"There are many different types of passion, Blythe," he told her. "There's passion for learning and passion for life. There's passion in striving for something you want more than anything else."

"I see that as an obsession. It engrosses the mind."

"Ah, but there's passion in obsession, too. There has to be, or it wouldn't be anything more than a dream." Pausing, he opened his desk drawer, and Blythe wondered what he had hidden in it. He appeared to be toying with something that he didn't want her to see. "There's also passion in defiance, in stubbornness—and most of all in anger. Yes, ma'am. There's passion in you, all right. You just don't recognize it."

He was right, but she had no intention of admitting it. Determined to turn their conversation back to the original topic, she said, "I thought we were going to discuss the portrait. I need some answers, Mr. Lucas. I *have* to have them."

Again, he laughed. "Such passion about a painting from someone who claims to be dispassionate."

"Don't taunt me! Just answer my questions."

"I can't. In fact, I was hoping you could answer mine."

Blythe stared over at him. "What possible questions could *you* have?"

"Only one—who is she?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"She's a beautiful lady, so I'm curious."

"So curious that you went to all of that trouble simply to meet me? That's quite an obsession to have for a portrait."

"A *passionate* obsession," he agreed with a grin.

Tired of his constant references to passion, Blythe rose and started toward the door.

She should have listened to her common sense and stayed away from him. The only reason she hadn't was because she thought he might be able to give her a piece to put in the puzzle of her background. Instead, he'd given her a difficult time, and she had no intention of ever being with him again, no matter how much she adored his laugh.

A breeze made her stop, and she stared up at Ethan as he blocked the door, ordering, "Don't leave yet."

Her fury rose, and she blistered, "You can force me to stay, but you *can't* force me to talk. So, what good would it do?"

"I'd be happy just to look at you."

"Look at your painting," she countered.

"She doesn't have a personality. You do." When he spoke again, his voice was husky; his eyes carried an expression of longing she'd seen in several suitors' eyes. "She's a painting, Blythe. You're real."

The moment he spoke Blythe wanted to run. She knew what would follow, but she didn't expect the surge of excitement that shot through her when his hands caught her upper arms. Without hesitation, she bent her elbows to put her arms between them. But she couldn't have anticipated that her heartbeat would speed up as he crushed her upper torso against his. Her toes barely touched the floor; her palms lay against his chest, where she could feel his hard pectorals. She couldn't have even imagined the power behind his kiss when his lips captured hers for the first time—or the tenderness. How could he show both at the same time? Above all, she couldn't have foreseen that the contact would block all rationality from her mind and replace it with nothing but feeling.

She should struggle to free herself, should show him that she wouldn't tolerate his treatment. But she couldn't move. She could scarcely even think. Somehow Ethan Lucas had bewitched her. Otherwise, she would never allow a married man to kiss her. That's right! He was a married man, so she had no choice but to put an end to the embrace.

Before she could react, he released her, not touching her anywhere. When he stared down at her, his mouth gaped slightly in astonishment. Unexpected tears stung her eyes, and she fought to control them. From the sound of his sigh, he regretted his actions. But why did she care if he was disappointed in her kiss? It was better this way—since he was married.

"I should go," she announced in a low voice.

"I suppose you should."

"Thank you for showing me the portrait."

"You're welcome." Opening the door, he let her pass. "Please come look at it whenever you feel the urge. I'll even leave so you won't be uncomfortable."

"Thank you, but I doubt I'll feel the urge. Good-bye, Mr. Lucas."

As Blythe strolled toward the stairs, Ethan closed the door. He wanted to watch her move away, her skirt—and her *hips*—swaying seductively, but that would make matters worse. Stroking the velvet ribbon in his drawer while she stood before him had done nothing to relieve his desire to hold her, and he had acted instinctively. And she might never forgive him for that. The only way to rid himself of the taste left by her lips was to drown himself in another woman. And that woman had to be Naomi, because he hadn't met any others on board, other than to ask if they'd seen Blythe.

Striding purposefully to his stateroom he entered to find Naomi sleeping. In his desperation to purge himself of Blythe, he'd forgotten that Naomi wasn't feeling well. As he stood at her bedside, he realized with a start that he couldn't have satisfied his need for

Blythe, anyway. Naomi wasn't the woman he wanted anymore—Blythe was, and someday he would have to have her.

FOUR

Although Blythe no longer feared Ethan, she was embarrassed that she hadn't at least chastised him after he'd kissed her. For two days, she avoided being where he might be, her efforts much less concerted than before. At first she couldn't understand why, then reality replaced confusion. She wasn't trying because, in her heart, she wanted him to find her.

Both nights she had dreamed of his laugh and his kiss so many times that it became a recurring nightmare of passion. The most interesting man she'd ever met was married! Maybe she would get over these feelings if she confronted him about the embrace. Maybe she would tell him that her lack of decorum didn't mean she condoned what he'd done. And maybe she wouldn't. Ethan Lucas was a dark, foreboding man of mystery, possessing an equally mysterious power over her. That was what she should fear—not the man but the spell he could cast on her with a single, rich-toned laugh.

Her best defense against him was to learn to hate him, to force herself to dislike the man. Arguing with him had brought on dislike, so all she had to do was prompt a disagreement if they spoke again. That would fuel her antipathy. A sardonic smile played at her lips. Staring him down would give her the advantage—just as it had in his office. Since Ethan was most dangerous to her heart, she needed to use every shield she could find to protect herself. So far that advantage was the only shield she'd found.

With renewed determination, Blythe returned to the observation deck.

Ethan started at the loud knock on his office door and automatically told the person to enter. Facing the door instead of the portrait he'd been staring at, a bright smile lit his face. Maybe Blythe had finally come to see it again. But his lips turned into a severe frown when he saw the red-and-gray-haired captain.

"You all right, Mr. Lucas?" Jennings asked as he closed the door. "You look tired."

"I am," he admitted, watching his left thumb stroke the soft, yellow ribbon he held. "I haven't gotten more than three hours of sleep a night since this trip started."

"Why not?"

"Blythe Bouvier."

"What?" Jennings asked.

"Angel's look-alike," Ethan explained, nodding toward the portrait. "Blythe's as much under my skin as Angel ever was. No, *more* than Angel. I can't sleep, I can't eat, and I sure as hell can't work—all because I can't stop thinking about her. The only thing I seem to be able to do is work with my dumbbells. They seem to help me work her out of my system for a while. But *only* for a while. I think what I really need is a good wrestling or boxing match, something one on one to have physical contact with an opponent."

"I didn't think you knew who she was."

"I finally found her a couple of days ago." Ethan sighed and turned his gaze to his captain. "What the hell am I going to do?"

"If you know who she is," Jennings suggested, "why don't you go talk to her? She spends a lot of time on the observation deck. I can see her from the helm. In fact, she's there right now."

Shaking his head, Ethan explained, "I can't. I want to see her again—God only knows how much—but I can't do it."

"That doesn't sound like you."

"I know, but I made some mistakes. One, which will probably become something good in the end, was telling her that I have a wife. Now she thinks Naomi and I are married. How can I pursue her when she thinks that?"

"Why would you tell her such a thing?" Jennings asked.

"I couldn't very well tell her the *truth*. She's probably too innocent to understand it. You know I've never understood women, and Blythe's different than any other woman I've ever known. She knows how to handle men, and that scares me. She doesn't do it in an obvious way like other women, either. She doesn't try to cajole or manipulate; she takes a stand against men. I sure as hell didn't expect her to be like that. I thought she'd be sweet and innocent because she has such a shy smile."

"Isn't she innocent?" Jennings asked.

"Of course, she is. That's one reason I told her that I was married. I didn't think she could understand how I live. You know, always looking for a better woman. But there's a hell of a lot more behind that sweet exterior of hers. She has fire in her, too. I never liked women like that before."

"I know *one* thing about her," Jennings told him. "She loves the water. In the last couple days, she's spent hours on end at the railing. Sometimes she watches the scenery, but mostly she just stares at the canal."

Ethan chuckled at the recollection of their interaction. "She likes to stare. You should have seen her stare me down when I lost my temper the other day. I couldn't believe it. She didn't blink a long, beautiful eyelash for several minutes. At least, that's how long it seemed." Then a frown returned to his lips. "I didn't like it at all."

"Sounds to me like ..."

"Don't say it!" Ethan ordered. "I know what the hell it sounds like. It sounds like she has some sort of power over me, and I don't like *that*, either."

"Then talk to her. Tell her how you feel. That's probably the only way you'll get her out of your mind."

"You're right. I think I will."

"Good. Now that we've found a solution to your problem, could we get down to business? I need some money to get supplies when we dock this afternoon."

Blythe loved the feel of the wind blowing her hair as she stood at the bow of the observation deck, and the crisp spring air seemed to clear her mind. In the open, she could think of Ethan rationally, could see him for the volatile man he was. If only she could see him that way alone in her room—or even in the dining room. Unfortunately, that didn't seem possible.

In the dining room, she remembered the charming, witty man who had delighted her over lunch. In her cabin, she could imagine his hands on her arms, her breasts crushed against his hard body, his powerful kiss. On the deck, though, she could vividly envision his attack on Herbert Moody. But the memory didn't produce fear now. Instead, she felt the

same pleasant, secure sensation she had when her brother had defended her honor.

But where Ethan had succeeded, Ben had failed and lost his life in the process. She'd wanted to stay with Ben and help, but he had insisted that Dan take her home. As she'd left with Dan, she glanced over her shoulder, making her last image of Ben clutching his chest, and her unwanted suitor running down the alley. When the brother and sister learned of Ben's death, they were devastated, then ...

An unexpected thought came to her. She'd been wearing a ribbon the night Ethan had protected her. What had happened to that ribbon, anyway? she wondered as she glanced around the deck. Since it was nowhere in sight, it must have blown away or somebody threw it away. After all, a ribbon wasn't something anybody would consider important. It wasn't important to her, either, but she was curious as to where it had gone.

"Are you looking for something?" a woman asked.

Straightening up, Blythe smiled when she saw Naomi. "Hello, Mrs. Lucas. I lost a ribbon the other day and wondered if it was here."

"What color was it? Maybe I've seen it."

"Yellow velvet."

"I didn't see it, but if I do, I'll give it back to you."

"Don't bother. It's only a ribbon—nothing to get excited about. Besides, it probably blew away. By the way, Mr. Lucas told me that you were ill. Are you feeling better?"

"A little, thank you." Naomi grasped Blythe's wrist and led her away from several people standing nearby. "Could I confide in you? Living on a riverboat, I don't have any close friends, and I need to talk to somebody. Can you keep a secret?"

"Of course."

"You can't tell anybody, especially not Ethan."

"You don't need to worry about that, Mrs. Lucas. I've only spoken to him once, and I doubt I will again."

"Call me Naomi. Anyway, I'm not positive yet. Not enough time's passed to be sure. But I think I'm going to have a baby."

"Oh, Naomi," Blythe said excitedly, "you must be thrilled."

Naomi shook her head. "I've been too sick to be thrilled. Ethan and I have been married a year and a half, and this is the first time I've had the symptoms. I'm a little afraid to believe it."

Unable to contain her enthusiasm, Blythe hurried on. "I hope you are. Babies are wonderful, and every time they learn something new as they grow up it will open your eyes, too. You'll feel like you're learning all over again."

"Do you have children?" Naomi asked.

"No, but I remember watching my brothers grow."

"I see. You won't tell Ethan, will you? I want to be sure before I say anything."

"Heavens no! I couldn't steal such a precious moment from a husband and wife. The joy of realizing that your love created a new person is something only you and he should share. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll extend my slightly early congratulations and leave. I have a few things to do in my cabin."

The emotional strength she needed to walk rather than run away from Naomi hurt. Blythe was happy for Naomi and Ethan, but the tightness in her chest was excruciating. It wasn't fair! Other women didn't seem to have trouble finding men to love, but she had never experienced the emotion. At this rate, she would never know the joy of motherhood.

At the bottom of the stairs, Blythe stopped short, shocked by the thought that came to her mind. She'd known many other women who had been with child and never hurt like

she did at Naomi's announcement. But it was even harder to admit that she wished she were the one carrying Naomi's child. She didn't want just *any* baby. She desperately wanted *that* one!

Down the corridor she saw the baby's father leaning against the wall. His left foot was planted against it, and his knee extended about a third of the way into the hall. Obviously, he was deep in thought again. He was toying with his mustache and his left hand was in his trouser pocket. Drawing in a deep breath to gather the courage to face him, she continued her stroll to her cabin.

"Blythe," he worded mutely as he rubbed the ribbon with his thumb, "I'm very sorry about the other day. I can't tell you how sorry I am about the other day, Blythe. Miss Bouvier ... I'm sorry for everything. Please accept my most humble apologies, Miss Bouvier."

Nothing was right—not one phrase. Ethan knew he should apologize for his actions in his office, but he didn't know how. Blythe was the first woman he'd ever felt he should apologize to, yet he knew he couldn't do it. And why? Because he wasn't sorry. He was *glad* that he'd kissed her. Actually, he should probably apologize to himself. After all, *he* was the one he'd hurt.

Even before their lips met that first time, he'd admitted that she would have a dangerous effect on his mind. And he'd been right. If he'd been obsessed with finding her, he only grew more so with the memory of their embrace. He could still taste the sweetness of her lips, feel the suppleness of her body and her hands upon his chest, hear his excited blood rushing through his ears.

Maybe she was right. Maybe liquor could kill his brain. That was apparently the only explanation for the lunacy he felt lately.

Glancing down the hall, he saw her. Her light hair hardly moved as she sauntered toward him. For several seconds, he watched her hips as they flowed seductively from side to side with effortless ease, her skirts swishing around her. No other woman he knew walked like that, and he wondered if there was *any* other who did. Leaving the ribbon in his pocket, he withdrew a key and turned to face her.

"Good morning, Blythe," he greeted with fraudulent cheer. "How are you today?"

"Fine, thank you," she replied. "And you?"

"Absolutely wonderful."

"Absolutely terrible, you mean."

He gasped in shock. "How did you know?"

"I don't know, Mr. Lucas. I suppose I sensed it. That, and you didn't sound very sincere. What's bothering you?"

"Nothing important. I just want to talk to you again. I got the impression you weren't telling me everything the other day, so I came to see if you'd would be willing to continue our conversation." While he spoke, Ethan unlocked and opened her door then looked down to watch her pass. But at the sight of her irritated expression, he found himself unable to continue.

"How did you get a key to my cabin?" she demanded.

"I have one to *all* of the cabins, in case of an emergency."

"Obviously, your idea of an emergency and mine are quite different."

"I didn't say this was an emergency."

"Then why do you have that key?"

"Let's go in, and I'll explain. It's too public here." Grasping her elbow, Ethan steered her into the room but left the door open. When he glanced down at her, he saw that she stared

directly into his eyes.

She was doing it to him again. That green-eyed stare of defiance which he had hoped to avoid was already working its effect on him. He wanted her. Oh, how he wanted her! Struggling to control his almost instantaneous arousal, he spoke in a crisp voice. "I was going to wait for you in here because I didn't think you'd want to see me again."

"At least, you're not a *completely* ignorant," she snapped.

"I'm not ignorant at all!" he raged. "You just turn me into a blithering idiot whenever you act this way."

Blythe sighed, causing Ethan to wonder why. Surely, it wasn't because he approached her again. After all, he'd been a complete gentleman—until she became angry.

"I *didn't* wait in your room, you know," he said. "I waited outside because I respect your privacy. But I'll quit respecting it and go through your belongings if you don't tell me why you're on my boat."

"You wouldn't go through my things," she declared, "so stop threatening me."

Shaking his head, he sighed at length. "You're wrong this time, Blythe. I'd tear this cabin apart to find the information I want if I had to. So why don't you save us both a lot of fuss and answer my questions."

Blythe wandered to the bed and sank down onto the edge of it. To be close to her, he sat down beside her. He watched her reaction as she turned her sorrowful gaze to his eyes. Something was bothering her, but he didn't think it had to do with him being in her room because he hadn't closed the door.

"Is something bothering you?" he asked after a moment of silence.

"I keep thinking about that portrait, Mr. Lucas. Shortly before I left France, I found a letter in an old trunk. My friend Solange and I were exploring the attic when we found it. The letter is twenty-five years old and was addressed to my father. It said that Henri Bouvier wasn't my father's real father. Francois, the man who wrote the letter, claimed he was. The woman I call *grand-mere* said the man who raised my father was actually his father's brother. Francois wanted to meet Papa and told him that he would be on the River Goddess. *That's* why I'm here. And that portrait just makes me wonder if she's the reason for the letter."

"Why didn't your father come?"

"He may have tried to at the time. I can't say for sure because he's dead, but it makes sense. He left France and came to America. He married my mother twenty-four years ago; they had a son but lost him before he was a year old. I was born two years after that. As far as I know, Papa never found his father. He never told us much about his background, either, even though Mama did hers."

"So now you're trying to find your grandfather. What does your mother think of this?"

"I told you before. She's gone, too. So are both of my younger brothers."

Ethan's heart went out to her. This poor young woman was alone in her life, just like in her travels. "Your family's non-existent then. How did you lose your younger brothers? Or is it too painful to talk about?"

"I was seventeen, and Ben had just turned fifteen. *Grand-mere* Bouvier gave him a birthday ball that year. My escort got too amorous; and Ben, like you, intervened to defend my honor. I tried to stop him, but he insisted that our brother Dan take me home so I wouldn't witness their fight. Ben never came home. My escort stabbed and killed him. Dan was like my older brother who died. He had a bad heart all of his life. He felt so guilty for not trying to stop Ben that he was gone within four months. He was only thirteen."

"So only you and your grandmother are left."

"She isn't my grandmother, Mr. Lucas—not technically. She told me that she raised my father as her son, but there was no direct blood tie to her and no adoption. She had just been married to Papa's uncle, who died shortly after he came to live with them. *Grand-mere* never had children of her own and raised Papa as her own. That's all I know about it."

"Who's your real grandmother?"

"I don't know, and neither does *Grand-mere* Bouvier."

"Did you ever stop to think that the woman in the portrait might be your real grandmother?"

Blythe gasped. Scrambling from the bed, she gazed down at him, her wide eyes filled with excitement. "Oh, Ethan! Do you think that's possible?"

Rising slowly, he studied the young woman before him. Although there were no tears in her eyes, there had been passion in the sorrowful tone of her voice when she'd explained her brothers' deaths and her father's background. And there was an equal amount of passion in her excitement now. But when she said his name, so easily, so naturally, he couldn't control his actions. Tenderly grasping her shoulders, he ordered in a near-whisper, "Say it again."

"I don't understand," she returned, staring up at him. To Ethan's surprise, another kind of excitement gleamed in her eyes as she asked, "Say what?"

"My name. Say it."

"Mr. Lucas?"

"No. Ethan. Say it!"

As Blythe stared up at him, Ethan saw the confusion in her expression. "Why?"

"Damn it, Blythe!" He shook her once and watched her long, baby-fine hair settle around her face and shoulders as she stared up at him in shock. "Say my name! Now!"

She opened her mouth slightly to comply, but nothing came out. For the first time in her life, she was speechless. In a way, he sounded angry, but in a different way, he sounded almost desperate. Never before had a man spoken to her like that. She tried again, but the words stuck in her throat. Resigned that she couldn't do as he asked, she released a long sigh from deep within her chest.

To her surprise, he dropped back onto the bed. His hands caressed her shoulders, and he drew her against him. Then his arms slid around her, his fingers tangling in her hair. This was an embrace she knew she would never forget!

While she stared down at him, he lifted his head toward hers. His hands cupped the back of her head, bringing it down toward his face. Then their lips connected. His tongue taunted her lips until it passed into her mouth, searching for her tongue. At first she didn't respond, but then ... Oh, yes! Then came the fire! The flame of his embrace engulfed her. When his tongue connected with hers, she gave over to these new, unexpected sensations he sent through her.

She lay her hands on his shoulders then let them move to his upper arms. The muscles she found so prominent under his shirt tensed and hardened under her touch. And the sensations inside her grew in intensity.

Blythe loved these feelings coursing through her. She wanted to feel forever, but she was also afraid to. What about Naomi and the baby? Oh, no! How had she forgotten about her new friend? No matter how mind-boggling his kiss was, no matter how much she enjoyed the moment, she had to end it.

Struggling to free herself proved hopeless. Ethan repositioned his arms and held her against him with his hands caressing the back of her head. Standing between his legs, she

could feel that he was excited. How could she be doing this to Naomi? This wasn't the kind of woman she was, but she couldn't bring herself to push away from him. His mouth moved against hers, compelling her acceptance with his spell until she believed she would faint from all the wonderful new sensations sweeping through her body.

She wanted to collapse, to quit fighting against him. But his kiss demanded her response. She had no choice except to give it in the only way she knew how. Oh, no! Her heart! It was beating so fast. Was she having a heart attack? Was the same fate that her brothers met going to happen to her? No, it couldn't! She didn't want to die—not in the middle of what had to be ecstasy. The only way to stop it was to calm down and quit fighting.

The fire died without warning, and Ethan broke the kiss. But when he relaxed his hold on her, she started to fall. His large hands encircled her ribcage, and he set her on his lap before moving her to sit on the bed. Finally, he got off the bed and knelt before her. Her face was hot after having had such a thorough kiss.

"Are you all right now?" he asked.

"Uh-huh," she replied, afraid to say more.

"Good." Ethan sat back on his feet and took her hands in his with a tenderness she hadn't believed possible from such a large man. "Are you going to try and find your grandparents?"

"That's why I came back to America," she declared. "But first, I have to get a job and earn more money. I only have fifty dollars left."

Ethan stared straight at her and toyed with his mustache. "Do you know how long it will take you to earn the kind of money you'll need?"

With a frown, she admitted, "Years probably."

"That's right. I, on the other hand, could teach you to earn up to a hundred *times* that by the end of your trip."

"You could?" she asked, shocked by his declaration. "How?"

"Poker."

Reluctant to accept his suggestion, Blythe shook her head. "I don't know, Mr. Lucas. I don't believe in gambling."

"With a stare like yours, you could make a bundle. Want to try it?"

"What if I lost my money?" she asked, hesitant to agree.

His dark eyes took on an excited glow at the prospect. "First, I'll teach you to play, then I'll stake you a hundred. If you blow it all, I'll take the loss—I can afford it. If you win, you can pay me back."

"That would mean we'd have to spend a lot of time together."

"Are you afraid that I'll ..." Ethan paused then added, "Of course, you are, and I don't blame you. Don't worry, Blythe. I promise not to ... force my attentions on you again."

"I hope you can keep that promise. Naomi would be devastated if she ever found out."

"Then you'll let me teach you?" he asked, his voice filled with hope.

Although her reluctance was faltering, she still had concerns. "What will people think if the married owner of the River Goddess spends so much time with a single woman?"

"We can tell them that you're my long-lost half-sister. That's how I explained my actions to Moody. Please, Blythe. Will you try it?"

Blythe hesitated another moment. Then, unable to resist the prospect of spending so much time with him, she said, "All right. If I can earn some money that fast, I'll trust you to keep your promise. I'd like nothing more than to find my grandparents before they die, too."

“Wonderful! There’s only one more thing. My half-sister wouldn’t call me Mr. Lucas. Why don’t you practice saying my Christian name again.”

She took a deep breath and obliged him in a whispery voice that surprised her. When he made a speedy exit, Blythe giggled. For such a large man, he had a lot of weak spots on which she could play her own hand.

FIVE

Late that afternoon Ethan sent a note to Blythe via one of his crew and requested that she join him and Naomi for dinner. Although his message explained that he wanted to set the stage for announcing that she was his sister, she had reservations.

How could she dine with the couple after Ethan had kissed her—twice—and she'd liked it? Besides, Naomi had confided in her. Most importantly, how could she hide the pain in her heart at seeing them together when it hurt so bad just thinking about them being married?

After reading the note, Blythe told the messenger, "Thank Mr. Lucas for me, please, but tell him I can't accept his invitation. He'll understand."

Despite her expectation that he would, the crewman didn't return. Blythe also half-expected Ethan to try and convince her to join him for dinner, but that didn't happen, either. Instead, she sat in her room for a while then decided to go to the observation deck. As she stood at the rail watching the water, Naomi joined her.

"Are you really Ethan's half-sister?" Naomi asked.

"That's what he claims," Blythe said, wording her answer so she didn't get caught in a lie.

"Then that lady in all the paintings is your mother. You must have been shocked when you saw them."

"I was."

"Ethan told me that he showed you the portrait. I imagine that one shocked you more than the others. It's been a long time since I told him to throw it away, so I didn't recognize you that first day. I didn't know he kept it in his office until he told me this afternoon. He'd told me he threw it away like I asked him. But I didn't know it was his mother. Ethan doesn't talk much about his family."

"I can understand that," Blythe admitted. "My father didn't talk much about his, either."

"Maybe men don't like to discuss things like that. He didn't tell me about *any* of his family until today. I can't imagine what it must have been like to have your father take you from your mother so early in life. And to have him tell you that she was dead! That was terrible. He must have been an awful man."

"No, he wasn't," Blythe denied, unable to mask the insult she felt for her deceased father. "He was a wonderful, witty man who adored me as much as I did him."

"I suppose he did. After all, he took you with when he left her. Ethan would never do anything like that. That's one reason I love him so much. And to think that you didn't have any idea Ethan was your brother when you first introduced yourself to me."

"That's true."

"You don't like Ethan very much, do you." When Blythe shook her head, Naomi continued in a concerned tone. "You should give him a chance. He won't hurt you like you think. I know I should have told you that before, but I was afraid I might lose him. He's always had a craving for pretty ladies. I thought he might leave me, even though I'm probably going to have his baby."

"Surely, you don't see me as a threat, Mrs. Lucas."

"Call me Naomi." The woman paused and sank onto a chair against the side of the riverboat. "I don't see you as a threat now, but I did when we first met. Like I said, he's always had an eye for pretty ladies. And he was trying so hard to find you! He's never done that before. I thought he was losing interest in me, because I'm not as pretty as I used to be."

"How can you say that?" Blythe exclaimed. "You're beautiful."

"I don't *feel* beautiful, and that's not going to change for months. In fact, it will probably get worse the bigger I get."

"But women with child get more beautiful. The closer they come to term, the more radiant they grow." Blythe's pale green eyes lit in excitement, and she sat down in the chair beside Naomi. "You have no idea how I envy you. I've always dreamed of a husband and lots of children."

"You won't feel that way when your stomach won't stop churning," Naomi advised. "You won't want to be pregnant when the mere *thought* of food makes you nauseous."

"I suppose you're right. But that passes in time."

"I know, but that doesn't make it any easier."

"How are you feeling today?"

"Well enough to have some soup while you and Ethan have a meal." Naomi rose and smiled at her. "Won't you reconsider and join us for dinner?"

"I'd like to," Blythe admitted, desperate to think of an excuse to decline her offer.

"Then do it. I'd like to get to know you better—and so would Ethan. He told me that he wants to spend as much time with you as he can. He even told me that he's missed you all these years."

Blythe gazed at Naomi. How could she respond in a calm tone after what had happened with Ethan? Looking at the other woman was hard enough, because her mind was filled with the vivid memories of his kisses. As badly as she wanted to forget, she couldn't. She could still feel herself crushed against him, hear the sound of his labored breathing, taste his lips upon hers. Her heart skipped a beat then raced on at the mere thought of the embraces.

"Do you think he really wants me to dine with you?" Blythe asked. "Maybe he's only being polite because he feels like he has to."

"Of course, he wants you to. And so do I. Are you going to join us or not?"

It took all her strength to answer in a calm voice. "All right, but I want to go to my cabin and freshen up first. What time should I meet you?"

When Naomi suggested seven, Blythe agreed then excused herself, scarcely able to keep from running. How could she have been so stupid to have given in to Naomi's pleas? Now she would be forced to see the couple together, and she wasn't sure she could bear that.

By the time she met them in the dining room, Blythe had worked herself into such a frenzy that her stomach ached. It wasn't nausea, but the sharp pain of nervousness she got on occasion. When she ordered a bowl of soup after Naomi did, Ethan flashed a smile at her.

"Don't you think you should have more than that, Blythe?" he asked.

"Not at the moment, thank you," she replied. "I'm not very hungry."

"I realize you aren't very big, but you can still eat more than soup." He chuckled as he

raised his head to look at the waiter. "Bring the lady steak, potatoes and corn." Turning his gaze back to Blythe, he added, "Can't have my little sister wasting away on my watch. Ma would have my head on a platter."

Instead of writing down the order, the waiter, one of the men who had helped with her luggage when she boarded, stared at her in amazement. "Your sister?"

"Half-sister," Naomi corrected. "Have you two met?"

"Not officially," Blythe said, glad that the young brown-haired man appeared interested in her. Maybe he could take her mind off Ethan, Naomi, and their child.

"Blythe Bouvier, this is Tom Travers."

Out of the corner of her eye, Blythe saw Ethan's mouth set in rage as she and Tom exchanged pleasantries. Was it possible that he didn't like her meeting other men? If so, that was too bad. He was a married man, and she was free to visit with any man she chose. And there was no reason that couldn't be Tom.

After he finished taking their orders, Tom headed toward the kitchen while Naomi spoke in Blythe's defense. "Don't be so protective, Ethan. She has a right to make some male friends."

"That's right," he agreed, stipulating, "but only if *I* think they're suitable for her. We're the only family we have now. At least, until I get her back to Ma. I spent years looking for Blythe, and now that I've found her I'm going to see that she's taken care of. She's not struggling on her own anymore, Naomi. She has me."

Blythe stared at him. The same man who had accused her of having great passion was exhibiting the same amount. And he sounded so determined when he said "She has me" that Blythe knew he meant the words. She also knew that he would never turn his back on her until one of them died. He seemed determined to remain her surrogate brother forever. But did she hate the idea—or *love* it?

"Blythe," Ethan said. "Would you please pay attention?"

"What?" she asked, jerking her head to look at him. Was it her imagination or did Ethan have the same look in his eyes that he'd had when he'd kissed her? That was nonsense. He wouldn't entertain such thoughts with his wife sitting next to him.

Ethan battled the unexpected desire to taste her lips again. As much as he wanted to be with her, to hold her close as he had earlier, he couldn't let his feelings show. He had to act calm and collected, to act like the protective brother he claimed to be.

To avoid his thoughts, he took a deep breath and repeated his words. "I won't have you associating with my crew. Is that clear?"

Glaring at him, she said, "As a matter of fact, it *isn't* clear. What makes you think that you can tell me with whom I may or may not associate? You may be my half-brother but that doesn't mean I'm used to it yet. You have no right to dictate which people I can have as friends—especially since you weren't there when I was growing up."

Ethan's heart ached. From the sound of her voice, she was taking this half-blood relationship seriously, not as a fabrication so they could be together. She looked so beautiful that night, even more beautiful than she had before. The mere sight of her caused him to grow with desire. How would he ever eat when he could hardly sit still on his chair! Then her words echoed in his mind—my half-brother.

The lie he had perpetrated to spare Naomi was hardest on *him*. It was even harder than the lie that Naomi was his wife. How he had ever gotten himself into this situation was beyond his comprehension. But he had, and he could see no way out.

"I don't want you to get hurt," he explained after only a moment's pause. "Is that really

so bad?"

"I've already *been* hurt, and you can't stop it from happening again. It's part of living."

Ethan couldn't help but wonder if she was referring to the kisses he'd stolen from her. But he couldn't ask her. He couldn't even take her aside and talk to her so she would understand that he felt nothing but regret for what he'd done. No, not regret. He could *never* regret those moments. But he was sorry that he had forced himself on her, and he needed to tell her that—sometime.

"Blythe's right, darling," Naomi said, bringing his mind back to the present. "Every woman has to suffer her share of hurt—every man, too."

How well he knew! Without even realizing it, Blythe caused him more pain than he ever believed he could endure. Not only did he have emotional pain, he had physical and mental pain, too. In fact, his desire and frustration felt as though it would send him to the nearest insane asylum. He didn't know how this could happen so quickly after meeting, but he couldn't deny that he was more than sexually attracted to her. He was emotionally attracted to her, as well. His heart ached for her at the mere thought of her.

To regain control of his thoughts, he asked, "Can you two blame me for wanting to protect my sister?" In his mind, though, he knew it was more than protecting her. He was jealous of other men's attention to her.

"Nobody's blaming you, darling," Naomi said. "Blythe would probably be thrilled to have you protect her if it's necessary. But it isn't, and you can't keep her from making friends—female *and* male."

Ethan studied Blythe for a moment. Her innocent beauty caught his attention. He would never be able to explain how much he wanted to be with her. Yet two lies kept him from showing the world how he felt.

With a sigh, he returned his gaze to Naomi. "I suppose you're right. Let's talk about something else. Blythe?" Facing her again, he noticed that she was still staring at him and grinned. "How would you like to hear some of the funnier escapades I've had at the gambling tables?"

"Oh, yes!" she exclaimed.

Dinner progressed pleasantly, with Ethan often drawing shy giggles from Blythe. She would get a look in her eyes, which often dropped to the table before him. What was she expecting to see? Maybe that he was excited by his banter? If it was, he needed to stay seated, or she would learn the truth.

Why was she doing this to him? he wondered. Why did she giggle in that enchanting way when she knew what it did to him? Or did she know? Given how innocent she appeared, she might have no inkling. If only he could think of a way to extricate this self-torturing mess he'd made without hurting either woman—especially Blythe. If only he hadn't lied to them!

What was it his father had told him about lies? *A lie begets more lies until, all of a sudden, your life is a mess.* At the time, Ethan had laughed at the notion. But now, all of a sudden, his life was a mess. For the first time, he understood what his father had been trying to tell him when he'd lied about gambling with his friends at fourteen. Although he'd started lying long before that, it was the only time he'd been caught. That was why he'd never regretted his fabrications. Until now!

"What's wrong, darling?" Naomi asked, bringing him from his introspection.

Glancing first at Naomi then at Blythe, he noticed that they both appeared concerned about him. To ease their minds, he grinned and winked at Blythe. "I'm wondering how I'll ever adjust to my little sister being grown up. I still have that protective instinct in me, so I

hope you'll bear with me—at least, for a while.”

“Don't worry, Ethan,” Naomi said. “Your wanting to be protective is very natural. You missed most of her childhood. Besides, between the two of us, we can make you toe the line. Right, Blythe?”

“Right,” she mumbled.

“Unfortunately, I think you will,” he admitted, gazing at Blythe fondly. “She apparently has a knack for managing men, but right now I could manage a huge piece of apple pie. Would either of you like some?”

Blythe's voice grew animated as the conversation shifted topics. “I *love* apple pie. It's always been my favorite.”

“There, you see? It's in our blood.”

When they'd all finished eating, Ethan announced that he needed to do some work in his office. With Blythe and Naomi flanking him, he escorted Naomi back to his suite, which was closer to the dining room than Blythe's cabin. Then he gazed down at Blythe and suggested that they take a stroll around the boat.

Blythe stared up at him, confused. “I thought you said you have work to do.”

“It was an excuse so I could spend some time alone with you,” he explained as they strolled away from his cabin door. “Now what do you say about that walk?”

Although she would have loved spending more time with him, Blythe recognized the inadvisability of doing so. But she didn't want him to avoid her because she'd rejected him, either, so she needed to decline his offer gracefully. “I don't think that's wise, Ethan. Too many people could see us together. Besides, I'm tired.”

“But I thought I'd start teaching you poker tonight,” he said.

Blythe giggled then taunted him again. “During a pleasant stroll along the decks? I've heard that you're very good at the game, but I doubt even you could teach someone while strolling the decks.”

“If I were you, Blythe Bouvier,” he warned in a serious tone, “I'd limit my giggles to when we're together publicly. I would have suggested it at dinner if Naomi hadn't been there.”

“I'll giggle or laugh whenever I please,” she snapped, “and there's nothing you can do to stop me.”

“For such a pretty little thing, you certainly have a *big* defiant streak in you. Where did you get it from?”

Again, he stunned her with his question and took all the irritation from her. “What do you mean?”

“Were your mother or father defiant?” he asked with a grin.

“Neither was. Solange used to tell me that I was defiant, too, so I gave it a lot of thought. I don't remember being defiant while my parents were alive. I must have acquired the trait when a stranger who said he was my uncle took me away from the grandmother and the country I loved.”

“That would probably make anybody defiant. Why don't we go to my office and start your lessons?”

“Are you positive you want to do this?” she asked. “It isn't necessary. I have no doubt that I can find a governess position at the end of your route.”

“I'm sure you *can* find a job like that in Chicago,” he agreed, “but it'll be years before you find your grandfather if you do it that way. He could be dead by then. My way you can start the second you're off the boat.”

"I suppose you're right."

"Of course, I am. Big brothers are always right." He extended his bent left elbow toward her. "Shall we go?"

Blythe frowned as she wandered down the hall with her arm linked in Ethan's. Although he chatted beside her, she heard nothing but a distant voice. Apparently, he truly thought of her as a little sister. But how could he when he'd kissed her like he had? Or had she misinterpreted her own reaction to those kisses? Impossible! The feelings she'd had in his arms were unlike any other she'd ever experienced. And, quite frankly, they frightened her, despite her desire for him to do so again.

On second thought, her feelings meant nothing. What Ethan felt was all that mattered to him, and she had no inkling of what was going through his mind. Nor did she know how he reacted to kissing her. That wasn't exactly true. She had felt his desire through her skirts that time. What other indication did she need?

When they reached his office, Ethan unlocked and opened the door, allowing her to precede him into the cabin. Her gaze went to the portrait of Angel. She wandered to it, her stare not leaving the picture until Ethan's voice startled her from behind.

"You're fascinated by Angel, too, aren't you," he observed, caressing her waist.

"It's difficult to believe that there's someone in this world who could be my identical twin."

"I doubt she's that anymore, Blythe."

"No, I imagine not, but she was at one time. Somewhere out there must be a woman who would be as surprised as I am at the resemblance."

"And Angel might be related to you," Ethan reminded her. "It's likely, you know, especially if this Francois who wrote to your father is your grandfather."

Blythe considered his words. Was it too much to hope for that this woman was related to her? Was it unrealistic to even think such a thing? She inhaled at length then released a long, slow sigh. This wasn't something she wanted to contemplate at the moment—maybe later when she was alone in her cabin.

She sighed again and tried to tear her gaze from the painting before she spoke. "I'd rather not think about that right now, Ethan."

"Then let's get busy with your lessons," he suggested. "The first one is teaching you to shuffle the cards, and they're over in my desk."

Steering her from the painting by her waist, he directed her to the chair before his desk. As she sat down, he sank onto his large chair on the opposite side. He withdrew a deck from a drawer and slid the cards from the wooden box, decorated with small, clear stones in the shape of a spade. Blythe reached across the desk to touch the container.

"Would you like to look at it closer?" he asked, laying his hand over hers and pushing it across the desk.

Picking up the red-tinged wooden box, she opened it and inhaled. Cedar! A flood of memories raced through her mind. She could vividly see her mother's hope chest and them sorting through the belongings that she would one day inherit. The same chest was in her grandmother Bouvier's house now, and Blythe wondered if she would ever see it again. Closing the lid, she traced the spade with her index finger.

"Those are really shiny glass pieces," she observed.

"Because they're not glass. They're diamonds."

"Diamonds!" She jerked her hand away. "Real ones?"

He laughed heartily, drawing her attention to his face. "Of course, real ones. And touching them won't hurt them. Diamonds are the strongest rocks on earth. Hell, they can cut

through glass.”

“I didn’t know that,” she replied, staring at the box in awe. “I’ve never touched one before. My grandparents in France were wealthy, but *Grand-mere* said jewels were a waste of money.”

“She was too ... frugal. If she’d been wise, she would have known that jewels are an investment—not merely something that makes a pretty woman look beautiful. Now, on with the lesson.”

Blythe tried to concentrate on his demonstration and her own feeble attempts to duplicate his example. But she found it impossible to keep from looking at the portrait. Finally, Ethan put the cards back in their cedar case.

“What are you doing?” she asked in amazement.

“Giving up for the evening,” he explained. “Having lessons in here isn’t going to work.”

“Why not?”

“You’re as obsessed with Angel as I am.”

“Then where should we go?”

“Nowhere tonight. From now on, though, we’ll have to do this in your cabin. I wouldn’t suggest it under normal circumstances—because of what I did to you the first two times we were alone together—but we can’t do it in public or people will know that I’m teaching you. Then you’ll never get into a game because the gamblers are sure to hear of it.”

Blythe bowed her head at the memory of his embraces and said, “I imagine you’re right.”

“Like I said before, big brothers are always right.” Rounding the desk, he grasped her hands and pulled her to her feet. Then he picked up the card box and put it in her hand, folding her fingers around it. “Take these back to your cabin and practice.”

“All right. Good night,” she said, hurrying toward the door before he could kiss her again. But his voice stopped her.

“I’m sorry, Blythe,” he apologized, his voice cracking with emotion.

Turning to stare at him, she noticed the disappointed expression in his dark eyes. “For what?”

“For the way I acted around you the first two times we were alone. I know it was abominable, and I promise not to force my attentions on you again.”

“All right,” she replied as she fled his office.

To her amazement, the fact that Ethan no longer wanted intimate contact with her distressed her. Who cared if it was better that way? She wanted a repeat of those moments—*many* repeats.

SIX

Outside Ethan's office, Blythe collapsed against the wall. She'd never been one to cry, except when her family members had died, but tears stung her eyes. No matter how frightened she was that she would have heart failure in his arms, his words still hurt. He was sorry that he'd kissed her; he'd promised never to do it again. One minute she was afraid when he held her; the next, she was upset because he'd rejected her.

It was probably better this way, though. He wasn't only married; he was going to be a father. She shouldn't have agreed to his charade so they could be together, but she didn't have a choice. He was so determined that he never would have listened to reason if she'd tried to dissuade him.

Sliding the cedar box into her skirt pocket, she wandered toward her room, leisurely running her thumb over the diamonds.

"Blythe!" a man called as she reached her cabin.

Glancing up, she saw the brown-haired waiter approaching. His long legs stretched out in his hurry to catch up with her. He was quite attractive, but not as attractive as Ethan. And he wasn't nearly as tall as Ethan. She gave her head a quick shake to rid herself of Ethan's image. She needed to stop comparing other men to Ethan. She had no business having those thoughts of him.

She took her key from her pocket as she waited beside her door until he arrived. "Hello, Mr. Travers."

"Tom," he said with a bright smile.

"All right. What can I do for you?"

His nervous rush of words brought a smile to her lips. "I wanted to see if you'd mind me courting you while you're on the riverboat. What I mean is I wanted to say hello before I went to see your brother. I don't think Mr. Lucas wants the crew courting his sister, so I thought I should talk to him before I said anything to you. Then again, I already said something to you, didn't I?"

The smile disappeared as she replied, "Ethan has no say in the matter. If I want to be with one of his crew, I'll do it. There's nothing he can do to stop me."

"Sure there is. He could fire me—or any other man. Then we'd have to leave ship. You couldn't do anything about that."

"Would he honestly fire you because you wanted to court me?" she asked, unable to believe somebody would do such a thing.

"You *bet* he would. That's why I want to talk to him first."

Furious that Ethan would go to such lengths to keep other men away from her, Blythe interrogated Tom with a barrage of questions. "What if he tells you that he won't allow it? Are you going to agree? Why wouldn't you stand up for yourself? Why not demand what you want to do?"

"I won't have a choice but to agree. I need the job."

"But what if I *want* you to court me? If I did everything I could to be in your company, would he do the same thing?"

"It's been a real long time since you've been with your brother if you don't know the answer to that. He absolutely would! In fact, he'd probably throw me overboard in some rapids to set an example. And I'm not going to tangle with a man his size. I've seen him without a shirt, and I don't want to fight with a man of his stature. Besides, I hear he wrestles and boxes for sport. I wouldn't stand a chance against him. If he says no to a courtship, I'll abide by his wishes."

"He can't tell me with whom I can associate," she fumed, "and I won't *let* him. Just because he claims to be my big brother, doesn't mean that I'll let him bully me. I won't—and you shouldn't, either."

"What do you mean by claims to be your brother?" Tom asked with a suspicious tone in his voice. "Do you doubt that he is?"

"I don't remember him being my brother," she said to conceal her mistake. "And I don't remember the woman in the portrait in his office, even if the likeness is uncanny."

"I'm still not taking any chances. I'm going to ask him if he'll let me court you."

"I wish you wouldn't. I'm perfectly capable of picking my own suitors. Besides, he hasn't been involved in my life for years. Why should he care now?"

"He had no control over your separation, Blythe. I have four younger sisters, and I know how he feels. I didn't like the way some men looked at them, and I do everything I can to protect them whenever I'm home. If I explain that to Mr. Lucas, he might not be so dead set against me courting you. And I'd honestly like to do that."

"I'd like it, too," she replied. "You seem like a nice man, and I'd love to get to know you better."

"Then I'm going to talk to Mr. Lucas."

When he started to leave, Blythe caught his arm to stop him. "Wait a minute, Tom. I don't care what he says. If I want you to court me, I'll let you—with or without his blessing. You talking to Ethan is only a formality because I won't listen if he doesn't agree. I'll spend time with you, anyway. You wouldn't mind, would you?"

"Not if I don't get caught."

She studied his expression for a moment then asked, "Are you really that afraid of Ethan?"

"There's not a man on board who doesn't know his temper. And he can be violent when he loses it. When I said he'd throw me into the rapids to set an example, I meant it."

"Don't worry. I can handle him."

Tom chuckled. "All he'd have to do is step on you, and you'd be squished. I've heard that he has a way with women. I've seen him with plenty, too. But I've never heard that women have a way with him."

"That was probably before Mrs. Lucas."

"Mrs. Lucas?" he repeated. "Oh, Naomi. Before *and* after is more like it. If he sets his sights on a woman, he gets her. I haven't seen him fail yet."

"He spends time with women other than Naomi?" she asked, unable to believe he would do such a thing. Then again, he'd shown her that he would be with her and not think twice about it. Without thinking, she asked, "How could he *do* such a thing?"

"He'd probably do it with you, too—if you weren't his sister. Only in your case, I wouldn't blame him. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go see if I can get his permission to court you. I'd prefer it if we don't have to do it behind his back. Good night, Blythe."

"Good night," she replied, watching him stroll down the hall toward Ethan's office.

As she went into her cabin and closed the door behind her, Blythe contemplated Tom's words. Was Ethan honestly that mean? Would he actually throw someone into the rapids

simply because they wanted to court her? Worse yet, would he seek out women even though he was married to Naomi? All the answers were obvious and could be answered in one word—yes.

The first time she'd spoken to him Ethan had only grunted in response. The night Herbert Moody kissed her he'd been violent enough to throw the man into the rapids. And he'd sought her out even though he was married, so he would other women, too. But Tom was wrong about one thing. If anybody could handle Ethan Lucas, it was Blythe Bouvier. She'd done it twice before, and she firmly believed that she would have no trouble doing it again. If Tom told her that Ethan hadn't agreed to their courtship, she would go to Ethan and demand that he change his mind so Tom wouldn't be afraid.

Her decision made, she started disrobing for bed.

When someone knocked on his office door as he poured himself a drink, Ethan glanced over his shoulder. "Who is it?"

"Tom Travers, sir," he replied. "May I talk to you?"

"About what?"

"Your sister."

"Wait a minute." After he put the ribbon back in the desk drawer, Ethan wandered to the door and opened it. "Come in—but only for a couple of minutes. I'm going to the tables soon."

Passing his employer, Tom glanced around the room. "I didn't think you'd let me in. Mr. Jennings said he's the only person allowed in here."

"I'm sure as hell not going to discuss Blythe in the damned hallway," Ethan responded. "Now what do you want?"

"She said the likeness was uncanny," Tom observed, staring at the painting. "She *must* be your sister if that's your mother."

"Get to the point, Travers."

"Right." Tom faced his employer. "I want your permission to court Blythe."

"You don't have it," Ethan declared. "Now get the hell out."

"You gave me a couple of minutes, sir. I hope you'll let me take it. I understand how you feel, Mr. Lucas. I have four sisters of my own, and I'm very protective of them. I don't want them to make the wrong choices. But I'm not the wrong choice for Blythe. I'm not going to hurt her, and I'm not going to do anything she doesn't want. I only want to get to know her better. I can't do that if we don't court."

"And if I don't trust you?" Ethan asked.

"Then you don't trust me. I still deserve a chance, and Blythe agrees."

Ethan stared down at him. "You've already discussed this with her?"

"I wasn't going to, but I saw her in the hall. There's something you should know, too. I don't think your disapproval will stop her. I won't do anything I shouldn't, and I won't go against your wishes. I like working for you, and I don't want to jeopardize my job. But Blythe doesn't have anything to lose. She doesn't give a damn how you feel about our courtship. She wants it no matter what you say. She says she'll do it, too."

"She probably will. I've never met such a defiant woman. In fact, if I say no, that's probably the only reason she'll accept your courtship."

"I don't think so. She said she wants to get to know me better. That doesn't sound like defiance, sir. It sounds like she's interested in me—as interested as I am in her. Won't you

at least give me a chance to prove that I won't hurt her?"

"I don't know." Ethan took two swallows of rye and studied Angel's portrait, wishing she would tell him what to do. Then he continued. "I honestly don't know. Let me talk to Blythe first. I'll give you my decision in the morning. Your couple of minutes are up now, so you'd better go."

"Yes, sir," Tom said as he left the room. "Thanks for listening to me."

"Thanks for coming," Ethan returned. "I'm not very good at being a big brother yet, and I don't know what I'd do if you go against my orders."

"That's why I came. I don't want to get thrown into the rapids somewhere along the way."

When the door closed behind Tom, Ethan finished his rye then set the glass on the credenza. Now all he had to do was convince Blythe not to let Tom court her. If he couldn't have her, no man could. But she would only rebel if she thought he was telling her that. To get her cooperation, he had to choose his words carefully, so she didn't realize what he was trying to do. He had to play the same games that women were so good at.

Stealing himself for their encounter, Ethan rapped three times on the door.

"Who is it?" Blythe asked.

"Your doting brother!" he replied.

"I'll be there in a minute."

In only moments, she pulled back the door with a bright smile. He stared down at her, his mouth gaping slightly, his gaze drifting from her face to her breasts.

"Get dressed," he ordered before closing the door.

Giggling, she opened the door again. "Would you please come in?"

As she sauntered toward the bed, the red in her hair became more prominent in the lantern light. Determined to talk to her in private, he entered the cabin and closed the door. Ethan couldn't believe that his manipulation had worked. He didn't want her to get dressed, so he had told her to do it. And she was so defiant that she'd reacted exactly as he'd expected. If he could get her to take off her robe, maybe he could get what he wanted from her more than anything else—something no respectable brother would want.

To his amazement, she sat down on the edge of the bed. In an instant, his mind returned to their embraces, and he began to swell in excitement. All he had to do was push her back; all he needed to do was move the material out of his way and cover her with his body. Then she would be his—just like all the others.

"Well, big brother?" she asked. "What did you want?"

His gaze moved to her face, where he saw her eyes riveted on his crotch. Embarrassed, he crossed his hands in front of his arousal.

"We need to talk," he announced. Given how she spoke, she thought of him as a big brother, and that meant he would never be able to have her. Then again, she did appear attracted to what he could give her. No! He couldn't think like that. He needed to play the role of big brother whether he liked it or not. With a heavy sigh, he collapsed onto the bed beside her. "One of these days somebody's going to question us about each other. We need to decide what our story will be."

Blythe frowned. "*Must* we continue this charade? I don't like playing games, and that's exactly what this lie we're telling is."

"If we don't, the passengers who saw me outside will think I'm here to seduce the most

beautiful woman aboard my ship.”

Blythe giggled. “And you’re *not*? I’ve got good vision, Ethan. I can see what you want.”

“I know, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to *get* what I want this time.”

“I’m glad you realize that.”

Although her laugh told him that she was teasing again, he spoke seriously. “Don’t taunt me, Blythe. I’m here for a reason, and I don’t particularly like it. We have to keep lying—at least, for now. People saw me come in here, and I don’t want them to think badly of you. I need to know a few things about you. How old are you?”

“Twenty. Or I will be soon.”

“Soon? When’s your birthday?”

“April 21.”

Excitement coursed through him. This was the perfect opportunity to impress her. “That’s only six days away. We’ll have a party—a big one. That way everybody will believe you’re that my sister. I’m going to have to tell Jennings that, too, but I don’t know how I’m going to convince him. I’ve already told him that I don’t know who you are.”

“Who’s Jennings?” she asked.

“My captain. *And* my best friend.”

“How can you change your story and make it seem real?”

“I’ve been lying to people all of my life, and I’ve only been caught once. I’ll think of something that will convince him.”

“At least, you’ve been honest with me,” she said. “You could have told me that you were a bachelor, and I never would have questioned you. I would have thought Naomi was your sister. I hate people who lie to me.”

His mind raced with unexpressed apologies and regrets. If he were a smart man, he would tell her the truth now, but he didn’t have the courage to risk her rejection. And if she hated liars, she would *loathe* him, because he rarely told the truth. To avoid her statement, he said, “By the time I’m done, Jennings will believe me. Where did you live in France?”

“It probably sounds too convenient, but it’s true. I lived in Paris.”

“When did you move there?”

“When I was eleven.”

“You said you had two younger brothers. How much younger?”

“Ben was two years younger, and Dan was four. Why?”

“Because we have to decide how old you were when your father took you away from my mother. Let’s say you were ten months. That way he could have remarried and fathered a child without any problem.”

“Fathered a child?”

“Of course, fathered a child,” he said. “How else are you going to explain it if people learn about Ben and Dan? We don’t have to say anything, but we do have to keep in mind that rumors spread. Somebody might hear something in passing.”

“You think of everything,” she said.

“How else can I be a successful liar? Besides, that’s one thing you do in poker. You have to read all of the other hands. Otherwise, you’ll lose almost every time. How old were your brothers when they died?”

“Fifteen and thirteen. I told you this before, Ethan. Don’t you remember?”

Grinning mischievously to lighten the mood, he winked at her. “Obviously not. Now about Tom Travers. Do you really want him to court you? Or are you only saying that you do to defy me again?”

Her expression masked with shock, Blythe stared at him. “How did Tom get into the

conversation?"

"Answer me!" he demanded. "I didn't say that he couldn't court you, but I sure as hell didn't say that he *could*, either. I told him that I wanted to talk to you first."

"I don't need your permission to court a man, be it Tom or someone else."

"Then you *are* being defiant again."

"I didn't say that. I like Tom—at least, I think I would if I had a chance to get to know him."

"Then you want him to court you. Is that right? I need you to be honest, because it will make a difference in what answer I give him. If you're only doing it to defy me, I'll tell him that. If you're doing it because you want him to court you, I'll begrudgingly give him my blessing."

Rising, she glared down at him. "I don't need your blessing, and I *don't* need your permission. Neither does Tom. And don't you dare throw him into the rapids."

Ethan laughed as he also rose. "I see Tom talked to you about this like he said. I've heard the rumors, too, angel; but, contrary to what people say, I've never thrown anybody overboard—not even into calm waters."

"Why don't you tell your crew that?"

"And have them lose their fear of me? That wouldn't be very wise. Besides, there've been plenty of times I've been tempted to do just that. Maybe someday I will, and then the rumors will be true. In the meantime, I have a little control over a sometimes unruly crew. After all, nobody wants to go out of life being battered around on a bunch of rocks."

"If you've never thrown anybody overboard," she asked in concern, "what happened to Herbert Moody?"

Her sudden change of mood caused Ethan to reach out and slide his large hands over her hair. It was so soft, so silky, almost like the texture of the ribbon he stroked when they were separated. Without touching her anywhere else, his hands slipped down her back to the end of her wavy tresses near her waist. But when he felt the material of her robe under his little finger, he stopped.

"Where is he, Ethan?" she demanded, her voice as soft and silky as her hair.

When he gazed down at her, he saw that she stared up at him. Her eyes were filled with a cautious trust so powerful that he drew her against him. To his surprise, she didn't protest. Instead, she slid her arms around him.

The way he treated her was incredible! So tender and gentle. She realized in that moment that she'd wanted him to hold her like this since the moment he entered the room. She shouldn't allow the caress, but she was powerless to stop it, powerless to do anything but return it. The same power he held over his crew with violence, he held over her with tenderness. Would Tom's words prove right? Would he get any woman he ever wanted—including her?

"Don't worry, angel," he said in a near whisper. "He's alive—not very well, but alive."

"What did you do to him?"

"I broke his nose and blackened his eyes."

"Why?"

"He was forcing himself on you, and I was protecting your virtue. I told you that."

"Oh."

After a few moments of silence, Ethan said, "I'd never do anything to hurt a woman, Blythe. Do you believe that?"

"I don't know," she admitted, even though she knew her words could hurt his feelings.

“This ought to prove it.”

Before she could protest, his lips met hers again, with that tenderness she couldn't resist. She still felt as though she would die in his arms. Her heartbeat quickened; her breathing became labored. Again, she experienced the mixture of fear and excitement in his arms. Oh, how she hated this feeling. Oh, how she loved it! What was wrong with her? How could she love and hate at the same time?

As her heart constricted, she tightened her hold on him. She didn't want to die! Not this way. If she had to go, she wanted it to be fast—not with the slow excitement that inflamed her every time they kissed. Then he tightened his embrace, moving one large hand to her rounded buttocks so he could press her against his body. She felt his masculine hardness against her stomach; she tasted his tongue as it collided with hers during its languid probe of her mouth.

Suddenly, his other hand moved to her barely covered breast and massaged it. Oh, no! What was happening to her now? The tip hardened almost on contact, just like it did when she was cold. But she wasn't cold—not in the least. In fact, she'd never felt so warm in her life, especially on the inside. As the fear began to subside, Ethan released her mouth and breast but continued his secure embrace.

“You have my permission on one condition,” he whispered.

“What are you talking about?” she asked, hoping her voice didn't reveal her disappointment that he had stopped.

“You and Tom. He can court you, but I want you to promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“Remember that I'm not your brother.”

“I don't think I'll ever forget,” she replied, “but I am going to try. You're married, Ethan. We shouldn't be doing this.”

“What if I told you that I'm not really married?”

“I wouldn't believe you. Men lie about being single—not about being married.”

“I suppose they do,” he said. “I'd better go back to Naomi now. I need ... a woman.”

“You mean you need your wife.”

Ethan strode to the door, opened it, and stood on the threshold. “Good night.”

The minute he shut the door behind him, Blythe flopped down on the bed. Why hadn't Solange come with her? Why had she insisted that they meet in Chicago? She needed Solange now, because her friend knew how to deal with men. Solange would know what Ethan was thinking and why he treated her like he did. Solange would also know why she felt like she was having a heart attack whenever Ethan kissed her.

Seven

Instead of going to the gambling parlor, Ethan went to the observation deck. If he tried to concentrate on poker before he found a receptive woman to relieve his desires, he would only lose a bundle again. First, he had to purge himself of Blythe's powerful hold on his mind and body. When he'd told her that even obsession had passion, he hadn't realized how right he was. He was as obsessed with Blythe as she was with Angel, maybe more so.

Strolling to the mahogany rail, he leaned against it to stare at the dark water. He'd called Blythe angel several times, but apparently she hadn't noticed, which was fine. It would make bedding another woman much easier. All he had to do was close his eyes, envision Blythe, and call the other woman angel. But first he had to find a willing partner.

There were several women on the deck. One of them had three children with her—and a husband somewhere else on the riverboat. He'd seen the family together several times. Four women were in a group—chatting with four men. That took them out of the competition. But the trio of women who sat across the deck from him, whispering among themselves while glancing toward him, looked promising. Maybe one or more of them would be a partner. It would be a long trip if he couldn't vent his sexual desires with Blythe, but he definitely couldn't touch Naomi anymore. He'd need more than one woman for that, too.

"Good evening, ladies," he greeted when he joined them. "My name's Ethan Lucas, and I own the River Goddess. Are you having a pleasant trip?"

"Oh, yes," the only brunette in the group said. "You have a beautiful boat. We were just saying that, weren't we, Mrs. Palmer?"

"That's right," the smaller of the blondes agreed. "Would you like to join us, Mr. Lucas?"

"Thank you." He smiled as he sank onto a chair beside the brunette. "I'd like that. May I ask your names?"

"I'm Lucille Palmer." Assuming the role of spokeswoman, she touched first the arm of the brunette then the larger blonde while she introduced them. "This is Miss Betsy and Miss Jenny Carson."

"Sisters?" he asked dark-haired Betsy.

"Yes, sir."

"Are you three traveling together?"

"Oh, no!" Jenny inserted with a pronounced lisp. "We just met Mrs. Palmer."

That was the woman he wanted. She probably didn't have a lot of men pay attention to her, so she would probably appreciate his overtures. But across from him, Lucille Palmer laid her hand on his knee to draw his attention to her. As soon as he looked at her, she removed it. On second thought, why should he waste time with a pretty miss? He could probably have the handsome missus.

"Did you ever find that redhead you were looking for at the beginning of the trip?" Lucille asked.

"As a matter of fact, I did. We had a very nice reunion."

"Reunion?" Betsy asked. "The word around the boat is that you didn't know her name."

"I wanted to be certain that she was the person I thought she was—my half-sister."

"I talked to her one day," Jenny inserted. "Her name's Blythe, right? She seems very nice, but she didn't say she knew you."

Ethan returned his gaze to the taller blonde. He admired her for not being self-conscious about her speech impediment. Smiling, he examined her slim body in the light of the half-moon. "I'm not surprised, Miss Carson. Blythe's having a difficult time accepting it. She adored her father, so it isn't easy for her to believe that he took her away from her mother when she was only one. Then for him to tell her that our mother had died. It's too much for her comprehend right now."

"I suppose it is."

"Her birthday is Saturday, and I'm going to have a big party for her. Maybe that will help convince her that I honestly care—and that I want to be her brother again. Will you three be able to come?"

"Jenny and I can," Betsy said excitedly. "We *love* parties."

"I'll be making notices to post around the Goddess with all the details." Settling back into his chair, he crossed one leg over the other. "Where are you lovely ladies from?"

"Jenny and I come from Boston."

"I thought so by your accents. You've come quite a way already. Where are you headed?"

"Chicago."

"Then you'll be with us to the end. Or are you changing riverboats somewhere along the way?"

"No, we're taking the River Goddess all the way," Jenny said. "I love this ship. I think I could stay here forever it's so beautiful. And the service is wonderful."

"Thank you, Miss Carson. It's nice to know that at least some of my passengers are happy."

"I don't think I've ever spent such a relaxing holiday," Lucille inserted.

"Why don't we go to the parlor and have some hot chocolate?" Betsy asked, drawing his attention to her. "It's very good here."

"Oh, yes," Lucille agreed. "Let's. That's my favorite room."

"You three go ahead," Jenny said with a quick glance at Ethan. "I think I'll go to bed."

"Are you sure?" Betsy asked.

"Positive. Go ahead without me. I'll be fine."

"All right."

When the two women rose, so did Ethan, with a quick apology. "I'd love to join you ladies, but I have some paperwork to do. I shouldn't even have been on deck, but it's such a nice evening that I couldn't resist taking a walk. Maybe we could visit tomorrow night instead."

"I'd like that," Betsy agreed. "Good night, Mr. Lucas."

"Good night, ladies." As Lucille and Betsy strolled away, whispering to each other, Ethan gazed down at Jenny. "Would you like me to escort you to your cabin, Miss Carson?"

Accepting the hand he extended toward her, she let him pull her to her feet. "Thank you."

"So, you're going to Chicago." He linked their arms at the elbow and followed her toward the stairs. "Do you have relatives there?"

"No. We got tired of Boston, so we decided to move."

"How are you going to live?"

"We'll find jobs."

"I admire your spunk." After a brief pause to caress her hand, he added, "There's some-

thing else I admire about you, but I don't know if I should say anything or not."

"It's about my lisp, isn't it," she said.

"You don't seem at all self-conscious about it, and I think that's wonderful. You have every right to be shy."

"I've always said if people can't accept my lisp, I don't have any use for them."

"That's a wonderful attitude." When she stopped at a cabin door at the bottom of the steps, he questioned her in surprise. "This is it already?"

"Uh-huh."

"I was hoping we'd have a little longer to talk."

"I thought you were busy."

Grinning down at her, he winked. "That was an excuse not to go to the parlor. I wanted to spend a few minutes alone with you. I'd like to get to know you a little better."

"I'd like that, too," she said with a smile.

"I thought you were tired."

"I didn't say that. If you'll recall, I said I wanted to go to bed." Laying her hand on his neck, she stared up at him with desire gleaming in her golden-brown eyes. "I don't have to sleep to do that."

Ethan was taken aback. This was the first time a woman actually admitted that she wanted to bed him only minutes after their meeting. Many had said so after a couple evenings of courtship, but never right away. Actually, that wasn't quite true. A few had—when he was a teenager and had paid for the privilege. On second thought, maybe this woman was a prostitute. After all, she had said they were moving to Chicago. Maybe they'd been run out of Boston.

"This is too easy," he said, suspicious of her. "Are you a prostitute?"

"Not anymore. I got tired of bedding married men. I want to have a courtship with an unmarried man, and I understand that's exactly what you are."

He had told a couple of people that Naomi was his wife, but only those he thought wouldn't spread the rumor. Still, he didn't want to have another entanglement with a woman until he knew for sure if Blythe would accept him.

"What if I'm not interested in courtship?" he asked.

"Maybe by the time we're done taking a nap you will be," she said, lowering her voice. "I've been known to change other men's minds, and I might change yours. Would you like to come in? Or are you afraid that I could be right?"

"I'm not afraid of anything," he snapped. In his mind, however, he added, *Except Blythe's hold on me.*

Once they were in the cabin, Ethan slid the bolt into place then faced Jenny. He embraced her tightly as his lips sought out hers. The passion in her kiss brought Blythe's vision to his mind, just as he had hoped. He wanted her so badly; he needed her so much. But even though he could get excited, he couldn't *stay* excited. Jenny's caresses from Blythe's, and even though he wanted to satisfy his desires, he discovered it impossible.

Deciding to satisfy her if not himself, he began to undress her.

"We don't have much time," Jenny whispered. "Forget about the clothes. Let's just lie down. I can't bear it anymore."

Without a word, Ethan unbuttoned his trousers and slid them over his hips. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he removed his boots then his pants while Jenny took off only her dress and pantaloons, dropping them carelessly on the floor. When that was done she pushed Ethan down and pulled up her petticoats to straddle his body.

"Not that way," he ordered. "Lie down."

Pushing her to her back, he covered her with his body. His manhood reacted and taunted her heated entrance, but he lost his excitement when Jenny spoke to him heatedly, telling him that she couldn't wait to feel his body inside hers.

In an attempt to regain his arousal, he devoured her mouth with his, drawing forth strong groans from her. He dominated her in a gentle yet masculine manner. Unable to perform the preferred way, he spent time being tender other ways then drove her to frenetic movements only to calm her again. Someday, he told himself, we would do this same thing to Blythe. Ah, Blythe. She would be his as soon as he could convince her he wouldn't hurt her. Then she would be his like this forever. He was determined to make it happen.

But this wasn't Blythe, and although her vision excited him, he couldn't do that do her. Minutes later, he satisfied the woman in a different way, then he collapsed next to her with his fingers linked together under his head, his elbows lying on the pillow. When she laid her head on his chest to toy with the thick blanket of black hair, exposed when she'd unbuttoned his shirt during their tryst, he ran his hand over her hair. But it wasn't soft and silky; it was coarse and greasy. He opened his eyes and stared at her. The woman running her fingers across his chest was *not* the woman he wanted.

"Damn!" he groaned.

"What's wrong, Ethan?" Jenny asked. "I'm sorry I couldn't satisfy you. But you sure satisfied me. That doesn't happen very often."

"I thought you said you weren't a whore anymore."

"I'm not, but I only stopped when we left Boston. We could have plenty of good times during the trip. And I mean we *both* could"

"I'd better leave before your sister comes." Pushing her off, he got out of bed and slid into his trousers. "Are you free tomorrow night? I'd like to see you again."

"I wish I was, but I have a gentleman escorting me to dinner. I don't think it's a good idea to have another one waiting for me. Don't worry, though. I'll tell him that I'm not interested. I'll be free every night after that."

He bent over and kissed her to say good night. "I'll meet you on the observation deck the next night at eight. Maybe you can find something to occupy your sister so we can have more time together."

"I'd like that, Ethan. I'll do what I can."

As soon as Ethan closed the door behind him, he stopped in the hall and faced the portal. He couldn't believe he'd been unable to maintain his desire. Then a new wave of emotion overwhelmed him. It was something he'd never experienced before, and he wasn't quite sure what it was. But he hated the feeling in his heart; he hated the gnawing at the pit of his stomach. Mostly, he hated the disappointed tone of Blythe's voice that rang in his ear, telling him that he was a bastard. That was insane. Blythe would never use such language. She was a lady in every sense of the word. Still, the word echoed through his brain in *her* voice.

"Oh, my God," he groaned. This new emotion was guilt!

"Is something wrong, Mr. Lucas?" a woman asked from nearby.

Turning around, he saw Betsy gazing up at him. Her golden-brown eyes met his without faltering. No woman would make him feel guilty—not even Blythe Bouvier. And he would prove it to himself if he had to bed every woman on the River Goddess. When he answered, he did so with a fraudulent smile. "No, Miss Carson. I was thinking about something."

"I thought you were supposed to be working."

"I decided it could wait for a while."

"Jenny changed your mind, didn't she," Betsy observed with a frown. "I don't know how she does it. She almost always gets the best men. I've only had a couple. She's older than I am; she has a lisp; she isn't even as ... Let's see. How should I word this? She isn't as well-endowed as I am. Why does she always get what she wants?"

"What makes you think she got what she wanted this time?" Ethan asked.

"Please, Mr. Lucas. I saw how you two were looking at each other."

"Maybe we only talked."

"I know Jenny better than that."

"Are you jealous?" he asked.

"Not jealous like you mean. I'm just tired of always taking second place. No man ever comes to me first. No man ever wants to give me a chance until after she rejects him. What does she have that I don't?"

"I couldn't answer that without getting to know you better. Could we spend some time together tomorrow?"

"You just feel sorry for me because I'm crying on your shoulder."

"No, I don't. When I first joined you three tonight, I had designs on you, but Mrs. Palmer and your sister were more open. You seemed a little shy."

"And you wanted to get what you could—tonight."

"Nonsense," he lied, making sure that he also added the truth to still Betsy's suspicions. "It was your sister's idea to go into your cabin. Any normal man would have accepted her invitation."

"What makes you think I wouldn't have given you the same thing?"

"Nothing. It's Betsy, right?" When she nodded silently, he continued. "I didn't want you to think that all I wanted was a night in your bed, Betsy. It's not. But I would like to be with you—alone in your cabin, with plenty of time for talking and getting to know each other."

"Honest?" she asked incredulously. "Me? Are you sure?"

In an odd way, Ethan was glad that he could answer with at least partial honesty. "Almost more than anything else. Could you find something to occupy your sister tomorrow morning so we can be alone?"

"I'll think of something. Does that mean you don't want her to know about it?"

"Definitely not. She thinks I'm interested in *her*—although I didn't tell her that I was. In fact, don't be a bit surprised if she brags about it. I didn't want to hurt her feelings. You can understand that, can't you?"

"I don't want to, either," Betsy admitted. "She doesn't show it very often, but she's very sensitive when it comes to men. She doesn't like to be rejected."

"Then I'll see you tomorrow morning. About nine?"

"All right. Good night, Mr. Lucas."

"If we're going to get better acquainted, you should call me Ethan. Good night, Betsy."

Ethan wandered down the corridor, a sly smile playing at his lips. He wouldn't feel guilty about bedding Betsy because she wasn't as candid about it as Jenny. In fact, this awful feeling of betrayal probably came from having nearly bedded a prostitute—even if he hadn't paid her. Come to think of it, it wasn't a pleasure at all. It was more of an obligation once he'd started and couldn't finish. Oh, he'd go back, all right, but only to try and relieve himself after being with Blythe. If he had to show an interest in a relationship to get Jenny in bed again, he would.

But that was with Jenny. With Betsy, he'd have to proceed a little slower. He'd have to coax her into bed, and that might even be more rewarding. After all, part of the excitement was the chase. Jenny was a too easy for his tastes, but he needed a woman he could visit

any time. Since Betsy probably wouldn't be that easy, he'd keep them both dangling until he could decide which could stay aboard when he told Naomi that their arrangement was over.

His decision made, he went to the gambling parlor to earn some money.

Blythe got off her bed where she'd been practicing shuffling cards and hurried to answer the knock at her door. Instead of seeing Ethan outside like she had hoped, Naomi stood before her with tears streaming from her eyes.

"Naomi," she said in concern. "What's wrong?"

When the taller woman passed her, Blythe closed the door then directed Naomi to sit on the bed with her. Only then did Naomi sob her question. "Have you seen Ethan? I can't find him anywhere."

"I was with him in his office earlier," Blythe dropped down beside Naomi. "He said he was going to play poker. Did you check the gaming parlor?"

"Several times. And I knocked on his office door several times. If he'd been in there, he would have answered. Where could he be?"

Blythe shrugged. "I don't know."

Grabbing Blythe's hand in both of hers, Naomi said, "I'm scared, Blythe. I told you that he's always had an eye for pretty women. He's probably with one right now. God, I hate it when he does this."

"Does what?"

"Cheats on me."

"You *know* about it?" Blythe asked in shock.

"Of course."

"Why do you let him get away with it?"

"I can't stop him. I've asked him every time not to do it, and he says he'll try not to. I'm not sure how *hard* he tries."

With an idea of how to help her, Blythe decided to take matters into her own hands. "Would you like *me* to talk to him about this? Maybe I can get him to see how much he's hurting you."

Naomi shook her head. "I don't think he cares."

"Well, *I* care," Blythe declared, "and I'm going to do something about it. If he's going to be a good father, he has to settle down and accept responsibility."

"Please don't say anything, Blythe. If he gets mad, he might leave me behind on his next trip. He always said that he'd never let a pregnant ..." Naomi hesitated.

"But there are several pregnant women on board."

"It's not other women he's worried about."

"Oh," Blythe said with a grin. "Then why are you worried about him leaving you? If he said he'd never take a pregnant wife on his trips, he must care a great deal about you."

"You don't understand. With a pregnant wife at home, he'd be even freer with the women. He wouldn't leave me behind for my *health*; he'd do it because I wouldn't look good beside him anymore. That matters to him a lot, you know—how we look together. Bringing a pregnant wife on an unpredictable trip like a river voyage would look very bad for him."

"You're right. I don't understand. What does that matter?"

"I'm his hostess. I greet the passengers at every port."

"You didn't greet me," Blythe reminded her.

"I was sick the day you boarded. On top of that, Ethan and I haven't we haven't slept together in days."

"That's probably because you haven't been feeling well."

"He hasn't even come to the cabin when I'm there. He waits until he knows I'm busy elsewhere to change his clothes. Ethan's with another woman right this second, Blythe. I know it."

"Do you want me to go find him?"

"No," Naomi said, her voice filled with sorrow. "It wouldn't make any difference, anyway. I never should have come here, but I thought he might be with you—catching up on your life. He said that's what he wanted to do."

"I'm sorry, but I haven't seen him for hours."

"If you do, would you tell him that I'd like to talk to him?"

"Of course."

Naomi went to the door and opened it before she turned toward Blythe again. "And please. Don't say anything about him cheating on me—or about the baby. If you do, he'll leave me. I just know he will."

Lucille blocked Ethan's exit from her cabin by standing in front of the door. "We've been talking for three hours now. Is that all you came here for?"

"As a matter of fact, it is."

"There's something I didn't tell you about my vacation." Her hands went to his shirt, her fingers leisurely working loose each button. "That's not all it is. I'm running away from my husband."

"Oh?" he asked as he laid his hands on her waist. "And you're never going back?"

"Never. I don't think he'll ever be able to find me, either."

"How long have you been away?"

"Three long, lonely weeks."

"In that case, you must be starved for affection."

"Almost to death," she whispered hotly.

"Then I'll feed you."

His lips caught hers while he pinned her against the door with his body. If everything worked out, he'd just found another receptacle for his desires had been conquered without her even suspecting it. Now he had every woman he'd set out to get. He would show Blythe Bouvier that she couldn't make him feel guilty; he would show her that *he* still controlled his mind and his body.

But *did* he have the control? He could only satisfy Lucille, too, not himself. What was wrong with him tonight?

With all these women wanting him, he was glad he had a good supply of condoms. After all, maybe he could perform tomorrow. From what he understood, most men didn't use condoms, but he refused to father a child he would not be raising. He didn't want to chance any woman getting pregnant. After all, he had no intention of staying with any of them.

Just the thought of that increased his guilt. He had to do something to keep that guilt at bay, but what?

EIGHT

When Ethan approached Blythe the next morning to invite her to join him for breakfast, she agreed. But her cheerful attitude from the previous evening was gone. Instead, she was distant, almost cold, to him. Even though he wanted to ask her why, he couldn't. He was afraid that she didn't want anything more to do with him. Although, she *had* agreed to breakfast.

Suddenly, he was worried. Had she learned about the two women last night? Had she discovered that he planned on being with a third woman that morning? His guilt at what he'd done increased—if that was possible. As he'd finally drifted to sleep in his office, he realized that he was consumed with guilt. He wanted to be with Blythe that morning, but he couldn't bear to stay past breakfast.

Making his way along the side deck, he considered his actions. Nothing had changed. He was the same man; he treated women the same way, with respect and dignity to make them feel as though they were important to him. They *were* important to him, too, only not like they wanted to think. They were important so he could purge himself of his attraction to Blythe. Nothing mattered to him now that trying to rid himself of his attraction to her, if for no other reason than the guilt raging through him.. He would rid himself, too—even if he died trying.

Without thinking, he went to his suite instead of his office.

"Are you still sick?" he asked as he wandered into the room.

"What do you care?" she snapped as she pulled the covers up on the bed. "You're never here, anyway."

To his own amazement, he responded calmly despite her anger. "That doesn't mean I don't care about your health."

"Then stop chasing women and come *here* at nights."

Had he been caught? He hoped not. Trying to sound like he didn't understand, he asked, "What are you talking about?"

"You *know* what I'm talking about. You were with another woman."

"I was in my office all night, Naomi. Why do you think I was with somebody else?"

"Because I knocked on your door several times, and you never answered."

"Ah-h," he sighed, the lie coming easily to his lips. "It was you. I didn't answer because I wanted to be alone. It wasn't because I had a woman in there. Besides, you know there's no place for bedding a woman in my office. The divan isn't big enough."

"You could probably do it on a chair."

"Don't be ridiculous," he said, remembering the times he'd done exactly that. "You can't seriously believe that I was with another woman in my office. You know I never let anybody in but Jennings."

"Blythe's been there. I know because she told me."

"You can't seriously believe that I would bed my own sister!" he said in horror. "That would be depraved, not to mention incestuous."

"Maybe that's what you've become—stupid and depraved. Someday I'm going to catch

you, Ethan Lucas," she declared. "And when I do, I'm going to take every penny I can get from you."

Suddenly his calm disappeared, and he narrowed his eyes in rage. But he kept his tone low when he replied so any possible passer-by would overhear their conversation. "You're letting this pretend marriage take over your common sense, Naomi. You know it's only for Blythe's sake. Nobody else on board has the foggiest notion that you and I have slept together but the crew—and they're not going to say anything, because they know who butters their bread. And that *isn't* you, my dear."

"You're getting ready to send me away, aren't you," she accused. "You're getting ready to tell me to get out of your life."

"If I did that, Blythe would never believe that we were married in the first place. And she hates liars."

"Then she must hate you with all her heart! You do nothing *but* lie."

No longer able to control his rage, he berated her as he grabbed some clothes from his wardrobe. "You've turned into a real bitch. Maybe you're right. Maybe I *should* get rid of you. It would be a hell of a lot more pleasant around here without you nagging me. I won't tolerate it, either. If you want me ..."

"If I want you? I've got you whether *you* like it or not, and there's nothing you can do to change it. Blythe's turned your head. She's your sister, for God's sake. Don't try to do to her what you do to every other woman you set your sights on."

"You're headed for trouble with accusations like that, Naomi," Ethan warned as he strode to the door. "And if you don't keep your damned opinions to yourself, you'll be sorry as hell. Don't expect me back today."

"Why should I? You haven't been here since you learned Blythe was on the boat."

"You said you were sick, and I didn't want to disturb you. *Now* I'll stay away because I need to. If you stay away from me and let me calm down, maybe I'll be back by the end of the week. Give me some time to myself."

"I won't come *near* you," she agreed as he walked out the door.

Stalking to his office, Ethan shaved and changed his clothes before he went to Betsy's cabin. She would be waiting for him, expecting to be treated with kindness, but he didn't feel kind. He felt like throwing somebody into the rapids—and he knew who that somebody was. His life was a disaster, and it was all because of Blythe. Well, he'd get even with her. He'd show Blythe exactly what kind of man he was.

All of a sudden, he realized that he wasn't even sure what kind of man he was anymore. Blythe had turned his mind into mush and his body into a machine ready to bed every woman possible. If he could stop thinking about her long enough to take care of the women the way he wanted to. *One* of them had to satisfy his body, and one of them hopefully would satisfy his soul, as well. Maybe that one would be Betsy. The sooner he got her into her bed, the happier he would be with himself. Then he could prove that he was his own man—not one controlled by a woman.

On his way to Betsy's cabin, he went to the kitchen to speak with Tom Travers, drawing him aside so they had privacy.

"I talked with Blythe last night," Ethan announced. "She made it very clear that she wants the courtship. She's not defying me."

"You're going to give us your blessing?"

"Not exactly my blessing, but you have my permission—for now. But don't hurt her, Travers, or I *will* throw you into the rapids."

"Don't worry, sir. I'll be as wonderful with her as you are with your ..." He paused for

effect. "... wife."

Ethan's eyes widened in amazement. "Where did you hear that?"

"From Blythe, of course. Everybody else knows you're not married. In fact, I'm surprised she hasn't heard about your lie by now. But *I* won't tell her. I figure you told her that because she's your sister and you didn't want her to get the wrong idea."

"That's it exactly."

"I won't spoil it for you, sir. I understand how you feel. Like I said, I've got sisters of my own."

"Thanks. I have to find Jennings and see how his check went this morning. Don't disappoint Blythe, Travers," Ethan warned. "She's a sweet young lady, and I want her to be happy."

"I won't, sir. And thank you for letting me court her."

On the bridge, Jennings looked over some charts on a table before him while another man stood at the large wheel. Greeting the pilot, Ethan strode to the table and bent over it to see what Jennings was studying. "Got a problem?"

"Naw," Jennings said with a nonchalant wave of his hand. "I'm just checking these new maps to see if anything's changed. What about you? I heard you and Naomi arguing when I was trying to find you this morning. Everything all right?"

"I think she's jealous of my sister."

Jennings' startled gaze shot to his friend, who stared at him with a wide grin. "What sister?"

"Blythe Bouvier."

Straightening up, Jennings examined Ethan. "Blythe Bouvier. The woman you were so desperate to find. You expect me to believe that *she's* your sister?"

"My half-sister, anyway," Ethan proclaimed. "Her father took her away before she started walking. Finding Blythe was one of the promises I made to my mother on her deathbed."

"Your mother. This is the same mother who had seven children, right?"

"That's right. And Blythe was the youngest."

"And this is the same Blythe who looks exactly like Angel?"

"Angel's my mother."

"Oh, stop it," Jennings said in exasperation. "You can't lie to me. I know all about you."

"Do you?" Ethan asked. "I don't know how. I don't talk about myself—not even to you."

"You told me many times that you didn't know who Angel was."

"I was embarrassed to tell you that she was my mother. How many grown men do you know who are that attached to a portrait of their mother?"

"A portrait? For God's sake! Her likeness is all over the riverboat."

"So? I was devoted to my mother, and I like having her pictures around me. There's nothing wrong with it."

"I suppose not."

"Why don't you join Blythe and me for dinner today? I'll introduce you."

"I wouldn't miss it. I want to see how close this brother-sister relationship is."

"It's not *that* close yet," Ethan explained. "We were just reunited, and she's a little leery of me. She thought her mother was dead. At least, that's what her father told her. Poor thing. Can you imagine growing up thinking the world of your father then learning that he'd deceived you like that? It can't be easy for her."

"I suppose it can't. All right. I won't judge your relationship—*yet*. But someday I will. When you two have been together for a while, I'll know exactly what to think of all this."

"You do believe me, don't you?" Ethan asked.

"I don't know yet. You never talked much about your family—other than to tell me that you have six brothers and sisters. And you do have a point about what people would think if they knew Angel was your mother. Come to think of it, maybe I do believe you."

"Good, because Blythe's my sister, and I don't ever want anybody to doubt it. I want to be with her without people making unfounded accusations."

"I'll even help spread the word to the crew. Hands off your sister, right?"

"Everybody except Travers. He has my permission to court her."

"*What?*" Jennings exclaimed.

"He asked me last night, so I discussed it with Blythe. They both want the courtship, and I won't stand in the way—as long as he treats her right."

"That's a good attitude to have."

"I didn't have much choice. Blythe doesn't exactly accept what I say. She's probably the most defiant person I've met. You don't know how long it took to convince her that I'm her brother. She didn't like me pushing her father off that pedestal she'd put him on. Not that I blame her. I wouldn't like somebody doing that to my mother, either." Ethan paused a moment then continued. "By the way, when you meet her today, would you call me by my first name? I told her that you're my captain and best friend. Captains may use last names, but best friends don't."

"You're lying to her already."

"It's not a lie, Jennings," Ethan insisted. "You *are* my best friend. Now's a good time to make it official, so I want you to call me Ethan from now on. In fact, I want you at the birthday party I'm giving her Saturday. You'll have to find somebody to cover the bridge for you."

"I will."

"This is going to be the biggest shindig this boat has ever seen. Everybody's going to be invited—except the people I need for waiting on tables and seeing that the River Goddess doesn't run aground." Ethan glanced at his pocket watch and saw that it was five to nine. "Damn! I'd like to discuss this longer, but I've got an appointment at nine. We'll see you in the dining room at twelve-thirty."

After breakfast, Blythe wanted to check on Naomi. But she found it difficult to even go to the suite Tom had told her was Ethan's. She'd wandered the riverboat for about an hour trying to get up the courage. Finally, she decided there was no sense in prolonging it another minute. If Naomi didn't want to talk to her, she could say so.

Filled with determination, Blythe walked to Ethan's cabin and knocked on the door. When Naomi answered it, Blythe knew she should have come sooner. Naomi was in tears again.

"Oh, Blythe!" Naomi wailed as she pulled the smaller woman into the room. "He walked out on me this morning."

"He *what?*" Blythe exclaimed. "Why?"

"We had a terrible argument."

Furious, Blythe stomped her foot in anger. "That does it! I'm going to talk some sense into that man if it's the last thing I do. I won't let him treat you like this."

"No!" Naomi exclaimed in a panic. "It wasn't his fault. I didn't know where he was last night, and I was furious and upset. I accused him of seeing other women, but he wasn't. He

was sleeping in his office so he wouldn't bother me."

"Are you sure?" Blythe asked, unable to believe he wasn't with another woman.

"Positive. He was upset because I accused him, but he didn't get mad right away like he always did before. He tried to reason with me. Only I wasn't in a reasoning mood. Do you think he'll forgive me?"

"I don't know him well enough to say. Does he hold a grudge?"

"Not usually."

"Then I don't think you have anything to worry about."

Naomi sank onto a brocade-covered wing chair and motioned for Blythe to sit on the matching settee. Running her hand over the material, Blythe absently wondered how much it cost—probably a fortune. Its wood was mahogany, a costly lumber. In fact, all the wood in the room was mahogany; all the fabric was either brocade or velvet, except for the silk drapes at the small window. And there was a large, crystal chandelier in the middle of the sitting room.

"This is a magnificent suite," Blythe commented.

"I know. Ethan doesn't do anything halfway. He treats me like a queen, except lately. I don't know what's gotten into him, but he's acting different than he used to. Give him time to get to know you, and he'll probably treat you like a queen, too."

"Time?"

"It takes him a while to part with his money the first time. But once he does, he'll lavish all kinds of jewels and fancy things on you—especially jewels. He loves buying ladies fine jewelry."

"I don't need jewelry *or* fancy things," Blythe declared.

"I didn't think I did, either, but it's very easy to get used to them. I'd never be able to give them away now."

"You don't have to."

"I don't know. He was awfully mad. He said something about getting rid of me."

"He was angry, Naomi. All couples quarrel, and most of them get over it."

"It wasn't a simple quarrel; it was an outright fight. I was so mad I almost blurted out that I was pregnant."

"You should have. That's not something you should keep to yourself. You should share it with Ethan so he can enjoy your pregnancy, too."

"There's not much to enjoy right now."

"Naomi," Blythe pleaded, "you have to tell him. You can't go on like this. Sooner or later, he's going to come to that conclusion by himself, and he'll be even angrier than he is now—because you didn't tell him. Don't you see that?"

"Just a little longer, Blythe. I promise. I don't want to tell him while he's still mad at me. He'll think I'm trying to manipulate him, and he *hates* that. I have to wait until he comes to me again."

"What are you going to do in the meantime?" Blythe asked in concern.

"Stay in here as much as possible. Would you do me a favor and take some of Ethan's clothes to your cabin? He can't spend the next several days with only what he's wearing."

"Then let *him* come here and get them."

"He won't. I've already packed some of his things, so all you have to do is take them with you. Nobody will think anything of it if he changes in your cabin. Please, Blythe? It will probably only be for a few days. He said he'd come back by the end of the week."

"All right," she complained, "but I don't think this is a good idea. If he wants to change his clothes, he should do it here."

"Why don't you like him?" Naomi asked.

Blythe considered that for a moment. Did she really not like Ethan? She didn't feel like she didn't. In fact, she found herself attracted to him. After all, he had been a gentleman to her—except that he kept kissing her. Maybe *that* was the reason she disliked him, although she doubted it since she liked the kisses so much.

Unsure she was speaking the truth, she answered Naomi's question. "Because of the way he's treating you. I think it's atrocious, and if I hadn't promised you that I wouldn't say anything, I'd tell him exactly what I think of him."

After lugging Ethan's heavy bag to her room, she sat down with a book to wait until she had to meet him at twelve-thirty. But she couldn't concentrate. She was furious with him, and she wanted to tell him everything on her mind. When she still hadn't read a page after an hour, she got up to wander the decks. As she passed an open window, she overheard two women talking in the social parlor. The moment she heard Ethan's name, she stopped and stood near the window but out of their view.

"We talked for hours, too," one woman bragged to another. "Ethan's a very intelligent man and so witty. I adored being with him last night."

"We didn't just talk, Mrs. Palmer," replied a woman with a lisp.

Blythe stifled a gasp that might give her away. She'd met that woman before, but which one was she? Ah yes. Her name was Jenny, and they'd spoken several times during the trip. She had to know more before she could confront Ethan about his sinful ways, so she moved closer to the window, still out of sight.

"Neither did we," Mrs. Palmer admitted with a seductive giggle. "In fact, we spent a lot of time *not* talking." Even though Mrs. Palmer lowered her voice, Blythe knew she was close because she could still hear the woman. "

"We didn't have a lot of time. Betsy's in the same cabin, remember? We had to hurry in case she came back."

"You couldn't have had half the good time I did then. I'm glad he's single. He's one man I'm going to have fun catching."

Single? This woman had no idea Ethan was married. Did she dare tell Mrs. Palmer the truth?

"You don't have a prayer," Jenny said with a laugh. "I already told Ethan that I want a courtship, and he already agreed to come back to me."

"Same with me."

"Do you think he's pitting us against each other?"

"What if he is?" Mrs. Palmer asked, obviously unconcerned. "I always liked a good fight over a man. He's the best, most tender lover I've ever had. He really knows how to please a woman, and I'm more than willing to see if he'll choose me over you. Are you interested in a little competition?"

"All right."

That was all Blythe needed to hear. Ethan had admitted that he was a liar, and he had just proven it by lying to Naomi. Turning around, she left the window from the direction she came, determined to tell Ethan exactly what she thought of him. On the way to his office, though, she saw him come out of a cabin with a woman. When he bent and kissed her tenderly, Blythe almost ran up to him and slapped him. But as badly as she wanted to, she couldn't do it. All she could do was turn and flee up the stairs.

He was kissing a brunette now. Last night he had been with two other women. And Naomi was pregnant. How could she ever have had dreams of being in his arms again? It

seemed so ludicrous now. He wanted to play her brother, yet he turned around and did this. Worse yet, he had kissed her then turned to another woman he could kiss. What more had he done with her? The same as the two women in the parlor suggested he had done with them?

She was more than hurt now; she was more than furious. And she had no desire to have a competition with *anyone*. She was going to teach that man a lesson he would never forget! But first she had to be as sweet as she could to him and meet him for dinner like they'd planned. She would meet his friend and be nice to him, too. But when it was over, she was going to her cabin and set forth a plan to get revenge.

When she was done with him, Ethan Lucas would never be unfaithful again!

NINE

Back in her room, Blythe couldn't even think. The ache in her heart was so strong that all she could do was cry. It hurt to know what Ethan was really like; it hurt that he treated Naomi so shabbily. It especially hurt that he had lied—if not to her, to his wife. Then again, it wasn't all his fault. Naomi should have left him when she first learned of his adulterous liaisons. If she hadn't ignored it then, he wouldn't be disappointing so many people now.

What was she doing! Ethan had broken her heart with his vulgar actions, and she was defending him. Why? Because she really wasn't surprised? Maybe that was it. After all, he'd already kissed her three times. He obviously wanted the same thing from her as he did the brunette, Jenny, and Mrs. Palmer. But if that were the case, why didn't he try harder to get her in bed? Why did he turn to other women instead?

"Oh, dear God," she wailed as she clung to her pillow. "Why is he hurting me like this? Why doesn't he want to be with me that much? He can cuckhold Naomi without caring, but he can't do it with *me*."

When she heard her own words, she stopped rocking on the bed. What was she saying? She didn't want to be the other woman—especially not to kind, accepting Naomi. The day she boarded the River Goddess she'd told Naomi that she would like to be friends. But she'd had no idea that a friendship would grow as strong as it did so fast. She genuinely cared about Naomi and hated Ethan for hurting her. Yet at the same time, she wanted Ethan in her own bed.

"Dear Heavenly Father," she prayed aloud, "I need Your help with this. I'm confused, and there's nobody else to talk to. Please, Father. What should I do to insure that Ethan's never unfaithful again? His baby deserves a good father, and Naomi deserves a good husband. What *I* want isn't important, so please give me the strength to do what's best for them."

When Tom called on her that afternoon, Blythe explained that she didn't feel up to spending time with him that day. To her relief, he accepted her decision and left without questioning her further. By supper time, her mood had become lighter. She spent a pleasant meal with Naomi, cheering her as best as she could before excusing herself. Even the two hours she spent with Ethan learning to differentiate between a straight, a flush, and a full house was enjoyable. He made her laugh with his witty remarks. When she finally fell into bed after practicing alone from nine until midnight, she was content and exhausted.

But it was the dream she had during the night that made her wake with a new outlook on life. If anything would work in stifling Ethan's urge to roam from his marital bed, the events of that dream would do it.

For the next three days, Ethan sought the total satisfaction he needed from the three women, plus two other ladies on board. But he couldn't find it. There were times, he couldn't even perform, which had never happened to him before. When he could get excit-

ed enough, he stopped himself for completing the task at hand. Once, he couldn't even begin the process. His body refused, probably because he'd been so desperate to purge the ache for Blythe that consumed his soul. Upon waking the fourth day, he vowed to give himself a full week. If he wasn't sated by then, he would know something was wrong.

Then all of a sudden, Betsy avoided him. She even ran in the opposite direction when he called to her from a distance. That same afternoon Lucille told him that she'd made other plans for the evening.

The following day matters were even worse. Women he'd never even approached for a liaison glared at him for no apparent reason. Men grinned and whispered to one another when he passed. But what shocked him most was when Jenny approached him and slapped him without provocation.

"Why the hell did you do that?" he roared, not caring who heard.

"You *lied* to me," she exclaimed. "And I'm not the only one. You lied to Lucille and Betsy, too. Betsy's been crying since yesterday. How many other women were there?"

"I don't know what you heard, but I haven't lied to you."

"You son-of-a-bitch! I've known about Lucille all along, and you destroyed my sister. So, tell me the truth! You've been unfaithful to your wife with me, Lucille, and Betsy. How many others were there?"

"Whoever told you that I'm married is the liar, Jenny," Ethan said, struggling to remain calm.

"I don't think so."

"I am not now," he declared with deliberately paced words, "nor have I ever *been* married. And there's not one person on my crew who won't vouch for me."

"I'm sure there's not. You pay them, so they're loyal. They're not going to say anything—like I'm not going to say anything to *you*—ever again."

Ethan stood immobile, too stunned to move, while Jenny hurried away. Who in the world would spread such a rumor about him? Suddenly, William Congreve's writing came to his mind: *Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned.*

No wonder the rumor spread so fast.

Blythe pounded until Naomi opened the door. Gently pushing the other woman out of the way, she closed the door and slid the bolt into place, announcing, "He'll be here any minute. Then we can set things straight."

"What are you talking about?" Naomi asked.

"Ethan. He'll be here soon."

"How do you know?"

Blythe explained in quick words so Naomi would understand as much as possible before Ethan arrived. "He heard that somebody started a rumor that he's married—and he's furious. If I'm not mistaken, this is the place he's going to come."

"Oh, my God!" the blonde shrieked. "He's going to think I told."

"Exactly. That's why I'm here."

"But I didn't, Blythe. I would *never* do anything like that."

With a gasp, Blythe stared at her friend in shock. "Why not? He's your husband. Everybody should know."

"You don't know everything."

"Then explain before he gets here." A loud bump against the door surprised Blythe, and Ethan swore. "Uh-oh. Too late. I'm going to hide. You let him in."

Ducking around the corner into the bedroom, Blythe remained out of sight and listened to what happened in the sitting room.

Ethan slammed open the door when the bolt released. "You bitch. You told everybody on the damned boat."

"No!" Naomi denied. Then the door slammed the door shut and the bolt slid into place. "I swear I didn't."

"Then why the hell did Jenny Carson slap me? Why did all the women turn against me in one day? You told them we were married. You, and nobody else."

"No, I didn't, Ethan. Honest I didn't. I don't know who did, but it wasn't me."

"Do you really expect me to believe that?" he demanded.

"It's the truth."

"I've given you everything you wanted—*more*. And this is how you repay me? By cutting off my source of pleasure? By seeing to it that not a single woman on board the Goddess will come near me? If you wanted revenge, you sure as hell picked the perfect way of getting it."

"But I didn't *do* anything," she vowed.

"The hell you didn't! Nobody else knew about that—nobody!"

"Blythe knew," Naomi reminded her.

"But Blythe didn't know about other women."

"She suspected because I told her about the other times. But I told her that I was wrong this time. I swear I did. I told her that I was upset, that I overreacted."

"Blythe wouldn't do something like that."

Now was the time, Blythe told herself. She needed to confess before Ethan took his anger out on Naomi. Stepping into the doorway separating the sitting room from the bedroom, she said, "Yes, Blythe *would*."

Her eyes met his unfalteringly as she stared him down. She had to have the advantage before their confrontation, or she might never be able to fix his marriage. And she had to use her best weapon—her stare. She'd lost track of the number of times during the past few days that he'd told her it always weakened his anger. Apparently, it was doing it at that moment, too, because she could actually see the fight draining from his face.

"You told people?" he asked in amazement.

"That's right."

"But why?" he asked sorrowfully. "I never did anything to you."

Blythe couldn't believe he'd said that. Of course, he'd done something. He'd rejected her, and she wasn't about to let him think that it didn't bother her. But she wouldn't tell him, either. This was something he needed to admit to himself before he admitted it to her.

To let him know that he was wrong, she kept her gaze riveted on his and spoke in a mysterious tone. "Didn't you, Ethan? Think about it for a while. Anyway, I told people because I couldn't watch you destroy your marriage. You were hurting my friend."

Unable to look at her, he turned his gaze toward the settee, asking, "What friend?"

"Naomi, of course."

"Naomi's used to it. She knows I always come back to her." He directed his gaze to the larger woman. "Tell her, Naomi. Tell her that I always come back."

With a frown, Naomi shook her head. "I wish I could, but I don't know if that's true anymore. You left me the other day. You said you'd be back by the end of the week if I left you alone. I did, but you didn't come back."

Ethan bowed his head, and Blythe knew that he finally understood what he'd done to their marriage. When he spoke again, his deep voice carried a note melancholy. "I suppose I didn't."

Glad to have weakened his anger, Blythe said, "Don't you think it's time that you two made up?"

He shot his gaze back to Blythe. "*How?* I can't get her a present until we get to the next port."

"I don't think that's what she wants, Ethan."

"It's not," Naomi admitted. "I only want you to come back."

After glancing from one woman to the other several times, he let his gaze rest on Naomi. "All right. I'll get my things from Blythe's cabin."

"I can do that," Blythe offered. "You stay here and make up with your wife. Now let me see you kiss her before I go."

Ethan bent over and kissed Naomi softly on the lips. But Blythe refused to accept that as any more than what it was—a token to pacify her. Instead, she insisted that he kiss her the way a man who had quarreled with his wife should.

When he drew Naomi to him and kissed her with passion, Blythe's heart ached. Tears came to her eyes now that she saw the caress. But it didn't matter. She had done the right thing, and that's all she should be concerned about. So they wouldn't see her distress, Blythe fled the suite while they were still embracing.

The second the door closed Ethan released Naomi and collapsed into the wing chair. "Don't take that for more than what it was, Naomi. I only did it because Blythe was watching. It will never happen again."

"You're not coming back this time?" she asked.

"Our time together is over," he announced without emotion.

He still loved Naomi as a person, but now he realized that he could never love her as a paramour again. His dalliances had changed his life since he met Blythe, and he didn't think it would ever be the same.

"Why?" Naomi asked. "What did I do?"

As much as his heart went out to her, he knew their coupling would never happen again. In an attempt to soothe her, he told her the only truth he knew. "You didn't do anything, Naomi. I just realized that something's missing. You're still a beautiful woman; you're still very desirable. I still love you like a friend, but I need more now."

"If you'll tell me what you need, maybe I could give it to you."

Ethan shook his head, almost afraid to admit the truth. But he knew he must, not so much *to* her as *for* himself. "If I knew what I needed, I would tell you. But I don't know. The closest I can come is that there's something I want that our arrangement doesn't give me. No, it's more something I *need*, and I can't find it with any woman. I know, because those other women I was with lately? I couldn't do what I man does to a woman. I left them satisfied, but I wasn't. Somehow I'm not the same man I was a few weeks ago."

"Are you saying that you've changed?" she asked as she sank onto the settee.

"I am."

"Where does that leave me?"

"I don't know. I'll provide for you financially for a while. It's the least I can do after all this time. But there's nothing left for us as a couple."

"But you told Blythe that you'd come back."

"I will—just not as your lover. You can sleep in the bed, and I'll take the sofa."

"Then you're only doing this to humor Blythe."

"Yes," Ethan admitted. "As long as she's still on the boat, I'll live here. But when she gets off, I'll move to her cabin if it's available and you'll get off the next time we dock. I don't even want her to be suspicious of this."

"In the meantime, it's another lie."

"That lie started when I told her I was married."

Naomi bowed her head and mumbled, "It started before that."

"Why do you say that?"

"The day I met her I told her my name was Naomi Lucas—*before* you found her. While you were trying to find her, I was doing everything I could to keep you apart. I didn't know she was your sister, Ethan. I only knew that you were obsessed with that portrait."

"That's all right," he said as he joined her on the couch. "Things worked out. We're getting closer all the time."

"You *should* be close. She's your sister, and she's been gone for a long time. Do you want to know something else? I like her a lot. She's become a good friend—almost like a sister to me, too."

"I'm glad, but that will have to end someday."

"I know."

"As long as everything's understood. We're going to play this hand until Blythe's off the Goddess, right?"

"Right. I don't want her to get hurt, either."

"I'll sleep here every night until then. She successfully removed my supply of women, anyway. None of them want anything to do with me." Patting her hand, he rose and started to leave; but he stopped at the door to face her. "You do understand why I can't bed you again, don't you?"

"No, but I know I'm not going to try to change your mind."

"Thanks. I'm going to get my things from Blythe now. I owe *her* an apology, too."

"You certainly do. You disappointed her."

"I got that impression by the way she got revenge," he said with a sad chuckle. "And that's the only word I can use after what she did."

Alone in her cabin, Blythe's tears flowed. She'd done the right thing; she'd gotten Naomi and Ethan to reconcile. Then why was it so hard to accept? Why did it tear her heart? It was obviously God's will. After all, she'd prayed for His help, and He'd sent her the dream that told her what to do. But now that she should feel good, she hated herself!

A gentle rap on the door startled her, and she grabbed her handkerchief, asking, "Who is it?"

"Ethan," he replied in a low tone. "May I talk to you?"

"In a minute." Wiping her eyes first, she blew her nose then hid her hankie. Hopefully, he wouldn't notice that she'd been crying. After taking several deep breaths to still her sobs, she opened the door and let him into the room with her head bowed. "I haven't had time to get your belongings together."

"I didn't come for my belongings," he admitted, shutting the door while she wandered away from him. "What's bothering you, angel?"

"Nothing for you to worry about."

Grasping her shoulders, he pulled her back against him then wrapped his arms around her in a gentle caress. "But I do worry about you—all the time."

It felt so good to be in his arms, to hear his kind words, that she longed to stay there forever. Even though she knew she should force herself to move away and distance herself from him, she couldn't. All she could do was revel in the warmth spreading throughout her.

"I know I disappointed you," he continued, "but I didn't realize how much until now."

"My disappointment doesn't matter. You hurt Naomi, Ethan. *She's* the one you should be comforting—not me."

"We already agreed that I should apologize to you. I'm very sorry, Blythe."

"I know you are. Because of me, you'll never get to bed any woman other than Naomi—at least, not on this trip."

"It doesn't matter. I couldn't find what I was looking for, anyway."

Blythe fought the urge to snuggle back against him as she questioned him. "What were you looking for?"

"Something. That's as close to the truth as I can come, too, so don't ask me anymore questions. I know how you hate liars, and that's all I could do to give you an answer. If I knew what that something was, I swear I'd tell you."

When she laid her hands on his wrists, he rubbed her upper arms. It felt so good to hold her like this—almost like this is the way his life should have been for years. But rather than mention it as he intended, other words, more urgent words, escaped from his mouth. "Why did you do it, angel? Why did you destroy my source of pleasure?"

She broke free and spun to face him. The fire in her light green eyes again took on the tint of her golden-red hair. "Your source of pleasure! That's why you came here? To ask why I destroyed something you never should have had in the first place? Your source of pleasure should have been Naomi, you lecherous bastard."

Blythe slapped her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide with shock. Equally stunned, Ethan's eyes widened, and his mouth dropped open. Her word echoed through his mind. In his thoughts, he'd heard her call him a bastard after his first time with Jenny, and now he was hearing it from her beautiful lips.

"I ... I'm sorry," she stammered. "I ... I ... don't know ... Dear Lord! Why did I say that?"

To ease her conscience, he agreed. "Because that's what I was."

"That's no excuse. I shouldn't have ... It was wrong! I've never said ... *that* word before—ever." Blythe turned her back on him. "Oh, Ethan. How could you do that? All those women? Just in the last few days! Over and over. Time after time. Five of them, for heaven's sake! And not only one each day, either. It had to be two or three a day. How could you do that to me?"

He stared at her in shock. Blythe wasn't defending Naomi anymore. She was angry for herself. "Me?"

"Yes, you."

"No, Blythe," he said. "You said how could you do that to *me*?"

"I did not," she declared. "I said *Naomi*, and you misunderstood. Don't you know how much it hurt? Naomi, I mean."

Turning her by her shoulders, he studied her expression. There, in her eyes, he saw the pain that he had missed earlier, the tears she could no longer control, the heartbreak he had caused. "This had nothing to do with Naomi, did it, Blythe."

"It had everything to do with her," she proclaimed.

Ethan rubbed her upper arms with a tender caress. Oh, how he needed her. But he

couldn't have her, not ever. She was too good for a man like him. To disguise his unexpected feeling of loss, he said, "I thought you didn't lie, but you're doing it right now. Not only are you lying to me, you're lying to yourself. And that's even worse."

"I am *not* lying. I did it for you and Naomi."

"You know something, angel? When Jenny accused me of being married, I denied it—right away. I didn't even stop to think of who would tell her that. Then I thought of William Congreve's lines from *The Mourning Bride*. Do you know it?"

"No."

"Congreve wrote: *Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned*. The first person I thought of was Naomi. Love to hatred turned? A woman scorned? Even in my suite I didn't realize it, but I do now. I thought I scorned the wrong woman. It wasn't Naomi; it was you."

"That's ridiculous," she proclaimed. "You're just so used to getting the women you want you'll take any quotation and turn it to suit your ideas."

"Not this time."

"If you believe that I'm the woman scorned, you must believe the first part of that quote, too—the part about love to hatred turned."

"I do."

"*What?*" She stared up at him with her eyes narrowed in anger. "You're more conceited than I thought. When did I say that I love you? Never, because I don't. Where did you *get* such an idea?"

"From your reaction in my arms. From this."

Without warning, he embraced her completely and captured her lips with his. Again, her heart began to race, and she experienced the now-familiar mixture of excitement and fear. She couldn't let this happen again. She had to stop him before she started to respond. She couldn't bear to be hurt again; she couldn't bear watching him walk out the door.

When she started to struggle, he tightened his hold on her back with one hand and held her head in place with the other. He was too strong for her. She couldn't get free despite her increased determination to do so.

In an instant, her determination disappeared. She relaxed against him, letting the heat that entered her mouth with his tongue warm her soul. Just as suddenly, there was no fear—only the excitement. Somehow he'd conquered the only thing that kept her sane in his arms, the only thing that kept her mind on his marriage. Almost as soon as she stopped moving, he released her, leaving her baffled by his unexpected rejection.

"What did you feel, angel? Honestly."

Embarrassed by her reaction, she gazed up at him. Did she dare tell the truth? Maybe she would be better off lying as he did. To avoid dishonesty, she said, "I don't think you'd want my honest answer."

"But I do."

"All right then," she agreed, but to avoid telling him the truth while not lying, she admitted something she didn't expect. "I felt scared."

"Scared?" he repeated, his voice displaying his disappointment. "Is that why you were struggling? Because you were afraid of me?"

"No, Ethan." Ah, yes. She had felt afraid like she had every time he kissed her. Thankfully, this answer was true. "I was afraid of my heart stopping like my brothers' had. I don't want to die like that. I want to go quickly, not in agony like you show me."

"It was agony?"

Her compassion for him exploded when she saw his sorrowful expression. “Not like you think, Ethan, but I can’t explain it any better. All I know is that I don’t like the feeling in my heart. I’m afraid it will kill me. Couldn’t we end this conversation? It hurts too much because of Naomi. I can’t let you kiss me again—ever. I feel guilty about it.”

“I’ll end it if you answer one question for me. Do you have this same fear when Travers kisses you?”

Blythe shook her head in silent response before she spoke. “So far, he hasn’t kissed me. If he did, though, I might.”

A smile slipped across his lips. “I understand. I’d better leave, angel. Will you still let me teach you poker?”

“I’d be disappointed if you didn’t,” she admitted in a quiet tone. “I would feel as rejected by you as you were by those women.”

“I’ll *never* reject you,” he vowed. “And another thing. I promise I’ll never be unfaithful again—not for as long as I live. Do you believe me?”

“Yes. But what I believe isn’t important. What Naomi believes is.”

“It’s important to me, angel,” he said as he exited the cabin. He stopped and stared down at her. “And so you know, angel, I never once completed bedding those women. I saw that they were satisfied, but I couldn’t satisfy myself. I haven’t since I met you—and not because I didn’t try.”

Then he pulled the door closed.

In the hall, he leaned against the wall. How would he ever surmount her fear? He could deal with it if she were afraid of *him*, but that wasn’t the case. She was afraid of dying in his arms. Somehow he had to prove that such a thing was rare, and she had nothing to worry about. But how?

With a groan, he pushed himself away from the wall and went to the kitchen to make final preparations for her party.

TEN

The next day Blythe lost her regrets at having reunited Naomi and Ethan. Part of it stemmed from Naomi's improved health, which Blythe attributed to her more relaxed marital state, and part of it came from the fact that Ethan didn't try to kiss her again.

When they docked, the trio went into town. While Ethan ran some errands, Naomi helped Blythe shop for a new dress. Later they all met for lunch at a restaurant, and Blythe was glad that Naomi ate something more than soup. At the end of the meal, Blythe suggested that she and Naomi go back to the riverboat so Ethan could finish his errands. Naomi, however, insisted that she wanted to go with him. Glad that they were getting along so well, Blythe started back to the River Goddess. On the way, she met Jennings.

"It looks like you had a productive outing," Jennings said as he took her package.

"I was lucky," she admitted with a shy smile. "Not very many seamstresses have dresses on hand."

Jennings grinned down at her. "I can't get over how much you look like your mother. I have a daughter a little younger than you. She looks like my wife, but you could be your mother's twin."

"How old is your daughter?" Blythe asked to direct the conversation along a different line.

"Eighteen. Now that you've had a chance to get to know Ethan a little better, how do you like having a big brother? I understand you only grew up with younger ones."

"I've grown quite fond of him. He's a witty, charming man."

"He didn't say so, but I could see that he was worried that you wouldn't like him. He understands how devoted you were to your father, and he was afraid he'd insulted you with the truth."

"He *told* you that?" she asked.

"Not in those words," he admitted.

Blythe paused to consider what he'd said. So, Ethan was concerned about how she would react to hearing the "truth" about her father. Apparently, he was playing this brother act very well if Jennings was so convinced.

To see if her theory was right, she said, "You must know Ethan very well."

"I don't think anybody knows him very well, but I probably know him better than most. He has his faults, Blythe—like a hankering for pretty women and gambling—but he's probably one of the most honest, trustworthy men I've ever known."

"Honest?" she repeated, remembering how he'd admitted that he lied all the time. Was it really possible his best friend didn't know that?

"He'd go out of his way to make a fair deal, and he's *never* cheated at poker. He wins his money fair and square, or he loses. But if he catches somebody cheating, he goes mad. That's how he got the scar on his face, trying to get back the money one man won by cheating."

"That's because he can't bear to lose," Blythe said.

"He wasn't even in the game. One of his crew was. Ethan was trying to stop the fight—

until he saw what was happening. He's got a real temper, but he only uses it when somebody's been wronged. And if a man does anything to a woman that she doesn't want him to? Well, let me say it this way. He flies into a rage. But you already know that, don't you."

"Uh-huh."

"I'm glad you two are getting on so well."

"I never thought I'd admit this, but I am, too. Even with all his faults, Ethan's a wonderful man. And Naomi's almost like a sister to me. We even confide in each other."

"That's the way families *should* be."

Deep in thought, Blythe sighed as they mounted the gangplank of the River Goddess. "Thank you for carrying my package, Mr. Jennings, but I'll take it now. You probably have things to do before Ethan and Naomi get back."

Strolling to her cabin, Blythe contemplated her conversation with Jennings. He liked Ethan a lot, but would he if he knew how often Ethan lied? He'd explained how honest Ethan was, yet he apparently had no idea that the brother-sister relationship was a lie in itself.

If a person lied like Ethan did, could he really be trustworthy? She doubted it. But in the time she'd known him, she'd come to trust Ethan completely. She knew he would always be there to protect her. It was too bad that they had to part company in Chicago.

Blythe was in the middle of brushing her hair the next morning when somebody knocked on the door. With her brush in hand, she went to answer it and found Ethan outside.

"Happy birthday, little sister," he greeted as he stepped into her room. "You look ravishing for an old lady of twenty."

"Be careful what you say," she warned with a giggle, brandishing her brush in front of his face. "I'm armed."

"And such lovely arms they are!"

Suddenly, she remembered that she was wearing only a camisole and short petticoat. Grabbing Ethan's wrist, she pulled him into the room then closed the door in case there were people in the hall. To her amazement, she felt no embarrassment from Ethan's steady scrutiny of her body. When she glanced at his face, a slow grin spread across his lips.

"I'm glad you understood my hint," he said. "There were several passengers in the hall—most of them men. I didn't want to have to fight them away on your birthday."

"Thank you. You're awfully early today."

"I tried to wait," he explained, extending an unwrapped, fabric-covered box in her direction, "but I couldn't. I had to see how you like your present."

Accepting the flat, dark green velvet container, she flipped open the hinged lid and stared at the contents in awe. It was the most beautiful pendant necklace she'd ever seen—a daisy with a shiny deep green stone at the center surrounded by clear stones as the petals and three shiny deep green stone leaves, all set in gold on a delicate gold chain.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed. "Is this what I think it is?"

"That all depends. If you think it's pretty pieces of glass, no. If you think it's diamonds and emeralds, yes."

"Oh, Ethan, it's exquisite, and I love it. But I'm afraid ..."

"You *have* to accept it," he interrupted, taking the brush and tossing it onto the bed. Then he closed the lid on the box and did the same with it. Before he continued, he grasped

her bare shoulders to rub his hands over her upper arms. An uncontrollable shiver rushed through her. "If you don't, Naomi will suspect that you aren't my sister."

"But if I do, I'll feel ..."

"... absolutely wonderful. You're skin's so smooth, so tight, so soft, and so *very* beautiful. I've never felt a woman with skin like yours."

"Ethan, please," she protested, struggling to stifle the excitement growing in her. "You promised you'd stay faithful."

"I have, Blythe," he said in a hurt tone. "All I'm doing is being honest. You like honesty, don't you?"

"You know I do, but ..."

"But nothing. You're a very beautiful lady, angel, very desirable."

"And *you're* very married. You shouldn't be saying things like ..."

"I'll say whatever I damned well please," he proclaimed, "and you can't stop me. Are you going to accept the necklace?"

"I shouldn't."

"But you're going to, aren't you," he prompted.

"I shouldn't."

"That's not what I want to know. I want to know if you're going to accept it. I want to know if I'll see it around this beautiful, soft neck tonight ..." He slid his large hands across her shoulders to tangle his fingers in the hair at the nape of her neck. Trailing his thumbs up and down her throat, he drew an excited shudder from her. "... or the ugly, scaly neck of some fish."

His movements felt so good! And for the first time, she wasn't afraid. Somehow she had to force words from her mouth and answer him. When she did, her normally clear voice was raspy with desire. "What do you mean?"

"If you won't accept it," he explained in a near-whisper, "I'll go to the nearest railing and throw your necklace into the Mohawk River. And believe me, I'll do exactly that."

Blythe's mouth dropped open in disbelief. "You wouldn't really throw away something that beautiful and expensive, would you?"

"As a matter of fact, I would."

"Why not give it to Naomi?"

"She got her own present. Besides, if you won't take it, I don't *want* any other woman to have it—not even Naomi. I bought it specifically for *you*, Blythe—to go with your gorgeous eyes—and you're the only woman I want to wear it."

"I don't know what to say," she said. "Nobody's ever given me anything so nice before."

"You could start with a thank you."

"Yes, of course. Thank you, Ethan, and I mean it with all my heart."

"Will you wear it to the party tonight?"

"I'll wear it to every party I attend from now on."

"I'm sure you'll be given lots of fine jewels to wear to parties, and you won't want to wear that one all the time."

He paused and stared down at her chest. Following his gaze, she noticed her pale skin, her rounded breasts and cleavage revealed by her camisole. His heavy sigh brought her gaze back to his dark eyes, which gleamed with an emotion she didn't recognize. Then he spoke in a deep, melodic tone that unexpectedly touched Blythe's heart.

"That pendant should come to about here."

While she stood transfixed, mesmerized by his caressing movements, the fingers of Ethan's right hand wandered around her neck and across her chest to stop on her sternum

about midway between her throat and her partially exposed body. Although she could scarcely feel his light touch, overwhelming sensations exploded in her body. She closed her eyes and sighed through her teeth.

“Oh, Blythe,” he breathed.

She looked up at him and saw his dark brown gaze riveted on her bosom. But she experienced no fear as his fingers scorched her skin on their way to the neckline of her camisole. There, between her moderate but firm breasts, he let his fingers rest. She began to think breathing impossible since she didn’t seem able to inhale. All she could do was experience that wonderful feeling he created.

Suddenly, he broke contact and grabbed the open neck of his shirt, proclaiming, “God, I can’t take it anymore.”

Before she could react, he had yanked his shirt front apart, popping two buttons which clattered to the hardwood floor. She had but a moment to see his well-formed chest and stomach. Lifting her with his arms around her, he crushed her against his naked chest. A second later his lips ground against hers. His tongue forced them apart.

This time when her heart raced she wasn’t afraid. This time she found only the excitement—and more! There was something in his kiss, something in the tickling of his body hair against the naked part of her breasts, something that made her want more than this. Without breaking his hold, he sank until she heard the bed creak under his weight. Now her feet touched the floor. His hand moved to her lower back, and he pushed her against him until she could feel his manhood throbbing.

Her instinct took over, and she swayed against him. He moaned into her mouth. A new sensation flowed through her as she ground against him despite his strong hold. The power behind his kiss was so overwhelming that she had to move. She couldn’t hold still for even a second!

The next thing she knew he moved her again, laying her on the bed before sweeping the brush and present onto the floor. Still, he didn’t break the kiss, not even when he came down on top of her. His hand searched for her covered breast until he found it. The contact increased her desire, and she worked her hand between them to tentatively cup his masculinity. To her amazement, she liked the feel of his trousers there and tightened her hold a bit. He inhaled sharply.

All of a sudden he scrambled from the bed and stared down at her with a sorrowful expression. When he spoke, his voice trembled with desire.

“I’m so sorry, Blythe. You’re right. I am a lecherous bastard. But I need you so *much*—more than any other woman I’ve ever known. The others you learned about—and I sure as hell don’t know how you did it—were me trying to find something that I didn’t know was missing from my life until I met you. And I couldn’t. I’ll find it someday, though. I only wish to God that I knew when.

“And this has nothing to do with what just happened. I’m as obsessed with you as I am with Angel. But you’re real, and it’s damned hard to forget that. I doubt that Angel ever had the fire you have, either. I love that fire, too. But you’re afraid, and I can’t conquer that fear because I don’t know how. I don’t know how I did it the last few days, but I did keep from kissing you. We’ll consider what happened here a mistake. You don’t have to worry about it ever happening again.”

“Ethan,” she said as she sat up on the bed.

“No, Blythe. I don’t want you to say anything. I know what I did, and I can’t leave here with you angry at me. I’m apologizing with all my heart and soul. Please accept it and promise that you’ll wear my present tonight. That way I’ll know for sure that you forgive me for

what I did." Fastening the buttons that remained on his shirt, he finished his speech then fled from the cabin. "I'm truly sorry, angel, but I ache for you because I need you so much. Maybe if you needed me that much, things could be different. But you won't accept me. I'm sure Naomi has everything to do with that, too. You're too close to her. I've got to get the hell out of here now. I won't see you again until your party, so have a pleasant birthday."

The audacity of that man! Blythe thought as he slammed the door behind him. He had no right to tell her what she felt, and he certainly had no right to reject her. If she wasn't the woman scorned now, she never would be. When she'd told the women he'd bedded about his marriage, she'd done it for Naomi. Now, though—now was different.

This was a personal affront to her, and she wanted revenge. He didn't even know the meaning of hell having no fury, but he would by the end of the night. She'd wear the necklace because she wasn't angry. At least, she didn't think she was. But she sure hated him for not finishing what he'd started.

All day she primped to get ready for the party. When Tom came to her room for their planned lunch together, she went with him in the hope of seeing Ethan and Naomi. Then she could put her scheme into action a little early. But Ethan hadn't come to lunch, and Naomi said she hadn't seen him since he took Blythe her present that morning. Fine. She would get her message across without the head start she wanted.

That afternoon Jennings came to her cabin with a gift for her. Embarrassed by the attention she was getting from people she hardly knew, Blythe invited the graying red-haired man into her room but left the door open.

"You didn't have to do this," Blythe insisted with a shy smile. "It wasn't necessary."

"I wanted to. Like I said, I have a daughter about your age, and I always seem to be gone for her birthday. I've come to think of you as a daughter, too. And I mean that. You're a lot like Lydia. Now open it."

Inside the box was a plain silver bracelet, a three-quarter circle that could fit as tightly around her wrist as she wanted. Taking it out, she slid it on between her slender wrist bone and her hand then pushed it together so it would stay in place. Then she kissed Jennings on the cheek. "Thank you, Mr. Jennings."

"My friends just call me Jennings," he responded with a wink.

"Why?" she asked, startled.

"Because I don't tell people my first name. I hate it."

"Does your wife know it?" she asked.

"Of course."

"And your daughter?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Because I don't feel right calling you Jennings. If you'd tell me—your other daughter—your first name, I'd feel much more comfortable calling you that."

"My name is Cadwallader."

"Oh!" She grinned. "On second thought, Jennings is a perfectly acceptable name."

"I'm glad you see it my way," he said with a laugh. "Now that the important part of the conversation is over, have you seen my boss yet today?"

"Haven't you?" she asked in amazement.

"No, and I've been looking all over for him. I even looked for him in the boiler room a couple of times."

"I suppose you already checked his office and suite," Blythe said.

"Of course. Naomi said she hasn't seen him for hours. If he's in his office, he isn't answering my knocks. I even hollered at him several times."

"I don't know what I can do to help you. I haven't seen him for hours."

"If you do, would you tell him that I'm looking for him? It's important but not urgent."

No sooner had Jennings left than four of the crew arrived and brought a large tub half-filled with water into her cabin. Thrilled to see it, she watched them put it down carefully before she questioned them.

"Are you sure you have the right cabin? Are you sure this shouldn't be in the owner's suite?"

"No, ma'am," the younger of the two men said. "This is right. Mr. Lucas told us to bring it here promptly at two."

"Wonderful!" she replied excitedly. "I can have complete privacy. Where is he so I can thank him later?"

"Don't know, miss. Nobody's seen him all day. He gave us our orders yesterday, but I couldn't find him when I tried to make sure they hadn't changed."

"Oh. Do you want me to tell you when I'm done with it?"

"You don't have to. We're supposed to come for it in an hour. Mr. Lucas said that should be long enough."

"He's right, too. Any longer and the water would be too cold, anyway. Are you two going to be at the party tonight?"

"Yes, ma'am. Everybody who's not on duty's going to be there. Mr. Lucas practically ordered it."

"Practically?" she repeated.

"He would have if he'd had to, but he didn't. We all want the chance to dance with the birthday girl."

"Everybody? I mean, all the crew?"

"All of them. I know you're Mr. Lucas's sister, so I'm trying to be polite. All the single men on board have had their eye on you. It's just that nobody thought they should say anything because of the way Mr. Lucas is. We don't want to tangle with him. But we figure he can't do anything if we want to dance with you at a party, so everybody who can is going."

"Good, because I love to dance. I could wear out one or two men without any trouble. I'll see you tonight."

When Ethan made his first appearance since he'd left her room, Blythe knew exactly why he'd disappeared. He'd spent a good portion of the day with a bottle of rye. He reeked of liquor when he and Naomi joined her in the social parlor, now decorated in green and gold silk material the same color as the brocade in her low-cut dress.

"Look at my baby sister!" he exclaimed. "All grown up and looking beautiful. And wearing the most beautiful necklace I've ever seen. I'll bet she even promised a man she'd wear it tonight. Is that right, angel?"

"Ethan, please," Naomi whispered. "You're embarrassing her."

"That's all right, Naomi," Blythe inserted. "Let him make a fool of himself."

"How could I make a fool of myself when my sister's the most beautiful woman here tonight? I'm proud of you, Blythe. Honest. And I want the whole world to know it." Bending over, he whispered in her ear. "Where's your brush?"

"In my cabin, of course," she answered, stunned by the question.

"Good. That means you're not armed." Straightening up again, he shouted over the noisy crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen! I want to introduce all of you to my half-sister, the

most beautiful woman aboard the River Goddess. This is the guest of honor, Blythe Bouvier! And I adore her, men, so don't get any ideas."

Furious with his attitude, she slid her arm around Tom and spoke to Ethan with venom in her voice. "I may not have my brush with me, Ethan Lucas, but don't be so sure that I'm not armed. Let's go, Tom. I want to dance."

Before she could leave, Ethan grasped her upper arm and directed her to a table at the side of the room. Once they were there, with Naomi and Tom arriving only a moment later, Ethan passed out glasses of champagne to them. Then he called out that everybody in the room should make sure they had a glass. When a waiter indicated that all did, Ethan raised his glass.

"First we toast the birthday girl." As she watched, he ran his gaze over her body then corrected himself. "Or I should say birthday woman. Happy birthday, little sister. May you be happy forever, not just today."

"I'm not happy right now," she said, refusing to accept the toast. "And I don't like champagne."

After downing his entire glass of bubbly liquid in one drink, he smiled and put her glass to her mouth. He tipped it so she had no choice but to drink or let it run down her chin. "Don't be embarrassed, angel. Everybody who has a birthday gets toasted at least once in her life. And you spent over seven years in Paris. I understand champagne's France's national drink. Drink up, everybody! The champagne's on me!"

"That's right," Blythe declared as she knocked his hand and spilled the remaining liquor on him. "It is on you. Music, please! The guest of honor wants to dance."

As the small orchestra struck up a waltz, Blythe led Tom to the dance floor and started the party on a more festive note.

While they hurried away, Ethan stared after her in shock. Naomi giggled beside him.

"What's so damned funny?" he demanded. "I was trying to be nice to her, and she did this. It's embarrassing."

"It was supposed to be. You embarrassed her, so she got revenge. She did a beautiful job, too. I'm surprised you didn't learn your lesson after what she did to your philandering. Now I'm beginning to wonder exactly what she meant about being armed. I was going to leave early, but now I think I'll stay. This could be a *very* interesting party."

As Naomi wandered off to greet one of the passengers, Ethan watched Blythe. What *had* she meant about being armed? She didn't look armed. She looked gorgeous in that low-cut, form-fitting green and gold brocade dress. And she sure didn't have any place she could hide a weapon unless it was under all her petticoats, strapped to one of her luscious, white calves.

Fury rose in Ethan when the dance ended. Blythe kissed Tom in public. She did it passionately—the same technique she'd learned from him. How *dare* she use what he'd taught her on another man! But it didn't end with Tom. She danced with every single man who asked her and kissed him the same way. If she danced more than once with the same man, she made even more brazen overtures by touching him intimately or molding herself closely against him. That wasn't the same woman he'd kissed that morning. This Blythe Bouvier was someone else in his angel's body.

The more his anger increased, the more Ethan drank; and the more he drank, the more his anger increased. When Blythe disappeared with three different men throughout the evening, he decided to follow her the next time. But before he could, Jennings approached him.

"I talked with Blythe for you, Ethan," he announced.

"When?" Ethan asked.

"When you were relieving yourself the last time. I told her she looked brazen, and she said she'd stop. She probably had a little too much champagne, and she's enjoying all the attention the men are paying her."

"She's enjoying it *too* much. I have to stop her before one of them gets ideas."

"Don't ruin her party, Ethan. She's having a good time, and I know that's all you really want for her. She's perfectly capable of handling the men, too. I followed her outside one time, and she let him know that she didn't want anything more than a happy birthday. Leave her alone. She'll be fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I'll watch her for you, and I won't start any fights if one of the men gets to be too much for her."

"Good, because I'm so drunk, I'd probably throw the damned bastard in one of the boilers and watch him burn to death—with a *smile* on my face."

ELEVEN

As Blythe prepared for bed, she relived the events of the evening. Pouring the champagne on Ethan had been sweet revenge, but making him suffer by flaunting herself to other men had been the best part. He'd hardly spoken to her after the champagne and even then it was only to ask her to dance—to support their charade, he'd claimed. He hadn't even talked while he waltzed her around the floor. He'd only examined her while she stared him down, afraid that if she didn't, she might kiss him. At the end of the song, however, he'd kissed her cheek, politely thanked her, then walked away, leaving her on the dance floor alone. In only a moment, Jennings raced up to rescue her from humiliation.

This left her with no doubt that she'd succeeded in her plan to get revenge. She could tell by the look in his dark eyes that he was jealous. That was exactly what she'd wanted, too—to make him so jealous that he would have a miserable evening. Obviously, he had, because he spent most of his time near the champagne table so it was convenient to refill his glass. And he did a number of times. He'd had too much champagne that night; but then again, so had she.

She even felt a little woozy when she finally slipped her nightgown over her head and got into bed. Blythe had had champagne before and knew what it did to her. Tomorrow, she'd be confined to bed with a massive headache. Hopefully, Ethan would be, too. And he deserved a headache after the way he'd treated her that morning.

Although the room circled as she lay down, it stopped when she closed her eyes. She fell to sleep within seconds, not even taking the time to get under the covers.

Moving as silently as he could, Ethan turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open. It squeaked, but she didn't move when he glanced at the sleeping figure on the bed. Thank God, she was alone and not in the arms of one of the many men she tried to seduce during the party. Pretty soon he'd show her what she'd done to him that night, but first he had other plans. After he shut the door and slid the bolt lock into place, he staggered farther into the cabin, bumping into a chair. Before it could crash to the floor, he caught it.

Still Blythe didn't move. Ethan sighed in relief. She was sleeping so soundly he might not be able to wake her up when the time was right. Oh, God, what if he couldn't? He'd suffered all day long, and even longer that night. He had to talk to her now. He wouldn't be able to bear waiting until morning. Besides, he would probably be sober by then. And he could never tell her the truth he'd learned that evening if he was sober.

Before sitting on the chair, he unbuttoned his trousers and slid them over his hips. That's what he would do. First, he would wake her up, then he would tell her the truth, *then* he would show her that he hadn't wanted to leave her that morning. Tossing his trousers over his shoulder, he strode to the bed and gazed down at Blythe.

He'd come to her cabin wearing nothing but his pants and now he was ready. He didn't want anything to come in the way of their perfect union. For her, it would be sweet and tender; for him, it could mean finding what was missing from his life—just like he'd vowed he would.

Sinking onto the edge of the bed, he carefully began releasing the buttons on her nightgown, slowly, barely touching them, until the fabric stopped him. No! That wasn't supposed to happen. He was supposed to push it all the way apart, but he'd only unbuttoned four buttons. Her breasts weren't even exposed yet.

"God damn it!" he raged, viciously grabbing the cotton material and rending the fabric completely down the front.

Blythe woke with a scream. *This is a dream!* she thought in a panic. It had to be. Ethan wasn't there; he wasn't doing this to her. He *wouldn't* do such a thing—he couldn't! But he felt so real as he clamped his hand over her mouth, and she stared up at him in fear.

"Shut up," he ordered in a harsh whisper, "or you'll wake up the whole damned boat. Are you going to scream again?"

When she shook her head, he released her mouth and she asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I came to show you how much I love you," he vowed, even though rage was still evident in his voice. "You tormented me tonight, and I want you to know how much it hurt me. I was never jealous—until *you* came into my life. I hate this feeling as much as I love you. You were definitely the woman scorned tonight, too. You can't deny it, because even Naomi knew what you were doing. In fact, she's the one who told me you were getting revenge. Now it's my turn. I'm going to love you like you've never been loved before."

"Ethan, please. I've never done this before."

"The hell you haven't," he growled. "I saw how you acted with every damned man who danced with you. I was watching every move you made, and you knew exactly what you were doing. No woman who hasn't had experience would act the way you did."

"But that's exactly what it was, Ethan," she said as he covered her with his body, "an act. I don't know anything about this. I've never done it before. Please, I don't know what I'm doing. I swear it."

"You're a liar—just like I am," he declared before he captured her mouth in a hungry kiss to stifle her protests.

Under him, she writhed, arousing him further. Her fingers went to his face, and he knew she was going to try to scratch him. Before she could, though, he grabbed her wrists and pinned them against the pillow. He would free her later, once she calmed down. Right now, he had to show her how much he needed her, how deep his love went. He positioned himself at her womanhood without entering her. Before he could do that, he had to get her ready. Then he could teach her the true meaning of love.

His tongue clashed with hers feverishly, causing an explosion of desire in her body unlike any she'd ever experienced. She'd wanted to feel his face, to caress his stubbled cheeks. But he'd moved her hands, and she didn't know what to do next.

This was what she'd wanted that morning!

The hair on his chest tickled her nipples, hardening them in an instant. The sensation caused her to stop moving and inhale sharply. As though he used that as his cue, he released her mouth and kissed his way down her throat. His action drew a groan of pleasure from deep within her. On his way lower, he kissed her birthmark lightly then continued to her breast. The moment his lips touched her nipple, she inhaled again, but when he sucked it gently, she exhaled with a heated sigh.

Now *this* was something she liked. His tender caresses of her breasts, his gentle suckling, made the urgency in her loins increase. He was so gentle, so very caring, that she couldn't hold her body still. Somehow she needed to douse that fire of desire that raged

through her, but she didn't know how.

Ethan kissed her nipple, then her stomach, then each of her thighs. Blythe released an unrestrainable shudder of arousal. *What's happening to me?* she wondered in a daze. These feelings were so strong that she wanted to know more about this kind of love Ethan said he would show her.

Trailing his tongue up her slender body, Ethan circled each excited nipple then propped himself above her on one arm while he tenderly massaged her pliant mound, letting his index finger continue to circle her nipple.

"I love you so much it hurts," he whispered. "Please say you'll let me show you. *Please* don't make me stop. God, angel, please. Let me love you completely."

"Oh, yes, Ethan," she returned in a heated whisper. "Show me what this kind of love is like."

As he lay down upon her, his lips recaptured hers with a passion even he had never shown her. One hand massaged her breast while the other guided his manhood. With a hot groan, he plunged into her body.

Pain ripped through her, and she cried in agony behind his kiss. The pain was excruciating! Why was he hurting her like this? How could he if he truly loved her? He couldn't, of course. This was nothing but a drunken dream brought on by her own lust.

But as he moved in her the pain began to subside into a dull ache. That was better. Ethan wasn't hurting her now. In fact, he was starting to make her feel *good* again. This was the most realistic dream she'd ever had. Hopefully, Naomi wouldn't ...

Oh, no. Naomi! She couldn't let this go on. She had to stop this nightmare before it was too late. In a desperate attempt to throw him off, she bucked beneath him. To her amazement, it created even more intense sensations in her—sensations that she was afraid to label in case this *wasn't* just a dream.

She shouldn't let this continue; she should fight against him. But her body wouldn't let her. Instead, she moved her hands over Ethan's muscular arms, around to his back, where she felt his muscles work under his movements. Her hands, apparently having a mind of their own, moved down to his buttocks. If only the image of Naomi would go away! Then she might truly be able to enjoy this dream. She struggled to get rid of the vision—until her thrashing brought on a new sensation—one frightening yet exciting. The combination of emotions terrified her.

And there were tears—floods of them—spilling from her eyes onto her pillow. She was so confused she couldn't even think clearly. She'd wanted Ethan to love her like this that morning, but he had rejected her. Now he was being tender and sweet, caressing her breast, kissing her passionately. But between her legs where there had been so much pain ... That wasn't love! It was lust. And it tore her heart now, as surely as it had torn her body earlier.

When he suddenly ripped his mouth from hers, she grabbed his neck tightly and tried to pull him back to her. But he was too strong. He propped himself up on one hand while he continued his lustful movements, his free hand tenderly massaging her breast. Through her tears, she studied his body and tentatively ran her fingertips through the dense hair on his chest.

All of a sudden, he stiffened for several seconds—then collapsed on her, proclaiming, "Oh, *God*, yes. This is it. I've finally found what I was looking for."

Oh, how she hated him for saying that. Oh, how she loved him! She hadn't known it before, but it was true. She loved Ethan Lucas, and that's what was wrong with her heart whenever he kissed her. Now, though—now, while it was important—she hated him for

treating her like he'd treated the other women. Only this time it was worse, because he had called it love. If only she could tell him how much she hated him, but she couldn't even do that much. She was choked with the memory of pain in her body, the pain of betrayal in her heart, and the loss of trust because of his lies. But the most overwhelming pain of all was the fact that she'd willingly consorted with a man she never should have. And the guilt of having betrayed Naomi by lying with her husband consumed her.

Ethan rolled off her and pulled her close against him. He was so gentle and sweet, exactly what she wanted from him, that she could only revel in the feel of him.

"I've never been so satisfied in my life, angel," he explained as he caressed her head and stroked her face with his thumb. "Don't cry, Blythe. We consummated my love for you. It was happy and satisfying—right down to my soul. And that's *exactly* what I was looking for."

"You promised you'd be faithful," she sobbed, although she wasn't sure why.

"I *was* faithful. I was faithful to *you*, darling. I never promised to be faithful to Naomi. I only said that I'd be faithful for the rest of my life. And I will. I'll never bed a woman other than you again."

"But Naomi ..."

"Don't worry about her. She understands everything."

"I can't help it. She's my friend."

"Don't worry," he repeated with a mumble as he drifted into a drunken sleep. "It's you I love."

Suddenly, Blythe knew that she wasn't dreaming. What had happened was very real.

For a long time, she was afraid to move. If she woke him, he might start all over again. But she also wanted him to—so she could see if there would be more pain. Solange had said only the first time, but she wasn't convinced that Solange had ever bedded a man. One of Solange's biggest faults was exaggeration.

Minutes later, Ethan snored softly into her ear. Finally, she felt it was safe to get up and change her gown. Rising so as not to awaken him, she gazed down at the man in her bed, and cringed in horror. Despite the darkness, enough moonlight came in through the port-hole for her to see the blood. It was on the blankets, on Ethan. She looked down at herself. It was on her, too! Blythe shuddered in distaste. Quickly stripping out of her destroyed nightgown, she threw it to the floor. There it lay, also spotted with red.

Weakness swept over Blythe; her stomach churned, demanding the release of its contents. But she battled the nausea and rushed to the bureau for a clean nightgown. When she reached into the drawer, she halted. Her hand was shaking. Shocked, she raised them both before her face, staring at them as though they belonged to someone else.

What was wrong with her? Ethan had been nothing but gentle and giving—except what couldn't be helped. And she had truly enjoyed those passionate minutes in his arms. If he hadn't surprised her, she probably wouldn't screamed. The way he woke her, though, tearing her nightgown like he had. Maybe that was why she was trembling.

Oh, no! She'd done it again. He had frightened her and hurt her, and she was supporting him. One second she loved him; the next, she hated him. But at that moment, the hate—and extreme guilt—far outweighed the love. To save her sanity, she had to get away from him; she had to get out of that lust-filled room. Sliding into a fresh nightgown, she pulled her long red-gold locks from it then grabbed her ruined nightgown as she raced from the cabin.

On the observation deck, she stood at the side railing. She stared numbly at the dark water for several minutes. Why had Ethan started her first time in a man's bed with such violent intensity by tearing her gown? Why couldn't he have been gentle like he'd been to-

ward the end? It was so unfair! Her first time should have been totally wonderful, not beginning with fear. She wondered if that would always be in her mind.

Blythe squeezed her eyes shut to ward off the tears. The passion in his embrace had driven her into an act that she had *wanted* to perform while she knew she shouldn't. This entire evening had her so confused that she didn't know how to feel anymore.

With a heavy, ragged sigh of distress, she opened her eyes. Instantly her gaze fell on the nightgown in her hands. Her body acted on instinct as the vision of Ethan, bloody and sleeping, lying on her blood-stained bed, flashed across her mind.

Ripping the gown with desperate ferocity, she tried to tear up the memory. She flung two pieces over the rail and watched each white fabric drift to the water. In her hand, she saw the red-stained material and instantly dropped it like a hot skillet burning her hands. But before that piece of nightgown reached the water, it got caught up in a breeze. Below it wrapped once around the railing on the deck. Her eyes widened in horror.

"No!" she screamed. That wasn't supposed to happen! It was supposed to drown with the rest of her nightgown. It had to!

"What was that?" Jennings asked his navigator on the bridge.

"It sounded like a woman screaming."

"Do you see anything?"

The navigator scanned the decks until he saw a lone figure on the observation deck. When the waning moon came out from behind a passing cloud a moment later, he caught sight of the distinctive golden red hair. "My God, Jennings! It's the boss's sister."

"*What?*" Jennings exclaimed. "Take over here. I'll go help her."

"Get off there!" she shrieked. "Go in the water. Please, God. Take it off there for me."

But the material flapped as the boat chugged along the calm river. The crimson splotches flashed at her in defiance. If God wouldn't kill it, she would have to do it herself. Racing toward the steps at the side of the observation deck, she ignored the man calling her name. Before she reached the stairs, however, he caught her by the arm and spun her to face him.

Jennings stared at her in disbelief. Tears streamed from her eyes in a torrent. He'd never seen so much remorse on anyone's face.

"Let go," she cried, tugging on her arm to free herself. "I have to get it off there. God won't do it for me."

"Calm down, Blythe," Jennings said soothingly. "You're not making any sense."

"Oh, Jennings," she wailed, collapsing against him. "Get it off there for me. Please! You have to get rid of it."

"Get rid of what?" When Blythe pointed over the rail, Jennings glanced down to see the white and red flag of her fear. "It's all right, honey. It's only a piece of material—a napkin or something."

"A nightgown—*my* nightgown. I wanted to throw it away, but it didn't work."

"Did something happen to you?"

"He came to my cabin. It hurt, Jennings. And I can't believe it let it happen. But I couldn't scream but I didn't want to, either. He was kissing me. He said I love you, but it hurt. I love him so much—and I *hate* him. I trusted him. Now I don't. It was an awful thing we did—and it was wonderful. God forgive me! I love him, but he's married. He said he loves me, but it hurt. He didn't *want* to hurt me; he just couldn't help it. He was gentle, but it

still hurt. But I still *wanted* him to do it. My heart hurt, too. And there was blood all over—on him, on the bed, on me. On my nightgown! Get rid of it, Jennings. Please!”

“Sh-h,” he hissed, tenderly running his hands over her hair as he held her. “It’s all right now. It’s all over. I’ll take you to my cabin, and you can get some sleep. You’ll be safe there.”

“He’ll find me.”

“No, he won’t. I won’t tell anybody you’re there until we can talk about this in the morning.”

“Not anybody. Not even Ethan.”

“He’d want to know.”

“Don’t tell him!”

“All right,” he agreed to calm her again. “I won’t tell him. Now come to my cabin and lie down. Will you do that?”

“First, get rid of it,” she demanded.

“If you’ll come to my cabin, I’ll sit with you until you go to sleep. Then I’ll come back and take care of it.”

“Do you promise?”

“I swear it,” he vowed.

As Jennings helped Blythe toward the stairs with one arm around her back, they heard another man’s voice. “Is Miss Bouvier all right, Jennings?”

Directing his gaze to the bridge, he shouted back, “No! Stay at the helm. I doubt I’ll be back tonight.”

“Aye, sir. Should I send somebody for Mr. Lucas?”

“She doesn’t want to see anybody right now—not even him. I’m going to let her get some sleep before I try to change her mind. And keep your mouth shut about what you heard.”

Ethan groaned in misery as he woke, and he clamped his hand over his head. Between the rye and champagne, he’d never been so drunk—and now he was paying for it. What had happened last night, anyway? Everything after his dance with Blythe was a blur. That was when he’d realized how deep his love for her went. But she’d ignored him the rest of the night. For the first time in his thirty-three years, he’d been rejected. And it felt terrible.

Then the memory of a sweet dream flashed across his closed eyelids. His love for her was so strong that he’d even dreamed he’d told her then bedded her. A soft smile came to his lips while he recalled the dream. She’d offered little resistance, claiming she’d never done it before, but he knew better. Only experienced women treated men like she had at the party. She’d proven her experience in his dream, too, by moving under him with a passion unlike any other woman’s, with that fire he loved so much. And no other woman had ever satisfied him so completely. If only his dream had been true!

Stretching the kinks out of his stiff body, Ethan jerked open his eyes. He wasn’t on the settee; he was in a bed. Afraid of his thoughts, he spread both arms out until they were flat on the bed. Thank God, he was alone! Yet the ceiling above this bed didn’t have a chandelier like it did above his own bed, so he wasn’t in his suite. And if he wasn’t in his suite, where was he? What woman had he bedded while he imagined Blythe?

With a heavy sigh to steel himself, he sat up to study the room in the dim light of day-break. He gasped at what he saw. It was Blythe’s cabin. His dream had been real! Then his eyes caught sight of the reddish-brown stain on the bedding. He moved his gaze to his lap,

where dried blood coated his thighs.

“Oh, my God!” he exclaimed. “What have I done?”

He’d gone to the cabin to demonstrate his love, but he couldn’t have shown her anything except that she was right. He was exactly what she’d called him. Instead of giving her love, he’d ... He couldn’t even put the true label on his actions. Somehow he had to apologize, but he doubted that any words he knew would express his remorse.

“Blythe?” he asked tentatively even though he could see she wasn’t in the room. “Where are you, angel?”

Getting out of bed, he went to the pitcher beside the wash basin and poured some water into the bowl. Furious with himself, he grabbed up the soap and lathered his hands well. He scrubbed the blood from his body with such force that it hurt. When he was clean and rinsed, he still felt dirty. He repeated the process three times, but the filthy sensation refused to go away.

“I have to find Blythe,” he mumbled as he slid into his trousers. “I have to beg her forgiveness. *Then* I’ll be clean again.” But where could she have gone? Not to Naomi—not after waking in *Blythe’s* bed—not after ...

He couldn’t complete the thought. Instead, he ran from the cabin without locking it behind him. If she was out there, she might want back in, and she’d probably been too upset to take her key. After all, she’d been crying. Now that he was sure his dream was real, he remembered that much. If he were Blythe, where would he go? To his favorite place on the Goddess, of course. That had to be the observation deck. That’s where Jennings had told him she spent so much time.

Ethan bounded up the stairs two at a time, frantically crying out for her several times. But there was no response. The deck was empty except for the chairs. When a scrap of white material slid across the floor in the gentle, early-morning breeze, he hurried to pick it up before it blew away.

It looked like part of Blythe’s nightgown, but he couldn’t be sure. His memory was too vague. When he glanced over the railing, no doubt remained in his mind. On the railing below, more white material waved at him, turning his remorse to guilt when he saw the too-familiar stains.

Sprinting down the steps, he retrieved the remnants of her nightgown and took it from the rail in disbelief. Had he really torn her gown like this? Desperately searching his mind for an answer, he couldn’t find one. He didn’t remember the time he’d been with her—except that he’d told her that he loved her and that he’d found what he’d been looking for. He looked up at the observation deck then to the water below.

“Oh, God, no!” he shouted in anguish. “Not that!”

Still holding the pieces of cloth, he rushed to the bridge and pushed the navigator from the wheel.

“What are you doing, sir?” the navigator asked in astonishment.

“Turning the damned boat around,” Ethan explained frantically. “We’ve got to go back for her.”

“What are you talking about? Go back for who?”

“Blythe. She jumped. I have to find her.”

“She didn’t jump.”

“Yes, she did, damn it! I found this on the railing,” he said holding up the blood-stained material in one hand. “And there was a smaller piece on the observation deck above it. She jumped sometime during the night. I have to go back and save her.”

“I was up here all night, sir,” the navigator said. “And I swear nobody jumped—

especially not Miss Bouvier.”

Suddenly, the bank of the Mohawk River loomed before them. The navigator pushed Ethan away from the wheel to take control again. “Get the hell away from here! Do you want to kill everybody on the Goddess?”

“I don’t care. I already killed Blythe, and nobody else matters.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I did, damn it!” he cried out, thrusting the nightgown out toward the navigator. “Don’t you see the blood?”

Before the navigator could respond, Ethan raced through the bridge door. He needed a drink. That was the only thing that would ease the grief and shame. After getting two bottles of rye and Blythe’s blood-stained ribbon from his office, he turned to leave again. As he did, his gaze fell upon the portrait of Angel. He’d killed Blythe, so he had to kill Angel, too. That way there wouldn’t be anything left to remind him of his folly.

Instinctively, he threw one of the bottles against the painting. Glass stuck in her face; the amber liquid drained down her shoulders and bosom. She should have died, but she still smiled at him shyly—almost as though she was taunting him. Grabbing his last bottle, he fled from the room. He would *never* go back in there. Angel would only bring on painful memories.

TWELVE

Jennings had never seen anybody cry as hard or as long as Blythe had, and he'd held her for hours in an attempt to calm her. She hadn't said anything once they were in his cabin, but it was obvious that she was hurting—in her heart if not in her body. When he finally got to the deck about an hour after the sun rose, the nightgown was gone, probably blown off by the increasing winds. At least, it was gone. All he had to do was tell her that, and she would probably think nothing of it.

But what was he going to do about Ethan? He'd promised Blythe not to tell him where she was, yet his conscience insisted that his employer should know the truth. Still, he couldn't break a promise—especially not to someone in such a fragile state. He would just have to wait until she agreed to him telling.

With a sigh, he went to the kitchen for some coffee. It had been a long night, and it would probably be an even longer day. Undoubtedly, Blythe would need a lot of attention just to keep her calm.

When Naomi rose that morning, she went to Ethan's office and knocked on the door. To her surprise, it swung open. Curious, she glanced around her then pushed the door a little more and slipped into the room. It reeked of rye.

Shutting the door, she surveyed the room. There was a large oak desk containing a kerosene lamp, a blotter, and a pen and ink set near the porthole. The large chair behind it was covered in tan leather to match the two smaller chairs in front of the desk.

Wandering to the large chair, she sat down and opened the top drawer. Nothing in there but paper. Trying the next drawer, she found it locked, as was the one below that. With a heavy sigh, she leaned back in the chair. Directly before her was the painting of Angel, marred beyond repair by fragments of glass and dried liquor. No wonder it smelled so bad in the office. But why had he destroyed his mother's portrait?

The events of the previous day came to her mind almost immediately. Was this why he'd disappeared for so long? Was it why Blythe had treated him like she had at the party? Whatever the reason, something serious had happened. What a dreadful way for Blythe to have spent her birthday. If she'd tried to see Blythe, maybe she could have patched up the disagreement, like Blythe had patched up her supposed marriage—or tried to, anyway.

But that didn't mean she couldn't settle the dispute now. First, she needed to talk to Ethan. He had to be angrier than Blythe if he destroyed his own mother's picture. Once she learned what the problem was, she would talk to Blythe. Maybe things weren't as bad as either of them thought.

Staring at the portrait, Naomi shook her head slowly. From the looks of that painting, things were very bad.

When she didn't find Ethan on the bridge, Naomi went to Jennings' cabin and knocked on the door, hoping he wasn't asleep. A couple seconds later he opened it a crack, and she asked if he'd seen Ethan that morning.

"I haven't seen anybody yet today—except the cook."

"He's not in his office," Naomi said, "and he wasn't on the bridge. I looked around from there, but I didn't see him anywhere. You're sure you haven't seen him?"

"Positive."

"Do you know where else he might be?"

"Not unless he's in the gambling parlor. I heard there were going to be a couple of games after the party last night. Maybe he lost track of the time again."

"I'll go check. Thanks."

But Ethan wasn't in the gambling parlor, either. Confused by the events transpiring, she decided to visit with Blythe instead. To her surprise, Ethan answered Blythe's door. His face masked in grief and still wet with tears he'd obviously tried to brush away.

"Ethan?" she asked tentatively. "What is it?"

"Damn!" he replied, his voice choked with emotion. "I was hoping you were her."

"Isn't she here?"

"No." Turning away, he wandered to the bed and sank down on it. Rearranging Blythe's party gown, he used it to cover the blood on the quilt. Yes, it was all still hidden, still concealing the memory of the pain he'd caused her. When he looked up again, Naomi had closed the door and stood before him. "She's gone."

"Where?"

"Where all good people go."

"I don't understand." Sitting down beside him, Naomi took his hand in both of hers. It was then that she noticed the blood-stained material he held. "What's that?"

His face masked with sorrow, Ethan stared at the material. "It's hers. I found it on a railing. She's gone, and I'll never see her again."

"But where did she go?"

"It's like they say. The good die young. And nobody will ever be as good as she was."

"Die?" Naomi repeated. "You really mean that Blythe's ..."

"Don't say it. Please. I can't bear to hear her name. It even hurts to think it."

Naomi stroked Ethan's tousled hair as tears came to her own eyes. Despite her desperate attempt to remain calm, the tears streamed down her cheeks. "I know, darling. You got quite close to her in the short time you knew her. It can't be easy for you."

"I loved her."

"I know. How did it happen?"

"She must have jumped."

"Are you sure? That doesn't sound like Bl ... It doesn't sound like something she would do. Maybe she was pushed."

"She was—but not in the way you mean. Something happened in here, you know." Although he hadn't planned to show Naomi the evidence of his time with Blythe, he carefully lifted the dress from the bed. When Naomi gasped at the sight of the blood, he groaned then laid the dress down again. "Now do you believe that she jumped?"

"Yes. I wonder who ..."

Ethan interrupted, glaring at Naomi. "Don't. She's gone, and it doesn't matter. Nothing can bring her back."

"I suppose not, but I'm still surprised that you're not out there trying to find who did it."

"I was furious with her last night. Did you see how she acted with all those men?"

"She did it on purpose," Naomi said. "Did you two have a fight yesterday? Is that why you disappeared all day?"

"It wasn't exactly a fight."

"That's why she was acting like that, though, wasn't it."

"Yes."

"Damn! I told her she'd get herself into a bad situation if she didn't stop it, and I was right."

"I killed her, Naomi."

"No, you didn't, darling," she said soothingly as she stroked his hair again.

"I did," he insisted. "I may as well have pushed her off the observation deck myself."

"That's not true, and you know it. Whatever happened here is what made her jump, Ethan, not your fight. It was something else."

"Where's my bottle?" he asked, glancing around the cabin. "I need my bottle."

To humor him, Naomi looked and saw it sitting on a small table by the door. When she went to get it for him, she noticed that it was already half empty. "How long have you been drinking?"

"Not long enough to kill the pain. Give me that." Striding to her side, he grabbed the bottle and took several swallows. "I need to be alone, Naomi. Why don't you go away?"

"Why don't you come back to our suite and get some sleep? You look like you could use it."

"How can I sleep now? It still hurts too bad. Now go away. I don't want anybody around."

"At least, come back to our suite."

"I can't. I have to stay here. I have to be with her."

"Ethan, please."

"No!" he raged. "I won't leave her."

"All right, but I'll be back to check on you. I'll bring you something to eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"You still need to eat," she insisted, closing the door as she left.

Without thinking, Naomi rushed to Jennings' cabin and knocked frantically on the door.

The sudden noise startled him, but Blythe didn't even move. When he cracked his door opened, Naomi stood on the other side. Before he could question her, she spoke in a concerned tone.

"I found Ethan," she announced, "and I think you should talk to him."

"What's wrong?" Jennings asked in concern.

"You know how much he was drinking last night. I don't know about you, but I've never seen him so drunk."

"Neither have I. Does he have a hangover?"

"Worse. He's still drinking. I think he drank most of yesterday, too."

"He's drunk *again*?"

"I'm not sure, but I wouldn't doubt it. He's not talking very coherently. He keeps saying that he killed Blythe."

"*What?*" Jennings asked in shock. "Why would he say that?"

"She jumped last night. It looks like she was a little too loose with the men at the party. I warned her about it a couple times, but she wouldn't listen."

"Maybe I *should* talk to him," Jennings agreed. "Give me a couple of minutes, and I'll meet you at your suite."

"He's not there. He's in Blythe's cabin."

"He is? Damn. I guess I'll have to go there. Are you going to meet me?"

"I don't think I should. He already asked me to leave. He said he doesn't want anybody

around, but you should go, anyway. Maybe you can talk some sense into him.”

“If he’s drinking, I doubt he’ll listen. But I’ll try.”

“Will you tell me what happens?”

“You know I will. Go back to your suite wait for me there.”

After writing a note telling Blythe that he had an emergency, Jennings hurried to her cabin and entered without knocking. There was Ethan—a bottle in one hand, the torn nightgown in another—hugging Blythe’s dress with both arms as he wept. Ethan was in even worse shape than Naomi had described.

“Go away,” Ethan growled when he saw Jennings pick up a chair. Jennings set the chair in front of his friend, sat down, and took the bottle. Ethan jerked it back. “Leave that alone. It’s mine.”

“You don’t need it.”

“The hell I don’t! I have to kill the pain.”

“That won’t do it.”

“How the hell do you know?” Ethan demanded. “You don’t even drink.”

“I don’t have to drink to know that it won’t kill anything but you.”

“I don’t care anymore. I don’t have anything to live for, anyway.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I killed the woman I love, damn it.”

“No, you didn’t. I just talked to Naomi. She’s fine.”

“Not Naomi. She was mad at me yesterday, you know. That’s why she flaunted herself to all those men last night. Then this happened.” Ethan pointed to the bed and showed his friend the nightgown fragment. “I found this on a railing. It tore off her when she jumped. I wanted to go back for her when I found it, but I almost ran us aground.”

“You were piloting the boat?” Jennings asked in amazement. “You don’t even know how. No wonder she lurched earlier.”

“Why the hell do you think I almost crashed into the bank. That new man you had navigating last night pushed me away. *He* saved the passengers—not me. I didn’t give a damn. The most important one’s gone, anyway.”

“Are you talking about Blythe?”

“Don’t you ever say that name to me again!”

“But she didn’t jump,” Jennings said.

“Yes, she did. I saw everything for myself.”

“No. She’s ...” Jennings stopped himself. If he told Ethan where Blythe was, Ethan would go to her, and he’d promised not to let that happen. To his relief, Ethan apparently didn’t notice that he hadn’t finished his sentence.

“You’re a damned liar. I’m a liar; you’re a liar; Naomi’s a liar; everybody’s a liar—except her. She hated liars.”

“Nonsense. She likes everybody.”

“Not liars. She told me so.”

“Listen to me, Ethan.”

“You don’t know how much it hurts, Jennings. You can’t feel the pain like I do because you didn’t love her.”

“I do love her, though—like my own daughter.”

Ethan glared at his friend. “That’s different. You weren’t as close to her as I was. You didn’t know her as well.”

“But she’s not dead.”

“Stop lying! I never want to hear another lie as long as I live. Hopefully, that won’t be

very long, either. I want to be with her again, and that's the only way I can do it."

"You're not going to do anything stupid like jump overboard, are you?"

"Don't worry. I'm not as courageous as she was. I have to take the slow way out—in case I change my mind. But I doubt I will. I don't have anything to live for."

Realizing that Ethan's condition was far beyond anything he could handle, Jennings put the chair back and left. How would he ever convince Ethan that Blythe was still alive if she didn't want anybody to know where she was? The only way Ethan would believe the truth was to see for himself, but that wasn't possible at the moment. Maybe once Blythe woke up again—but more likely not. True to his word, Jennings went to discuss what Ethan had said with Naomi.

"Well?" she asked anxiously when they were comfortably seated in the suite.

"Did he tell you that he wants to die?"

She gasped in horror. "He does?"

"I don't know how we're going to convince him not to, either. If a man says he wants to die, that's the only way you're going to stop him."

Naomi twisted a lock of her hair around her finger. "Not necessarily. I might have a way to change his mind."

"What's that?" Jennings asked.

"I can't explain right now, but it might give Ethan something to live for."

"I doubt you can change his mind. He's still drinking, and we have to stop that first. We have to watch him, and as soon as he passes out, we have to hide all of his rye. Better yet, we should dump it in the river. That way he won't be able to find it."

"How are we going to do that if he wants to be alone?"

"We'll keep checking on him. Go down every hour or so and knock on the door. If he answers, you'll know he's not out yet, and you can leave. If he doesn't, go in and get everything. Will you do that for me? I've got something more important to take care of. Let me know when you get rid of his liquor. I want to try talking to him again."

"All right," she agreed, "but I can't promise he'll open the door just because somebody knocks on it. He didn't yesterday."

By the time Jennings returned to his cabin, Blythe had awakened and was lying in bed staring at the ceiling. Trying to cheer her a little, he spoke in a light tone. "I see you've finally quit napping. How do you feel?"

"Tired," she admitted. "Embarrassed. No, mortified by what I did."

"There's no need for such terrible emotions."

"But I'm being a problem for you."

"Don't be silly. You had every reason to be upset last night. I didn't mind sitting up with you, either. I'll go to the kitchen and have them fix something for you. What do you want to eat?"

"Nothing. I don't feel like eating."

"Too much champagne last night?"

"No. It's the other thing."

"You should eat something, Blythe. You have to keep up your strength."

"Why?"

"You'll make yourself sick if you don't."

"I'm already sick."

Sinking onto the edge of the bed, he brushed a lock of hair from her face. "Let me tell Ethan where you are. I think you should see him."

"No!" she denied frantically. "No, I can't see anybody. Everybody will look at me and

know what I did. I can't see anybody. I don't *want* to see anybody. I don't even want people to know where I am. They'll see me and know how humiliated I am."

"That's not true," Jennings assured her. "People can't tell those things just by looking at you. What about Naomi? She's your friend. Why don't I get her? Maybe talking to a woman would help you."

Blythe grabbed his wrist and gazed at him with pleading eyes. "Please don't make me see anybody, Jennings. Don't make me talk to anybody. I can't do it right now."

"You can't hide forever," he said. "Someday somebody's going to find you here and tell Ethan. Then what do you think will happen? He'll come running, and he'll be furious because nobody told him sooner. He blames himself for what happened."

"Good, because it never would have happened if it weren't for him."

"Him making you mad is no reason to blame him for last night. Naomi and I both warned you about what you were doing. What happened you brought on by your own actions."

"A lot of women flirt. They don't turn into something they don't want to be like I did last night."

"I'm not convinced you turned like you say, but you've got to admit ..."

"I don't have to admit anything! I don't even have to talk about this—and I won't. I want to be left alone now. I don't want to have to answer questions, and I don't want anybody to know where I am."

"What do you want me to tell people?"

"I don't know. Tell them I got off the boat. Tell them I'm sick. For all I care, you can tell them I jumped overboard and drowned."

"Even Ethan and Naomi?" he asked, shocked by her statement.

"Everybody."

"Will you at least tell me what happened?"

"No. I'm embarrassed and don't want to talk about it."

With that, Blythe rolled onto her side so her back was to Jennings. She couldn't bring herself to say Ethan's name, so how could she tell Jennings what happened? Ethan had earned her trust, then he had given her his love. Because of that, she was furious with herself. She should have turned him away. And yet—oh, how she had wanted him last night!

If she could convince herself that she hated him ... Unfortunately, that didn't seem any more likely than him asking her to marry him. Besides, if she hadn't been so startled the previous night, she was positive she would have enjoyed their intimacy from his very first kiss. She experienced a lot of pleasure during their time together—*too* much pleasure for a young woman brought up to save herself for marriage. And definitely much more than she should have in the arms of a married man. That's why she blamed him—because he was married and had lied to her by saying that he loved her. *He* caused her to hate him by being a liar. Otherwise, she would love him—she thought.

Maybe next time ... *Next time*? There wouldn't be any next time! Tears of overwhelming sorrow spilled from her eyes. For another two and a half hours, she cried. Then she drifted into a restless sleep, riddled with dreams of being in Ethan's passionate embrace.

THIRTEEN

For three days Ethan stayed either drunk or unconscious from liquor. Neither Naomi nor Jennings could understand how he came upon his endless supply, until Jennings found two cases, one empty and one nearly empty, of champagne from Blythe's party in her cabin. Jennings could imagine what that did to his friend. Taking the remaining champagne, he went to the galley and told the cook not to give Ethan liquor of any kind. Then he pulled Tom aside to speak with him.

"I want you to spread the word for me. Let everybody on board know that they're not to give Ethan a drop to drink. I have to sober him up, and I can't do it if he keeps finding liquor behind my back."

"This is because of Blythe, isn't it, sir," Tom observed. "Because she disappeared?"

"She didn't disappear, Tom," Jennings told him, knowing that the youth was truly interested in her. "She's still on the Goddess, but I promised not to tell anybody where she is."

"Why?"

"Something happened after her birthday party, and she doesn't want to see anybody."

"Maybe I could change her mind."

"I doubt it. She's still upset. Most of the time she sleeps or cries. She hardly even talks. This whole thing has been very difficult for her."

"Are you sure there's nothing I can do?" Tom asked in concern.

"Positive, but I'll talk to her again. I keep trying to convince her to see Ethan or Naomi, but she won't. Maybe she'll see you instead."

"I'm surprised she won't see them. She adores both of them. She told me so several times. She even told me that Naomi is one of the best friends she's ever had."

"I know. That's why I keep trying." Sighing heavily, Jennings sank onto a chair at a table. "I'm worried about her. If only she'd talk to somebody—or eat! She can't even do that. All she does is move the food around on the plate."

"You bring her food?" Tom repeated with an idea. "Why don't you let me do it next time?"

"If I thought it would help, I would. But I'm afraid it would do her more harm than good. I can't break my promise, Tom. She's very fragile right now."

"All right. Would you let me know if she changes her mind? I want to help if I can."

"I will. In the meantime, spread the word about the liquor. Don't let anybody give him a drop. After he's sober, maybe I can talk to him. Then maybe he can talk to Blythe."

Ethan hated being sober. It left too much time to think while he was rational. He had physically loved Blythe, but he couldn't remember how it started or how he'd treated her. Hopefully, he'd been just as gentle as he was with all other women.

If only somebody would give him rye or whiskey—or even that vile-tasting champagne—anything that would take away the grief. In truth, alcohol hadn't really taken away

the guilt; alcohol had only covered it up until he was sober again. No matter how hard he tried to control himself, the tears eventually flowed, and he would collapse on her bed in agonizing emptiness. Losing Blythe was like losing part of himself.

When Naomi came to him in his second day of sobriety, she sat at his side and comforted him while he spoke of Blythe with glowing praise.

"She was so good, Naomi. Why did she have to die? Why couldn't it have been me instead? I'm the liar—not her. And I'm the lecherous bastard. She said I was, and she was right."

"No, she wasn't. She was just upset. I suspect that she even apologized."

"That doesn't make her wrong," Ethan insisted. "You don't understand any of what I'm going through, do you."

"Some of it. I feel her loss, but she was only my friend. She was your sister."

"She was so sweet," he said, ignoring her statement, "so kind. She didn't deserve what happened."

"Remember what I said about her being pushed? I can't believe that she committed suicide. Do you think she was murdered? And if she was, we should do something about it."

"She wasn't."

"How do you know?"

"I just do. Besides, somebody on the bridge would have seen her struggling with her murderer on the observation deck. The new man didn't see a thing. He could have missed her jumping. That's what I decided when I was drunk, and it's the same thing I believe now that I'm sober—which I don't want to be. Get me some more liquor, Naomi. I'd feel a hell of a lot better."

"You'd feel better if you clean up, darling. Take a bath, shave, eat something."

"I've tried eating, and I can't. As for taking a bath, I know it won't work. I lost track of the number of times I've cleaned up in the wash basin. I scrubbed hard, too, and it doesn't help. I still feel filthy."

"A bath is different. I'll have one of the crew fill it with hot water in our suite. You can sit in it as long as you want."

"Don't bother, because I won't use it."

Naomi fell silent, causing Ethan to wonder what she was thinking. When she finally spoke again after several seconds, she did so tentatively. "Ethan—darling—Jennings told me something the day after this all started. He told me that you wanted to die. Has that changed since you sobered up?"

"I don't see much to live for," he admitted. "I was never so happy as when she was on the Goddess, and now I've lost her. Did you know that I loved her?"

"Of course, you did. She was your sister."

"No," he proclaimed in a serious tone that she couldn't misunderstand. "I *loved* her."

"Your *sister*?" she asked in shock.

Noting her expression of disbelief, Ethan realized he should tell Naomi everything, but he couldn't. She would probably never speak to him again if she knew the truth. "I don't know what to say, Naomi—except that I loved her with all my heart."

"There's something you should know, darling. I already told Blythe, and ..."

"I told you not to mention her name again!" he proclaimed.

"I'm sorry. She wanted me to tell you this almost since she heard. I'm going to have your baby, Ethan." He stared at her in shock, his dark eyes filled with tears. "Isn't it wonderful? I was beginning to think I'd *never* get pregnant, then all of a sudden I was. Now we can get married, and our game will be real."

"I can't marry you," he said, shaking his head.

"Can't marry me?" she asked, stunned.

"I can't marry any woman. I promised her that I'd be faithful for the rest of my life."

"But you won't be breaking your promise. Oh, Ethan, at least think about it. Don't say no right away. She would have *wanted* you to marry me—if she'd known that we weren't already married."

"Maybe."

"It's true. If it's a girl, we can even name it after her. Then you'll have something to remember your sister by for the rest of your life. Wouldn't you like that?"

"What if it's a boy? Come to think of it, you're probably lying to me like everybody else. You're probably not even pregnant. That's it, isn't it. You're lying so I'll marry you. It won't work, Naomi. I won't marry you. I'll stay unwed forever."

"It's the truth!" she cried in a pained voice. "You can even ask the doctor. He'll tell you."

"He'll tell me what you want him to," Ethan declared. "You probably dreamed up this whole scheme and convinced him to go along with it so I wouldn't kill myself over her."

"You can't believe that."

"I can, and I do. I don't want to see you for a while. I need time to decide if I'm going on or not. I can't kill myself with liquor, because Jennings took it all away from me. But I *can* find another way to be with her."

"No! Ethan, you can't! Please. If you won't think of me, think of the baby. Don't let it grow up being called a bastard. Blythe wouldn't like that."

"Don't say that name!" he roared. "And get out of my sight. I'll come to you when I decide what I'm going to do."

With an expression of fear, Naomi fled the cabin.

How dare she try to coerce me into marrying her! he thought. He'd already told her that their relationship was finished, so why did she suddenly decide she was pregnant? It couldn't be true. In fact, she'd practically said it herself. They'd been together eighteen months, and she hadn't gotten pregnant, because he'd been careful it wouldn't happen. It was too convenient that she was now—now that he'd fallen in love with somebody else.

Thank God, he'd never told Naomi that he loved her. Things would be even worse if he had. In his drunken stupor, he'd told Blythe that he would be faithful to her forever; and nothing had changed in his heart. He would still remain faithful. But if Naomi was honestly pregnant, something had to be done. After all, she wasn't the only one at fault. He'd been there, too.

He grabbed the metal container beside the bed and vomited into it. Going through this abrupt loss of alcohol was worse than being drunk and throwing up. At least then, he didn't care.

"How are you feeling this evening?" Jennings asked Blythe as she sat in his bed.

"Foolish," she replied with a shy smile. "I've been overreacting to all this, haven't I."

"Not as far as I'm concerned. No woman should have to go through what you did."

"I've told you often that I've overreacted but couldn't stop it. And I probably overreacted because I feel guilty about being a willing participant. I don't care if I had had too much champagne that night. I had no right to allow it to happen. I'm pretty sure I could have stopped it if I had wanted to." She gazed up at him with a frown. "I've been such a bother. I'm very sorry, too. I couldn't seem to help myself."

"You're no bother."

"Oh, but I am."

"Didn't I tell you that I think of you like a daughter?" When she nodded silently, he said, "I wouldn't feel like my daughter was a bother at a time like this, and I don't feel like you are. In fact, I feel protective—like I've been missing something all these years."

Suddenly, she wanted to know more about the captain and questioned him quietly to change the topic. "Were you gone from home a lot?"

"Most of the time. I've got six kids, but that's only because my wife and I made up for a lot of lost time whenever I was home." When Blythe bowed her head to avoid his gaze, he added, "I'm sorry, honey. I should have thought before I spoke. I shouldn't have brought back the memory of what happened that night."

"It isn't *that* memory that bothers me. *That* memory is nice—not bad like you seem to think. It's more complicated than that, anyway. He isn't only married, Jennings; his wife is pregnant, too." A new concept to that night flashed across her mind, and she stared at Jennings in shock. "Good heavens! What if that happened to me, too?"

"Is it possible?"

Blythe shrugged, hoping Jennings wouldn't see how concerned she truly was. "I don't know. My grandmother never told me anything about those things—except that it hurts. And she was right."

"Maybe I should have the doctor look at you."

"No! Then he'll know I'm here."

"Somebody's going to find out, anyway. I almost told Tom the other morning, but I didn't—because I'd promised not to. He's so worried about you, though, that I came awfully close."

"I don't care. I don't want to see Tom."

"What about Ethan? He's absolutely ..."

"No," she denied with a firmness he would be unable to deny. "Nobody."

"Naomi?"

Blythe thought about how she'd betrayed her friend, and her heart ached. How could she have been a willing partner with Ethan when she was a friend of Naomi? At last, she said, "Not even her."

"Then I'm going to tell Ethan who did this. There can't be that many married men on board who have pregnant wives."

"Don't!" she exclaimed, frantically grabbing his wrist. "Please."

"This has gone on long enough, Blythe," he said. "I'm not keeping my promise anymore. Ethan's very upset. He has to be told."

Jerking away from her, Jennings strode out of his cabin while Blythe tried to dissuade him.

"Ethan's not here," Naomi announced as she and Jennings sat down on the settee. "Are you going to talk to him about his drinking?"

"I'm going to try. Are you sure he's sober?"

"And hating every second of it."

"Good. I've got some news that's bound to make him happy."

"That's what *I* thought," Naomi said sadly, "but he wouldn't believe me. He says everybody's a liar except Blythe."

"Then I'll have to *make* him believe me. You see, Blythe isn't dead like he thinks. She's been hiding in my cabin since the night of her party."

"She's *alive*?" Naomi couldn't believe it. If Jennings managed to convince Ethan of that, she'd never get to marry him. Somehow she had to postpone that announcement until after the wedding. She would think of something to hide her fraudulent pregnancy *after* they said their vows.

"That's right," Jennings was saying as her mind returned to their conversation. "I tried to tell him several times when he was drunk, but he didn't hear me—or wouldn't listen. Maybe he will now that he's sober."

"Hearing you and believing you are two different things," Naomi advised him. "He may be sober, but he's still not in the mood to believe anybody. He's still claiming that everybody's a liar. Besides, he looks terrible, and I heard him vomiting when I left the cabin. I don't think he's going to believe anything yet."

"I think he would believe me, Naomi. He loves his sister. It's painful for him to think about her, let alone use her name."

"But she's alive. Do you know what that means?"

"It means I'm going to tell him the truth no matter what she says. And I'll *make* him believe me."

"He won't."

"He will by the time I'm done," Jennings declared. "Blythe doesn't want me to tell him, but I don't care. They need each other."

"You should respect her wishes, Jennings."

"I can't. They're too close not to want to help each other."

"Let *me* tell him," Naomi said with an unexpected idea. "He'd probably take it better. He might be so mad about you hiding her that he'll hit you. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

"Definitely not! All right. You can tell him. But don't wait too long because they're the only ones who can help each other."

As Jennings left, Naomi paced the suite. At least, she'd stopped him from saying anything. Now all she had to do was convince Ethan that he wanted to marry her. Unfortunately, that wouldn't be easy. She needed the right words. But before she could think of them, she fell asleep on the sofa.

It was already dark when Ethan made his decision. Thank God, the knocks on Blythe's cabin door had finally stopped so he could think undisturbed. Talking with the doctor had helped, too.

Still wearing only his trousers, he called on Naomi at the suite but refused to enter. He didn't dare be alone with her, for fear of losing his temper. Instead, he suggested they take a stroll along the decks. On the second level, at the same place where he'd found Blythe's torn gown, he stopped to lean against the rail.

"I did a lot of thinking after I talked to you, Naomi," he said. "I didn't even answer the door when Jennings and a couple other people came looking for me, but I did talk to the doctor. He said that it *sounds like*—and those were *his* words—you have the classic symptoms of pregnancy, but he can't be sure yet. So, I went back to her cabin to think. I didn't answer the knocks because I didn't want to be disturbed while I was making my decision."

"Which is?" she asked, her voice filled with hope.

"I'm sorry, Naomi," he announced, using his most sincere tone, "but I can't marry you. I can only support you—and the baby if there is one."

"You still don't believe me?"

"I don't know *what* to believe anymore. The only thing that I truly believe is that I lost somebody very dear to me, somebody I loved deeply."

"That's depraved, Ethan," Naomi proclaimed. "You can't love your sister that much. It's against God's Word."

"She wasn't my sister."

Naomi stared at him in shock. "I don't understand, darling. You told me that she's your half-sister, and that's the same as if she was your full sister in the eyes of God. You still can't be with her."

"No, I can't. But I promised her that I'd be faithful. I can't marry you or anybody else—not now, and maybe not ever."

"Don't you think she'd want you to be happy?"

"I know she would. But marrying you so soon after I lost her wouldn't make *me* happy. I don't think it would make her happy, either. She'd at least want me to grieve for a while."

"How can you possibly know that?"

"I spent the last couple of days reading her diaries. She wrote something when she lost her brothers. Grieving was the hardest thing she'd ever done, but it eventually made getting on with life easier. I think that's what she would want for me, too. I couldn't grieve completely if I got married right now."

"What about the baby? Are you going to abandon us?"

"Admit it, Naomi. You're not pregnant."

"I am, damn it!"

Ethan shook his head. "It doesn't really matter, Naomi. I never told you that I love you. All I've ever said was that I *need* you. I didn't even know the meaning of love until I met her. She's the woman I needed all along. Whether either of us want to admit it or not, I've never needed you like that."

"I'll kill myself—and your baby."

"Don't be melodramatic, Naomi. You're just saying you'll do it because *she* did," he said in his most soothing tone. "Contrary to how you're acting, I'm not angry with you. I probably should be, but I understand how hard this must be for you. And don't make threats that we both know you don't mean."

"But I do," she insisted. "And I'll prove it."

Without warning, she slipped over the railing and dropped into the dark water below. Ethan's shocked voice echoed in her ears. "Oh, God! Not again! Naomi!"

When she glanced up, she saw that he straddled the rail. Then the black water closed in over her. But she wasn't afraid because Ethan was coming to save her. He would rescue her and feel responsible for what had happened. Then he'd marry her just like she wanted. Although she was an excellent swimmer, she didn't move toward the surface when she kicked her legs together. Oh, no! Something was wrong.

Trying to remain calm, she kicked again. When nothing happened, panic set in. She was stuck on something! Her skirt had probably snagged on a hidden log but tugging on it did no good. The harder she tried to free herself, the more tangled she became. Dear God! Now Ethan had to find her in the dark water. But could he?

"I can't find her!" Ethan shouted to people on the deck. "For God's sake, somebody help

me!”

He disappeared back under the surface while several women ran for lanterns. Other men jumped into the water after Ethan, all of them diving and surfacing several times. Jennings arrived at the sight and called to Ethan to see what was happening. When he learned that Naomi had jumped, he started to join the search until a woman nearby grabbed his arm. Other men joined the search, leaving Ethan, already out of breath, at the surface listening to Jennings and another woman.

“It won’t do any good,” she said. “She’s been down there about fifteen minutes now. They can’t save her—only find her.”

Every time a man came to the surface, Jennings called him out of the water so they wouldn’t drown, as well. But Ethan refused to climb back aboard and angrily cursed the men who left him to search alone. He had no idea how long he was in the water, but eventually, two men dragged him onto the boat. Fighting all the way, Ethan finally collapsed against a wall in exhaustion. Sliding down to the deck floor, he rested his elbows on his knees and cradled his head in his hands.

“I tried, Jennings,” he said weakly, “but I couldn’t save her.”

“We’re anchoring here for the night. We’ll look again in the morning.”

“Good. I couldn’t bury *her*, but I’ll do my damndest to bury Naomi.”

“I know. Maybe you should go back to your suite and get some sleep. I’ll even bring you a bottle if you want.”

“It doesn’t do any good, anyway. If you need me, I’ll be in her cabin. Just because Naomi’s gone doesn’t mean I can go back to the suite.”

Unable to believe what she’d heard, Blythe stared at Jennings in shock when he told her what the commotion outside was. Naomi was dead, and Ethan was a free man again. But how long would it be before he was truly free? Grieving was an important part of losing a loved one, but she wasn’t convinced that he would be able to grieve. Most people frowned on men showing emotions. Most people thought men should be strong. And there was the requisite mourning period. At least two years for widowers.

Suddenly, her feelings didn’t matter anymore. Ethan needed someone who had suffered through the loss of loved ones as much as she had. He needed someone to console him while he grieved instead of telling him that he should be strong. When Jennings left to organize a diving party, Blythe slipped one of his shirts over her nightgown and left his cabin.

FOURTEEN

Before she could see Ethan, she needed to clean up. Chances were he wouldn't be able to sleep well that night, so she probably had plenty of time.

People she passed stared at her, but she forced a smile and pretended as though nothing was out of the ordinary. There was no telling what kind of rumors were being passed among the passengers of the River Goddess. From the looks on their faces, she had been the topic of much idle gossip since she took refuge in Jennings' cabin.

When she arrived at her cabin, she pushed down the door handle. Thank goodness, the door wasn't locked. Glancing around her, she slipped into the room, closed the door, then collapsed against it with her eyes shut. That had been the hardest walk she'd even taken.

A loud gasp across the room startled her. Opening her eyes, she saw Ethan clutching his bare chest with both hands as he stared at her, his dark eyes wide and his mouth gaping. He looked terrible! Beneath his tan, the color drained from his face; he trembled all over; his eyes rolled back as he crumpled to the floor.

"Ethan!" she screamed, rushing to kneel at his side. While she rolled him onto his back, she chastised the unconscious man. "Don't you dare die, Ethan Lucas. Danny went this way, but you can't. I don't want to lose another loved one."

On the opposite side of him, she noticed her Bible lying on the floor. It was open to the page where she and her mother had recorded the births, deaths, and marriages in the family. Beside it lay her yellow ribbon, splattered with spots of dried blood. No wonder she couldn't find it; Ethan had taken it. Reaching across him, she picked up her Bible.

In the column headed *DEATHS* across from her name, someone had written: *April 22, 18...* The date wasn't finished, and the still-wet ink was smeared where he had clung to the book. Apparently, Ethan had been recording it when she walked in. No wonder his heart had failed! He thought he was seeing her ghost.

"Angel?" he asked weakly. "Is that really you?"

Dropping the Bible, she laid her head on his chest and hugged him. "Thank You, God. You answered my prayer before even I asked it."

His arms encircled her, and his fingers sought out her hair and stroked it. This felt so good she wanted it to never stop.

"Oh, angel," he said, his deep voice cracking with emotion. "My beautiful angel."

"I was afraid your heart had stopped, Ethan—just like Danny's."

"I fainted. I tried not to, but I couldn't help it. Let me up, angel."

Rising, Blythe helped Ethan to the bed and knelt before him so they could talk facing each other. Before she spoke, she took both his hands in hers and tenderly kissed the back of each one.

"Jennings told me what happened tonight, Ethan, and I couldn't stay away any longer. You need someone who'll let you grieve, and that's me."

"You shouldn't be worried about me," he insisted. "I don't deserve it."

"Of course, you do."

Ethan shook his head. "No, I don't. In fact, you'll probably leave as soon as I tell you that

I wasn't honest with you."

"It doesn't matter now," Blythe told him.

"Yes, it does. Everything I told you was true—except one thing. I've never been married."

Blythe's heart went out to Ethan. It couldn't be good for him to act as though Naomi meant nothing to him. It was like he was denying that Naomi had ever been his wife, and that *must* be bad. He obviously wasn't accepting her death.

To help him release his emotions, she gently urged him to accept the truth. "Don't deny what's happened, Ethan. It can only make matters worse. You lost your wife tonight, and you need to accept that so you can grieve."

Slowly pulling his hands from hers, he wandered to the porthole and looked out into the night.

"Night used to be my favorite time of the day, Blythe," he announced. "I always did my best thinking then. Now I'll never see night as a haven again."

"That's understandable. You lost your wife at night."

"Naomi was not my wife," he declared as she went to stand behind him. "I only told you that so you wouldn't think badly of me. I wanted you to like me."

"I did."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe because you were honest with me."

Spinning to face her, he grasped her shoulders with such tenderness that she almost melted against him. He stared down at her, captivating her gaze. "But I *wasn't* honest, Blythe. I told you that I was a liar, and that was my one lie to you. I tried to tell you the truth once, but you said no bachelor lies about being married. After that, I didn't know how to convince you that it was true."

"It doesn't matter now, because you aren't married anymore."

This time he shouted at her. "Damn it, Blythe! I keep telling you that I never was. She was trying to get me to marry her when she jumped. I still can't believe she did something so stupid. I can't believe she drowned when she told me that she was a good swimmer."

With a soft smile, Blythe nodded and said, "That's good. Disbelief is a normal part of grieving. I couldn't believe that I'd lost my entire family, either. It won't seem like it for a while, but it will help you."

"Do you know why she did it? She said she was going have my baby, but I didn't believe her. I'd talked to Doc, and he said that the symptoms she claimed to have *could* mean she was pregnant. But he also said they could be influenza. Anyway, my point is, she couldn't prove that she was pregnant, and I wouldn't agree to what she wanted. That's why she jumped, Blythe—because I refused to marry her. I swear, Blythe, she told me she was a good swimmer, that she'd been swimming since she was a toddler. But she never came up. I don't know why. Maybe she hit her head on something."

She replaced her smile with a frown. "Now that's bad, Ethan. You mustn't blame yourself."

"I don't. I blame her jealous stupidity. And I *don't* grieve for Naomi. I know because I know all about grief. I suffered through hell when I thought you'd jumped—and that *was* my fault. If I hadn't come here that night, ..."

"I don't want to discuss that night."

"So, *you're* the bastard who did that to Blythe," Jennings accused. The couple spun to face the enraged man in the doorway. "I didn't piece it all together until this second. I should kill you for what you put her through."

"Stop it, Jennings," Blythe ordered with a maternal note in her voice. "This is no time for that discussion.

"The hell it's not!" he declared. "I didn't spend the last few days taking care of you for no reason. I care, and I want answers."

"I know," she said patiently, "and I appreciate all you did for me. But Ethan just lost his wife. He needs consolation, not a lecture."

"The man never had a wife."

"Never?" she repeated, knowing she could believe Jennings if not Ethan.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," Ethan inserted.

Blythe turned toward him, her heart tearing in two directions. On one side, she was happy to hear the news, because that meant he wasn't obligated to mourn. On the other side, she felt betrayed—again. He'd told her that he hadn't lied to her, yet the very statement was just that—another lie. How many other lies had he told her? Could she ever trust him again?

"I tried to tell you sooner, angel," he confessed. "Honest. But the words either didn't come out right—the one time they did—or they wouldn't come out at all. I didn't want you to hate me."

"Instead, you lied to me, even when you said you didn't. How many others were there?"

"On my mother's grave, Blythe. I didn't even touch *Naomi* after you caught me."

Blythe stared up at him in amazement. "What are you talking about?"

"The other women. Aren't you?"

"I'm talking about your lies. How many others were there?"

"To you, none. To everybody else, lots. I lied about one thing to everybody on board, remember? I told everybody that you were my sister."

"She's not your sister?" Jennings asked incredulously, still standing in the doorway. "But you had me convinced."

Blythe returned her gaze to Jennings, as Ethan said, "I think you should leave. We have a lot to talk about."

"If you think I'm leaving Blythe alone with you, you'd better think again."

"It's all right, Jennings," she insisted. "He's not going to try anything."

"How do you know?"

"I know," she said with finality. "I appreciate you trying to protect me, but I'll be fine."

"That's right," Ethan agreed. "I won't even touch her."

"You'd better not," Jennings warned as he left the room, "or you'll answer to me."

When they were alone, Ethan sighed and returned to the bed, dropping onto the edge of it. Blythe picked up her Bible to read what he had written in it again.

"I can't believe you thought that I would jump," she said.

"I thought I had evidence—your torn nightgown with blood on it. I found it on a railing."

"The blood wasn't from that."

"I know. Do you remember what I said about knowing all about grief?"

"Yes."

"I know I don't grieve for Naomi because I grieved for you. It isn't even close to being the same feeling."

"You felt guilty," she explained, desperately trying to believe her own words, "probably because you were unfaithful to Naomi again. I know I felt guilty about betraying her."

"You're damned right I felt guilty," he declared, "and that hasn't stopped. But guilt and grief are two different things, Blythe. I tried to drown the pain of losing you in liquor, but it

didn't work. When I finally sobered up, I felt guilty, grief-stricken, *and* sick. I'll tell you one thing, though. That bout sure cured my drinking. I don't care if I never see another drop of rye."

Blythe offered him a shy smile. "I'm glad. You know how I felt about your drinking."

"*You* sure as hell put away more than your share at your party," he intoned.

Despite her own irritation, her voice didn't change when she responded. "And I paid for it, too, didn't I."

As the fight drained from him, he rose and wandered to the washstand to stare at himself in the mirror above it. "God, I look terrible. I need to shave and take a bath. That's what your disappearance did to me."

"I don't look any better," she admitted as she stood beside him to let her eyes meet his in the mirror. "In fact, I look worse. My hair's filthy and tangled, and I haven't washed up since ... I haven't even changed my clothes since before I ripped up my other nightgown." She reached up and stroked his stubbled cheeks once. "Besides, I like your beard."

"You look beautiful to me." After a brief, uncomfortable pause, he questioned her tentatively. "Is that what happened, angel? You tore up your nightgown?"

"That's right. And that piece you found must have been the one that got caught by a breeze."

"But why? Why didn't you just throw it away?"

"I'm not sure. I was awfully upset, Ethan, and very confused. Upset, confused, and feeling guilty because I'd let a married man seduce me without trying to stop him." Even though Ethan started to interrupt her, she continued to finish her explanation. "I think I was trying to kill the memory so the guilt would go away. Everything's rather vague, but I remember asking Jennings to get rid of it. He's the one who found me on the observation deck. He took me to his cabin and held me until I cried myself to sleep. I did a lot of that between then and now."

"So did I."

"You?" she asked in shock. "But you're so strong."

"I'm not nearly as strong as I'd like to be—not where you're concerned. It hurt like hell to lose you. I was awfully drunk that night, Blythe. I'm not sure why I did it. Quite frankly, I'm not even sure how I was *able* to do it. Usually, when I'm that drunk, I can't do anything. All I know is I felt satisfied right down to my soul when I woke up. Then it was remorse when I saw the blood, and guilt when I found the material. I don't think you could have stopped me no matter how hard you tried. And I agree. You didn't try very hard—that was obvious to me even as drunk as I was. You just said something about not having done it before. You didn't even tell me to stop. The satisfaction, the blood, the guilt—those three combined weren't *half* the emotion that came out of the grief. I wanted to die, and that's exactly what I told Jennings and Naomi. I think that's why they took away my supply of liquor—to save my life. I probably would have drunk myself to death if they hadn't."

Blythe didn't want to discuss the subject anymore, so she returned to the bed. As she sank onto the edge, she watched him join her and waited until he was also seated before she spoke again. "How do you feel *now*?"

"Relieved that you're alive. Happy that I have the chance to make it up to you—and I will. But I'm still praying that someday you'll forgive me for hurting you like that."

"I was talking about Naomi. How do you feel now that she's gone?"

"Nothing like I did when I thought I'd lost you. I miss her, but that's all."

"What about the baby she might have been carrying?" Blythe asked. "Don't you feel a loss for it?"

"I can't lose something I never had—or wanted. She wanted me to marry her, but I said no."

"Why? I thought you loved her."

"I never said that—not to her. And I sure as hell never told *you* that I did. We were a couple because we looked good together. She was good for my business and my image. My passengers liked her. I found that out on her first trip with me eighteen months ago. That's why I kept her for so long. But I never felt any love for her, and I never said that I did."

"I still don't understand how you could do that."

"Do what?" he asked.

"Sleep with other women."

"To begin with, I never actually bedded any of those women, but not for a lack of trying. Something was missing from my relationship with Naomi. Hell, something was missing from every relationship I've ever had. I wanted to find it."

"Did you?"

"Not until that night."

"What night?"

"You know what night—the night I came here—the night of your party."

"I don't want to talk about that night, Ethan," she said. "So would you please stop bringing it up?"

"We *have* to talk about it, angel."

"No. We can forget that it ever happened. We can go on with our lives and pretend ..."

"That's exactly it," he interrupted. "We can pretend. The fact is that it *did* happen, and there's not a damn thing we can do to change it. There's nothing I want to do more, but it's not possible. We have to talk about it, to clear the air."

"Why?"

"Because I have a lot of feelings in me that I don't understand."

"I don't," she lied. "I know exactly how I feel about you."

Ethan studied her, an expression of concern etched on his face. "You don't hate me, do you? No, that's not possible. If you did, you wouldn't be here trying to console me."

"I didn't come here to console you. I came to clean up and change into clean clothes. You happened to be here. Which reminds me, why *are* you here?"

"I couldn't go back to Naomi, and I couldn't stay in my office because of Angel's portrait. With you gone, this was the only vacant cabin on the Goddess."

"How convenient."

"Just as convenient as Naomi's pregnancy. That's why I didn't believe her. I made an important decision once I sobered up, Blythe. I decided to take up where you left off."

"Now what are you talking about?"

"Your search for your grandfather. I'm going to find him; and if he's dead, I'm going to find Angel. There *has* to be some kind of blood relationship."

The word blood brought a flash of memory of that night and sent an involuntary shudder coursing through her body. Ethan slipped his arm around her shoulders, but she scrambled from his embrace, staring down at him anxiously as she stood before the bed. Because she had betrayed Naomi and bedded Ethan, Naomi was dead. For some reason, she couldn't bear the thought of lying in his arms again.

"I'm sorry, angel," he said softly. "I know why you reacted like that, but I was trying to comfort you."

"I don't want your comfort."

"Don't you?" he asked, rising. "You were awfully eager to hold me after I fainted."

"That was different. I thought you were dying. Now I know you're quite healthy—maybe *too* healthy. You told Jennings you wouldn't touch me."

"All right. I won't touch you again."

"You'd better not."

"Can we get on with this?"

"Just don't touch me." She knew if he did, she would give in to his desires—and to *her* desires.

"Look, Blythe," he said, "I'm going to tell you the truth. But you need to understand something first. When I did it, it was only because I didn't think I'd ever see you again. I thought you were dead—I believed it with all my heart."

"What did you do?" she asked suspiciously.

"I read your diaries."

Blythe narrowed her gaze in rage. How dare he look into her private belongings, let alone read her journals. The audacity of him to do that! Just as she started to chastise him, he continued.

"Please understand, angel. I wanted to know you better. I wanted to help you. You were gone, and I thought I could make up for what I'd done by taking over your search. I could see in your diaries how desperate you were to find this missing part of your life, and I wanted to do it for you."

"Why? If you thought I was dead, what possible difference could it have made to me?"

"I don't know. All I know is that I had to do it. Maybe somewhere in my heart I thought I could give you the message when I died, and then you'd forgive me."

"What did Naomi think of this?" she asked.

"I didn't tell her. I wasn't going back to her, anyway. Only her funeral is keeping her tied to me. Once we find her, ... Oh, no!"

"What's the matter?"

"There's not a vacant cabin on the boat, remember? Where the hell am I going to put her body until we can get to the next city? I can't put it in the suite because I have to sleep somewhere now that you're back. I know! I'll put her in Jennings' cabin."

"You can't!" she exclaimed in shock. "That's his home while he's on board. Once she's been buried, he'll have to go back there."

"I don't have a choice. I've got a doctor in case of an emergency, but he doesn't have any beds. He takes care of my passengers in their cabins. Jennings will have to sleep in my suite for a couple of nights."

"I won't let you do that to him, Ethan," Blythe insisted. "He's been good to me, and that's a terrible thing to even think about. What about putting her in your office? You said you aren't using it anymore, anyway."

"I have to now that I know you're alive. I didn't do a damn thing while I thought you were gone. Now I have to catch up on everything I didn't do."

"Can't it wait a couple more days?"

"It's already waited too long. Wait a minute! I know what to do. I'll put her in here. You can stay in Jennings' cabin, and he can stay with me. It's perfect."

"It's awful!" she exclaimed in shock. "I'd never be able to set foot in this cabin again. I'd have to stay in Jennings', and I've already been too much of a problem for him. I won't put him out of his living quarters."

The look on Ethan's face told her more than she needed to know. He was thinking about them staying together in his suite. And that certainly would solve the problem. But was it wise? Before he could bring it up, though, she said, "I don't know, Ethan. Do you hon-

estly think it's a wise idea under the circumstances?"

"Do I think what is a wise idea?"

"Us living in the same suite. That's what you were thinking, isn't it?"

"Yes, but how did you know?"

"Your expression said it all. Do you think it's a good idea?"

"I can't think of anything else. Everybody already believes we're related, so it would seem natural to them."

"That's what I thought, too," she admitted, "but I'm worried about what might happen once the door's locked for the night."

"Don't. I wasn't bedding Naomi, so I won't miss it. I'll sleep on the settee just like I did with her."

"If I agree to this, Ethan—and I'm not saying I will—you have to take the bed. You're too big for that sofa, and I'd be much more comfortable on it."

"I won't argue. I always got cramps sleeping there."

"We would also need some rules."

"We don't need rules, angel. I know I did wrong. God, how I know! I *still* feel dirty because of it. And I don't think that feeling's going to go away for a long, long time."

Blythe smiled for a moment, then continued in a solemn tone. "In that case, we'll try it until a cabin is vacated. But if anything happens, I'll go to Jennings' cabin, and he can stay with you."

"Fine. Let's get your things out of here tonight. That way we won't have to do it after Naomi's been found."

While they packed her valises, they did so in silence until they were finished. Only then did Ethan speak, waiting until she already had her hand on the door handle to halt her with his words. "Blythe?"

"Yes?" she asked, turning to look up at him.

"I swear I'll never hurt you like that again."

Although she smiled up at him shyly, she didn't respond. She couldn't. Her heart was bursting with happiness and beating so relentlessly it blocked any words that may have come to her mind. He hadn't proclaimed his love, but the tone of his voice did. And it filled her with joy. She believed him, too. Maybe one day she would even be able to trust him again.

FIFTEEN

About noon the next day, Ethan watched with his arm draped over Blythe's shoulders as two men pulled Naomi from the Mohawk River. Unable to watch, she buried her face against his chest. Naomi had become a good friend in the short time they'd been acquainted, and Blythe felt her loss deep in her soul. A moment later Ethan slid his other arm around her, as well.

"Why don't you go back to the suite?" he suggested.

"No," she denied. "I promised to stand beside you through this, and I will."

"You don't need to. I'll be fine. You probably shouldn't see this, anyway." He motioned to one of his crew, who joined them. "Take my sister to my suite. I don't want her seeing this. She's been with me through the waiting, and that's enough."

"Aye, sir," the young deckhand agreed as he laid his hand on her lower back.

An unexpected wave of repulsion swept over her, and she jerked away from him, exclaiming frantically, "Don't do that." She glanced up at Ethan and saw his stunned expression then returned her gaze to the crewman, continuing more calmly. "I'll go, but don't touch me."

Many people stared at Blythe in astonishment, but nobody spoke until she led the crewman away from the crowd that had gathered. Once they were gone, whispering spread among the spectators. They were no longer interested in the events concerning Naomi. A living woman's predicament was much more interesting and had far more potential for gossip.

Furious that these people would use Blythe in such a manner, Ethan shouted at them. "Leave my sister alone! She had a terrible experience after her party, and she doesn't need you upsetting her more."

"She asked for it!" a vaguely familiar female voice said.

"The hell she did! Unlike all of you, I've talked to her about it. What happened was unprovoked, and it was in no way her fault."

A man holding Naomi in his arms approached Ethan and asked, "Where should I put her, Mr. Lucas?"

"Follow me," Ethan said. "I'll show you."

After they put Naomi in Blythe's bed, Ethan studied her sorrowfully while he covered her with the blood-stained quilt. He was sad that she was gone, but he could never grieve for her like he had Blythe. He simply hadn't felt that strong of an attachment to her.

"We were lucky that she jumped," the man told Ethan.

"Lucky?" Ethan repeated in shock. He shot his irate gaze to the man. Just because he didn't love Naomi didn't mean that he would let anybody talk about her like that. "How can you say such a thing?"

"She was caught in some branches only about eight feet down—and close to the boat."

Ethan's concern surfaced in an instant. "Could you see very well down there?"

"Not bad. There weren't any other paddle wheelers stirring the water. There are a lot

of branches down there.”

“Positions?”

“After we found her, I checked everywhere. One on the starboard bow will do some damage. We can’t miss it.”

Toying with his mustache, Ethan contemplated the news for a few seconds. “I’ll see if it can be moved. Anything else?”

“A couple on the port side, but we might be able to miss them if we can get rid of the one on the bow.”

“I don’t want even a scratch on this vessel,” Ethan insisted. “*Might* isn’t good enough for me. I don’t take chances with my passengers’ lives. Do you know who Captain Jennings is?”

The worker nodded.

“Have him meet me at my suite. I’m going to check on my sister.”

“I heard something happened to her the other night, and now this. How’s she feeling?”

A tension headache throbbed behind Ethan’s eyes, and he applied pressure to them with his fingertips. He should have known he would get a headache; it happened every time his passengers were endangered. But this time his problems were complicated by his concern for Blythe. With a heavy sigh, he dropped his right hand to his side but dragged his left hand over his cheek to toy with his mustache. “*I thought* she was doing fine, but now I’m not convinced. That’s why I want to see her.”

“Would you please tell her that if there’s anything I can do, I’d like to help?”

“What’s your name?” Ethan asked, even though he knew he wouldn’t deliver the message. How could he and still hold on to her?

“John Preston.”

“I’ll tell her, Preston.”

After locking Blythe’s cabin, Ethan went to his suite while Preston went in search of Jennings. Despite his concern for Blythe and the questions he had, he soon learned that he would have to wait for answers. The moment he entered the room she raced to embrace him.

When he closed the door, she flew into his arms. He hugged her in return as she asked, “Are you all right, Ethan?”

“Except for a headache, I’m fine.”

“I believe you now—that Naomi wasn’t your wife. But it must still be hard for you. You were together for eighteen months. You must have had *some* feelings for her. If you want to cry, I wouldn’t think less of you.”

He stroked her hair from crown to the nape of her neck. Oh, how wonderful it felt to have him be so tender with her. It almost made her want to lie in his arms again. Although she had no reason to be worried about betraying Naomi again, Blythe’s emotions were so twisted together she couldn’t untangle them.

“I don’t have time for tears now, angel,” he explained. “The Goddess is in danger.”

Stunned by his confession, she stared up at him. “Danger? Does that mean you could lose everything?”

“Down to the last paddle on the wheel if I’m not careful.”

“I don’t pretend to know anything about riverboats, but if there’s anything I can do, tell me.”

“How are you with children?” he asked.

"I love them," she replied curiously. "Why?"

"I'm putting you in charge of seeing to their safety. No matter how you feel about me, I trust you implicitly. I know you'll protect them."

"What's happening, Ethan?"

"I'll explain when Jennings gets here. Until he does, I'll tell you what I want you to do."

"All right."

"As soon as we're done, go to my office and get the passenger roster from my desk. The children are all listed by age so they can be found quickly in an emergency." While he spoke, he withdrew some keys from his trouser pocket and placed them in her hand. "The roster's in the second desk drawer with a large ring of keys that are all etched with the cabin numbers. First, get every child on deck by the lifeboats—their mothers, too. And there's a widower traveling alone with two children. They're small, and I want you to take charge of them."

"Is there anything else?"

"Yes. As soon as all the children are on deck, put your two in another woman's care for a while. Then make sure that nobody's left inside. I want everybody on deck—everybody. I don't care if they're sick or well. Get them all out of the cabins. Then get back to the children."

"How much time do I have?"

At that moment there was a knock at the door. Without asking who it was, Ethan told Jennings to come in.

"Naomi drowned in eight feet of water," Ethan explained as Jennings entered and closed the door behind him. "She was caught on some branches. Apparently, her death saved our passengers. There's a snag at the starboard bow and two port. We can't miss the one at the bow, but we might miss the others if we can get rid of the bow branch. I'm going down to see exactly what we're dealing with, then I'm going to arrange three work crews with every man who can swim."

"Why three?" Jennings asked.

"I won't endanger my passengers, Jennings," Ethan declared. "You know that. I want all those branches either moved or broken apart."

While the men discussed the problem and its possible solutions, Blythe studied Ethan. Was this really the same man who had only grunted at her when she first spoke to him? Was it the same one who could infuriate her with his actions? This man was sincerely concerned about everybody on his riverboat, and he was doing everything possible to insure their safety.

"It's important that we avoid all snags," he was saying as Blythe's mind returned to the conversation. "I don't want one board on the Goddess weakened. She's got a long trip ahead of her. She's going to New Orleans this time, but we'll discuss that later. Let's get to work."

"Wait a minute, Ethan," Blythe inserted. "You didn't tell me how much time I have."

"Take as much as you need," he said as all three left the suite, "and be absolutely *sure* nobody's inside. Let me know when you're done, so we can start work."

"Where will you be?" she asked.

"The lowest deck—bow. And did I tell you to send any men you meet there, too?"

"No, but I will."

"Let's move. We're already behind schedule."

It took Blythe about forty-five minutes to gather all the passengers on deck. After getting another mother to watch the two children in her care, Blythe went to the bow. When she arrived, he was climbing over the railing, his body glistening with water and his trou-

sers clinging to his muscular legs. He directed Jennings away from the other men, Blythe made her way toward them, straining to see Ethan. For the first time, she realized what a magnificent physique he had. And even under the circumstances, she wanted to see more of it.

As he explained the gravity of the situation to Jennings, Ethan saw Blythe standing off to the side and extended his arm in her direction. "Come here, angel."

Blythe joined the friends, and Ethan casually took her hand in his. The expression on his face told her they were in dire straits if something wasn't done soon. Now she was concerned for *his* safety.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"You look so worried," she replied. "How serious is it?"

"It's no branch on the bow, that's for sure. It's a fallen tree, but I can't see how it got there. It might be a sabotage attempt by pirates, so we'll have to watch carefully. But even that's not the important problem. It's partially under the boat, so we can't use the derrick to move it. If Naomi hadn't jumped, we'd *all* be under water now."

"God has strange ways of protecting His children, doesn't He?"

"What about the other two problems?" Jennings asked.

"Port side? One of them's no problem at all, and the other's good sized branch, but I think three or four men could get it to the bank. I'm still trying to understand how that tree got there. I'm going to have to put a rope around the thing to move it. We'll need men in the water *and* on shore to even budge that monster." Gazing down at Blythe, he squeezed her hand reassuringly. She glanced down at their hands then met his stare. "It will take a long time—at least two hours. And I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out to be longer. I'm pretty sure some branches are embedded in the mud. But we'll do our best to get it out of the way without causing any damage. Not just for us, either—for the boats that follow us, too."

"If you're going to move it," Blythe asked, "why do you want everybody on deck?"

"In case of an accident. There's a big branch about a foot from the bow. If we miscalculate down there, it could rip a huge hole in the Goddess. I want everybody ready to get in the lifeboats as soon as Jennings or I send the word. And I want you and those children you're taking care of off the Goddess first. I'm putting their father on shore, so they won't be orphaned."

"You said if *we* miscalculate," she said slowly. "Does that mean what I think it does?"

Jennings announced that he would go tell the men what Ethan had learned and left them alone as Ethan led Blythe down some steps. "Let's go below decks. We need to talk in private."

When Ethan reached the bottom step, Blythe remained two steps up so she could gaze directly at him. As he collapsed wearily against the wall, she considered questioning him, but she hesitated. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear his answers. In fact, she *feared* what he would say. To her relief, he spoke before she could draw up the courage to ask.

"I can't let my passengers or crew take chances, Blythe," he explained, running his thumbs over the backs of her hands. "Most of them have families. Besides, it's my riverboat, so it's *my* responsibility."

"It's dangerous, isn't it," she observed in a quiet tone.

"Yes. I've got to dig under it."

"Don't do it all yourself, Ethan," she begged. "Please. Let somebody without a family help you. There are plenty on your crew who are single."

"I'm sorry, angel, but I can't endanger others. I've never been much of a church-goer, but I can tell that you are. God will listen to you. Would you pray for me—and the rest of

the underwater crew?"

She smiled up at him. "You know I will. You didn't even have to ask."

"Thank you. I only have two more things to say before I go. Get as many blankets together as you can. That water's really cold."

"Is it all right if I get Betsy and Jenny to help me? I don't think I can carry very many at a time."

"Good idea." He paused as though not wanting to admit the truth. Then he continued in an anxious tone. "This won't be easy for you to hear, angel, but I still have to say it. God might not think I'm worth saving, and He'd be right after some of the things I've done in my life—especially lately. In case He decides ... I want you to know that I love you. I hope that someday you'll be able to forgive me."

Before she could respond, he released her and started toward the steps. Acting instinctively, she blocked his exit. When he halted and stared at her in astonishment, she tenderly grasped his head to press her lips against his.

But it lasted only a moment. When Blythe pulled away, he grabbed her around the chest and crushed her against his wet body. His mouth sought out hers for a hungry kiss filled with desperation. She leaned toward him, but her feet didn't leave the step. It was the first time they'd kissed on the same level.

Obviously, he was worried that this would be their last kiss, and the thought caused her to throw her arms around his neck. If she could grant him this little pleasure before he faced death, it was the least she could do.

When he released her, he spoke in a husky voice. "Thank you, angel. I wouldn't have done that if you hadn't kissed me first, and I appreciated it more than I could ever explain."

"I don't know why," she admitted, her eyes clouding with tears, "but I did, too." Throwing her arms around his neck again, she hugged him tightly while he stroked her hair. "Oh, Ethan! Please be careful."

"I will. And if anything does happen to me? Always remember that I love you. And I've never told another woman that—except my mother, of course."

Blythe was in a quandary. Although she felt she should repeat his words, she was afraid to. What if he survived, as she truly hoped? She would feel obligated to show that she meant her words, and she didn't think she could. But if he did die—God forbid—he would never know how she felt. Could she live with the guilt if that happened? The answer to that question was obvious.

"I love ..." she started.

Laying three fingertips on her lips, Ethan interrupted her. "Don't say it, Blythe. They would only be words meant to give me something to live for, and I already have that because you're alive. I know you don't love me—you *couldn't* after what I did. I only hope that I live through this so I can start over and prove my love in a better way. I have to go now. You find Betsy and Jenny and get those blankets. Oh, and towels. My crews are going to have to work in shifts it's so cold down there."

"All right," she agreed as she pushed away from him.

"And one more thing. I wasn't going to say this, but I think I should. If I don't come through this alive, there's something for you in the top drawer of my desk. Jennings can explain it if you have any questions, but let's hope that you never have to read it."

"I'll pray for you."

He smiled. "I'm glad. God will listen to someone as wonderful and good and innocent as you."

With those words, he hurried up the steps. But Blythe remained where she was,

stunned by the passion in his words. Since there was so little time to gather the items he wanted, though, she couldn't stay and contemplate what he'd said. She had to find Betsy and Jenny before she could take time to think. Locating the sisters on the lower port deck, Blythe rushed up to them.

"Excuse me, please," she said. "Ethan asked me to get all the blankets and towels I can, as *soon* as I can. I know I caused problems for both of you, but I don't have any female friends on board and the men are all busy. I need help to collect them, and Ethan said I could ask you two. Would you help me?"

"After the way he treated us?" Jenny asked angrily. "Why should we do anything for him?"

"I think we should, Jenny," Betsy disagreed. "He's trying to save everybody's life."

"I suppose he is. All right. We'll help. What should we do?"

"I'm going to the crews' quarters," Blythe explained. "You each take one of the upper decks, and I'll meet you here to collect everything and take them where they're needed. The passengers' cabins are all unlocked—except mine. That's where Naomi is. Take all of the blankets to the men on the bow. They'll probably know what to do with them. In case I don't see you again, thank you for helping."

Without waiting, Blythe hurried away to gather the necessities. Twenty minutes later, she'd completed her task and returned to the children in her charge. As she hugged the three-year-old girl to her, she prayed desperately that God would protect Ethan while he in turned protected his passengers.

Minutes dragged by as Blythe's anxiety increased. She prayed and consoled the frightened little girl. They were the only two things holding her together. After another twenty agonizing minutes, there was a severe jolt to the boat. Women and children screamed. With a shocked gasp, Blythe stared toward the bow, fighting the urge to run and see if Ethan was all right. But she couldn't. She had to stay with the women and children to supervise the lifeboat loading if necessary.

"Do you want to go see if your brother's all right?" a lady near Blythe asked.

"I'd love to, but I can't. He wants me to take care of Helen and Bobby. And I have to see that ..."

"Leave the children with me. I can see how worried you are."

"But I ..."

"Go," the woman ordered gently as she took Helen.

Blythe smiled, thanked the woman, and rushed toward the front of the boat. Her heart beat relentlessly in her chest as she prayed that he was safe.

At the bow, Ethan burst through the surface of the canal and gasped for breath. As he did, he shouted to Jennings between pants. "Find Blythe! Tell her ... I'm fine. So's the Goddess. Not even a crack. So far, God's ... with us."

And he inhaled deeply before he disappeared into the water again. A couple seconds later Blythe pushed her way through the men warming up in blankets.

"Let me through," she pleaded. "Please. I have to know how Ethan is."

"Blythe!" Jennings called when he heard her voice. "Over here!"

He stood by the railing, and Blythe wended her way to him. "How's Ethan?"

"Fine. He was just up for air. The Goddess is fine, so keep everybody aboard for now."

"That was quite a jolt. What happened?"

"He didn't say, but everything's fine. You don't need to worry."

Frowning, Blythe shook her head. "I can't help it. I *care* about him."

While they talked, several men surfaced for air then went back down. When Ethan

came up again, Jennings pointed to the water. "There he is now, and you can see that he's fine. Go back to the lifeboats and try to relax. I'll send word if anything happens."

Once Blythe returned to the women and children, she broke into song. Hymns had always given her strength, and she needed that more now than she ever had. To her amazement, other women joined in. Apparently, they were comforted, too. Soon everyone on board was singing. For a long time, they sang—hymns and popular songs—over and over—constantly making music until a woman shouted out that the men on the bank were moving backward. The songs grew louder to spur the men to work harder. Three and a half hours after work started Ethan and two other men splashed onto the bank, heaving the last of the submerged tree onto the ground. A tumultuous cheer rose from not only the River Goddess but two riverboats that had to stop behind her.

Ethan and his crew had saved scores of people, and no one was as proud as Blythe. The man who had initially frightened her had also shown her such a great sensitivity. Her heart nearly burst with a mixture of happiness and pride. And when passengers told her how grateful they were to him, she beamed her agreement.

SIXTEEN

With the emergency over, the men returned to the riverboat. Those who had wives and families greeted them with happy, although weary, hugs. As Blythe held Ethan close, he glanced around and saw Travers watching them. Even though Ethan believed he could stay this way forever, they couldn't if they wanted to keep portraying themselves as siblings. As reluctant as he was to do so, he needed to stop the embrace.

Pushing her away after only seconds, he said, "Go greet Travers now." Then he turned and strode away from her.

"Why?" she asked.

He stopped and spun to face her. Was it possible that she honestly didn't know the reason? Or was there more to her question that she hadn't voiced? If that were the case, maybe there was hope for a future with her. No, he couldn't think that way. He couldn't get his hopes up only to be disappointed again.

"Because he's your suitor," he explained.

"But you're family," she insisted. "I'd rather be with my only relative right now."

Without speaking, he raised his arm toward her, and she hurried to take his hand. Once they were away from the thick crowd, Ethan admitted, "I'm glad you wanted to be with me, angel, but I have work to do."

"You should rest first. Jennings can take care of anything that needs to be done."

"It's my responsibility to see that everybody's safe. We'll be leaving soon, and I need to find somebody to man the derrick. I can't take chances now that I know there are snags in the river. Then I need to check the boilers and have two others do the same thing. I want us moving again within the hour."

"I'll get Jennings to take care of those things," she insisted, pulling him toward the steps. "You hardly slept last night. And don't try to deny it, because I heard you pacing. You worked hard this afternoon, too. If I have to, I'll force you to bed."

"Blythe, please," he protested. "I don't have time."

"I'm *making* the time for you," she insisted in a maternal tone. "You've been down in that cold water for hours, and you're going to get pneumonia if you don't rest."

All he needed to do to resist her was stop, but he followed Blythe to the top deck, complaining all the way to his suite. Apparently, he was powerless to combat her determination to mother him.

"You're overreacting to this, angel," he said. "I'm a big boy. I'll be perfectly fine."

"That's right. You will—as soon as you get rest and some hot food in you. But first you sleep," she said as she opened the suite door. "Now get in that bedroom and take off those wet trousers."

"Blythe, ..."

"If you don't," she threatened, "I'll do it for you."

"You would not." Shutting the door, she joined Ethan in the middle of the sitting room. When she began to unbuckle his belt, he grabbed her wrists, exclaiming, "No! If you do that, I'll go to bed—but not alone. I won't hurt you like that again."

"Then get in that bedroom this second. Get out of those trousers and get into your bed. You have five minutes before I come in to see if you've done as you were told."

"You know, angel?" he asked merrily. "You're going to make a hell of a mother someday."

"You're giving me plenty of practice. Now go!"

When Ethan went into the other room, Blythe smiled. Being a mother was something she'd wanted all her life, and maybe it would happen before long. It didn't even matter if her child had a father or not. Nobody knew her where she was going, so she could claim to be a widow.

Ethan may have told her that he loved her, but she refused to put her faith in him marrying her if she was pregnant. After all, Naomi had jumped because he wouldn't marry her. And Blythe could foresee no change in his attitude. Yet for some reason, it didn't matter. If she could have a child, that was all she really wanted.

Five minutes later she rapped softly on the bedroom door. Hearing no response, she peeked in and saw that he was already asleep. Thank goodness, he'd followed her orders. He needed his rest, and she was glad he'd given in to the exhaustion.

Blythe closed the door with a slight click of the latch then hurried from the suite in search of Jennings. As she looked, she asked crew members along the way if they had seen him and finally learned that he was on the bridge. Despite her reluctance to bother him, she knew she must.

"Jennings?" she asked tentatively from the doorway. "Could I speak with you for a couple of minutes?"

"Of course," he agreed. "I sent a deckhand to find Ethan. You haven't seen him since he got back on the Goddess, have you?"

"That's why I'm here," she explained. "I made him go to bed. He wants to be moving again within the hour."

"I'll get three men to check the boilers."

"And the derrick. Ethan wants someone to man it. I know most of the crew, so if you'll tell me who can do it, I'll find him."

"Do you know Jack Smithers?" When she nodded, Jennings said, "He's the best derrick operator we have, so get him—and Paul Mathews as a replacement."

"All right. After that I'm going around to the passengers and make sure they're all right. Then I'm going to get all the wet blankets together and hang them on the railings. Maybe at least some of them will dry before tonight. Should I do anything else?"

"Get some rest yourself."

"I will later. Right now, I'm too tense. I need to do something."

"All right." As she started to leave, he added, "Would you come down to my cabin before you go to bed tonight? I want to talk about something personal when I'm off duty."

"What time?"

"About eleven? Or is that too late?"

"I'll be there. If you think of anything else I should do, tell me. I'll do whatever I can to help."

After finding Smithers and Mathews, Blythe got the passenger roster from Ethan's drawer, where she'd put it before collecting blankets. When she went from cabin to cabin, she learned that three people had been slightly injured when the tree hit the riverboat and sent them to the doctor for treatment. As she visited the various cabins, she gathered the wet blankets and hung them on both the upper and middle railings. The more she could

dry, the more people who would be warm that night. Finally, she returned to Ethan's office to replace the roster, in which she had noted the passengers who had been injured and their complaints. She would wait until the next day to ask the doctor what his diagnosis for each was.

Collapsing into his desk chair, she released a long, slow sigh. At last, she could relax for a few minutes. Then across the room she noticed the severely marred portrait of Angel. What had happened to it? Had it been done when the sternwheeler lurched during the work that afternoon? Or before?

Wandering to the painting, she picked some shards of glass from it. No bottle of rye could have done that much damage in an accident. Whatever happened had been done intentionally. Maybe Naomi had been so angry that she sneaked into Ethan's office and threw the bottle against it. Until she could ask Ethan, she would do what she could to repair the damage. Hopefully, the portrait hadn't been completely destroyed.

Blythe carefully lifted the painting from the wall and laid it on the floor. After getting Ethan's wastebasket, she knelt before the portrait and picked the remaining shards of glass from the canvass. When that was done, she went to the kitchen for some water. Hopefully, she could wash some of the rye away without smearing the paint. As she was leaving, Tom approached her.

"I see you finally tore yourself away from your brother," he said.

"What do you mean?" she asked, truly stunned by his attitude.

"You didn't even have time for me after all the work I did this afternoon," he complained. "And it wasn't easy. You couldn't even give me a hug, much less a kiss like other men got."

"I was busy."

"With your brother. I saw."

"Good heavens, Tom! He did more work than all you of men put together, and you know it. I wanted to see that he got into a warm bed."

"Alone?"

With a startled gasp, she lashed out to slap him, but he caught her wrist before she could. Instead, she chastised him. "How dare you say something like that! It was rude and insulting, and I demand an apology."

"I'm sorry," he said flatly, "but it's a logical question. I can see the way you look at each other. If I didn't know better, I'd say that you two are lovers."

"Why are you saying these things?" she demanded. "Why do you keep insulting my brother and me?"

"I'm not sure that he's actually your brother. And I'm *almost* positive that you're the reason Naomi jumped."

"I am not," she denied, jerking her arm from him. "She jumped for another reason, so leave Ethan and me alone. Now I've got to get back to work. You should work, too."

"What work do *you* have to do?" he asked.

"That's none of your business. I'm Ethan's sister, and I'm helping him. You just follow orders."

Taking a pan of water and a rag back to the office, she worked on the painting until she felt she could do no more without destroying it. Maybe he would never be able to display it in a prominent location again, but at least she had saved it to some extent. Now she needed to ask him if he knew what happened to it.

By the time she finished, it was nearly seven o'clock. When she returned the pan and rag to the kitchen, she put together a tray of food to feed Ethan and herself in the suite. The

more rest he got, the less the chance that he would get sick from the cold water.

Upon her arrival, she discovered he was still asleep. As badly as she wanted to let him stay in bed, he should wake up so he would be able to sleep that night, as well. Putting the tray on the table in the sitting room, she returned to the bedroom and sank down on the edge of the bed.

He looked so innocent lying there on his stomach with one arm draped over a pillow and the other hand tucked under his head. It was almost like he was a little boy who'd lost his favorite toy—almost. But his bare back was definitely that of a man. Even in his sleep, his muscles protruded as though he was hard at work. She reached out tentatively to run her fingers over his upper arms. When he didn't move, she dared a stronger caress, squeezing his hardness as she slid her hand from his elbow to his shoulder.

When he rolled onto his back with a groan, Blythe jerked her hand away for fear that he had awakened. But he just lay there, not moving except to breathe. Releasing a sigh of relief, she stared at his chest as it rose and fell rhythmically. Suddenly, the memory of how good it felt against her naked breasts flashed across her mind. She'd loved the feel of the fuzziness, but she hadn't realized it until that moment. Now she wanted to feel it again!

Using both hands, she trailed her fingertips lightly through the dark hair to relive the memory. And she did! She could feel his hair against her breasts, tickling her nipples enticingly. All of a sudden she wanted more. She wanted to feel more of him, to find out exactly what his body was like—hard, yes, but anything else? And how did it taste? How did it smell?

Instinct overruled her moral upbringing, and she lay her head on his chest and inhaled deeply. She giggled as the hair tickled her nose. Then she kissed his chest. When he still didn't move, she kissed him again—this time on his shoulder—then slid her tongue to the junction of his neck, on to his throat, and up to the small cleft on his chin.

His fingers slipped into her hair, his hands grasped her head firmly while he brought her mouth to his. She stretched out beside him and draped her leg over the lower part of his body, covered by a quilt. This time when her heart raced at the contact of his tongue to hers, she felt a new excitement. A burning in her loins made her grind against him in a desperate attempt to douse the fire. Without warning, he broke the kiss and pushed her head away from his, gazing into her eyes.

"I'm sorry, angel," he whispered, "but I have to stop. I have to preserve the little bit of self-respect I have, because there sure as hell isn't much left after that night."

She stared down at him, her heart breaking by his rejection. "You don't want me?"

"It's worse than that. I need you more than any other woman I've ever known. But I can't *have* you."

"Why not?" she asked in a wounded tone.

"I wouldn't feel right about it."

"But you worked so hard today. I was so proud of you. It's the least I can do to prove how much I appreciate what you did for everybody."

"Is that all it would be?" he asked irritably. "Appreciation? Hell! I don't want that, angel. I want you to need me as much as I do you."

"Oh" was all she could say. As much as she wanted to assure him that she did, she couldn't. She simply didn't *know* if she needed him—even a little bit. She didn't even know what it was like to need somebody, and that wasn't something she should lie about. It sounded too important.

"Do I smell food?" he asked with a grin. When she nodded, he pushed her off and sat up in the bed. "You should get out of here so I can get up. I don't think you'd want to see that

I'm not wearing anything except the covers."

Her face heated with embarrassment, and Blythe left the room, closing the door behind her. Ethan was right. She wasn't ready to see what he looked like nude. Sitting down at the table, she waited until he sat down opposite her. They said grace and began eating before she questioned him hesitantly. "Ethan? What happened to the portrait of Angel."

"I suppose you were bound to find out about it sooner or later," he explained. "It happened the morning after *that* night."

"How?" she asked.

"I was angry with myself, and I didn't think I deserved to have that portrait in my life anymore. I threw a full bottle of rye at it. I hate myself for what I did, Blythe. I felt so dirty that I kept washing myself, but it didn't help. Nothing would take away that filthy feeling."

"I see. Do you know that you've been neglecting something since you found out when my birthday was?"

"What?" he asked, stunned by her abrupt change of conversation.

"My poker lessons."

"You don't need them anymore. I'm going to make up to you for what I did by supporting your search for the man who wrote that letter in your box. I know it's not much, but I can't think of anything else."

"You don't need to make up for anything," she said with a shy smile.

"I certainly do. I treated you abominably. I hurt you and made you cry. And I didn't take your feelings into consideration. I was drunk, Blythe, and I was determined to find what was missing from my life. I did, too."

"I still want to learn to play poker. It seems like fun."

Ethan shook his head. "No woman of mine is going to play poker."

"I am. And if you don't teach me more, I'm going to learn it the hard way. I'm going to the gambling parlor tonight and start playing right away."

"The hell you are!" he raged. "You stay away from that place! You're not ready to play. You'll lose what little money you have left. Besides, you don't need money now. *I'm* going to support you."

"But I'm not going to let you."

"Damn it, Blythe! Don't do this. It's the only way I can prove that I know I did wrong. I treated you worse than a prostitute, and I have to show you that I know better."

From across the table, Blythe stared at him. Her gaze didn't leave his dark eyes for even a moment until the fight drained out of them again. Her defense of staring him down always worked, and she was glad. It was the only thing she could depend on when he got angry, because she could never beat him in a physical altercation. He'd already proven that.

"One of these days, Blythe Bouvier," he announced with a grin, "that's not going to work."

"What's not going to work?"

"You staring me down—and you know it. But it did work this time. All right. I'll teach you poker, but don't you dare go to the gambling parlor until I say you're ready. Is that clear?"

"It's a compromise, anyway."

"Now all we have to do is talk about what happened that night."

"No. I won't talk about that, Ethan—not with you and not with anybody else."

"We have to."

"We do not," she declared as she glared at him. "You were drunk, and so was I. But what happened—the way it happened. Oh, all right. I'll say one thing, and then I'll never tell

you anything else about that night. Yes, I was scared, and yes, you hurt me. But that doesn't mean it would have been any different if you'd done it another way. There was nothing you could do to stop the pain."

"But I didn't have to scare you."

"I didn't say you did." That was the truth, too. Ethan hadn't frightened her. She was just frightened about what was about to happen because she didn't know what to expect. But she wasn't about to tell *him* that. "Now I won't talk about it anymore—ever. Let's finish our meal and get on to my poker lessons."

As she took a bite of her meat, he prompted her on gently. "Why don't you explain your reaction to my crewman's touch today."

"I didn't want him to touch me," she said, "and I made my feelings known. That's all it was. I won't hear another word on *that* subject, either."

"All right," he snapped, "but that won't change what's happening in your heart and mind. Someday all that's going to erupt. It's as much of an obsession for you as my wanting to discuss it is for me."

"That remains to be seen," she declared

"What did you want to talk about?" Blythe asked as she sat down on the edge of Jennings' bed. "Ethan was furious that I was coming here at this hour."

"That doesn't surprise me," Jennings admitted, dropping onto a wooden chair to face her. "He's probably in love with you. I highly doubt that he trusts me to be alone with you right now."

"He did tell me that he loves me, but I thought it was because he felt like he had to, because of what happened."

"That's what I want to talk about."

"Like I told Ethan, I won't do it."

"Then let's discuss your relationship with Ethan," he suggested. "I have a feeling there's more between you two than your secret. I already know that you're not siblings. What I'm trying to say is that I think you two are in love. Maybe you should get married."

"Married!" she repeated in shock. "How can you say that?"

"He owes it to you, Blythe."

"Do you honestly think I'm going to marry somebody simply because *you* think he owes it to me? Even if he believed the same thing, I wouldn't agree to a wedding. He doesn't want to be a husband, anyway. Why do you think Naomi jumped?"

"I don't know. I thought they had a fight."

"They did. He told her that he wouldn't marry her. That's supposed to give me faith in him as a husband? Good heavens! He couldn't even be faithful to Naomi. Why should I expect more than that?"

"Because he loves you."

"Wait a minute!" she exclaimed. "You're trying to *force* a wedding, aren't you?"

"You're damned right I am," Jennings declared. "He should support you for the rest of his life after what he did to you."

"Don't I have a right to an opinion about this?"

"Not as far as I'm concerned. The only reason I asked you to come here is so you'd know what I was doing. After the preacher in the next town buries Naomi, I'm going to have him marry you and Ethan."

"I won't say the vows—and I doubt Ethan will, either."

"What happens if you're pregnant? How are you going to support a baby? Lucas owes you, and he owes that child."

"A woman doesn't have to be married to have a baby," Blythe reminded him. "Besides, I can tell people that I'm a widow. Nobody knows me where I'm going, so they'll never know the difference. Besides, I won't let my baby have a father who doesn't want it. Ethan doesn't want children, and I won't give him the chance to tell me to my face."

"Would you be reasonable? You can *make* him marry you. He can give you everything—a big house, nice clothes, jewelry that costs a fortune. You wouldn't even have to do anything for it—just marry the man. You'd be taken care of for life."

"But he couldn't give me the one thing I do want," Blythe said.

"What's that?"

"A husband who can settle down. Do you honestly think that he could stay faithful to someone he married for convenience? He was a philanderer with Naomi, yet you still want me to believe that he could be faithful to me. I refuse to marry a man who needs other women in his life. And before you say anything, I don't care *what* Ethan owes me."

"You're making a big mistake," Jennings warned as Blythe hurried out of his cabin and slammed the door behind her.

SEVENTEEN

Ethan paced his office as he waited for Jennings to arrive. He'd summoned his friend because he had to talk to somebody who would talk back. Angel couldn't do that. After hours of one-sided conversation, he was no closer to a solution. If anybody could tell him what he should do, it was Jennings.

When the captain finally got to the office, he asked what the emergency was, to which Ethan replied, "My sanity."

"What do you mean?" Jennings questioned as he sat down on a chair.

Leaning against his desk, Ethan toyed with his mustache and thrust his hand into his pocket where he carried Blythe's yellow ribbon. Since it had given him solace early in their friendship, he'd assumed it would now, too. Unfortunately, rubbing the velvet didn't relieve his stress anymore.

"We'll dock about ten tomorrow morning."

"Ah. This is about Naomi."

"Not completely. I know what to do about her. I'm going to find a preacher and have her buried in the church cemetery. And Blythe suggested that I have the preacher distribute her clothes among the needy."

Jennings nodded in agreement. "That's a good idea. What about her jewelry?"

"I don't know yet," Ethan admitted as he shook his head. "I thought about giving it all to Blythe, but I don't want her to get the wrong idea."

"What idea is that?"

"I don't know how to explain it. That's one reason I can't decide what to do. What would she think of me if I gave her jewelry I'd originally given to another woman? If a woman gave me something she'd given to another man first, I'd be furious. I'd feel like I was second best. And I *never* want Blythe to feel that way, because she isn't."

"You could sell it," Jennings suggested.

Ethan sighed in distress. "At a loss, and I don't want to do that. Besides, I *want* Blythe to have the jewelry. She deserves it after what I did. But I can't tell her, or she'll think I'm trying to buy her forgiveness."

"Are you sure you're not?"

"No," Ethan insisted, "I truly want her to have it—more than almost anything. Even if things were perfect between us, I would think she deserved it. But how can I make her understand that?"

"Tell her what you told me."

"I don't know," he said sadly as he withdrew the ribbon. He dragged it through his fingers, again and again, as though he drew comfort from the action. If Jennings could feel the pain in his heart he would suspect the truth. His life had fallen apart since he met Blythe, and no amount of handling that ribbon would ease the agony. "There's more, too."

When Ethan didn't continue, Jennings prompted, "Such as?"

"I should have the preacher marry us."

"That's true."

Ethan shot his astonished gaze to his friend. "You agree?"

"Of course."

"But she's so sweet and innocent," Ethan said. "She doesn't deserve somebody like me."

"More to the point, you don't deserve somebody like her."

"I don't understand. You just said we should get married, and now you're saying that I don't deserve her. It doesn't make sense."

"It makes perfect sense. You owe it to Blythe. You should give her everything she'll ever want for the rest of her life."

"I know," Ethan admitted, "and I know I should tell her. But she doesn't love me. How can I suggest marriage?"

"I should let you learn this the hard way," Jennings said as Ethan paced again, "but I don't have the heart. Blythe wouldn't marry you even if you asked. She already told me so."

Startled, Ethan spun to face Jennings. "When did you talk to her about this? And why?"

"Last night. If she hadn't been so sure of herself, I was going to talk to you tonight. I was going to force you if I had to. But she won't have you because of your ... debauchery."

"That's why I didn't say anything to her. Why did you talk to her about it?"

"I didn't want her to end up where all your other mistresses have ended up. You treated them all like ladies, gave them all jewelry and clothes, then threw them away like last week's scraps. They all said you were a gentle and caring lover, but you still broke their hearts. Why couldn't you have treated Blythe the same way? Why did you have to be so rough?"

"Rough?" he exclaimed in shock. "Is that what she told you? If she did, it was a lie. I was just as gentle, just as caring with her as I was the other women—more so. How the hell was I supposed to know she'd never done it before? She certainly *acted* like she had at her party. And when I found out she hadn't, I wanted to die—especially when I thought she was dead."

"In a way, I wish you had," Jennings snapped. "She wouldn't be sleeping with you now if you were dead."

"She's not sleeping with me. She's sleeping on the sofa."

"And you expect me to believe that? Knowing the kind of man you are?"

"I've changed," Ethan said.

"And I'm the King of England," Jennings replied sarcastically. "You don't know the meaning of the word."

"I did. I found something with Blythe that I've never had before. I found a satisfaction so complete that I don't need other women."

"How long do you think that will last?"

"For the rest of my life, I hope."

"What if you marry Blythe then find out that satisfaction has disappeared? What would happen to her?"

"That does worry me, of course," Ethan admitted, "but I honestly don't think it would happen. What I found with her is more than I believed possible. Don't you understand, Jennings? She's given me something that I never want to lose."

"So, you want to marry her."

"If you know a better way to keep that feeling, say so, because marriage scares the hell out of me. If I can avoid it, ..."

"Then you *don't* want to marry her."

"Yes, I do. I love the feeling she gives me."

"But do you love Blythe? I mean truly love her."

"That's what I told her," he announced. "When I was drunk, I felt it while she danced with other men. When I was even drunker—and I have only a vague memory of that night—I told her. I told her again yesterday, too—when I was facing death. But I haven't told her when I'm sober and safe."

"Why not?"

Ethan wandered to Angel's portrait and studied it. How many times had he told Angel that he loved her while thinking of Blythe? And it was so easy. He simply opened his mouth, and the words burst forth. But whenever he'd tried to tell Blythe the night before, the words stuck in his throat.

"I don't know," he finally admitted. "I just can't do it."

"Maybe it's because you know it would be another lie. You've told her one right after the other all along, haven't you."

"No! I swear it. I've been honest with her all along, Jennings—except about being married."

"Blythe's like a daughter to me," Jennings explained, "and I don't want to see her hurt. But as my friend, there's something you should know. I don't think Blythe would marry you even if you did tell her that you love her. She said she'd rather raise a child alone than have a man like you for a husband."

"A child?" Ethan repeated numbly. "God, I didn't even think about that. Is she pregnant?"

"She has no idea. All her grandmother ever told her was that it hurt. And *you* proved her right."

Ceasing all movement, Ethan stared at Jennings in astonishment. "Didn't you tell her that it isn't always like that?"

"It's not my place to tell her."

"What do you mean? You said that you think of her like a daughter. Wouldn't a father tell his daughter something like that?"

"In our family, that's the mother's job. I talked with my sons. I don't know what to say to a girl—something Blythe's not anymore, I might add. She's a woman, and I sure as hell can't discuss something that intimate with a woman."

"Maybe I should say something," Ethan contemplated aloud.

"Have you gone *mad*? She'll know that I told you what she said, then she might never talk to me again."

"I won't mention this conversation. I'm definitely going to ask her to marry me, too. That way ..."

"... if she's pregnant, right?" When Ethan nodded, Jennings shook his head. "She won't have you. She doesn't want a husband who can't be faithful. If you did get up the courage to ask her, you'd only be disappointed. Don't say anything—at least, not for a while. Maybe someday she'll change her mind, but it won't be soon."

Blythe couldn't believe the number of people who attended Naomi's funeral at the church. Although the riverboat had to cast off before a grave could be dug, the passengers and crew went into town wearing their most conservative clothes. She herself had dressed in her only black dress, and how she hated it! It was the same one she'd worn to both Ben's and Dan's funerals, as well as two of her uncles' and one of her aunt's. In fact, it was the only one she'd saved; but she wasn't sure why. All she knew was that she thought she should

have one on the trip just in case she needed it.

After the short service, Blythe stood by Ethan as he accepted condolences from the other mourners. He handled the words of comfort well, even though he had to pretend that Naomi had been his wife. That was the hardest part for Blythe—pretending that she was sorry for Ethan. In her heart, she was thrilled that he didn't need to go through the traditional mourning period. She was secretly glad that Naomi was no longer part of his life.

When the last of the guests left, Ethan turned to the preacher and asked that he wait for a few minutes. Then he pulled Blythe away toward the door where they wouldn't be overheard.

"What is it?" she asked curiously.

"I'm going to do the right thing for the first time in my life," he answered. "I'm going to marry you—right now."

"No!" she denied, not wanting to but knowing she must so he could preserve his mourning widower image.

"Yes. We have the preacher, and we can still get the witnesses. All we have to do is step outside and ask the passengers and crew to come back. We're getting married."

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

Blythe's heart ached. If he'd said that he loved her, she might have broken down and said yes. But he hadn't. He only wanted to marry her because he dictated it. No man had ever dictated anything to her, and neither would Ethan Lucas.

"I don't care what you say," she said defiantly. "I won't marry you—even if it didn't make you look bad."

"What do you mean by that? How would I look bad by setting things right for you?"

"Your passengers think you and Naomi were married. They think you and I are siblings. How would it look if you had a service for her then turned around and married me, somebody you claim is your half-sister? Then everybody would know you've been lying all along. And everybody would probably think that I caused her death."

"It isn't me you're worried about looking bad," he accused. "You're worried about your *own* image. That's always the way it's been, isn't it—the sweet, innocent sister of a man who would cheat on his wife. Everybody believes somebody like you, don't they?"

"You don't," she snapped in a quiet tone. "You called me a liar when I told the truth."

"When the hell did I do that?"

"Don't swear in God's house. I don't care what you do outside, but don't you *dare* swear in this or any other church."

"Then answer my question."

"You know when. That night."

In his expression, Blythe saw the anger drain from him. "That night? Do you mean ..."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Then why did you mention it?" he demanded. "You tell me what I said right now, Blythe, because I don't remember much about that night."

"You said I lied when I told you I'd never done it before. But I told the truth, just like I always do."

"That's why we should get married. I can't think of any other way to make it up to you."

"Maybe I don't want you to. Maybe I want you to leave me alone."

When Ethan's dark eyes drooped downward in sorrow, Blythe hated herself for saying such a thing. She didn't want him to leave her alone, so why had she told him that she did? The answer was actually very easy. He'd hurt her by not telling her that he loved her, and

she wanted to hurt him back. If she'd learned anything about Ethan in their short time together, it was exactly which words he would least like to hear.

"Do you honestly mean that?" he asked.

"In a way, yes; but in another way, no. I want to be your friend, not your wife. I won't marry a man who can't be faithful, and you've already proven you can't confine your ... escapades to one woman."

"I'll admit that there was a time I felt that way."

"Are you saying that's changed?"

"Yes, and you're the one who changed it."

Studying his expression, she asked, "Was there ever a time you were faithful to Naomi?"

"Of course," he admitted. "In the beginning, I didn't need other women. Things were new and exciting then."

"How long did it take those things to get old and dull?"

"A couple of weeks, maybe. Why?"

"Because *now* you could honestly tell me that you'd be faithful if I married you. But what would happen to me in a couple of weeks—when the excitement is gone? That would probably happen, too, because I didn't particularly like what we did."

Deep in her heart, Blythe knew that was a lie, but she refused to retract her words. Ethan deserved to be hurt and disappointed, because he hadn't said the words she desperately wanted to hear at this moment—I love you.

Ethan stared at her in disbelief. She *didn't like* what they did. She *didn't like* lying in his arms, having him love her as he had loved no other woman. But he couldn't let her see the agony in his heart. He had to hide it from her, and the easiest way to do that was to deny her words.

Drawing up his courage with a deep breath, he said, "That's because it was your first time. Things will be different next time. I promise."

"Maybe I don't want to try again to see if you're right. And maybe I don't want to try again—only to find out that you lied to me yet again."

With a heavy sigh of tentative relief, he tenderly grasped her hands and rubbed his thumbs over the soft skin on the backs of them. "In other words, you don't trust me. At least, that explains why you rejected my proposal. But where does it leave us?"

"Still friends, I hope," she said.

"That's not what I mean. You said that you can't go back to your cabin. Where are you going if we're not married?"

"No place. I'll stay in your suite with the same sleeping arrangements—unless you don't want me there."

"I don't like the sleeping arrangements, but I don't I have a choice. You won't marry me, and I want you to stay. We may as well tell the preacher that we won't be needing him after all. Then we should get back to the Goddess."

That night after dinner Ethan and Blythe again sat down to poker lessons. This time she insisted that they actually play a game instead of simply dealing the cards to see what turned up. After all, the night before she'd proven that she could distinguish a good hand from a bad one. He'd even admitted that she was adept at deciding when to draw and when

to stay.

But more lessons were in order. Ethan insisted he still had to teach her the most important moves in the game before she could sit down at a table. Blythe was good at poker, too. She loved the game almost as much as Ethan did. It was almost as though gambling was in her blood.

For two hours, Blythe played the cards well, beating Ethan hand after hand. Then suddenly everything turned. But she understood. That happened in the game. Not every hand was good. Letting matters go for about a half an hour without complaint, she grew increasingly suspicious. It wasn't the look he had in his nearly black eyes, because he still studied her with interest as he always did. It was the way he moved.

"Are you getting tired of playing?" she asked.

"Are you serious?" he asked with a laugh. "I'd only now be starting to get rich if we were playing for money. Why do you ask?"

"I just wondered." Changing the subject, she asked, "Did you hear all the praise you got after that tree was moved? The passengers think the world of you now."

"I'd rather have *you* think the world of me."

"Do we have to discuss that again? I'm having enough trouble concentrating on ..." Then she caught it—that subtle motion of his fingers. One second he took a card from the top of the deck like he should; the next, he took it from the bottom. Enraged by his actions, she jumped to her feet and pushed the table over on him. "You cheat!"

Instead of losing his temper, Ethan grinned and set the table upright. Then he picked up the cards that had fluttered to the floor. "Would I do something like that to my favorite lady?"

"Yes! I *saw* you, Ethan Lucas, so don't deny it. You were dealing from the bottom of the deck. Cheating's almost as bad as lying. My father used to tell me that it's the same thing with a different spelling."

"Do you know something, angel? You're good."

Suspicious, she narrowed her eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing derogatory. I was paying you a compliment."

"It didn't sound like one."

"It was," he said as he rounded the table to caress her shoulders.

"Don't do that," she demanded, shrugging out of his hold. "I'm furious with you. You were supposed to be teaching me to win at poker. What will it be tomorrow night? Are you going to suggest that we play for money, then rob me?"

"Believe it or not, that was part of tonight's lesson, and you were definitely good. You caught me the second time I tried it."

"I did?" she asked with a note of pride in her voice. "The second time?"

"That's right." This time when he grasped her shoulders, she didn't pull away but let him rub his thumbs over her neck. She loved the feel of his taunting her skin and, beyond her control, she wished he would touch her more intimately again. Instead, he continued this small caress. "I didn't even think you were paying attention; and that's good, because if I didn't suspect you're watching that closely, nobody else will."

"Did you honestly do it as a lesson, Ethan?" she asked suspiciously. "You're not just saying that to get out of trouble again, are you?"

"If I were in trouble, I wouldn't be holding you like this."

"You're awfully sure of yourself."

"Not with you, I'm not. But I am sure of you. For instance, I knew you wouldn't marry me, but I had to try. I wanted you to know that I was willing to accept responsibility."

Her anger returned in an instant, and she pushed away from him with her hands on his chest. Furious, she lashed out at him, but he grabbed her right wrist before it made contact with his cheek.

"Why you ...?" She tried to slap him with her left hand, but he grabbed that wrist, too, as she demanded, "Is *that* all it was? Responsibility? Wasn't there *anything* else?"

"Of course, there was. I need you."

"I see. You lost Naomi, so you need another woman to make you look good. Since you felt guilty about that night, I was the obvious choice. How noble of you."

"That's not it at all. I also love ..."

"Don't you dare say that, Ethan. I'm not interested in any proclamation of love—especially not from you. I don't believe you mean it."

"You believed me the last time."

"When you were getting ready to risk your life? You had nothing to lose then. Now you think you have to say it again. But you don't have to tell me something that isn't true just because you think I'll leave if you don't. I'm not going anywhere."

"Nothing I can say will change your mind, will it."

"Absolutely nothing."

"Then maybe this will."

To her surprise, he drew her against him again and slid his arms around her, holding her securely without being forceful. At the same time, his mouth captured hers. But this kiss was different. It wasn't filled with hungry desire; it was filled with a sweetness that set her body aflame. And that fire spread slowly, not rapidly like the others he'd created in her. To show him how much she liked this embrace, she returned his hold and let her tongue taunt his lips. When she did, he pulled back his head to stare down at her with a mixture of desire and sorrow in his dark eyes.

"Do you remember when we were together?" he asked tentatively.

"Yes."

"Do you remember the pain?"

"I don't want to, but yes. I can't forget it."

"I know I frightened you that night. I never should have come to you when I was drunk, when I couldn't control my lust. But I have to know something, angel. Other than the pain that couldn't be helped, did I hurt you?"

"Other than that?" she repeated, not really knowing how to answer his question. If she told him the truth, he might get the wrong idea. If she lied, he might be so hurt that he would never kiss her again. Unfortunately, she had to answer the only way that would give her peace—no matter what the consequences. "No, Ethan. Other than that, you were very tender."

"Then remember something, angel."

When he strode to the bedroom door, she asked, "Remember what?"

"It will never hurt like that again. I'm going to change my clothes and go to the gambling parlor. I need to make some money before I take you on in a betting game. You're too good for me."

"I like poker," she said, "and I plan to win a lot of money playing the game."

"Just don't take all of *mine*," he returned with a grin. "I have a search to finance."

EIGHTEEN

Blythe was so tired that she didn't hear Ethan come back in the middle of the night, but she did hear the frantic knock on the door the next morning. Grumbling as she wrapped the blanket around her, she went to answer it. Outside stood one of the crewmen and a female passenger.

"May I help you?" she asked groggily.

"I'm sorry to wake you up, Miss Bouvier," the crewman announced, "but Mr. Jennings sent us here. Somebody stole Mrs. Richardson's jewelry."

The haziness of sleep escaped, and Blythe became alert in an instant. "*What?* Are you sure that you didn't misplace them, Mrs. Richardson?"

"Positive," she replied. "I didn't have much—a gold locket and some pearls. I kept them in a small box. I dropped the box this morning, and the lid fell off. That's when I learned that they were gone."

"I assume you went through all of your belongings to be sure."

"So did my husband."

"All right. I'll wake up my brother, and we'll find out what happened. What cabin are you in? He might want to talk to you."

"Twenty-one."

"We'll get to the bottom of this as soon as possible, Mrs. Richardson." Blythe started to close the door then stopped. "I almost forgot. When do you remember seeing them last?"

"On your birthday. I wore my pearls to the party."

"All right. It had to have been sometime between then and now. I'm sure Ethan will know what to do. We'll probably meet you at your cabin soon. Why don't you try to relax and wait for us there?"

"All right. And thank you, Miss Bouvier."

"Don't thank us until we find your jewels. Now if you'll excuse me, the sooner I get dressed, the sooner that will happen."

Closing the door, Blythe leaned against it. How could somebody have gotten into the Richardsons' cabin when Ethan kept his extra keys locked in his desk? Obviously, the Richardsons had left their cabin unlocked despite the note of caution Ethan had posted in each room, declaring that he was not responsible for lost or stolen articles when left in unlocked, unattended cabins. Had other cabins been robbed? Had hers?

Blythe raced to the dresser in the bedroom where she stored her clothes and frantically dug through the top drawer until she found the green velvet box. Her hands trembled as she stared at the container. Did she really need to open the box? Instinct told her that her necklace was missing, but she didn't want to know if she was right. If she put the box back, she could keep the illusion that her most prized possession was still where it belonged. Then again, if she didn't look and it was gone, she would probably never see it again. And if that happened, she would never forgive herself for her stupidity.

Blythe held her breath while she slowly flipped back the hinged lid. The box was empty! She cried out in agony, her worst fears confirmed. "No! Ethan!"

Behind her, he bolted from the bed to her side, exclaiming, "Oh, my God! Blythe!"

Enfolding her in his arms, Ethan pulled her back against his bare chest. Blythe couldn't help but find comfort in this position as he held her for several minutes, rocking on his feet while she shuddered in his embrace. She clung to his arms until her shaking subsided.

Without releasing her, he asked. "What happened, angel?"

But she didn't respond. Her mind was on the predicament she'd made for herself. She should have let Ethan put Naomi's body in Jennings' cabin so she could have stayed in hers. She never should have suggested this arrangement. She could never fall in love with a man she knew would be unfaithful, and living in his suite would only encourage him. The best thing to do was leave, but she couldn't bring herself to tell him that's what she wanted. She couldn't even bring herself to speak because her mind always became muddled in Ethan's arms.

If only Solange had taken the riverboat trip with her! Then she wouldn't be in this predicament. Suddenly, she remembered her mission for Mrs. Richardson and reluctantly pushed away from Ethan. With her heart breaking over her loss, she stared up at him as she picked up the empty box and showed it to her.

Struggling to control her distress, she said, "My necklace is gone. And I wouldn't have known for a long time if Mrs. Richardson hadn't come to the door a few minutes ago. Her jewelry was stolen, too."

"Stolen?" he repeated in a daze. "Nothing's ever been stolen on my boat. How could this have happened?"

"I don't know. We always keep this suite locked, and I always kept mine locked. What are we going to do?"

"To begin with, get dressed. I'm going to talk with the Richardsons and get to the bottom of this."

"That's what I thought you'd say, so I told her to wait for us in her cabin. I'll wait until you leave then get dressed myself."

"You'll get your clothes and dress in the sitting room while I shave and dress in here. I want you with me throughout this investigation. After all, you've had something stolen, too."

"All right." Blythe collected some clothes as she suggested, "Why don't you see if you still have Naomi's jewelry? That was probably stolen, too. And I have a feeling that everybody on board lost something."

"Why do you say that?"

"Intuition. Have you decided what you're going to do with her jewelry?"

"If it's not here," he said, taking out the box which held the jewels, "I don't have to worry about it." He lifted the lid to find it empty. "Just as you suspected, I don't have to worry about it."

"It's not there?"

He replaced the lid then tossed the box onto his unmade bed. "No. I suppose I'll just accept my losses."

"Don't you want to find it?" she asked in disbelief. "That was a lot of jewelry, Ethan. It must have cost a fortune. I don't think even you can afford that kind of loss."

Ethan smiled at her. "I can't, but I'll take it. I didn't know what to do with them, anyway."

"The least you could do," she insisted in a maternal tone, "is find them and sell them to a jeweler in Chicago. Maybe then you could get most of your money back."

Taking her clothes into the sitting room, Blythe closed the bedroom door behind her. If

she had any courage, she would ask Ethan to prove his love by giving her all of Naomi's jewelry. She adored every piece Naomi had shown her and would love to have them for herself. Unfortunately, she couldn't bring herself to ask for them. After all, Ethan had invested a lot of money in those jewels and had given them to a woman he thought he looked good with, a woman who was his mistress. He most likely wanted to rid himself of all the memories of Naomi—just as he had rid himself of all her clothes. Blythe had no right to force him into keeping them. Besides, it wasn't her place to tell him what to do with the jewels.

Once Blythe and Ethan were dressed, they went directly to cabin twenty-one, not even stopping for breakfast. As they questioned the Richardsons, Blythe suddenly realized how the theft had been accomplished. With a gasp, she made her announcement.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed. "I can't believe it, Ethan. I think I know who did this—Jenny Carter."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because of the way she acted the other day."

"What other day?" he prompted, growing impatient with her slow confession.

"The day you moved the tree. Don't you remember? You told me to see that everybody was on deck, then you told me to get all the blankets. I asked Jenny and Betsy to help me, remember? Jenny didn't want to because of what you'd done to her, but Betsy was sweet about it. She said they should help because you were trying to save the people on the boat. I told them that all the cabins were unlocked so they could get the blankets."

"Oh, my God," he groaned. "She probably took everything. If she did, I'm going to lose the River Goddess, because I'll have to pay back all my passengers."

"Not necessarily. We'll see if we can find it all. I'm not going to let you lose your business, Ethan—not after everything you've done for me. Come on. We have to talk to Jenny. We only made one stop since then. I doubt she took the jewelry off the boat, either, because she didn't have anything big enough to carry it all in. Besides, she probably wants to sell it, and that was a small town. Nobody could have paid as much money for the jewels as she would have wanted."

"You're right. If you'll excuse us, Mrs. Richardson, we should leave. I'll do my best to find your jewelry." Ethan smiled down at Blythe, adding, "I don't think my little sister will have it any other way."

The first place they looked for Jenny and Betsy Carter was in their cabin, which Ethan led Blythe to without a word. Even if he'd wanted to conceal his indiscretion, he knew it would be useless. She already knew that he'd been with both women.

Beside him, Blythe remained equally silent. She hated the thought of going to the cabin where Ethan had been with other women, but she didn't have a choice. He wanted her with him during every step of his investigation. If she was going to make it through his interrogation of Jenny, she had to remember that she'd already had her revenge.

To the couple's amazement, Jenny and Betsy were both in their cabin. When the sisters balked at admitting the couple, Ethan insisted.

"What do you want?" Jenny asked as Ethan closed the door. "To show your sister exactly what kind of bastard you are?"

"She already knows," Ethan admitted. "We're here on official business. Blythe tells me that you two helped her gather blankets for the divers the other day. Exactly which cabins did you get them from?"

"Everywhere but the crew's quarters," Betsy answered socially. "Why?"

"Because some things are missing."

"And you think we took them," Jenny inserted, her voice filled with venom. "We wouldn't touch anything that didn't belong to us. Besides, I didn't even want to help. Betsy was the one who said we should."

"Which is precisely why Blythe suspects you might be involved in the disappearance of some very valuable jewelry."

"Why, you little bi..."

Stepping in front of Blythe when Jenny started toward her, Ethan grabbed Jenny's upper arm. "Don't call my sister names. She's trying to solve this mystery without getting the whole damned boat involved. Did you take the jewels?"

"I sure as hell didn't! And I resent you even thinking such a thing."

"Then you don't mind us searching your cabin."

"You're damned right I do. Stay out of our belongings. We weren't the only people on board who could have taken them, you know."

"That's right, Ethan," Betsy said. "Lucille Palmer asked us what we were doing."

"That's right! She did!" Jenny exclaimed. "And there were two other women with her. What were their names? Oh, hell, it doesn't matter. I don't think either one of them would have stolen any jewelry. But Lucille might have. She was awfully angry about you deceiving us."

"You were angry, too," Blythe reminded her. "You swore you'd get even with him. What better way than to take all the jewelry on board during the confusion of that day? You probably knew Ethan would have to sell his sternwheeler to repay all the losses."

"But I'm not angry anymore," Jenny proclaimed. "If you weren't living with him, I'd even come to his cabin to console him. I'd give him the kind of loving a married man is used to, too—not the kind he gets from a sister."

"Only a *prostituée* would do something like that!" Blythe countered angrily.

"I know French, but even if I didn't, I could tell what you said. I'm not a prostitute."

"You are!" Without realizing that she was capable of such a thing, Blythe dove around Ethan and pushed Jenny to the floor. Her temper was hotter than it had ever been. "And you're worse! You would take advantage of a recently widowed man to satisfy your own needs."

At first Ethan couldn't react. He knew that Blythe could get physical when she was angry, but he never dreamed that she would attack anybody other than him. When Blythe pounced on the woman on the floor, he knew he was wrong. Blythe could probably beat Jenny, too, even though Jenny was bigger. Suddenly, he realized what was happening wasn't a dream. He grabbed Blythe around the waist and lifted her off Jenny before she could hit the woman a second time.

"Put me down!" Blythe demanded.

"Not until you promise not to hit her again," he said.

"Why do you care if I hit somebody? You would have beaten Mr. Moody to a pulp."

"You're only making matters worse. Stop fighting right now."

"Oh, all right. But make her promise not to seduce you again."

Knowing he needed to calm Blythe, he vowed, "She couldn't seduce me if she wanted to. I wouldn't respond. I'm not interested in her anymore, Blythe. Now will you settle down so I can let you go?"

"I *said* I would." When she was standing on the floor again, Blythe glared down at Jenny. Ethan followed her gaze with his and saw that Jenny's left eye was already red and puffy from the blow Blythe had delivered.

"You'd better get up, Jenny," Blythe declared. "I might not let Ethan stop me next time, and it's too tempting when I see you lying there."

"I'll get even for this," Jenny said, pushing herself off the floor.

"You'll leave my sister alone," Ethan declared. "And, Blythe, you leave Jenny alone. Is that clear?"

"You can't tell me what to do," Blythe insisted.

"Excuse me," Betsy said, her voice still calm after all the commotion, "but a fight isn't going to solve anything. I think you'd better talk to Lucille, too. Jenny did tell her what we were doing. And if I remember right, she also told her that all the cabin doors were unlocked."

"Why would she do a stupid thing like that?" Blythe demanded.

"It came out in the conversation. I'm sure Jenny didn't mean any harm."

"All right. We'll visit her, but we'll be back if I'm not satisfied that she's the culprit. Come on, Ethan. Let's leave before I do something I'll regret." Outside, Ethan started to question Blythe about her actions. But as she did every time she was uncomfortable with a conversation, she said, "I don't want to talk about it. Let's go see if Jenny was lying about Mrs. Palmer."

"Before we do," he said, "there's something you should know."

"That she was another one of your women? I learned of your unfaithfulness when I overheard her and Jenny bragging about their escapades with you."

"I don't know what they said, but I do know that I couldn't please myself with them. Thank God, that part of my life's behind me," he said. "Hopefully, I can convince you that it will never happen again."

But his light mood didn't change her seriousness. "There's only one way you could do that. By being faithful to someone who won't give herself to you willingly."

Ethan smiled. "In that case, my dear, I won't have any trouble convincing you. But how long will this woman make me wait?"

"More than a couple of weeks."

"Then I should know by the time we get to Chicago."

"Maybe. Let's see if Mrs. Palmer has the jewelry in her cabin. I'm warning you, though," she added with only a slight pause. "If she does, I won't necessarily believe that she took it. I still think Jenny did."

"You'll never stop blaming her, will you?"

"Not until I prove that she did it," Blythe insisted, "or somebody else proves that she didn't."

In Lucille Palmer's cabin, Blythe questioned her before Ethan could speak. "Were you angry when you learned that Ethan lied to you about being married?"

"Of course," Lucille admitted with a casual shrug. "No woman likes to be lied to. But I wasn't mad for long. I realized that I wasn't any better than he was."

"Why do you say that?"

"I may be running away from my husband, but I'm still married."

"Then you weren't angry enough to get revenge?"

"Of course not. Even though we didn't consummate anything, he was the best lover I've ever had. I wouldn't do anything to hurt him."

"That's what I thought. Would you mind if we look around your cabin? Some of the pas-

sengers had some things stolen, and one of them pointed a finger at you.”

“Go ahead, but there’s nothing here.”

“Thank you.”

Much to Lucille’s surprise, Blythe uncovered a large valise filled with valuable trinkets—her necklace, Mrs. Richardson’s two items, all of Naomi’s, and many other pieces of men’s and women’s jewelry. Also in the valise was the locked box in which Blythe kept her most prized possessions—those that had belonged to her relatives. When Ethan recognized it, he was enraged.

“What the hell are you doing with my sister’s personal effects?” he demanded. “There isn’t even anything valuable in there. It’s personal things she kept through the years.”

“But I didn’t *take* this,” Lucille declared. “I don’t even know how it got in my valise, let alone in my cabin.”

“I know you don’t,” Blythe said. “I think it was put here by somebody who wanted to hurt Ethan.”

“Or me.”

“I doubt that, Mrs. Palmer. You see, I think I know who did it. If my instincts are right, Jenny Carter stole it when we stopped to get the snag out of the riverboat’s way.”

Lucille shook her head. “That’s impossible. Jenny was with me almost the entire time.”

“She was?” Blythe asked in amazement. “But I was so sure. Who were the other ladies with you?”

“Paulette Anthony and Hannah Mandle, but if you suspect either of them, you’re wrong again. The four of us were together. You can even ask them.”

Ethan’s tone took on a suspicious note. “The four of you? There weren’t five of you?”

“Betsy was with us for a while, but she went to talk to somebody else she knew. She came back later.”

“That’s it!” Blythe exclaimed. “No wonder she was so willing to help that day. No wonder she was so eager to tell us about Mrs. Palmer. I didn’t realize it before, because I was so angry with Jenny, but now I suspect that *she* did it.”

“And *you’re* too eager to convict any woman I’d been intimate with during this trip,” Ethan said, his voice filled with exasperation.

Angered by his tone, Blythe let her anger show as she countered, “Did I try to convict Mrs. Palmer? Did I try to convict Betsy before this? Give me enough credit to know what I’m doing, Ethan. I solved a few mysteries with my friend Solange in France, so I’m not grasping at anything that’s convenient.”

“But Betsy’s so quiet,” he observed.

“So completely unassuming, that you’d never suspect her. Right?”

“Right,” he agreed. Turning to Lucille, he said, “It seems as though my sister knows what she’s doing. I’m sorry about everything that happened while you were on board. I hope it didn’t ruin your trip.”

“I couldn’t have had a more hospitable host,” she said with a grin. “And if your sister will excuse me, I’d like to say that I’ve never had a more caring lover, either. I hope she’s lucky enough to find a man like you.”

Ethan grinned at Blythe. “So do I. In fact, I hope she finds somebody *exactly* like me. Now, if you’ll take your possessions out of your valise, Blythe and I will leave you alone for a while. We’ll return your bag later.”

On the way back to the Carter sisters’ cabin, Blythe suggested that Ethan let her apologize to Jenny before he said anything to Betsy.

“Why?” he asked curiously.

"We can see Betsy's reaction to us finding the jewelry in Mrs. Palmer's cabin. She'll probably think she's free of suspicion."

Jenny accepted Blythe's apology in a suspicious tone. "Thank you, but I don't understand why you're apologizing."

"Because I let my temper get the best of me. Ethan's a very handsome man, and I'm no different from the rest of the women who see him. I have a bit of a crush on my brother. After all, we only got back together on this trip. I suppose I might have been a little jealous, too. That's something I'm going to have to get used to—other women wanting to be with him, I mean."

"Where did you find the jewelry?" Betsy asked.

"Before we get to that part," Blythe continued, "there's something we need to know. Did either of you have anything stolen?"

"I checked as soon as you left," Jenny admitted, "and I was surprised that all of our jewelry is still here. We have a lot, too. I wonder why our cabin was missed."

"Yes," Ethan inserted, "I wonder. Lucille didn't even know she had the jewelry. In fact, from the look on her face, she was more surprised to see it than Blythe was."

"You're still suspicious of me, aren't you."

"Absolutely not. We know that you were with Lucille almost the entire time that day."

"Wait a minute! That must mean that you suspect ..." Jenny spun to face her sister, whose face was deep red with embarrassment. "My God, Betsy! How could you *do* that?"

"Do what?"

"You stole all that jewelry, didn't you. And don't try to deny it. I know the look you get every time you've been caught at something you shouldn't have done."

"He lied to me!" Betsy explained. "He lied to you, too. Saying all those sweet things—like how good I was in bed even if you were the one who had been paid all along. And what a wonderful body mine would be to sleep against every night for the rest of his life."

Blythe stifled a gasp when she heard Betsy's angry words. She couldn't let Ethan see how much knowing what he had said to other women hurt her.

Ethan shook his head. "I never told you that, and I never completed the act."

"Maybe not," Betsy said, "but you made me believe you would feel that way."

"And I never told you that I love you."

"That doesn't matter," she insisted. "You still led me to believe that we could have something that would last forever."

"I never said that."

"The inference was there."

"Jenny, did I ever tell you that I love you?"

"No," she admitted, "of course not. I'm not even sure I wanted to hear it."

"At least, you admit it," Ethan said. "When I learned that somebody had spread the news that I was married, I wanted to wring my late wife's neck. But Blythe told—not Naomi—and I swore I'd never be unfaithful again. Have I come to either of you since then?"

"Not me," Jenny admitted.

"Me, either," Betsy sobbed.

"Good. I know you were both going to stay aboard until Chicago, but I want you off in Buffalo, Betsy. I don't care if you stay or not, Jenny. That's your decision. But Betsy has to leave—unless she wants to be arrested for theft. Come on, Blythe. Let's get out of here before I take the law into my own hands."

In the hall, Ethan stopped Blythe by the arm when she started down the corridor. "Before we return all the jewelry, I want to know what you think about my discussion with

Betsy and Jenny.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she answered, jerking her arm from his hold. “I want to get this job done so I can eat. I’m hungry.”

NINETEEN

Standing beside Ethan at the end of the gangplank, Blythe said a pleasant farewell to the Carter sisters as they left the River Goddess. In a way, Blythe was glad to see them off the boat. But in another way, she was sad to see Jenny go. She would have liked to speak privately with the woman. She had a lot of questions about intimacy.

One good thing came out of the sisters' departure, though. Blythe could have a cabin of her own again. But that dream lasted about a half an hour. After all departing passengers were off, she and Ethan walked to his small riverfront office as Ethan explained that such an office was unusual for steamboat owners. One staffed with three telegraphers who worked in eight-hour shifts was almost unheard of. But with it, his business never lagged, and he was rarely overbooked with passengers. Obviously, his system of spending money to make money worked. He had a full ship again, with three scheduled cabins filled and four couples waiting to see if he would have an extra. The two couples who had been waiting the longest were assigned Blythe's old cabin and the one the Carter sisters had shared.

While they wandered the streets of Buffalo, Blythe said, "I didn't realize you did so much business with a telegraph system."

"I lost a lot of business because people weren't sure when we'd dock and leave again. I started wondering if a telegraph would help me make a bigger profit, so I researched it. Now I wonder what I did without one. At every scheduled port, I let the next city know if I'm ahead of or behind schedule. The passengers appreciate it, too, because my people get messages to them. That's how I filled Moody's cabin so soon."

"How did you fill the Carters' room?"

"That was luck. They wanted a boat to Chicago, and mine was the first to leave."

"Unfortunately, you forgot about me."

"I'll never forget about you, angel," he vowed with a grin.

"Don't tease me, Ethan," she said as she gazed up at him with a pout. "You said I could have a cabin of my own when one was available, but you filled it."

He stopped and stared down at her in shock. His deep brown eyes clearly showed his distress. "I thought you *liked* living in my suite."

"I do," she confessed, "but it isn't appropriate."

"Why not? Everybody thinks we're related, and we don't sleep together—no matter how much I wish we could. I don't even try to seduce you. Haven't I been a perfect gentleman?"

"Of course, you have."

"Then what's the ... ? Wait a minute! I know what's bothering you. You paid for your passage, and now you sleep on a sofa. I'll reimburse your fare. I won't miss it. I'll even see if I can find a bed for you."

With a slow shake of her head, Blythe turned her distraught gaze to the ground. "That's not it, Ethan. I don't mind sleeping on the divan—it's really quite comfortable. But somebody could find out that we're not related."

"Then we'll take care of that right now. We'll go get married. If anybody finds out, we

can tell them that you lied about Naomi being my wife. We can tell them that I felt sorry for you because of that night, so I married you.”

She returned her startled stare to his face. “I won’t lie anymore, especially not at my expense. And I won’t lie to help you hide your indiscretion.”

“You won’t have to if we get married.”

“And I won’t marry you,” she declared.

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t trust you to be faithful.”

“I won’t stop asking you, Blythe,” he vowed. “If I have to ask you every time we dock, I’ll do it.”

“Why?”

“I want you. Can’t you see that?”

“Maybe I don’t want you.”

“That’s not what I see in your eyes whenever I laugh. And it’s definitely not what I heard in your voice when we were talking to Lucille, Jenny, and Betsy yesterday. I think you’re starting to believe how sorry I am for not listening to you.” When she didn’t respond and started to walk away from him, he caught her wrist. “That’s what it is, isn’t it. You’re starting to believe that I’m not such a vile man after all. Deep in your heart, you know that whatever pain you had couldn’t be helped. You know that everything else I did was very tender.”

“I won’t discuss that night, Ethan. Forget that it ever happened.”

“I can’t do that, because it was the most moving experience of my life.”

She glared up at him with fury in her eyes. All she wanted to do right now was hurt him. He wanted to marry her because he felt that he *had* to—not because he loved her. And she knew exactly what words would inflict the most pain. “You’re going to force me to say this, aren’t you. All right, I’ll tell you. That night is a nightmare I’ll never forget. It wasn’t a moving experience for me. It was painful. And I never want to be touched like that again.”

“I know, angel,” he admitted softly. “That’s why I don’t get close to you. Granted, once in a while, I backslide. But that’s because I want you so much. But out of all the opportunities I’ve had the last few days, have I ever done more than kiss you?”

“No!” she exclaimed, shocked by how much it hurt that he hadn’t.

Ethan smiled down at her. “And I won’t until I’m absolutely sure that you’re ready. If I thought you wouldn’t be offended, I’d give you every piece of jewelry Naomi left behind. But even that wouldn’t ease my guilt. Only your forgiveness can do that.”

Stunned, she began to stroll along the boardwalk again. His words were too impossible to believe. His declaration that he would wait until he was sure she was ready was exactly what she’d wanted all along. Unable to say anything along those lines, though, she asked, “You would give me her jewelry?”

“Every piece.”

“And you’d do it because you feel guilty?”

“Partially, and partially because I don’t know what else to do with it.”

“I see.” Blythe wanted to cry. He didn’t really want her to have it; he just didn’t know any other way to dispose of such expensive trinkets. But how could she tell him that she would love to have Naomi’s jewelry without sounding greedy? She couldn’t, especially now that he’d told her why he wanted to give it to her. “Could we go back to the Goddess now, Ethan?”

The whole walk back to the sternwheeler, Ethan mentally scolded himself. Why hadn’t

he told her the truth? He wanted to give her the jewelry because he wanted *her* to have it—nobody else. His motives had nothing to do with guilt or not knowing what else to do with it. He wanted to give everything bright and sparkling and beautiful to the most beautiful, sparkling, bright woman he'd ever met. That's why he wanted Blythe to have them—because she was a jewel in his eyes.

Now he was lying to her again, just like he had about Naomi being his wife. Even though he knew she hated liars, he couldn't seem to stop. He couldn't seem to tell her that he loved her again, either. Come to think of it, that was probably the only phrase that would get her to say yes to a wedding. Why couldn't he be honest? Probably because he knew it wouldn't mean anything to her yet. She'd already told him that she couldn't marry a man who couldn't be faithful. It would hurt a lot more if he said "I love you" before she rejected his proposal.

Somehow he had to convince her that he meant his words before he said them again. He had to *show* her that he could be faithful and trustworthy, that he could be generous and loving. The trustworthy, generous and loving parts would be easy. But the faithful part? Even he wasn't sure he could do it. No other woman had required it of him. Blythe was the only one who hadn't been overjoyed just to have his attention for a few hours at a time. She was the only one who wasn't impressed with his abilities in bed. But why should she be when he'd frightened her so badly? He *had* to make that up to her—even if it took the rest of his life. And when he did, he would show her exactly how passionate of a woman she was!

Blythe was furious. He'd completely quit talking to her after she turned down his proposal again. Then he'd walked her to the riverboat and left her on board, heading back toward town while she stood at the railing in a daze. He didn't even come back in time for dinner together as they'd planned. Where was he, anyway? Probably out bedding another woman. Maybe he was even with Jenny and Betsy one more time. Maybe even at the same time!

She'd show him how she felt about what he was doing. The Carter sisters' cabin was still vacant until the next morning when they cast off. She would spend the night there. All she had to do was get the key from his desk drawer. Seeking out Jennings, she asked him for his key to Ethan's office and was stunned that the captain surrendered it without question. Although curious as to why, she took it with an absent thank you and hurried to the office.

As she sat down at his desk, she remembered something he had said the day he'd removed the tree from under the bow. He'd told her that if anything happened to him, there was something in his top desk drawer for her. Suddenly, she was curious as to what it was. Sliding open the drawer, she saw an envelope with her name scrawled across it. Blythe rushed to the door and slid the bolt into place. Finally, she opened the envelope, which hadn't even been sealed with wax. Removing the piece of paper, she unfolded it slowly then read:

April 27, 1842

I, Ethan Lucas, do hereby bequeath all of my worldly possessions, in specific the sternwheeler called the River Goddess and the business built around it, which I firmly believe belongs in her family, to Blythe Angelique Bouvier, because I owe her more than everything I have.

At the bottom it was signed by Ethan Lucas and C. J. Jennings. Obviously, Ethan had discussed this with his best friend and Jennings had agreed to it. Why else would he have signed it?

Still, that didn't mean anything other than that he felt guilty about what he'd done. It didn't mean that he loved her; otherwise, he would have said so in the will. When he was drunk, he'd told her that he loved her; and when he was facing death, he'd told her. Why couldn't he tell her when he was sober and safe? Why! Because it wasn't true. That could be the only reason.

Although her heart had softened when she started to read the will, her anger grew again. He didn't love her. He only wanted her in his bed and thought that forcing her to live in his suite would put her there sooner. If she had any sense, she would tell the couple he'd given the Carters' cabin that there had been a mistake and it was already filled. She couldn't do that, though, because it would be a lie—and she had vowed never to lie again.

Putting the letter back in the envelope, Blythe got the extra key to the Carters' cabin and left. When Ethan got back and found her gone, he would be furious because she had defied him. Then she could dislike him again, and the pain of knowing that he was in the arms of another woman would be easier to bear.

About nine that night, Blythe's solitude was interrupted by a knock on the cabin door. Curious as to who had learned of her whereabouts, she went to open it. Outside, Ethan smiled down at her, his dark eyes sparkling with mischief.

"When Jennings told me you borrowed his key to get into my office, I thought I'd find you here," he explained as he passed her and closed the door. "What are you mad about this time?"

"Aren't you angry with me?" she asked, stunned by his calm, cheerful manner.

"Hell, no. I knew you were on board, because people had seen you."

"Don't you care that I hid from you?"

Ethan shrugged. "That's your privilege. I must have said something I shouldn't have, but I can't think of what it was."

"It wasn't something you said," she admitted hotly. "It was that you didn't say *anything*."

He stared at her as though shocked by her words. "What are you talking about?"

"You didn't talk to me all the way here from the riverfront office today—not one word after I told you that I wanted to come back. Then you left without even a good-bye. You went to see another woman, didn't you." She glared up at him, her anger already at its peak. "You probably saw *more* than one. After all, you're perfectly capable of being with several in a couple of days. You've already proven it."

"I wasn't even with one," he explained. "I was alone—shopping."

"I don't believe you."

"That's all right," he said calmly, "because I know the truth. If I keep telling it, eventually you're bound to believe me."

"It's dark out, Ethan," she declared. "What else could you have been doing all this time?"

"Looking for you. I knew you were upset when we parted, so I gave you time alone with your thoughts." Without warning, he caressed her shoulders and pulled her against him. "Did you make any decisions?"

Blythe wanted to break away, but again she couldn't. He sounded so sincere that all she could do was stare up at him. Had she let her imagination take over her rationale? Had Ethan truly been out shopping and not in the arms of another woman? That couldn't be possible. He'd been without sex for over a week; he *had* to need a woman by now. He was probably saying these things because he knew that's what she wanted to hear.

His head came closer to hers; his lips silently begged for her to let him kiss her. She should move; she should get away from him as fast as possible; she should run ... His lips caught hers; his tongue slipped between them as she instinctively slid her arms around his back. She should stay right where she was and enjoy the incredible sensations that raced through her body!

One of his hands went to her head. His fingers tangled in her mass of waves while his lips ground against hers in a heat unlike any he'd shown her yet. His other hand moved to her waist so he could crush her stomach against him. And she could feel his desire swell.

Oh, no! Her heart was racing again; she could scarcely breathe. She was scared—and she was overjoyed! She hated this feeling in her chest—and she loved it! How would she ever know what was happening within her if every time he kissed her she felt like she was going to collapse from heart failure?

Tears sprang up behind her closed eyes, and one slowly trickled down her cheek. Did kissing him make her happy or sad? What was wrong with her that she couldn't understand her own feelings? If only Solange was with her. She knew about things like this, because she was experienced with men.

Suddenly, Ethan broke the kiss and stepped away from her, asking, "Now do you believe that I wasn't with another woman?"

"So that was it!" she exclaimed in an attempt to hide her confusion. "You were trying to trick me into believing you. Well, it won't work."

Ethan shook his head but still grinned down at her. "I wasn't tricking you, angel. I was trying to prove that I was being honest. I was shopping. Don't you want to see what I bought?"

"I won't go back to the suite with you tonight," she warned him.

"Did I ask you to? If you want to stay here, fine."

"Then how are you going to show me what you bought?" she asked.

Widening his grin, Ethan reached into his trouser pocket and withdrew something in his fist. When he opened his hand, a gold, link bracelet with four green stones flanking three clear ones set on a solid gold plate in the middle lay on his palm. It was a simple trinket, but Blythe stared at it in shock for several moments. That bracelet had to have cost a *fortune*.

"Well?" Ethan said, bringing her back to the present. "Aren't you going to take it?"

She stared at the expensive trinket, unable to take her eyes from it. "It's for me?"

"Of course. Do you think I'd buy it for another woman then show it to you? I may do some pretty stupid things, but that's not one of them."

"Why?" she asked, suspicious of his reasons for giving it to her. "What did you do?"

"Do? Nothing! I want you." When he didn't continue, Blythe's irate gaze shot to his eyes. "To have it, I mean."

"You want to buy me into your bed, don't you. Well, *that* won't work, either." Knocking his hand, she studied his stunned expression while the bracelet flew across the room toward the door. "I'm not like Jenny. I'm not a *prostituée*. Just because you give me trinkets and other women money doesn't mean it's any different. It's the same thing, and I'm not stupid enough to be bribed into bedding you."

“That’s not what I was doing, Blythe. Honest. I bought it because of the emeralds. Every time I see one, it reminds me of your eyes—it reminds me of *you*.”

“Your sweet words won’t work, either. Now get out of here and leave me alone.”

“All right, angel,” he said as he bent to pick up the bracelet.

“And don’t you *ever* buy me anything with diamonds in it again. They have a special meaning that has nothing to do with buying my body. It’s insulting when you do that.”

Standing with his hand on the door handle, Ethan smiled back at her. “I’ll take your anger into consideration when I dream about your reaction to my disappearance today. And don’t think this is the last time you’ll ever see the bracelet. Good night, my dear. Sleep well, because tomorrow night you’ll be on a sofa in my suite again.”

The nerve of that man! Blythe thought as he closed the door behind him. He was supposed to get angry with her—just like she did with him. But he’d stayed calm the entire time. Why? Had he been that sure his gift would get her into his bed? Somehow she sensed there must be more to it than that, because he hadn’t even been mad when she knocked the bracelet from his hand. Something was wrong. He was being too nice, too understanding, too much of a gentleman. He hadn’t even complained when she ordered him out of the cabin. He’d simply picked up the bracelet and left, despite his reminder that she was obligated to go back to the suite the next morning.

Collapsing on the bed, Blythe lay back. How long would it be before they reached Chicago? According to Jennings, the worst and longest part of the trip was behind them. They would dock at Cleveland, Ohio, late the next afternoon for a change of passengers and overnight. Then it would only take two days to cross Lake Erie to Detroit, Michigan. But after that, he hadn’t told her anything about a length of time.

Blythe sighed heavily and rolled onto her side. A full ship the entire way, and she had no place to sleep except in Ethan’s suite. She did that with mixed feelings. Granted, she truly enjoyed his company, but she was still afraid that he wanted more from her. But she couldn’t believe that he would take what he wanted without her permission, either. Deep in her heart, she knew he would never treat her like he had that night in her cabin under normal circumstances. In fact, he hadn’t treated her *that* badly then. He’d only startled her awake, and she’d overreacted. If he’d been gentle in waking her, she knew she wouldn’t have experienced *any* fear.

With a gasp, she bolted upright in bed. No wonder he hadn’t believed her that night! Her actions at her party had convinced him that he was missing something every other man at the dance could have. Jennings and Naomi had been right when they’d warned her to stop flirting so outrageously, but she’d been too angry and too tipsy to listen to them. That didn’t excuse Ethan’s actions, but it definitely explained them.

“Oh, Solange,” she moaned as she got comfortable on the bed, “where are you when I need you? I made a mess of my life that night, and I need you to tell me how to fix it.”

After Detroit, they went through Lake St. Clair to the St. Clair River and Port Huron, Michigan. From there the riverboat wound its way through the Straits of Mackinac to Lake Michigan and south to their destination of Chicago. Once they docked, Blythe took her place beside Ethan at the end of the gangplank. But this time her heart wasn’t in wishing all the passengers well. This time she was preoccupied with finding her friend. Then she heard a woman with a heavy French accent shout her name.

Glancing in the direction of the voice, Blythe saw Solange Devereau, a dark-haired,

dark-eyed young woman of her exact size, making her way through a crowd of people. Waving happily, Blythe called back. "Solange!"

She wanted to run and greet her friend, but she didn't know if she should. The passengers expected her to be with Ethan until everyone was off the River Goddess. When she felt his strong hand on her shoulder, she turned her gaze up to the handsome man smiling down at her.

"If you don't go meet your best friend right this second," he said cheerfully, "I'm going to carry you over there."

Blythe raced away. From the dock, Ethan watched the friends embrace each other with a wide smile. He'd never seen Blythe so happy, and he was happy for her.

TWENTY

"Who is that man?" Solange asked as they started toward the riverboat. "He is very handsome."

"That's Ethan Lucas," Blythe explained. "He owns the River Goddess. Oh, Solange! So much happened on the trip. I can't wait to tell you everything, but first I'll show you to your cabin. We won't be leaving again for a few days, but Ethan planned for our cabins would be next to each other when we do. We're going to have such a wonderful trip to New Orleans! But first we have to stop in a place called Peoria, Illinois. Ethan said that's where the man he won the riverboat from got off. We're going to see if we can find him for another clue."

"Can you pay for the voyage?"

"I don't have to. Ethan's doing it."

"Why?"

"Don't sound so suspicious. He has a good reason. Come on, and I'll introduce you so you can see that he's a nice man. Ethan!" she called out as they neared him. "I want you to meet Solange Devereau."

"So you're the best friend my baby sister can't stop talking about," Ethan greeted, cheerfully continuing their charade for the passengers with him. "I'm glad to finally meet you."

Before Solange could reply, Blythe whispered in her ear. "Ethan told everybody on board that I'm his sister. I'll explain everything later. Just laugh like this is a joke."

The friends giggled, and the woman in front of Ethan smiled in approval. "That's definitely your sister's best friend, Mr. Lucas. They share a lot of secrets you'll never know about."

"Oh, boy!" he groaned. "Am I ever in trouble?"

"That's what little sisters are best known for, Mr. Lucas," the woman replied with a sly grin. "We had a marvelous trip, by the way. Thank you for everything."

"And thank you for using my steamboat."

"Excuse me please," Blythe said with her shy smile. "Could I borrow your office key, Ethan? I want to show Solange the portrait."

"Of course." He dug into his pocket and handed her his keys. "As long as you're there, get the spare key from my desk. I'm tired of having to share mine."

"All right," she said. "Come on, Solange."

Grabbing her friend's wrist, Blythe hurried up the nearly empty gangplank. When they were finally away from people, Blythe slowed down and spoke to Solange with an enthusiasm that Blythe had never felt before.

"I've missed you so much. I can't tell you the number of times I wanted to talk to you. You should have come on the Goddess with me. Ethan's so very nice—even if I did think he was an ogre at first. He told me he was married, but he kissed me, anyway. You know how I feel about things like that."

"He is married?" Solange asked in amazement.

"No, and even if he had been, he wouldn't be now. His mistress ..."

“What is mistress?”

“*Maitresse*.”

“Ah, *oui*! He beds with women.”

“Plenty of them, and they all think he’s wonderful. Some told me so. Anyway, Naomi died a little over a week ago. But he didn’t love her. He only kept her because she made him look good, and she was the *hotesse* of the riverboat,” Blythe explained, trying to remember that there were a lot of words she hadn’t translated for Solange. They arrived at the office, and she unlocked the door. “The first time he kissed me was right in here. We were talking about the picture over there.”

When Solange let her gaze follow in the direction that Blythe pointed, she gasped in shock. “*Mon Dieu!* It is you.”

“No, it’s not,” Blythe admitted, closing the door so they could have privacy, “but Ethan thinks I might be related to her. He thinks my father was looking for my grandfather and that this woman might be my grandmother. He could be right, too. What do you think?”

“I do not know.”

Blythe shrugged as she and her friend stared at the portrait. “It doesn’t matter. We’re going to see if we can find my grandfather then that woman. What do you think of Ethan? Isn’t he the most handsome man you’ve ever seen?”

“Yes. Do you love him?”

“I can’t. He was unfaithful—*infidèle*—to Naomi. I can’t love a man like that.”

“You talk like you do,” Solange observed.

“Nonsense!”

“You do,” Solange insisted with a grin. “You are very happy. I can see it.”

“I am happy! You’re back with me. I can say things to you that I can’t to Ethan.” Blythe rushed to the desk and opened the top drawer, pulling out the envelope with her name on it. “He doesn’t know that I found this, so you have to keep it a secret. Not a word to anybody.”

When Blythe finished reading Ethan’s will, Solange studied her. “Why does he think the River Goddess belongs in your family?”

“*What?*” Blythe asked in amazement.

“Why ...”

“I know what you said, Solange. I was shocked to hear you say it. I didn’t think of it before, because I was so surprised that he wanted me to have it. But you’re right. I wonder why he believes that.”

“You use words I do not know,” Solange reminded her.

“I’m sorry, but they weren’t important so I won’t explain. I was thinking out loud. You know I do that sometimes.” Putting the will back, Blythe rose and started toward the door. “Come on. I’ll show you to your cabin.”

When Solange saw the elaborately furnished cabin she was supposed to occupy, she shook her head. “I cannot pay for this.”

“You’re not paying; Ethan is. He said he makes enough of a profit from the rest of the cabins that he won’t lose any money with one being rent-free.”

“Where do you sleep?”

“Next door,” Blythe said happily, pulling Solange to the next door. Again Solange gasped at the extravagant surroundings of the suite, and Blythe giggled beside her. “Nice, isn’t it?”

“*Magnifique!* How did you pay for it?”

“I didn’t,” Blythe admitted with a laugh. “When I first came on board, I was in a little

cabin on the lowest deck. This is Ethan's suite. I moved in when he put his mistress in my cabin after her death."

"You are now his *maitresse*?" she asked in shock.

"No! I sleep here," Blythe said, patting the settee. Hurrying to the door, she bolted it locked so Ethan couldn't walk in on their conversation then returned to the sofa. "Sit down so I can tell you what happened." When her friend was seated beside her, Blythe realized she wasn't sure where to begin. "Good heavens! Where do I start?"

"At the beginning," Solange suggested, "like you tell me."

"I tried to make friends with him even before I knew he was the owner, but he wasn't in a very good mood. It was a *bad* first impression, and you know how I am with first impressions. Anyway, I learned that he was looking for me and hid from him in my cabin. He finally found me and hit another man for kissing me. He thought it would be better if people thought we were related, so he made up a story about us. On top of that, he told me that he was married. But I ate a meal with him, anyway. He was so charming that I agreed to go with him to his office—alone—to see the portrait of Angel. We argued; he kissed me, and I left."

"Did you like it?"

Blythe shook her head at the memory. "No. I was afraid. My heart hurt, and I thought I was going to die like Dan. I didn't see him again for two days, then he came to my cabin. We talked; he kissed me again, and he left."

"And you are not his—how is the English word again—*mistresse*?"

"Mistress, and no. I'm *not* his mistress. I heard that he was bedding women other than Naomi, and I was furious—very angry. I told everybody on the Goddess that he was married, but he wasn't mad when he learned that I was the one who told. He even gave me a birthday party, with free champagne for everybody. I was mad at him, though, because he kissed me on my bed and that was all. That's why I decided to get even again."

"He did not stay in your bed? He did not ... um ... *avoir des relations sexuelles* ... with you?"

"No, we didn't have sex. At my party, I did what you do with one man at a party. I flirted with every man except Ethan and his best friend Jennings. And I drank champagne—a lot more than I ever did before. So did Ethan. He was so drunk that he doesn't remember much about coming to my cabin and scaring me. That's when it happened, Solange. That's when he bedded me. Only I was afraid because of the way it started. I was asleep, and he ripped my nightgown. I told him that I'd never done it before, but he didn't believe me because of how I'd acted at the party. He said he loved me and wanted me, so I didn't fight to make him stop." Blythe paused only a moment before she added, "I should be honest with you. By the time he ... *did* it, I wanted him to."

"You did it?" Solange asked excitedly. "You always said you couldn't because your *grand-mere* said it would hurt."

"I didn't want to at first, but he was so tender. And every time he kisses me, I feel like I'm going to die. He doesn't do that anymore, though. Kiss me like he used to, I mean. He still kisses me, but not with that kind of passion. And I honestly don't know if I *want* him to. He told me it wouldn't hurt again—he practically promised—but what if he's wrong?"

"He isn't. The first time it hurts, but not again. Do you want to be his mistress?"

"I don't think so. He can't be faithful, and I don't want the heartache—*chagrin*—that Naomi went through."

"You love him."

"No, I don't," Blythe denied. Then her face lit with excitement again. "But I could have a

baby. I've always wanted one, you know. I love babies. Naomi told me that she was pregnant, but she lied. I believed her, though, and I wished it could be me."

"Are you?"

"I don't know, but I *want* to be." With a slight smile, Blythe admitted, "Ethan keeps asking me to marry him, but I tell him no."

"Why?" Solange asked in amazement.

"He can't be faithful. I could never marry a man like that." The look of concentration came to Solange's face that always meant she was thinking up scheme. Blythe examined her, recalling all the times when they were younger that Solange had gotten her into trouble. The last thing she needed now was an involvement in one of her friend's schemes. Determined to avoid that, she asked, "What kind of adventure are you planning now? No, don't tell me. I don't want to know. That way I won't be tempted to participate."

Solange shrugged. "I am thinking—like you. We should find something else to talk about."

Glad that Solange didn't force the issue, Blythe nodded. "Good idea. How was your trip to Chicago?"

To Blythe's relief Solange eagerly recounted her cross-country trip in a slew of French words.

Ethan took one week to fill his passenger list and be sure that he had a good crew—most of whom were new since he was making a new run. Although she thought it best to stay with Solange, Blythe knew the bed would be too small for both of them, and there was no divan like Ethan had. She wanted to suggest that he give her a cabin of her own, but she didn't want Ethan to lose more money because of her. If that meant spending the entire trip in his suite, she would do it.

On the third night of their journey down the Illinois River, Blythe stayed in the suite at dinner time. She didn't feel well and wanted to get some rest. Although Ethan wanted to sit with her, she insisted that he go with Solange. After a pleasant dinner, Ethan walked Solange back to her cabin, planning to go back to Blythe immediately.

"May I talk to you, Ethan?" Solange asked when he said good night at her door.

"About what?" he asked.

"Blythe. I am *inquiet* about her. I don't remember the English word. Maybe *worsted*?"

Ethan took a moment to try to translate. When he realized what her might be saying, he smiled. "Worried?"

Solange's eyes brightened. "Yes, worried."

"She's just not feeling well tonight. I'm sure she'll be fine by morning."

"She is not happy," Solange proclaimed.

"Not happy?" Ethan repeated in shock. "My God, I've never seen her as happy as she has been lately. She adores you and loves having you with her."

"That is only for you. *S'il vous plait*. We must talk."

Ethan knew a few French words, and this was one of them. It meant please, and he wasn't about to deny her request.

"Of course," he agreed, "if you think she's that unhappy."

In the cabin, Ethan soon learned that Solange had more on her mind than her friend. They chatted about Blythe for a while, but it had nothing to do with her happiness. Then the conversation turned.

"Do you like me, Ethan?" Solange asked as she sauntered around the room.

"Of course, I do," he replied. "You're very nice."

"I can be much nicer to men. Blythe does not know how to make a man happy. I do."

"Blythe knows more than you think," Ethan said. He needed to get out of this situation as soon as he could without alienating Blythe's friend.

"One time does not mean she knows."

Stunned, Ethan stared at her open-mouthed, momentarily unable to believe that Blythe had confided in Solange about something so personal. After a few seconds, he recovered and strode toward the door, saying, "I'd better go see how she's feeling."

Before he could reach it, Solange stepped before him. She unbuttoned her blouse, very slowly, one button at a time, as she spoke in a hoarse whisper Ethan found even more enticing than her movements. "She feels sick, but I feel good."

"That's I feel well," Ethan corrected, his voice cracking in his nervousness.

"No." Taking his hand, she laid it on her naked breast. "I feel good. Yes?"

Ethan couldn't believe Blythe's best friend was openly seducing him. But something even more amazing was happening to him. He felt nothing for her! Any other time he would have fallen prey to a woman who made advances like that, but he wasn't interested in Solange. Why? Probably because she was Blythe's best friend. He had to know for sure; he had to know if that was actually the reason.

Not taking his dark gaze from hers, Ethan slid his hand around Solange's waist to the small of her back and drew her against him. His lips met hers hungrily, but his hand wouldn't push her closer when his mind told it to. This wasn't right! Suddenly, he released her and stepped back, breaking all contact.

"*Merci*," he said.

"Why?" she asked, confused. "We did not do anything."

"You showed me something very important, Solange," he explained. "I can't be with Blythe's best friend. It wouldn't be right. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go. Good night."

Ethan was so curious he could hardly stand it. Had other women aboard shown an interest in him that he had missed? If such a beautiful, seductive woman as Solange didn't interest him, would other women? He had to find out; he had to know if he could be faithful or if he was only reluctant to bed Blythe's friend.

On the observation deck, Ethan found several women without escorts chatting in three groups. It was amazing the number of women who traveled alone or in pairs. Apparently, most of them were going to a different life. More married women traveled with their husbands, but the number of unmarried female travelers was increasing with every trip.

Nearby he heard several women giggling and turned to see them gazing in his direction. With a wide smile, he strolled to join them. "Good evening, ladies. Are you enjoying your trip?"

"Oh, yes," a redhead said with what was supposed to be a shy smile. But that smile was fraudulent, not honestly shy like Blythe's. "We love this boat."

"I'm glad. My name is Ethan Lucas, and I own the River Goddess."

"We know," admitted a tall blonde who reminded him of Naomi. "Your sister told us. I'm Caroline Gordon."

"I'm Blanche Newcomb," the redhead inserted before touching a smaller blonde on the arm. "And this is Colette St. Clair."

Although he smiled at them, his mind was on Blythe. She would be thrilled to know that he had no interest in any of the women before him—but not as thrilled as he was. Even though they were all lovely ladies, not one could compare to the woman in his suite. Wish-

ing his passengers a pleasant voyage, Ethan wandered to another group of women. Again, none caught his fancy, so he tried two more groups with the same results.

Filled with a sense of accomplishment unlike any he'd ever before experienced, he started toward the riverboat bridge. He needed to talk to Jennings. His friend would know the next step he should take with Blythe. But the man behind the large wheel announced that Jennings wasn't on duty that night and could probably be found in his cabin.

"If it isn't my long-lost friend," Jennings teased when he saw Ethan outside his door. "I thought you'd jumped overboard."

"Not me," Ethan returned with a laugh as he entered the cabin. "I have too much to live for."

"To what do I owe the honor of seeing you?"

"I guess I have been neglecting you lately."

"Me! You've been neglecting everybody but Blythe. Could there be a reason for that?"

"It could be true love," Ethan admitted with a grin.

"Oh, you think so."

Ethan's chest swelled with pride at what he was about to admit. He never believed that he would be able to say these words with the conviction with which he wanted to deliver them. "I *know* so. Solange tried to seduce me tonight—and failed."

Shaking his head, Jennings tried to get Ethan to accept reality. "That's because she's Blythe's friend."

Determined not to be daunted by his friend's words, Ethan grinned mischievously. "Then explain why not a single woman I talked to—out of fifteen, I might add—interest me."

Jennings gasped, truly astonished by the news. "You're kidding."

"I'm happy to say that I'm not. When I couldn't get interested in Solange, I decided to find out what other women would do for me. I thought the same thing *you* did at first. I thought it was because Solange was Blythe's best friend. They confide in each other about almost everything, so I thought that might be one of the things they talked about. That's when I looked for other women—and nothing—not even a twinge of excitement. The only woman who excites me now is Blythe. I know because it's all I can do not to touch her. And when I kiss her good night? I want to carry her to bed every time. But I don't."

"Why not if you've already done it."

"I want her to be ready for me, and I don't think she is."

"That does sound like true love."

"I know. That's why I'm here."

Jennings laughed. "No, no, no. You have that all wrong. A man who's in love is supposed to be with his *woman*—not his captain."

"Very funny," Ethan said with a sarcastic laugh. "I need some advice."

"About bedding a woman? You really have lost your heart."

"Not about that. I need to know what I'm supposed to do now that I know I'm in love."

"You're not serious," Jennings said incredulously.

"But I am. I've never been in love before, Jennings. I don't know what to do next. I want to tell Blythe how I feel, but I'm not sure she'll be receptive. And I sure as hell couldn't bear that kind of heartache if she isn't. Remember what I went through when I thought she was dead? Losing her forever because she's gone is one thing. Losing her forever because I made a mistake that I can't fix would be something completely different. What am I going to do?"

"Did you ever think of showing her first?"

Ethan stared at Jennings in shock. "I can't take her to bed again until I tell her."

"There are other ways of showing your love without taking a woman to bed. That's too easy, anyway. The hard part is showing her without sex."

"How do I do that?" Ethan asked.

"There are several things you could do. Why don't you buy her something nice—like jewelry. You always bought the others jewelry."

"The last time I did that, she knocked it out of my hand and told me never to buy her anything with diamonds in it again. She said they have a special meaning, and that's why she didn't want them."

"Then that's exactly what you should buy her—something with diamonds in it. And nothing else. Women think diamonds mean love. Why else do you think wealthy men buy their intended brides diamond rings when they propose? Wealthy men like you, I might add."

"You're right!" Ethan exclaimed. "I can afford to buy her every diamond she could ever want, couldn't I."

"That's why I mentioned it."

"What do I do after that?"

Solange didn't need to hear anything else. Hurrying from the door, she raced back to the suite so she could talk to Blythe.

TWENTY-ONE

Blythe couldn't believe how unfair God had been to her. Just when her life was at its happiest with her first infatuation, He'd taken her parents. He'd separated her from the grandmother she loved by sending a stranger to take her to a strange country and a new grandmother. As if that weren't enough, He'd taken her brothers, too. Then she'd learned that her new grandmother, whom she'd come to like if not love, had lied to her.

But her life had been better after she met Ethan. She finally had hope and true happiness again. Then God had ripped it all away—again. Having a baby had meant everything to her. It had meant having the family she'd missed for so long. That afternoon, though, God had taken away that dream, too. Now she was back where she started on her return to the United States—alone, with no family and no hope of having one.

A knock on the door startled her to reality, and she rose to answer it. When she saw Solange, she stepped back to let her friend into the suite then closed the door again.

"I have good news for you," Solange announced.

"I could use some," Blythe admitted. "What is it?"

"Ethan is not *infidèle*."

"So?"

"You can marry him."

"I don't want to. Besides, how do you know he's faithful? If you asked him, he lied. He told me that he does it all the time."

"I tried to *seduire* him."

"You did *what*?" Blythe shrieked. "How could you, of all people, seduce Ethan? You were my friend."

Enraged beyond control, Blythe pushed Solange against the wall. Solange hit her head so hard that she lost consciousness and slumped to the floor.

"Damn," Blythe said, frustrated by what happened. "Why did you have to pass out? I wanted to tell you that I don't need friends like you. And I don't need Ethan, either."

Storming from the room, Blythe slammed the door. With nowhere else to go, she slipped into Solange's cabin and slid the bolt lock into place. There! Now nobody could bother her.

But where would Solange sleep? What a stupid thought! She could sleep with Ethan. She'd already seduced him once; she shouldn't have any trouble doing it again. He enjoyed bedding women, and he hadn't done it in weeks. It was only natural that he would fall into Solange's arms.

But that didn't matter now, anyway. He'd told her that he could only stay faithful for a couple of weeks, and he'd finally proven it. Actually, under the circumstances, it was a good thing she wasn't with child. If she had been, he might have eventually convinced her to marry him, then she would have been forced to live in misery for the rest of her life.

Lying down on the bed, Blythe stared blankly at the ceiling. For some odd reason, her heart didn't ache; she wasn't happy or sad. In fact, she felt exhausted, empty, numb. Apparently, hearing the truth from Solange had just proven her suspicions.

When Ethan returned to his suite late that night, he was stunned to see Solange sitting on the settee.

"What are you doing here at this hour?" he asked curiously. "I decided to play poker so Blythe could get some more rest. But I didn't expect *you* to be here."

"I cannot go in my cabin," Solange explained.

"You lost the key?"

"No. Blythe is there. She will not let me in."

"Why not?"

"I told her what I did, and she is angry."

"But nothing happened," he said. "All I did was kiss you. She should be happy that I proved I can be faithful."

"She would not hear that. She would hear only that I—What is the English?—*seduire*."

"You didn't seduce me, if that's the word you want. You tried, but you didn't succeed. Didn't you tell her that?"

"She would not hear. She will not talk about it."

"God damn it, anyway! What the hell's wrong with that woman? Every damned time somebody wants to discuss something important, she stops them. 'I don't want to talk about it,' she says. Well, *I* want to talk about it, and I'm sure as hell going to. Even she won't stop me this time."

"She is very angry."

"So am I. I'm tired of her stupid little games."

"Blythe does not play games," Solange said. "She is very sad now. She does not—ah—*pretexter*."

"Pretend?"

"Yes! Pretend. She is very sad."

Ethan shook his head, unable to comprehend their conversation. "I don't understand. She's never been happier since I met her, and now you're saying that she's sad. It doesn't make sense. She *must* be pretending."

"She does not pretend."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"I know Blythe for many years. I know when she is sad."

"Do you think it's because of what I did?"

"There is more," Solange admitted, "but I do not know what."

Striding to the door, Ethan declared, "I'm going to find out. You wait here. I'll see if I can settle this." When he got to the next cabin, Ethan knocked softly and called Blythe's name. But she didn't respond. Determined to talk to her, he tried to cajole her into opening the door. "Come on, angel. I know you're in there, so let me in. All I want to do is talk to you. Solange said you're unhappy, and I want to help."

"I don't need your help!" she shouted back. "And I don't need *you*. Now leave me alone."

"Is this about what happened with Solange?" he asked in concern. "If it is, ..."

Furious that he wouldn't leave her alone, she declared, "I don't want to talk about it."

"But I do," he insisted, undaunted by her anger. If he was going to find out what was bothering her, he couldn't respond in kind. He had to be patient. "Please, Blythe? Open the door. The least you can do is let me explain."

"I don't want to talk about it!" she shouted. "Obviously, you don't understand English any better than Solange does."

"But, angel," he pleaded, "we've been so close. Don't turn your back on me now."

"Why not? You turned your back on me."

Ethan forced firmness into his patient tone that he could only hope would convince her of his sincerity. "No, I didn't. And if you'll let me in, I can prove it."

"I've already had enough of your proof!" she declared. "Besides, I don't need you. I don't need anybody. I went for a long time without a family, and I can do without one again."

With a heavy sigh, he laid his forehead against the door. He couldn't bear the agony in his heart. Blythe said that she didn't need him, that she didn't need family. But it was just the opposite for him. He needed her desperately, and Blythe and their children would be the only family he ever wanted again. Even his brothers and sisters didn't mean as much to him as Blythe did.

"Oh, God, Blythe," he moaned. "Don't torture me like this. Please. Let me in so we can talk."

"I don't *want* to talk," she returned. "I want to be alone. Why can't you understand that?"

Realizing that he couldn't persuade her to change her mind, he said, "All right, angel, but I'll be back in the morning. Think about this overnight. Think about our mission in Peoria. Think about why you came back to America. Think about all the family you lost and all you could have in the future. If you change your mind, come back to the suite. I'll be happy to talk to you whenever you're ready. Good night."

Without getting up from the bed, Blythe stared at the door in shock. She did need him! Maybe she didn't need the man, but she did need his help in finding her lost past. Apparently, he was the only person with even a clue as to where to begin.

When the suite door closed, she almost ran after him. But there were too many thoughts racing through her mind. Was he really the only person with a clue? If he didn't know where to go after Peoria—other than New Orleans—she had as many clues as he did. But he owned the riverboat, and he was better able to finance this search. He'd given her back the money she'd paid for her passage to Chicago, but she still didn't have enough to search for her grandfather. Obviously, they had to work together whether she liked it or not.

Ethan collapsed onto the sofa beside Solange. His life was in a turmoil, and he didn't know how to fix it. For the first time, he was in love, and the woman of his affections didn't love him back. How could he possibly go on if he couldn't convince her that he was trustworthy. How could he go on if she wouldn't agree to marry him and left him forever?

Beside him, Solange interrupted his introspection by questioning him tentatively. "Would Blythe talk to you?"

"No" he admitted. "It's ironic, Solange. All of my life I avoided being faithful no matter how badly a woman wanted me to. Nobody actually said the words, but they didn't have to. I could tell they wanted it, but I didn't admit it to myself until now. Blythe's the only woman who ever demanded faithfulness. Maybe that's why you couldn't seduce me tonight."

Rising, he wandered to the porthole and looked down at the unmoving wheel. If he knew this river better, he wouldn't have to tie up every night. But he wouldn't risk his passengers' lives by traveling an unfamiliar river in the dark. There were too many unknowns: sleepers—those pesky water-soaked logs floating beneath the surface that couldn't be seen

at night— sandbars, or even more planters like the one he'd removed from the Erie Canal. Any one of them—and more—could sink his boat in minutes.

"Did you want to be with me tonight?" Solange asked curiously.

Ethan sighed, unsure he should answer. But in his heart, he knew he must. "Don't ask. You wouldn't want to hear the answer."

"Ah, you did."

Stunned by her response, he spun to face her. "*That's* the answer you wouldn't want to hear?"

"*Oui.*"

"I don't understand. You tried to seduce me, but you didn't want me to want you? That doesn't make sense."

"To a French woman, it does. It was a—ah—test, yes?"

"A test?" he repeated. "To see if I could be faithful to Blythe? Did she know about it? No, she must not have if she's so upset. You should have told her what you were going to do. Maybe she wouldn't have taken it wrong. I'm going back to your cabin and get her. We're going to settle this all right now."

"No," Solange pleaded, grabbing his arm before he reached the door. "She wants to be alone. We must let her. I will sleep here—on the divan like Blythe."

"I suppose you're right. We should give her time. I'll wait until morning to settle things with her. I'll get you one of Blythe's nightgowns then turn in. You can change in here—like Blythe does."

In the morning, Blythe still refused to discuss the incident and continued to do so the entire trip to Peoria, so Ethan and Solange went to breakfast. When Ethan returned earlier, she was in his cabin. To his surprised, she looked drawn and pale.

"Blythe!" he exclaimed when he saw her. "God, you look *awful*. What's wrong? Are you that sick?"

"I'm perfectly healthy," she replied.

"You sure as hell don't look it. Oh, my God! No wonder you won't see me. You're pregnant. That settles it. We're getting married today."

"I won't marry you, Ethan," she declared. "And you can't make me."

"But you're having a baby—*my* baby. I'm not going to let it grow up being called a bastard."

Blythe shook her head. "I'm not having a baby."

"Don't lie to me, angel. I can tell. You're acting very odd. You haven't eaten much in days. You look *terrible*. You're going to have my baby, and we're getting married."

"No, we're not!"

"I'm not a fool, Blythe. Naomi died because I wouldn't marry her. I'm not going to let that happen to you. I couldn't bear to lose you a second time. We're getting married."

"*Mon Dieu!*" she exclaimed irately. "Why won't you listen to me? I don't want you. Can't you understand that? And the only reason I haven't walked off the River Goddess is my grandfather."

While Ethan followed her, Blythe went into the bedroom and got her locked box out of the drawer where she kept it. Then she pulled something from beneath the collar of her high-necked dress and leaned forward. Stepping to the side of the dresser, Ethan stared at the object in her hand. She was unlocking the box with a key on a chain. Also on the chain

was the emerald and diamond pendant he had given her! When she finally withdrew the key from the hole, he tenderly grasped her wrist and pulled her closer to him.

"If you don't want me," he asked, keeping his voice quiet and even, "why do you wear the present I gave you?"

"It was stolen," she said, "and I don't want that to happen again. This necklace is the most valuable piece of jewelry I own, Ethan. I'd be crushed if I lost it forever."

"Then it must have sentimental value," he said with a grin.

"You're awfully arrogant. The necklace is expensive, and I don't want to lose it. Now quit pursuing me. I'm not interested. All I want to do is find my grandfather and get on with my life."

"What about Angel?" he asked.

"What about her?"

"Don't you want to find her, too?"

"*You're* the one obsessed with Angel, which is probably why you're so obsessed with me. I'm not a picture. I'm a living person. I eat; I sleep; I breathe; I have a heartbeat; I have feelings. I can hurt, damn it! Don't you understand that?"

Ethan studied her distraught expression for several moments then observed, "You hurt right now, don't you."

"Not as badly as I did," she explained, "but yes. I hurt because you won't see me as a person. You think of me as a walking portrait."

"It's because of what Solange told you, isn't it. That's why you hurt like you do."

"Partially. You bedded her—and she seduced you. How else was I supposed to feel after being betrayed by my two best friends?"

"If you would have listened to us when we wanted to explain, you wouldn't have had to suffer like you did. Please, angel, ..."

"Don't call me that!" she raged. "That's the title of the portrait you're obsessed with."

"I'm not obsessed with that portrait anymore," he denied in a quiet tone, "and that's not what I'm going to talk about."

"That's what *I'm* talking about."

"No, my darling, you're not going to talk at all. You're going to listen to me even if I have to gag you and tie you to a chair."

"Oh, all right," she said as she dropped onto the settee. "Say what's on your mind so we can get off this boat and look for Bower."

"Thank you—I think." Sinking down beside her, he kept his steady gaze riveted on her eyes. "If you'd listened to us, you would have learned that Solange instigated that seduction to see if I would fall prey to it. I didn't. As soon as I kissed her, ..."

"You *kissed* her?" she asked in shock.

Ethan's eyes narrowed in his growing anger. "If you don't shut up, I'm going to gag you. That's not a mere threat. I only kissed her to see if it would get me excited. I didn't want her just by looking at her. I wondered if my roving days were over or if I wasn't interested because of your friendship with her. I thought a kiss would help me decide. I was thrilled when it didn't, so I went to the observation deck and met some women there. And guess what happened?"

"You found *more* women to bed that night."

"I found nobody, damn it!" he shouted in frustration. "I don't want other women anymore. I want *you*."

"Well, you can't *have* me. I've listened, so let's go."

"Not until you agree to marry me—today."

“No.”

“Why not?” he demanded.

“Because you only feel guilty.”

“What about the baby?”

“There is no baby!”

“Marry me,” he ordered, grabbing her by the shoulders when she wrenched her wrist free.

“Never!”

He crushed her against him; his lips descended to hers so fast that she didn’t have time to react. His kiss was so heated that she suspected he was demanding her to say yes. But she wouldn’t. Not now—not ever.

Her heart started beating faster as his lips ground against hers; her breathing became more labored. Then it happened! All the wonderful feelings she’d felt in his arms that night returned in an instant, and she melted against him.

Well, maybe not never, she thought as his arms slid around her back. Maybe later—after he took her to bed again. But instead of him carrying her to the bed, he pulled back his head and smiled down at her.

“Marry me,” he repeated, this time in a low, loving voice.

“I can’t,” she denied.

“What about our baby?”

“There is no baby, Ethan. Why won’t you believe me?”

“Because you’re too proud to admit that you *have* to get married—even to yourself. You really won’t marry me, though, will you.”

“No,” she said in a hoarse whisper, “I won’t.”

“Then I suppose I should forget about that for today,” he announced, releasing her without warning. “Get your letter, and we’ll go see if we can find Bower for another clue.”

The first place Ethan and Blythe went was the sheriff’s office, where Ethan explained what he wanted. “My friend and I are looking for a man who might be able to tell us where to find her grandfather. A little over four years ago, I won a sternwheeler called the River Goddess in a poker game. The man’s name was Bower—Frank Bower. Do you know him?”

“Frank Bower?” the sheriff repeated.

Blythe also repeated the name in her mind. Frank Bower—Frank Bower. That was quite a coincidence. His first name was the English version of Francois. And her father had grown up thinking his name was Jacques—the French version of Jack.

“I know a few Bowers,” the sheriff was saying, “but none of them are named Frank. There’s Ray and Homer. The rest are women.”

“Could we make a list of the ones you can think of?” Ethan suggested. “Maybe one of them could give us an idea of where we could find Frank.”

“Sure. Have a seat.”

Frank Bower, Blythe thought again. If Francois had given his son an American name, could he have taken an American name, too? It was likely, but how possible was it? Francois Bower didn’t sound right. But it didn’t sound wrong, either.

“Blythe,” she heard Ethan say.

“Huh?” she asked, stunned back to the present.

"We're waiting for you to sit down."

"Oh! I'm sorry." Absently sinking onto the straight chair before her, she considered names she'd never before pieced together in the same sentence. Frank Bower—Francois Bower—Jack Bouvier—Jacques Bouvier. There was something about those names, but what? They didn't sound alike at all. Taking the letter from her handbag, Blythe slipped it from the envelope and read it again.

Dear Jacques—Please come, Jack. (That is your Christian name, not Jacques.)—Your true father, Francois Bouvier. Bouvier: B-O-U-V-I-E-R. The name on the painting flashed across her mind. Bower: B-O-W-E-R. Frank Bower—Francois Bouvier! Blythe gasped in shock. "Mon Dieu!"

Both men stared at her, and she gazed at Ethan. "You didn't tell me this man's name was Frank."

"So?"

"Here," she said, thrusting the paper she held into Ethan's hand. "Look at Father's letter. Don't you see it? Frank Bower—Francois Bouvier. He Americanized it."

"You know a Bouvier?" the sheriff asked. "There's a family here in Peoria with that name."

"Do you think it's the same person?" Ethan asked as he studied the letter. "It's possible, isn't it?" Turning her gaze to the sheriff, Blythe asked, "Are these people by the name of Bower related to the Bouviers?"

"Not that I know of. But I don't know any of them, either."

"Where could we find the Bouviers?"

"They have a big house over on Glover Street. They're one of the wealthiest families in town."

"Then why don't you know them?"

"I've only been here two years," the sheriff explained. "My son only started courting the youngest daughter—Angela—a couple of weeks ago."

Again Blythe gasped in shock, but this time Ethan chorused her. When she stared up at him, she saw that he was as astonished as she. "Are you thinking what I am, Ethan?"

"It's too much of a coincidence, isn't it."

"Yes."

"Excuse me," the sheriff inserted, "but I'm curious. What are you talking about?"

"This young lady's name is Blythe Angelique Bouvier," Ethan announced. "We may have just found her missing grandfather."

"Well, go over there right and find out. It sounds like you may have a lot of catching up to do."

"It certainly does," Ethan agreed, grasping Blythe's elbow while they all three rose. "This is a lot easier than we thought it would be, too. What did you say the address is?"

"Thirty-two Glover Street."

After getting directions, Ethan shook hands with the sheriff and thanked him for his help. As the couple left the office hand in hand, a myriad of feelings rushed through Blythe. She was happy; she was nervous; she was worried that they wouldn't accept her. But most of all, she was afraid that it might not be the family she had long dreamed of having.

TWENTY-TWO

"What do you think, Ethan?" Blythe asked as they strolled along the boardwalk. "Could they be my grandparents?"

Ethan shrugged. "I don't know what to think, angel."

"Don't call me that anymore," she insisted. "It was nice in the beginning, because I could see how fascinated you were with the portrait. But Angel seems real now. I don't feel right being called by her name."

"You feel it, too, then?"

Startled, she shot her gaze to his face. "Feel what?"

"I've looked at that picture every day for over four years, and nothing happened. Then when I met you, it seemed to come alive. But that's nothing like what happens when I look at it now. That feeling started almost as soon as we were on the Illinois River, too."

"What feeling?" she prompted.

"It's hard to explain," he said. "Whenever I look at the portrait, I feel ... I don't know. It's almost like a presence. Sometimes I even feel like she's calling to me. Do you?"

Blythe giggled. "You're more obsessed with that portrait than I thought."

"More than ever," he admitted. "And I'm serious. Angel calls to me—almost like she *wants* me to find her. It was never important before, but it is now. Let's hope that ends pretty soon. Let's hope she's living at 32 Glover Street."

"Do you really think she's my grandmother?"

"I don't see how you can doubt it now," he said. "There are too many coincidences. Here's Glover Street. Let's see if we can find the house."

Thirty-two Glover Street was a large house surrounded by a high wrought iron fence, and they stopped across the street to study it in amazement.

"Look at that house, honey," Ethan warned. "They're going to think you want their money."

Staring at the house, she replied, "Why do you think I brought the letter?"

"That letter's only going to make them more suspicious. And look at you. You look like a street urchin since you've been sick."

Blythe glanced down at herself and noticed with a start that he was right. "But this is one of my best dresses."

"It hangs on you because of the weight you lost. You look like you picked it out of a church charity box."

"Why didn't you tell me before we left the boat?" she asked.

Ethan chuckled. "And have you try on a dozen dresses, only to find that they all fit that way? We wouldn't have gotten here until tomorrow. It wouldn't have mattered which dress you tried on. They're all too big for you right now."

"I suppose you're right." With a heavy sigh, Blythe returned her gaze to the house. "Do you think we should go over or not?"

"Of course, we should."

"What if it isn't the right person?" she asked in concern.

"What if it is?" he countered.

"What if it is and he doesn't want me? I'll have lost a family."

"You'll have lost nothing." Grasping her shoulders, he turned her toward him and gazed into her eyes. "Remember when I offered to stake you a hundred dollars for your first poker game?"

"Yes, but what does that have to do with this?"

"You sit down at the table with nothing in front of you, then I put a hundred dollars there. I say, 'All right, honey, you have one hour to make as much money as you can with that. When you're done, you can keep all but the hundred I gave you. If you lose it all, we'll have a party.' You play for an hour and lose every penny of that hundred. How much of what you sat down with did you lose?"

"I didn't have anything when I sat down, so how could I lose anything?" Excitement coursed through her. "I understand. Right now, I have no family, so if I find out it's not the right man or he doesn't want me, I'm back where I started. I can't lose something I don't have."

"Exactly."

"I hadn't thought of it that way before, but you're right. Sometimes I don't know what I ever did without you, Ethan Lucas. You're a very wise man."

"Marry me," he replied heatedly, "and you'll never have to do without me again."

"Ethan."

"I know. The answer's no. But this time I was only teasing—to relax you. Let's go."

The walk across the street was the longest she'd ever taken. First, her eyes focused on the gate, taller than Ethan by more than a half a foot. Then, as they strolled up the stone path to the steps, she concentrated on the huge, ten-foot-tall oak double doors, one of which had a brass lion-head knocker on it. Concentrating on these inanimate, unfeeling objects was much easier than thinking about what lay in her immediate future. When she saw Ethan's hand reach for the knocker, she grabbed his wrist.

"Are you sure ..."

"I'm positive," he interrupted. Offering her smile, he draped his arm around her shoulders. "This is absolutely the right thing to do."

Only seconds after Ethan knocked, an average-height, distinguished gentleman of about sixty-five answered the door. From his heavy accent, Blythe knew that he was French.

"May I help you?" he asked.

"Is this the Bouvier residence?" Ethan questioned.

"*Oui, monsieur.*"

"My name is Ethan Lucas, and the lady and I are looking for a Mr. Francois Bouvier. Does he live here?"

Blythe studied the Frenchman's expression. Obviously, he'd heard of Francois. When the butler glanced down at her, Blythe noticed his expression change to something she couldn't name.

"Would you please wait in the foyer?"

Inside Blythe stared in astonishment, her mouth gaping and her eyes wide, at the ornately decorated entry room. The twelve-foot high ceiling held a crystal and brass chandelier, which was about four feet in diameter on the bottom of its three tiers. The floor was highly-polished wood that matched the stairs, banister rail, and three closed doors leading from the yellow room. It was a bright, cheery room, decorated with tables and fresh-cut flowers of the season. Blythe was certain that it must be filled with roses in the summer-

time, probably from the large garden she'd noticed from the street. Beside her, Ethan released a low whistle of amazement.

"This is quite a room!" he praised.

"Excuse me, please," the French butler said. "I shall return in a few minutes."

As the butler disappeared behind one of the doors, Ethan gazed down at Blythe. "Are you all right, honey?"

"Look at this," she drawled. "It's incredible, and it's only the foyer. What must the rest of the house look like?"

"You look even whiter than you did on the Goddess," he observed.

"I'm nervous. I think the butler knows him. Do you agree?"

"Yes, but I don't think he went for your grandfather."

"We don't know that it's the same Francois Bouvier."

"It probably is," he insisted. "There are too many coincidences for it *not* to be. Besides, didn't you say your French grandparents were wealthy? That would account for trappings like these."

"I can't get my hopes up, Ethan. I'll be too disappointed if we find out that it's not the same person."

He nodded. "I suppose that's one way of avoiding heartbreak."

The door to the room where the butler had gone open, and Ethan and Blythe faced it in expectation. Instead of an elderly man exiting, a beautiful woman of about forty-five came into the foyer with a flourish which demonstrated that she took her position in town very seriously. She was immaculately groomed and wore a peach taffeta dress that looked more handcrafted than handmade.

"I'm Mrs. Abigail Bouvier," she said with a note of hautiness in her voice. "Dausett tells me that you're looking for Francois Bouvier. May I ask why?"

"My name is Ethan Lucas, Mrs. Bouvier," he explained. "My lady-friend found a letter several months ago which he mailed to her father. She'd like to speak with Mr. Bouvier."

"That's impossible. My father-in-law died almost four years ago."

Blythe's heart ached. Now she might never know if it was the same man or not. For a while, it had seemed like she was so close, had felt like she might have a family again. But this woman obviously didn't want to associate with an intruder.

"Don't you even want to see the letter?" Ethan asked.

"I don't know what good it would do," Abigail replied.

"Are you the lady of the house now that your father-in-law is gone?" Ethan asked, determined to get as much information as possible. "Or is your mother-in-law still alive?"

"Madam Bouvier is alive, sir, but very ill. She can't have visitors—especially people she doesn't know."

"Please, Mrs. Bouvier? This young lady has come all the way from France to locate Francois. Surely, that shows you how important answers are to her. Couldn't you make an exception in this case?"

"Absolutely not."

"At least, read the letter before you make such a quick decision. Show her, Blythe."

Reaching into her reticule, Blythe withdrew the letter and held it out toward the woman. After a brief pause, Mrs. Bouvier took the letter and pulled it from the envelope. The silence seemed to last an hour while the older woman read the letter then slid it back into the envelope and returned it. The entire time Mrs. Bouvier's expression didn't change. She was either a very cold woman, or she was an excellent actress.

"I doubt that's the same Francois Bouvier, miss," Mrs. Bouvier said flatly. "It makes no

mention of Peoria, Illinois, in that letter—only New Orleans. Why would you even come here?”

“I have good reason to believe that he had another name,” Ethan explained. “Did Mr. Bouvier ever own a riverboat?”

This time the woman couldn’t contain her surprise, and her eyes widened as she answered. “How did you know?”

“He lost the River Goddess in a poker game a little over four years ago, didn’t he.”

“Where did you get your information?” she demanded.

“He lost it to me—under the name of Frank Bower. Mrs. Bouvier, Blythe could be his granddaughter. All she wants to do is know for sure.”

“I understand now!” Abigail exclaimed. “This is a trick to claim his inheritance. Well, it won’t work. My husband is a lawyer, and he’ll stop you.”

Unable to remain silent a moment longer, Blythe denied the accusation as calmly as she could. “No, ma’am. I only want to find the missing part of my past. I don’t want his money.”

“Look at you! Do you really think I’m going to believe you? I don’t care how nice that dress is, it doesn’t even fit.”

“Miss Bouvier’s been ill,” Ethan inserted. “She’s hardly eaten for days. She was bound to lose some weight, and that was bound to show in her clothes. Now that you’ve read the letter, would you please change your mind and let her visit your mother-in-law? Maybe she can tell us if there’s a relationship.”

“Get out of our house,” Mrs. Bouvier insisted. “Dausett!”

“Could we at least compromise? Tell your mother-in-law that Miss Blythe Angelique Bouvier, daughter of Jack Bouvier, would like to talk with her. Let Mrs. Bouvier make the decision.”

“All right,” Abigail agreed as Dausett entered the foyer, “but I doubt she’ll talk to you. Watch them, Dausett. I think they’re trying to get the family’s money.”

“*Oui, madame.*”

To Blythe’s surprise, Dausett watched her unfalteringly. She didn’t like him staring at her. To hide her discomfort, her gaze followed Mrs. Bouvier as she entered a room at the top of the stairs, closing the door after her.

In only a moment, a flood of French words came from the room. Ethan recognized only one: *prostituée*. Obviously, Blythe’s name had some meaning to the unseen French woman upstairs. Glancing down, he saw that Blythe’s face had become even more ashen. Suddenly, she began weeping as though she was weak.

This couldn’t be happening! Blythe thought. This unknown woman was calling her a prostitute, was saying that she had stolen her husband, was shouting that she never wanted to hear that name or see that face again. But as far as she knew, she’d never met Madam Bouvier. Why would she react so viciously to someone she didn’t even know?

As Ethan started to support her, Blythe went limp and collapsed into his quick arms. Laying her on the floor, he stripped off his jacket while frantically ordering Dausett to get her a glass of water. As he covered her, the voices upstairs quieted and Mrs. Bouvier came down the steps, staring back at the room in disbelief. When she finally turned her gaze to the foyer, she saw Ethan cover Blythe with his jacket then kneel beside her and tenderly take her hand in both of his.

“What happened?” Mrs. Bouvier asked as she knelt beside him.

“She fainted. She’s going to have a baby.”

“Ethan?” Blythe said weakly as she regained consciousness.

"Yes, darling. It's me."

"We have to leave," she said. "She doesn't want us here."

"You can't go anywhere yet," Mrs. Bouvier insisted, her voice taking on a note of concern.

"I can't stay here. This isn't my family, so I can't intrude any longer. Please, Ethan. Take me back to the Goddess."

"If this isn't your family," Abigail replied, her voice filled with suspicion, "why did you get so upset?"

"You heard her."

Dausett returned with the water, and Ethan helped Blythe sit up. She took several sips while Abigail responded to her statement. "I heard her, but I don't know what she said. I don't speak French."

"She called me a prostitute. She said that she never wants to hear my name or see my face again. I don't even know her. Why did she act like that?"

"But, Blythe," Ethan said, "she could be ..."

"She isn't my grandmother. I don't know who she is, and right now I don't care. But she is definitely *not* my grandmother."

Ethan turned his gaze to Abigail. "Does Madam Bouvier look anything like Blythe?"

"Heavens no."

"See, Ethan?" Blythe said. "I told you. Madam Bouvier isn't my grandmother, so let's leave. This Francois Bouvier was the wrong man. He wasn't my grandfather."

"But he was Frank Bower," Ethan insisted. "Something's happening here."

"I just want to go back to the Goddess—now."

"You shouldn't leave yet," Abigail said. "If you're going to have a baby, you should rest before you walk back to the boat."

"I am not ..." Blythe shook her head, knowing her words would only be denied. "Never mind. Nobody would listen to me, anyway. I'm fine now. Honest. I was only shocked by how angry *Madame* Bouvier was."

"At least let me send Dausett for the doctor," Abigail offered.

Blythe smiled then said, "I appreciate your kindness, but I'm fine. Honest. All I need is a little food. Like Ethan said, I haven't eaten much lately."

"That's understandable, but I must insist that my groom take you to the riverfront. I'm going out myself before long, and my carriage is already hitched. And before you say anything, my errand isn't something that can't wait until he gets back."

"We'll accept your hospitality, Mrs. Bouvier," Ethan said before Blythe could decline her offer. "Thank you."

Although Ethan wanted to talk about what had happened, Blythe stubbornly refused. By the time they reached the Goddess, she didn't even want to think about the incident. She told him that all she wanted to do was eat and take a nap. So he wouldn't disturb her, Ethan went to his office to do some work.

While he was there, Ethan thought he heard Blythe say, "Come to me," but when he looked at the door, she was nowhere in the room. Dismissing the incidence as his imagination, he continued with his paperwork. But the same phrase echoed through his mind twice more during the afternoon.

Again, Ethan ate dinner alone with Solange because Blythe didn't feel like eating. Now

he was even more certain that she was pregnant, and no amount of denial on her part would change his mind. But how could he convince her to marry him?

After dinner, he walked Solange back to her room then went to the observation deck. Pulling a chair near the railing, he propped his feet on it to lean back and relax.

"Excuse me," a man said about a half an hour later. "Are you the owner of the River Goddess?"

Ethan scrambled to his feet. Turning around, he saw a tall, ruggedly handsome man of about thirty-five extending his hand in greeting. "Yes, sir. Ethan Lucas. Do you want passage?"

"No, but I'd like to talk to you," the man announced as they shook hands. "My name is Ray Bower."

"Bower?" Ethan repeated suspiciously. "As in Frank Bower?"

"That was one of my father's names—the one he preferred and used for business purposes. His real name was Francois Bouvier. I had my name legally changed about ten years ago because he preferred Bower. Dausett tells me that you have a friend whose name is Bouvier—a female friend."

"As a matter of fact, I do," Ethan admitted, "but I'd rather not talk about it here. Let's go to my office."

In the privacy of Ethan's office, Ray's gaze fell upon Angel's portrait. "So that's Angelique. She was a beautiful woman."

"Angelique?" Ethan repeated.

Ray nodded. "That's right. My late father's mistress."

Ethan stared at him in shock. "What?"

"Dausett said that Miss Bouvier looks exactly like Angelique. I'd like to meet her if I can. I'd like to ask her a few questions."

"Such as?" Ethan prompted.

"I need to know what her father's name was," Ray explained. "On second thought, maybe I *should* talk to you first. My father had a liaison with Angelique that produced a child—a son—his only blood child. The rest of us were adopted, because his wife couldn't have children. Do you know the name of Miss Bouvier's father?"

"Jack."

"That's what I thought. When my father was dying, he called me and Peter into his room. Peter's my brother—a lawyer—and Father wanted us to know that he had another child. That's when he told us about Angelique and Jack. It was a deathbed confession of sorts. When Peter was gone, Father asked me to find Jack, but I haven't been able to."

"Why did he ask you—if Peter's the lawyer?"

"Peter would never do it. I was just like my father, Mr. Lucas ..."

"Ethan, please."

"All right. That's one reason I changed my name. Peter's only interested in the wealth, so he won't look for a missing brother."

"Then there's an inheritance?" Ethan asked.

"I didn't say that. All I'm saying is that I promised my father I would find Jack. You and Miss Bouvier are the closest I've come. The last information I had was that Jack was on his way to the United States from France. That was over twenty years ago. I've searched a lot, but I can't find the man. Do you know where he is?"

"He died about eight years ago."

"Then Miss Bouvier is probably my father's only blood granddaughter."

Ethan nodded his agreement. "It appears that way."

"I'd like to meet her. Will you show me to her cabin?"

"I don't know," Ethan said, suddenly leery of this handsome stranger. "She wasn't feeling well earlier."

"I promise not to stay long. I only want to ask her a few questions. Peter and I decided that we need to know the truth, and I was elected to get it."

With a sigh, Ethan nodded. "All right. I did offer to finance the search for her past, and you're apparently part of it. Come on."

TWENTY-THREE

As she opened her eyes, she saw Ethan sitting on the edge of his bed.

"You have a visitor, angel," he said.

"Solange?"

Shaking his head, he replied, "A man named Ray Bower. He wants to talk to you, and I think he should. He knows an awful lot about the portrait in my office."

Blythe had mixed feelings about this. After what happened at the mansion, she didn't think this was a good idea. But she'd traveled to far. She couldn't turn away an opportunity to see where this meeting would lead. Sitting up, she said, "Let me splash some water on my face and brush my hair. I'll be there shortly."

As Ethan left, Blythe got out of bed and went to the wash stand. So there was finally somebody who had a clue about Angel. That ought to make Ethan happy. He wanted to find out who Angel was even more badly than she did. For Blythe, Angel was merely somebody who looked like her during another era. For Ethan, Angel was an obsession—a passionate obsession, as he'd once admitted.

But if that was all it was, why would he be so interested in her talking to Ray Bower? More importantly, who was Ray Bower? What possible connection could he have to her? Unless ... Maybe Ethan had found the Frank Bower from whom he'd won the River Goddess. Nonsense. If that were the case, Ethan would be more interested than she again. Something was happening, and the only way to find out what was to talk to Ray Bower.

Inhaling deeply to steady her nerves, Blythe set down her brush and exited the bedroom. As she did, both Ethan and Ray rose from their seats. Blythe studied the blond, blue-eyed man with interest. He wasn't quite as tall as Ethan, but he came close. And he had an outdoor look about him, already deeply tanned from working in the sun despite the time of year.

"Blythe," Ethan said with a note of irritation in his voice, "this is Ray Bower. Ray, Blythe Bouvier."

"How do you do, Mr. Bower," she said with a shy smile.

"Under the circumstances, Blythe," he returned, "I think it would be more appropriate if you call me Ray. Would you be willing to talk with me privately?"

"Privately?" Ethan raged. "Absolutely not! She won't be alone with you or any other man."

Glaring at him, Blythe snapped. "I'll be alone with whomever I please."

"You're only defying me again."

"Maybe I am this time," she agreed, "but this is my decision. Apparently, he has something important to discuss."

"I *know* what the hell he has to discuss," Ethan declared, because he already told me. "And believe me, it's nothing he can't discuss in front of me. I'm not leaving."

"Fine. Then you won't mind if we do."

"I'll follow you."

"Ethan Lucas," she said maternally, "this is my suite, too. I have as much of a right to

privacy here as you do. You're the one who filled your boat. *You're* the one who booked it so full that there wasn't anyplace else for me to stay."

"You *live* with him?" Ray interrupted in shock. "And you're not married?"

"It sure as hell isn't *my* choice," Ethan told him. "I'll go, but you keep your hands to yourself."

When Ethan stalked from the room, Blythe sank onto the sofa and motioned for Ray to do the same. "I apologize for arguing with Ethan in front of you, Ray. I didn't think he'd care if we were alone."

"Obviously, you were wrong," he observed with a chuckle as he also sat down. "He must love you very much."

Blythe stared at him in amazement. "Ethan? He doesn't love me like you think. He thinks of me as his little sister. Now what can I do for you?"

"I understand that you have a letter to a man named Jack Bouvier from one named Francois Bouvier."

"As a matter of fact, I do. How did you know?"

"Dausett told me. Do you remember him from the Bouvier residence this morning?"

"Of course. He looked at me quite strangely."

"I'm not surprised. He said that you look exactly like Angelique."

"Angelique?" she repeated, stunned. "That's my middle name."

"He heard. That's why he came to my house. I have a letter, too, Blythe—from a woman named Mireille Bouvier."

"My grandmother?"

"Yes. Would you like to see it?"

"Please."

Accepting the tattered paper Ray took from his pocket, Blythe opened it carefully and read the French missive:

Francois,

I lost my husband, then three months later you stole my son. Jacques told me that, because I deceived him all these years, he wants nothing to do with me. He is on his way to America.

Your dear, departed father tried to help your son, tried to keep him from the pain of being called bastard. I loved him as my own, Francois, and I raised him. You should have written to me before you did Jacques. I could have spared him more heartache. Now he says I will never see him again.

You destroyed my family, Francois, and I pray Jacques will do the same to yours.

Mireille Bouvier

"I didn't know *Grand-mere* Bouvier was so bitter," Blythe said as she passed the letter back to Ray. "I hope her prayers weren't answered."

"They weren't, but not because our family was loyal to Father. Jack never made it to us."

"Francois Bouvier was your father?" she asked in amazement.

"That's right. Now do understand why I said that, under the circumstances, Ray would be better. I'm your uncle, Blythe. Actually, I'm not sure what the relationship is, but I suppose that's the closest. Jack was Father's blood son. Peter and I were adopted. So were our sisters."

Blythe stared at him blankly. She had a family now, but she felt the same as she had a

couple of minutes ago. She didn't feel a kinship to this handsome man, and she didn't feel like she *should* have one. Why? After all the miles she'd traveled, all the months of planning her search, shouldn't she feel something? Why was it that all she felt was ... What did she feel toward this man? She definitely didn't think of him as an uncle. Suddenly, she remembered him mentioning somebody by the name of Angelique.

"Who's Angelique?" she asked.

"Your grandmother."

"What?"

"Angelique Fabre is your grandmother, Blythe," Ray explained. "That's probably where your middle name came from."

"No, my father had heard the name somewhere and wanted to name his first daughter that. But Mother liked Blythe, so they compromised. As far as I know, he never knew his real mother's name. He liked Angelique for as long as he could remember, but that's all he said about it."

"He could have heard it when he lived with his mother. As I understand it, he was stolen from her when he was only three. Father and Angelique searched for him for years—until Father got a letter from my uncle Jean's attorney in France. Apparently, Jean had died and left a message for Father, telling him that Jacques was his son. Father wrote to him immediately, which is probably the letter you have, right?"

"Yes. This Angelique Fabre. Do you know what she looked like?"

"You don't know this, but Father was an excellent artist. He painted a lot in his spare time. There was one portrait in particular ..."

Before he could finish, Blythe blurted out, "Angel!"

"Who's Angel?"

"That's the woman in the portrait Ethan has. You should see it. She looks exactly like me—really. It's uncanny how close the resemblance is—right down to the birthmark on my collarbone."

"I saw her portrait, too, and you're right. That's why Dausett told me about you. He knew Angelique because he traveled with Father."

"Do you know where Angelique is now?"

"I imagine she's still in New Orleans. Mother heard about Father's affair and insisted that he stop meeting Angelique. What she didn't know was that Father still had Angelique at the other end of his run—from Chicago to New Orleans. Mother in Peoria, and Angelique in New Orleans. That went on for several years—until Mother found him buying toys in a store here. But they didn't have any children and no relatives with children. That's when she learned that Angelique was still in Father's life and threatened divorce. No good Catholic could get a divorce, so Father suggested adopting us. Apparently, he thought children would keep their marriage in tact."

"Obviously, he was right," Blythe mumbled.

Ray shrugged. "It was more of a way to keep her from finding out that he was still seeing Angelique. On his deathbed, Father told me that he loved Angelique with all his heart and was devastated that he'd lost the River Goddess. That meant he couldn't be with her again. It took him a long time to save up and buy that steamboat. You see, his parents wouldn't give him money for that. But he paid for it in cash—partly through gambling. Then he lost it the same way. If you ask me, not seeing Angelique anymore is what killed him."

"That's a very romantic story," Blythe said with a soft smile. "I wish my life could be as exciting."

"It looks to me like you have all the excitement you need, young lady," he said paternal-ly. "Living with a man you're not married to is stupid. You heard where it got Angelique and Father."

"But I'm not living with Ethan like *that*. I sleep here on the divan, and he sleeps in the bed."

"I saw the way he looked at you. That's a man who wishes things were different. And you're a very beautiful, very young woman. Wait a minute! Abigail told Peter that you're going to have a baby."

Blythe's face heated in embarrassment. "That's what Ethan told her, but he's wrong. I keep telling him that, but he won't listen."

"Why would he think you're going to have a baby if he didn't have first-hand knowledge that the possibility exists?"

"You didn't come here to discuss my health, Ray," Blythe said.

"You *do* sleep in his bed."

"I do not! He won't touch me like that anymore." Slapping her hand over her mouth, Blythe stared at Ray in shock. She hadn't intended to say anything, but Ray was so easy to talk to. How would she reverse her blunder? "And even if he wanted to, I wouldn't let him."

"I think we should change the subject. I don't want to have to scold the niece I just met. Tell me everything you can about your father's and your backgrounds."

"I don't know much about his, but I'll tell you what I can," she agreed.

"How long does it take a man to say 'That dead man named Francois was your grandfather'?" Ethan asked Solange as he paced her cabin. "And why is it so quiet over there?"

"They are talking," she said.

"How do you know?"

"Blythe likes you. She is not interested in other men, as she says."

"She *told* you that she's not interested in other men?" he quizzed, filled with a new hope.

"No, that is the English she used in France. Do you love Blythe?"

"Of course, I do!" he exclaimed. "Why *else* do you think I keep asking her to marry me?"

"She says you are guilty."

Ethan nodded with a frown. "I do feel guilty—if that's what you mean. But that doesn't mean I don't love her, and I've told her that. Unfortunately, she doesn't believe me. Maybe that's because I started our friendship by lying to her. She probably thinks everything I say is a lie. But when I was drunk and went to her, I remember only two things: telling her that I love her and that I was completely satisfied—right down to my soul—when it was over."

"That night?"

"Yes."

"That was not love, Ethan." When he stopped and stared at her in shock, Solange continued. "Love does not hurt the heart like you hurt her heart."

Ethan stared at her. "I hadn't thought of it like that. No wonder she won't marry me; no wonder she doesn't believe that I'll be faithful for the rest of my life. Being gentle in bed isn't enough, is it, Solange. Being obsessed with a woman isn't enough, either."

"Passion. You must have passion. American men—bah! They do not know passion. But French men—*they* know passion. French men can make a woman very happy with pas-sion."

"Do you think that would help with Blythe?"

"You try. You will see."

"I will, Solange. And thank you for the advice."

"It's hard for me to think of you as my niece, Blythe," Ray said.

"I'm having trouble thinking of you as my uncle, too," she admitted. "You're easy to talk to, and I've truly enjoyed it. But we got distracted by other things tonight."

"We certainly did. I'm glad you asked me to join you on the trip to New Orleans, too. I'd like to meet Father's one true love—if she's still alive."

"I hope Ethan has a cabin available for you. He only has a couple of single ones."

"Maybe I should find myself a wife so I can get a bigger cabin if I have to."

"Do you have a special lady?" she asked.

"Hardly! I'm not ready to settle down yet. If I did, I'd have to give up impromptu trips like the one I'll be leaving on in a few days." When he rose, Blythe followed suit. "I'd better be leaving. Ethan should be back soon."

"He won't come back until I go find him. I get quite nasty when I have my privacy invaded."

"Just like your grandfather Francois," Ray admitted with a laugh. "Just like me."

"A family trait?" she responded.

"It's in the blood for you maybe. For me, it's probably from living with him for so long."

"I imagine," she agreed as she walked him to the door. "I'm glad to have met you."

"I'm glad you were receptive to our conversation. I wasn't sure you would be after Mother's performance at the house. She's quite ill, and her mind wanders a lot. Apparently, she thought you were Angelique—at least, that's what Dausett said she was shouting about."

"That explains it then. I have no hard feelings. I know when I'm not wanted, so I won't go back to the house uninvited—maybe not even invited."

"You'll always be welcome at *my* house, Blythe," he told her. "You know that, don't you?"

"Uh-huh." Blythe took his hands and stood on her toes, planting a soft kiss near his lips. "Thank you for coming."

Ray stared down at her with amazement in his eyes. Instead of saying you're welcome, Ray swept her into his arms and covered her mouth with his. His tongue slid past her lips to unite with hers for the first time.

Oh, no! Her uncle was kissing her like Ethan did. She couldn't let this go on. But the moment she began to move against him, the new feelings Ethan had created in her sprang to life in full force. And in her mind, she could only envision Ethan. Again, her instincts overruled her logic, and she hugged him tightly in acceptance. Her body melted against him, moving seductively, grinding, pushing, striving for the satisfaction she'd never had. If only he would put her to bed! But he didn't. Instead, he held her tightly while he stared down into her eyes.

Blythe stared up at him in shock. That wasn't Ethan—it was Ray. She had no business kissing a man she'd just met. But then, she had done it with Ethan. Her mind reeled with the inappropriate behavior she'd just exhibited.

"I can't believe I did that," he admitted in a whisper.

"I can't believe I *let* you," she replied in a like tone.

"You're so beautiful, Blythe. And you have so much passion in you that I couldn't bring myself to stop. Are you sure you're not having relations with Lucas?"

"I think I'd know it if I were."

"The man must be a monk if he's living with a woman like you and not taking you to bed with him every night. Or he doesn't know what he could have if he would ask the right question."

"What question is that?"

"Would you let me take you to bed, of course. All he'd have to do is be honest with you. I'm surprised he doesn't know that."

"He asked me to marry him several times. Doesn't that mean the same thing?"

"Hardly. If I were living with you, I certainly wouldn't want you sleeping on the settee."

Blythe blushed and bowed her head. "Ethan's the only man I've ever been with, and it was only one time." She turned her gaze back to Ray. "But my best friend's been with more than one man. She says it's better for a woman to have experience before she gets married. Maybe she's right."

"I don't think so. I think something like that is between the woman and the man she's planning to marry. Are you planning to marry Lucas?"

"No. He hasn't said the words that will get me to the altar."

"He hasn't told you that he loves you?" Ray asked in amazement. "The man's a damned fool."

"Not at the right moment, anyway, and I can't ask him to say it. It wouldn't mean anything. But I shouldn't mislead you. He told me when he was too drunk to remember what he was doing, and he told me when he was in danger of losing his life. But that's not when I want to hear it. I want to hear it when everything's sane."

"If it weren't for Ethan ..."

"I know. I feel the same way. We have a very good rapport, don't we."

"Very good. I can't help it. I'm going to kiss you again before I leave."

His mouth caught hers hungrily, draining her mind of anything but being in a man's arms. This time, though, she pushed him away. She needed to discourage this behavior, even if she did love the sensations coursing through her body.

The door slammed open, and Ray suddenly jerked away from her, leaving her hands in the same position as when they were on his chest. Then Blythe saw Ethan balling his right hand into a fist. She screamed and grabbed his arm before he could hit Ray.

"Ethan! Stop!" she exclaimed. "It's not what you think."

"What the hell do you mean not what I think?" he demanded. "I've got eyes, damn it. I can tell when two people are headed to bed."

"I was pushing him away."

"I told you to keep your damned hands off her, Bower."

"Why?" Ray retaliated. "You're not a jealous lover. From what I understand, you're not even her lover—jealous or not."

"Both of you stop it!" she shouted.

"I'm going to marry the woman," Ethan growled.

"You are not," Blythe declared. "I've told you over and over that I won't marry you."

"You said you wouldn't when you thought I couldn't be faithful. That's changed."

"My *mind* hasn't."

"You're still carrying my child."

"Damn it, Ethan. I'm not pregnant, and I wish you'd quit telling people that I am. It's embarrassing."

"I don't believe you," he declared. "You're only saying that to defy me again. For some reason, that gives you a lot of pleasure."

Furious with the way he was acting, she made a proclamation she knew would hurt him. "*You* don't want to be intimate with me, Ethan Lucas. Maybe I *should* find a man who will. You find all the women *you* want."

But he reacted as though her words hadn't bothered him in the least. "I told you that I'm done with other women. I don't want anybody but you. When will you believe me?"

"Maybe when hell freezes over," Ray inserted angrily as he yanked his shirt from Ethan's hands. "At least, that's when I hope she believes you. I'd better go now, Blythe. I'll see you tomorrow about arrangements for the trip."

"All right, Ray. Good night."

Before Ethan could stop him, Ray raced from the room. When he glanced back to Blythe, she stared up at him defiantly and said, "I would have done it, Ethan. If he would have asked, I would have gone to bed with him. And I would have given him everything I had—just to spite you."

Without a word, Ethan embraced her tenderly and lowered his head to hers. Now *this* was what she wanted, from the *man* she wanted. After only a few moments, he released her, strode to the settee, and collapsed onto it with a heavy sigh.

"God, angel," he groaned as he ran his fingers through his hair, "what have you done to me? You've confused me so badly that I don't even know how to think anymore."

TWENTY-FOUR

Blythe closed the door then wandered to the wing chair across from him and dropped down. "I didn't do anything to you. Whatever you think happened, you did on your own."

"I never felt this way before I met you," he proclaimed. "In thirty-three years I've never had feelings like these—not even for Angel. Or maybe I should say Angelique. After all, that is her name."

Blythe nodded. "Yes, Angelique Fabre. As far as Ray knows, she still lives in New Orleans. I actually have a family, Ethan. Do you realize that?"

"I don't want to share you with a family."

"You don't have a choice," she countered irritably. "I invited Ray to join us on our search for Angelique."

"You did *what*?" he asked in shock. "How could you? You know how I feel, honey. Why would you ask a man—a relative at that—who kisses you on a long trip?"

"I didn't know that kiss would happen when I suggested it. Besides, he's not a blood relative. He was adopted."

"He's older than I am."

"So?"

His eyes met hers with so much misery that her heart went out to him. "Don't you feel *anything* for me, Blythe?"

Moving to sit beside him, she grasped his hand and spoke in a caring tone. "Of course, I feel something. You're a very dear friend."

"But I keep asking you to marry me. Can't you see I want more than friendship?"

"If I could get over the feeling that you only ask because you feel guilty about that night, maybe I could, too. But I can't get over that feeling, Ethan. And I certainly can't marry a man merely because he feels guilty."

"Isn't there some way I could prove guilt has nothing to do with this?"

"I don't know. There's also the fact that you want to marry me because of a baby. That's no way to start a marriage."

"People get married because children are on the way all the time, and most of them stay together."

"But we're not most people," she insisted, "at least, I'm not."

"That's true. You're different from any other woman I've ever met. No, that's not quite true. I *have* met other women like you, but I was never interested in them. Defiance isn't one of my favorite attributes. Then again, there's something different about you that intrigues me. I think it has to do with the way you can handle me. You don't back down from an argument; you make *me* do it. No other woman has ever done that to me—not even my mother." Staring into her eyes, he released a low, disheartened moan. "God, I wish I could remember that night more clearly. Do you know that I haven't had a drop of liquor since I sobered up?"

She stared back at him, startled by his admission. "Why not?"

"I never again want to be so drunk that I can't remember what I do with you. I want to

remember every detail of our relationship. I know part of that's impossible now, but I can remember almost everything before that night and definitely everything after it. When I realized that the most important night of my life was nearly a total blank, I wanted to die. That's why I stayed drunk for so long. But when you came back to life, I knew I had a chance to recapture that moment someday."

"That moment will never be recaptured," Blythe said to put some rationality in his mind, "by either of us."

"No, I suppose not. I'm sorry that I got so upset about Ray. I overreacted because I could see you in bed with him when I wanted to be the man in your arms."

"You don't own me, Ethan," she replied. "You can't tell me who I can and can't be with. Besides, I would never do anything with Ray. He's my uncle whether it's by blood or not."

"I know that now. Just don't be captivated by him. It will make you miserable, and I don't want that for you. I want you to be happy forever. I could make you happy, too, Blythe. I know I could—if you'd only give me the chance."

"There's more to happiness than having a good lover," she reminded him.

"I know." Pausing a moment, he continued. "Did you honestly think I was a good lover?"

Her anxiety exploded in that moment. She shouldn't have said that, shouldn't have admitted that she'd enjoyed with they'd done. Now she had to find a way to explain away her blunder without hurting him in the process. Choosing her words carefully, she said, "I didn't say that. But I heard talk, Ethan. I overheard conversations between Jenny and Lucille, and both of them told me straight out how good you are. Don't you remember? You were there at the time."

"But they were trying to convince each other that they were the better partner. I truly never consummated anything with them." He paused again. "Maybe I should let you sleep. We've both had a long day, and I want to discuss a few things with Jennings."

"It was awfully nice of him to stay on from Chicago, wasn't it," she observed.

"He did it for you. When we find Angelique, he's going home to his family and watch his children finish growing up. He found out how much he's been missing since he got so close to you. So, you see, you've changed more than one man on this trip."

After giving her a quick kiss on the lips, Ethan rose and stalked to the door with an absent good night. Waiting a few minutes so he wouldn't see her, she left the suite and went next door to visit with Solange. Ray's kisses had left her wanting more, and she had to know how to get Ethan in bed with her. Since Solange had been with several different men over the last few years, she would know exactly what to do.

"Did you have a good talk with your uncle?" Solange asked as Blythe entered her cabin.

"Ray's very easy to talk to," Blythe said, "and we get along quite well."

"What happened? Ethan was very angry."

"Furious. He walked in on Ray and me kissing—not like uncle and niece, either. But he's not really my uncle, Solange. He was adopted. At first, I was excited by the embrace. Then I realized he wasn't Ethan. I was very embarrassed by what I'd done. Ray is quite handsome, don't you think?"

"Ethan is handsome."

"Ray can be handsome, too," Blythe countered. "Besides, Ethan treats me like a little sister. Ray treats me like a desirable woman. *That's* how I want Ethan to treat me."

"Ethan is ... how do you say *jaloux*?"

"Ethan's jealous?" Blythe exclaimed.

"You can have Ethan, Blythe," Solange insisted. "Do you want him?"

"Of course! But I'm afraid, too. I don't know how to seduce a man, and I don't want to

make a mistake—not with Ethan. He’s used to women with experience. Now I wish I’d listened to you in France! I shouldn’t have saved myself for marriage—like my mother said. It didn’t happen, anyway, and now I don’t know how to please an experienced man like Ethan.”

“I do not think he cares. I think he likes your innocence.”

“My innocence!” Blythe replied in amazement. “Honest?”

“He did not want me. He did not want other women. I was there while he talked to them. He looked, but he did not touch. And he did not look interested. He is not *infidèle*, Blythe. I think he loves you.”

Blythe sighed. “Then why won’t he tell me again?”

“He, too, is afraid. You must tell him you want him.”

“I can’t! I’ve already tried, but nothing comes out.”

“Then you must show him. I will tell you how.”

“Now that we’ve discussed business,” Jennings said as he sat in his cabin with Ethan, “let’s discuss the real reason you’re here. What happened with Blythe this time?”

Ethan’s mouth dropped open, and he stared at his friend in astonishment. “How did you know I came because of Blythe?”

“We’re friends, remember? Now what is it? Didn’t things go well this morning?”

“They went a little too well. Frank Bower and Francois Bouvier were the same person. According to her uncle, Bouvier used Bower for business purposes.”

“That shouldn’t surprise you. You always did suspect that the River Goddess belonged to Blythe’s family at one time.”

“I sure as hell didn’t think Bower and Bouvier were the same person,” Ethan said.

“So, she has a family who wants her.”

Ethan shook his head. “She has a family, but I’m not sure they want her. Bouvier’s widow’s sick, but she made it very clear that she doesn’t want Blythe anywhere near her.”

“And her uncle?”

“He wants her *too* much,” Ethan proclaimed.

“What do you mean?”

“The bastard was here a while ago to meet Blythe. I stayed with Solange while they talked in the suite—so I would be nearby in case Blythe needed me.”

“Why would you think she might need you?”

“I took Ray Bower—that’s her uncle—to my office. He knows Angel’s real name. It’s Angelique something.”

“My God! That must mean she’s related to Blythe.”

“Apparently, she’s Blythe’s grandmother. Ray’s been trying to find Jack Bouvier for the past four years. Frank died shortly after I won the boat. At least, that’s how I piece it together. I let Blythe and Ray be alone for about two hours before I went back to the suite. And guess what I saw. They were kissing. And Blythe loved it! I could tell by the way she was moving against him. He’s her uncle, for God’s sake. What was that bastard thinking about? She did push him away, but still she let him kiss her.”

“Sounds to me like somebody’s jealous.”

“Somebody’s furious,” Ethan declared. “And it’s me.”

Jennings shook his head. “Are you seriously going to sit there and tell me that you didn’t fly into a jealous rage when you saw them together?”

Ethan stared at Jennings in shock. Is that what had happened? Had he been jealous of Ray Bower? How was that possible? No other man had made him jealous. With a gasp, he realized the truth. Other men *had* made him jealous! That was why he got so drunk on Blythe's birthday, why he had gone to her during the night, why he hadn't believed her declaration that she'd never done it before. He hadn't wanted to believe it because, if he had, he wouldn't have taken her.

"Oh, my God," he groaned, burying his head in his hands.

"So you finally see it. It took you long enough."

Raising his head again, Ethan gazed at his friend. "What am I going to do? I asked her to marry me again today, and she turned me down—again. She doesn't want me."

"Don't be so sure. Do you remember what I told you when she said she didn't want that bracelet?"

"About diamonds? I remember. But I haven't bought her any yet. Solange and I are going into Peoria tomorrow to find something."

"Won't Solange say something to her?"

Shaking his head, Ethan replied, "I doubt it. They may be best friends, but she supports that we're together. She believes I can make Blythe happy forever." Ethan sighed. "If only *Blythe* would believe it."

"Can you blame her after everything that's happened?"

"No. But how can I convince her? I treat her right, and I haven't made any overtures that she could misconstrue. One of the things that attracted me was her innocence. And what did I do? I robbed her of it. How can I go back now?"

"You can't. You can only go forward."

"I suppose you're right." Ethan sighed again as he rose. "Thank you for listening to me, Jennings. Blythe should be asleep by now, so I should get to bed if I'm going shopping tomorrow morning. Good night."

Ethan closed the door with a quiet click then turned around, only to see that Blythe wasn't in the room. Calling her name softly, he waited for a response but received none. Maybe she was visiting with Solange. They hadn't spent much time together that day, and she probably wanted to tell her friend all about her talk with Ray. Leaving the kerosene lamp on the wall lit so she could see when she came in, he went into the bedroom. Enough light came into the room for him to see that she was sleeping in his bed.

No wonder she hadn't answered him. Although it was tempting to rip off his clothes and join her, he casually disrobed and put his clothes away. After cleaning up, he slid into a nightshirt that he'd bought shortly after Blythe had moved in with him. He hated nightshirts, but they helped keep him celibate. Now to wake up Blythe and send her to the sofa she'd already prepared for the night.

"Blythe, honey," he said softly as he sat down on the edge of the bed. "It's time for you to go into the other room."

"M-m-m," she moaned, rolling from her side to her back without opening her eyes.

"Blythe. Darling. Come on, honey, wake up. I'm ready to go to bed." When she didn't stir, he decided to carry her to the sofa and tossed back the covers, revealing the nude woman beneath them. He released a heated sigh of surprise. "Oh. My. God."

He examined her body in the dim light and could feel himself grow. So this was what she looked like naked! Ever since that night he'd wondered, and now he knew. That night!

If only it hadn't happened. Her seduction was sweet and innocent—just like she was. But he couldn't have her again until after they were married.

She was so beautiful, so perfectly proportioned. Her breasts were so firm, her stomach so flat, her hips so round, her legs so long in proportion to the rest of her body. And her womanhood so very enticing! No! He couldn't think that way. He had to cover her up again. Otherwise, he would do something he'd vowed not to until she was his wife.

But his hands wouldn't move to the covers. They were so attracted to the memory of her soft skin that he could actually feel her chest against his fingertips—just as he had the morning he gave her the necklace. Without realizing it, he sank onto the edge of the bed again. His hand reached out to caress her cheek while he stared down at her.

Solange had told her to pretend that she was asleep until he lay down beside her, but Blythe couldn't do it any longer. His touch was so tender that she had to open her eyes and see the expression on his face. Good Lord! That wasn't lust in his dark eyes; it was love. Ethan Lucas really did love her, even though he never said the words anymore. He didn't want to marry her out of guilt, and he didn't want to marry her because of a baby. He wanted to marry her because he was in love.

"I'm sorry I woke you, darling," he whispered.

"I wasn't asleep."

"No, I imagine you weren't. This is your sweet, innocent way of seducing me."

"I don't know any other way."

"I can't do it, darling. I can't bed you again yet."

Without a word, Blythe reached up and began to unbutton his nightshirt while he ran his fingers through her soft hair over and over again. When she opened the bottom button and discovered there was still material, she did what Ethan had done to her nightgown—she tore it apart.

"Are you sure about this, darling?" he asked. "Is this *really* what you want?"

She breathed her answer. "Shut up and kiss me."

His lips met hers with tenderness until she slipped her tongue into his mouth. She didn't want tenderness that night. She wanted a passion unlike any she'd ever known, and she was determined to get it. To show him what she wanted, she moved his hand to her breast.

His mouth ground against hers. His tongue probed and explored, clashing with hers as she tentatively caressed his manhood. His movements became even more passionate. He didn't merely caress her breast; he massaged it as his free hand skimmed over the other side of her body, scorching her skin with so much heat that she wanted to cry out in joy.

When he suddenly broke the kiss, she grabbed his head and forced it back to hers. She didn't want to stop kissing him—not ever. After prying her hands from him, he broke the kiss again then kissed his way lower, to the excited pink tip of her breast. The sensation of his lips on her nipple was incredible, and she moaned as she tangled her fingers in his thick hair.

One of his hands disappeared from her body, and noises from beside her confused her, but she ignored it. She wanted to feel more. But *both* of his hands disappeared. Her mind centered on other actions he made.

He circled her hardened bud with the tip of his tongue then slid it over her breast, through the valley, to the other breast. He kissed her nipple and circled it with his tongue. Again he didn't linger long before he glided his tongue down her stomach to her navel, kissing her tenderly before moving lower still. His hands caressed her everywhere—her

calves and thighs, her arms and shoulders, her hips and sides. And her breasts! His thumbs taunted her hard tips until she could scarcely bear the excitement raging through her. She wanted him, but not this way. She wanted to feel him in her body!

As if he read her mind, he kissed his way upward again. Starting at the insides of her thighs, he slowly worked his way over her stomach and each breast. Finally, he positioned himself between her spread legs at the eager passage to their union. Staring down at her, he touched her excitement with his. Desire more than flooded through her. It became rapids so swift that she frantically grabbed his hips and thrust him into her in a desperate attempt to still the deluge.

This was it—their union! And there was no pain—only excitement. Her heart beat within her so fast that she was temporarily overcome by fear again. Then she remembered that she hadn't had heart failure the other times.

Her mind went blank. She thought nothing. But did she ever feel! Everything was centered between her legs, in her loins where Ethan was driving into her over and over, slowly at first, then with increasing speed, until she had to have release.

Oh, no! Now what was happening to her? She couldn't recall ever having had such incredible sensations. The waves of the rapids were getting higher and higher, rougher and rougher. She was going to crash on the rocks; she could feel it. Then what would happen?

"Oh, my God. My darling!" Ethan whispered into her ear.

"Call me angel," she returned.

"But ..."

"Call me angel!"

"Yes," he exclaimed as he dove deeply into her. "You're my angel—my own personal angel."

It happened at that moment. The crash came, and the waves swept over her in a torrent for several moments until the relaxing peacefulness of calm washed over her. If that was love, she could take it for a lifetime! Suddenly, Ethan's weight upon her was noticeable. Gasping for breath, she pushed him off.

"I'm sorry, darling," he apologized. Rolling onto his back, he cradled her head in the junction of his chest and shoulder. "How do you feel?"

"Tired. Why? Almost all I do lately is sleep. It's like I can't get enough of it."

"That's probably because you're going to have our baby."

"But I'm not. Honest. I'll admit that I thought I was for a while. That's why I was so happy. But I was wrong."

"You *wanted* my baby?" he asked in amazement.

"I wanted any baby. It meant I would have family again. I didn't realize how important that was to me until I realized that I wasn't pregnant."

"But you have a family now," he reminded her.

"Who wants me? Not quite."

"Ray wants you."

"That makes one."

"I want you, too."

She giggled and snuggled against him. "You just had me. Are you so old that you've forgotten already?"

"That's not what I mean," he said, "and you know it. I want you with me for the rest of my life. I want you to marry me."

"But why?"

"Look, honey ..."

"No, Ethan, call me angel again."

"But I thought you didn't like that anymore."

"That was before I found out that my grandmother's name is Angelique. She's not just a portrait now—she's a person with a real name. My grandfather must have nicknamed her Angel, and I don't see any reason why I can't be called that, too. Now why do you want to marry me?"

"You'll have a family if I do. We can get married and make a baby—dozens of them if you want."

"I thought you didn't want children."

"I never said that," he declared.

"Then why wouldn't you marry Naomi when she told you that she was carrying your child?"

"Because I knew she wasn't," he explained. "I couldn't be her husband, Blythe—but I could be yours—forever."

"Maybe I started my family tonight."

"No, angel, you didn't."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I protected you. I'll explain another time."

When he didn't continue, Blythe covered them up then snuggled into a more comfortable position against him. He wasn't going to say what she wanted to hear, so she may as well get some sleep. If he wasn't careful, though, he was going to lose her forever instead of live with her forever. She couldn't marry a man who wasn't able to tell her how he felt. She was one woman who needed to hear the words, not just have a man show her. But she *could* marry a man who protected her—whatever he meant by that.

TWENTY-FIVE

Blythe didn't realize that she'd fallen asleep until she felt Ethan's lips against hers. When she smiled up at him as he sat beside her, she noticed that he'd already dressed.

"Good morning," she greeted with a yawn. "You're up early."

"You're up late. Solange and I already had breakfast."

"Why didn't you wake me?"

He grinned down at her. "I tried to, but not very hard. You said you were tired last night, and you fell asleep right away. I didn't have the heart to wake you. Did you sleep well?"

"Very," she said, stretching her arms over her head. It felt good to wake up in a real bed instead of on the settee. Come to think of it, maybe that was why she'd been so tired lately. She probably hadn't been sleeping as well as she'd thought. "I wish you would have tried harder. I have to meet Ray this morning."

"I remember, but I don't like it. I'm not fond of having him on my boat."

"Don't tell me you're still worried after last night. Ray can help us find Angelique, and you know how obsessed you are with her portrait. Now you'll be able to find out exactly what she's like."

"I was obsessed with that painting before I met you. Now I'm just obsessed with you."

"A *passionate* obsession," she teased. "What time is it?"

"Almost nine."

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed, tossing back the covers. "Ray will be here any minute, and I'm not ready. Get out of here so I can clean up and dress without being interrupted. And when Ray gets here, will you please tell him that I won't be long? Maybe he'll let me eat before I meet his brother and sisters."

"Is that what you're doing today?"

Blythe padded to the washstand and poured some fresh water into the bowl. After washing her face, she began to brush out her long, golden-red hair then stopped. She would only have to do it again after she was dressed, so she may as well wait.

"You didn't answer my question," Ethan said. "Is that what you're doing with him today?"

It suddenly dawned on her that she was prancing around in the nude with him watching her. But to her surprise, she didn't care. Nor did he appear to.

"Partly," she admitted, doing her best to remain unphased by his scrutiny. "First, we're going to see if you have a single cabin free. No, first, I'm going to see if he'll let me eat breakfast. I'm starved."

"And this is coming from a woman who didn't eat much all last week," Ethan said with a laugh. "I hope it has something to do with last night."

"It probably has more to do with not eating much for a week," she returned in a taunting tone. "Now would you please leave? You're distracting me."

"Not as much as you're distracting me," he countered with a grin. "Don't you want to know my plans for the day?"

"I assume you'll be busy arranging a full boat again." Shooting him a playful grin, she added, "By the way, I intend to be in the gambling parlor tomorrow night so make sure those passengers have a little money in their pockets. I'm tired of beating you without winning cash."

"You love poker, don't you."

"It must run in my blood. After all, Grandpa Bower—which I plan to call him from now on—loved gambling, didn't he?"

"He certainly did! But you're a lot better than he was."

"That's because I had a better teacher. Now get out and let me dress. Otherwise, Ray might walk in and see me."

Ethan chuckled as he hurried from the bedroom. "Can't let *that* happen again. I'm leaving!"

Sitting in Pete's office with Ray, Blythe nervously tapped her front tooth with a fingernail. She wasn't ready for this. She needed more time, but she didn't have it. Ethan had almost a full passenger roster, and they were leaving in the next morning.

Ray grasped her wrist and laid her hand in his lap, saying, "Would you relax? They're not going to bite you. They may not exactly be thrilled to see you, but they won't hurt you. I promise."

"It's the not thrilled part that I'm worried about," she admitted. "Maybe I shouldn't even be here, Ray. Just because you like me doesn't mean they will."

"They can't help but like you. You'll have Pete eating out of your hand in seconds. He's a fool for a pretty face, and yours is beautiful."

"But what about your sisters? You said they didn't even know Grandpa Bower had a blood son."

"They're about to hear it. Besides, if Pete tells them, they'll believe it, and *he* can't deny it, because I brought the letter."

"Won't they believe the letter whether Pete says something or not?"

"I'm the one holding it," he explained, "and I'm the one who always sided with Father. Chantal might believe me, because she was pretty close to him, but Gisele and Suzanne? They don't pay attention to the likes of me."

"Why?"

"They think I'm a rogue. Chantal wants me to settle down, but she doesn't keep trying to talk me into getting married like Gisele and Suzanne do."

The office door opened, and four people entered. Their gazes immediately fell upon her. But it was Pete's cold, gray eyes that caught her attention. This man didn't want her in the family for some reason, and it would probably take a lot to convince him that she didn't want his money.

Rising, Ray kissed each of his sisters on the cheek then turned toward Blythe, who also rose. "I want you all to meet Blythe Angelique Bouvier. Blythe, this is my oldest sister Gisele Markly, then is Pierre Bouvier—Pete, Suzanne Carpenter and Chantal Adams. Like I told you last night, I'm the youngest. My name is actually Raimund, but I go by Ray. I prefer the English names."

Blythe wanted to give them the impression that she was confident, so she smiled at them and shook hands with the assortment of brothers and sisters. Given their appearances, not even two of them were related in any way, because all of them looked different.

Gisele was short, rotund, and already gray. Pete wasn't as tall as Ray, hefty without being fat, turning gray and balding. Suzanne was very attractive, with dark hair and a tall, slender figure. Although not beautiful, Chantal was quite well built and her clothing accentuated her body instead of her face and limp, brown hair.

As Ray had explained, Pete was obviously the sibling she needed to convince of her sincerity. All she wanted was a family, and somehow she had to convey that to him. Directing her attention to him, she spoke as calmly as she could. "I'm very pleased to meet all of you. It's been a long time since I've had anybody I could honestly call family."

"Yes," Pete returned. "Well, let's be seated and hear what kind of claim you feel you have."

"Claim?" she repeated as she sank onto her chair.

"What do you think you're going to get from this family?"

"Nothing."

Ray had warned her not to say more than absolutely necessary, so she thought it best that she follow his instructions. After all, he knew his brother a lot better than she ever would. Around her, the siblings also sat down. Ray draped his arm over the back of her chair, and Chantal sat in the other chair next to hers.

Returning her gaze to Pete, Blythe asked, "Why do you think I want something?"

"We're a wealthy family, and suddenly you come forth claiming to be a long-lost relative."

"She didn't come forth like you mean," Ray inserted, his tone filled with anger. "And you know it. She only wanted to know if Father was the same Francois Bouvier as the one she had in a letter. Abigail read the letter, too, and she told you what it said."

"Ray, please," Blythe said, laying her hand over his. "Don't start a confrontation."

The siblings all gazed at Blythe in amazement. They were quite clearly leery—especially Pete.

"And if you can't get a fortune from us, you'll get it from Ray, right?" Pete said with an accusing tone.

"What do you mean, Mr. Bouvier?" she asked.

"You and my brother. It's obvious that you have more together than a simple uncle-niece relationship. You've cast some sort of spell over him."

"She did not!" Ray retaliated. Without a word, Blythe rose and started toward the door. Ray scrambled to grab her arm. "Where are you going?"

"I'm not going to cause dissension between brothers and sisters," she insisted. "It's not worth it. When I came to Peoria, I didn't have a family. I'm not losing anything by walking out that door. I'm sorry I bothered you, and it honestly was nice to meet you. But if my staying means your family will break apart, I'll leave. Good day."

This time when Blythe walked away, Ray stood but didn't follow. The room was silent as she closed the door behind her—not one person said anything until Ray shouted several seconds later. "Now see what you did! You sent her away, and she didn't even *do* anything!"

Instead of going back to the River Goddess, Blythe strolled along the boardwalks of Peoria. So much for finding a family here. If she had any hope of having one again, she would have to rely on Angelique. Maybe her grandmother would accept her.

As Blythe sat on the observation deck with Ethan and Solange, a man's voice interrupted their conversation. "Hello, Blythe."

Turning around, she saw Pete standing behind her and rose to greet him. What was *he* doing there? “Good evening, Mr. Bouvier.”

“I can see that you’re suspicious of my presence,” he admitted, “but if you don’t mind, I’d like to speak with you.”

“She’s not going to do it alone this time,” Ethan insisted. “I saw what happened last night.”

“That was different, Ethan,” Blythe said. “Pete, this is Ethan Lucas, the current owner of the River Goddess, and my friend Solange Devereau. Ethan, Solange, this is my uncle, Pete Bouvier.”

“I’m not leaving,” Ethan insisted. “Not after what Bower did.”

“He’s quite taken with Blythe, isn’t he,” Pete agreed with a chuckle. “But that’s Ray. He has an eye for pretty ladies.”

“That’s almost exactly what he said about you,” Blythe broke in, “but I think he was wrong.”

“No, he’s not. We both got that from our father.”

“You certainly didn’t prove it this morning.”

Pete smiled. “You didn’t exactly give me time. The five of us had quite a talk after you left.”

“I didn’t come here to start a family argument, so if you’re here to tell me ...”

“I’m here to apologize, Blythe. Ray’s sure that you’re Angelique’s granddaughter, and if that’s the case, you’re also our niece. There’s no denying that Father and Angelique had a liaison for years, and there’s no denying that they had a son. Father told us all about them before he died. I must admit, though, that the rest of us are rather hesitant about accepting you as eagerly as Ray does.”

“That’s because you think I want your money, but I don’t—not even a penny. All I ever wanted was a real family. It’s been over two years since I actually felt like I was part of one, and I desperately wanted that kinship back. But I know when I’m not wanted. I also know that I don’t feel any differently now than I did before I met with you this morning. I didn’t have a family then, and I don’t have one now.”

“Ray tells me that he’s going to New Orleans with you.”

“You can’t tell him not to, Mr. Bouvier. He’s a grown man, and he can decide who to believe. I had no effect on his decision, either.”

“I think you had every effect on it. Besides, I think it’s a good idea. I didn’t even try to talk him out of it. We all want to know the truth, Blythe. We don’t want to turn our backs on a true member of the family, especially since you would be truer than any of us.”

“Wait a minute,” Blythe said. “Are you saying what I think you are?”

“I’m saying that we decided to give you a chance. We voted after Ray explained your conversation last night—and the portrait of Angelique. It was unanimous; we all want to know if you’re Father’s granddaughter. Sending a member of our family will help us determine the authenticity of your claim.”

“I never *claimed* anything,” she replied. “All I did was ask questions.”

“Which is exactly what Ray said. This is all so sudden, though. I hope you’ll take that into consideration when you think about our reaction to meeting you. Our sisters didn’t even know Father had had a mistress. Surely, you can imagine their shock.”

“I don’t want anything, Mr. Bouvier. If you don’t want to accept me, that’s fine. I’ll live without a family.” Glancing up at Ethan, she returned her gaze to Pete and added, “Or I’ll have one of my own someday. I’m young, and I have plenty of time for things like that.”

“We’re not turning our backs on you—not yet, anyway. We only want to be sure before

we become involved. Think of what this could mean to us.”

“I already have. You don’t want to take a chance that I’m here to stake a claim on some of your inheritance. Well, I don’t want money. That’s why I don’t care one way or the other what you decide about me.”

“You’re an honorable young woman if that’s how you feel. And if it turns out that you *are* Father’s granddaughter, you’ll be welcomed into the family no matter what Mother thinks. Father’s last wish was that we recognize our brother. Since he’s gone, you’re the closest we can come. I have to leave now, Blythe. Good night.”

“Good night,” she returned, her mind on the idea that she could actually be part of a large family once again.

When Pete was no longer in sight, Ethan draped his arm around Blythe. “It seems as though you finally have that family you wanted.”

“I’m not sure I *want* this one,” she complained.

“Why not?” he asked, stunned by her response.

“They won’t accept me without me proving myself. I have to pass their test, or I won’t be a member of the family. That’s not how a family should love each other, Ethan. It’s totally conditional. I want the *unconditional* love that only a family can give.”

“But Bouvier has a valid point. You can’t honestly expect them to welcome you with open arms when they could lose so much if you start trouble about inheritance.”

“What difference would it make? Surely, Grandpa Bower left a will. After all, he was a wealthy man. If they want me in the family, they’re going to have to do more proving than I will. I don’t want conditional love that depends on me passing a test. Now let’s talk about something else. Nothing’s going to change unless we find Angelique Fabre.”

“I have a better idea. I have a couple of things I need to do before bed tonight, so you and Solange talk alone. I’ll come back when I’m done.”

“What do you think?” Ray asked when Pete joined him on the docks.

Pete released a heavy sigh and thrust his hands into his trouser pockets. “I think we’re going to lose a lot of money.”

“But I was so sure she didn’t want any.”

“So am I.”

“Then what are you talking about?”

“Father’s will. If Jack or one of his heirs doesn’t appear within ten years, we’re to split his share of the inheritance. Otherwise, Jack or his heir is due equal to what we received.”

“Good God!” Ray exclaimed. “You finally believe she’s our niece. What did she say to convince you?”

“Nothing. It was more her attitude—and a painting I saw on the River Goddess.”

“Did she show you the portrait of Angelique?”

“No, it was a painting I saw when I was looking for Blythe. Mother was very prominent in the picture, as though it had been painted of her. But in the background was a woman who looked exactly like Blythe. I looked at other paintings, too, and that woman was in all of them. Two in particular caught my attention. One was the woman—probably Angelique—with a different figure. I’m pretty sure she was pregnant. And there was one of both her and Father when he was much younger. I don’t know if you remember what he looked like then. He changed a lot over the years. If that woman in the pictures is Angelique, I don’t doubt for a second that Blythe is our niece.”

"Then tell her and get it over with," Ray demanded.

Pete shook his head. "I won't be that hasty. You go to New Orleans and find that woman. Make sure she's who she claims to be, then we'll decide if Blythe should be recognized. But don't tell her anything about the inheritance. She might try to trick us into giving it to her. Is that clear?"

"It's clear," Ray grumbled in agreement, "but something happened last night that you don't know about. Blythe might get some of that inheritance, anyway."

"How?"

"She's a beautiful woman," Ray explained hesitantly, "and she doesn't want to be tied down. That's exactly how *I* feel. Maybe we'll get married."

"You can't be serious!" Pete exclaimed. "You just met her."

"She's living in Lucas' cabin, but she told me that she doesn't want to marry him. Obviously, there's nothing between them. Why shouldn't I take a chance? If neither one of us want to be tied down, we might make the perfect match."

"Are you sure she's living with him?"

"She said she was, and we talked in their suite."

"Then maybe he's behind all this about Angelique. Maybe he saw the resemblance between Blythe and Angelique and decided to get our money through her. I don't think she's interested in anything that's due her, so maybe he's manipulating her—using his sexual prowess to persuade her to marry him."

"Then why don't you tell her about the inheritance?"

"I don't want to make a mistake that could cost us a fortune. Be careful about getting too close to her. If you talk her out of his bed, you'd *damned* well better be sure that she doesn't go into yours for the money."

"Well, angel," Ethan said as he stretched. "I think it's time for bed now."

"Me, too," Blythe agreed. "Are you tired yet, Solange?"

"No," Solange said. "I shall stay. Good night."

"Good night," Ethan and Blythe chorused as they got up to leave.

When they reached the suite, Ethan sent Blythe into the bedroom to get ready for bed first. Almost as soon as she lit a lamp, she noticed a small box on the pillow next to the one Ethan always used. Was this meant for her services? If so, she refused to accept payment her for bedding with him—especially since she had enjoyed it so much.

Infuriated by his lack of sensitivity, she grabbed up the box, stalked into the sitting room, and threw it at him. "You're the most uncouth man I've ever met!"

"What are you talking about?" he asked as he caught the box.

"You bought me again," she proclaimed, "and I *hate* you because of it."

"Did you even look at this?" he asked in concern.

"No! And I won't."

"You'd better, because it's not what you think."

"Don't tell me what I think! When did you buy it?"

"Today. Solange helped me pick it out while you were meeting your relatives."

"Then you don't deny that last night was the reason you bought it?"

"Of course, it was, but it's not what you think. I was going to buy you a present, anyway. Last night only showed me *what* to buy." Extending it toward her on his open palm, he asked, "Aren't you going to open it?"

“Absolutely not. I won’t be bought.”

“Then I’ll have to open it for you.”

As Ethan removed the lid, Blythe turned her back on him. The last thing she wanted to see was something that would make her feel like a prostitute. That wasn’t the kind of woman she was, and she didn’t want Ethan to think he could change her into one. A moment later his hand was before her. Nestled in his palm was a sparkling ring. Blythe stared at it silently for several seconds, unable to think and unable to look away. Even though she’d told him not to buy her anything again—especially anything with diamonds—he had done exactly that.

“This is the biggest diamond I could find, angel,” he said. “I don’t want other men to guess about whether you’re taken or not.”

“I’m *not* taken,” she declared.

“Do you want to marry Ray?”

Horrified by his question, she spun back to face him, exclaiming, “No!”

“Do you want to marry any other man?”

“I’m not sure I’m ready for marriage to *anybody*.”

He grinned at her. “That’s what I thought you’d say. I want you to marry me, Blythe, and I want you to wear this ring until you decide if you will or not. I won’t even take it as a sign that someday you’ll say yes.”

“Honest?” she asked, turning to face him. “You wouldn’t pressure me?”

“I wouldn’t pressure you, but that doesn’t mean I won’t ask you again every chance I get.”

“But *why* do you want to marry me so badly?”

“Because we’re good together—both out of bed and in. We make a great couple.”

Again, she’d given him the opportunity to say the words she desperately wanted to hear. And again, he hadn’t done it, although he did seem to be getting closer. He hadn’t said that they looked good together; he’d said that they *were* good together. There was a distinct difference. He’d also said that they made a great couple, and she couldn’t disagree with that. Until he told her that he loved her, though, she simply couldn’t agree to a wedding.

Taking the ring from his palm, she studied it in awe. It was a beautiful piece of jewelry—so clear and large. Under normal circumstances, she would give anything to own one like it. But circumstances since she’d arrived on the River Goddess hadn’t exactly been normal. First, a man she feared told her that he was married, then she’d found out she was attracted to him. Then she learned that he’d cheated on his wife. What was next? The jealousy that arose when she when she’d thought he was unfaithful, followed by that night. Wait! That was the first time she’d admitted to herself that he hadn’t actually been unfaithful in the sense of actually had intercourse with those women.

Then she remembered what she’d told Jennings about the man who had taken her. She’d told Jennings that she loved the man and she hated him. And it was true! One minute it was easy to hate Ethan, but the next she loved him with all her heart. No wonder she couldn’t say yes to his proposals. She wasn’t even sure how she felt. Maybe if she wore the ring, she would discover the answer.

“Ethan?” she asked. “Are you positive you won’t think it’s a commitment if I wear your diamond?”

“Would I buy a puny one-carat stone if I wanted complete commitment from the most beautiful, the most enchanting woman I’ve ever met?”

“And if I eventually say no, you won’t get angry?”

“You can even keep the ring. Do these questions mean that you’ll wear it?”

“I’ll wear it—as long as you won’t expect a promise that I might not be able to keep.”

“All I’m asking,” he vowed as he slid the ring onto her left finger, “is that you think only about marrying *me*. I don’t want you wondering what it would be like with Ray or some other man. I want you to wonder what it would be like to spend the rest of your life with *me*.”

“I already wonder,” she admitted in a near-whisper. “What do we do now that we’ve settled this?”

Embracing her, he gazed down at her and said, “First, I kiss you. Then I carry you to bed so I can show you part of what it would be like for you to be my wife.”

TWENTY-SIX

For the first two days on the river, Ray spent every minute possible with Blythe, which she discovered she liked. Ray was a good man who kept her laughing nearly all the time. If only Solange wasn't seasick and having female problems! She and Ray would adore each other, and Blythe desperately wanted them to spend time together.

On the fourth day, Solange finally felt well enough to venture from her cabin. When Blythe introduced them, Blythe was surprised that Ray paid little attention to her friend. Instead, he continued pursuing her. Apparently, he couldn't see how attracted to him Solange was. While Ethan was discussing the next day's route with Jennings on the fifth night, Ray visited Blythe in her suite.

"That's quite a diamond Ethan gave you," he said. "When's the wedding?"

"We haven't set a date," she explained, "because I haven't decided if I'm going to marry him."

"But you're wearing his ring. You must have said yes."

"The only thing I said yes to was making a decision. I made a condition—no commitment yet. I'm only trying to *decide* if I want to be his wife."

"Does that mean there's still a chance for me?"

"It's unlikely since you're my uncle."

"At least, that's not a no. Besides, I'm just an adopted uncle. Do you still sleep on his sofa?"

Although tempted to tell him the truth, Blythe decided to keep it secret. Ray had no business knowing that she slept in Ethan's bed now—and even enjoyed physical relations with him. Yet Ethan had made her promise to wait to start a family. Instead, he insisted that he always use a contraceptive sheath. She had no inkling when she was most likely to conceive, so it was a good thing he was experienced enough to handle matters.

"You do still sleep on the divan, don't you, Blythe?" Ray asked.

Blythe shot him a startled gaze. "Why do you sound like you don't believe it?"

"That smile for one thing. And you got a far-away look in your eyes."

"Don't worry. Everything's fine as far as the settee goes." When Ray sighed, she knew that he believed what she wanted him to. "Now I have a question for you. What do you think of Solange? She's very pretty, isn't she?"

"Of course, but I'm interested in you."

"I noticed, but I want you to *stop* being interested in me. You need a different woman to occupy your mind."

"Why don't you give him back his ring, Blythe? Let me court you instead."

"Ethan's been through a lot with me. I can't just say no to such a serious proposal without giving it equally serious thought. It wouldn't be right."

"Do you love the man?"

Blythe shrugged. "I'm not sure. That's why I have to think about it."

"Does he love you?"

"Except for the two times I already told you about, he hasn't said so."

"Then why do you stay with him?"

"He's good to me." Her eyes brightened, and her voice grew more animated. "He taught me to win at poker. Did I tell you that I made two thousand dollars in three nights? That's more than I could earn in a *year* as a governess. Besides, he's financing my search for Angélique."

"He wants to find her, too."

"But he had no desire to know who Grandpa Bower was," Blythe added.

"He already knew."

"No, he didn't. *I'm* the one who connected Francois Bouvier and Frank Bower. He hadn't even considered it."

Taking her left hand in both of his, he fingered the diamond then gazed into her eyes. "Give it back, honey. Let me show you about love. I can even say the words. I love you, Blythe. The least you can do is let me fight for you. I know I could make you happy."

"Don't you think Ethan can?"

"I seriously doubt it. You already told me that he was unfaithful to one wife ..."

"Ethan's never been married," she inserted. "I said he'd *told* me that he was. He'd lied about it."

"What makes you think he won't lie again?" Ray countered. "And how could you possibly believe that he would be faithful to you?"

"He's already proven it. He tried to seduce other women, and he couldn't. He promised me that he's faithful now—and Solange vouches for him, because she watched him that night."

"Maybe Solange lied, too."

"I already thought of that, but Solange would never lie to me. Besides, Ethan knows I hate liars, and he wants me to love him. I don't think he'd do anything to endanger that."

"All right. For argument's sake, let's say that he is faithful now. What about after you marry him—if you do. Do you honestly believe he could stay faithful for the rest of his life?"

"I don't know. That's one thing I need to think about."

"I could be faithful, Blythe. I could spend the rest of my life with only one woman in my bed. I love you, and I want you to be that woman."

"Ray," she started to say, but she stopped when Ethan opened the door, his face set in rage.

"Don't you dare say yes!" he demanded as he slammed the door shut. "He may say he loves you, but he can't love you even a tenth as much as *I* love you. We're getting married as soon as we dock in St. Louis, and I don't care if I have to *drag* you to the damned altar. I'm not going through any more pain because of you rejecting my love than I already have. And I'm not going to let your *uncle* court you. You're going to be *my* wife. Do you understand? You're marrying *me*, Blythe Bouvier."

Blythe smiled up at him. He was so angry that he hadn't even realized he'd told her that he loved her. It wasn't exactly the circumstances she'd dreamed of, but just hearing the words was enough to fill her heart with joy. Tears flooded her eyes at the realization that she indeed loved him, too. She couldn't believe her happiness. He loved her, and she loved him. They were in love! No wonder she didn't feel the desperation for a family that she once had. She had love! And that was all that really mattered.

"Did you hear me, Blythe?" he asked. "I told you that you're going to marry me in St. Louis."

"You can't make her, Lucas," Ray insisted. "It's her decision, and she isn't interested in a man who can't be faithful."

Ethan shot his irate glare to Ray. "I can, though. I've already proven it. Blythe's the only woman in my life, and she's the only one I *want* there. She's stolen my heart and won't give it back." His expression softened as he returned his gaze to her face. "Don't you see that, angel? Don't you know that I'll be faithful forever? He doesn't love you like I do, Blythe. He couldn't. That's why you're going to marry me in St. Louis. The second we dock I'm taking you to the nearest church and we're saying our vows. You're going to do it, too. I don't care what your uncle says."

"All right," she agreed.

Ray dropped her hand like it was hot, and both men stared at her in shock. Clearly, neither one had expected her to react so calmly to his tirade. Then they chorused their surprise as Blythe went to stand before Ethan.

"*What?*"

"I said all right. I'll marry you in St. Louis." Sliding her arms around his waist, Blythe laid her head on his chest and hugged him tightly.

"But why?" he asked as he returned her embrace. "What changed your mind?"

"You did. You were so mad that you didn't even realize what you said. You said that you love me, Ethan. And I love you, too. Can you think of a better reason for me to accept an order of marriage?"

Giving her a gentle squeeze, Ethan released a nervous chuckle. "I suppose it *was* an order. Since I already know the answer, I want to do this right." He looked over at Blythe's uncle. "You're the closest relative Blythe has, Ray. I suppose that means you're the person I ask for her hand in marriage. What do you say? Are you man enough to accept my defeating you—like your father was man enough?"

"I don't know Blythe well," Ray admitted, "but I do know she won't change her mind even if I'm not. I know when I've lost, and that's obviously the case here. All right. You can marry my niece—but you'd sure as hell better be good to her."

"Does that mean you'll give me away, too?" she asked. "I'd certainly appreciate it."

"Of course. I should leave you two alone now. Good night."

As soon as Ray closed the door behind him, he realized that he had only wanted Blythe because he couldn't have her. All of his life he'd enjoyed the thought of conquering the unconquerable woman, but he'd lost this time. And why? A sudden realization gripped him. He'd lost because he didn't really want her. Another woman had entered his life—a woman he found much more intriguing, much more interesting than his niece. Striding to the next cabin, he knocked on the door and waited until Solange opened it.

"I suppose I shouldn't say this," he explained with a wide grin, "but I wanted to see you. This was the only excuse I had. Blythe's getting married when we get to St. Louis. Could I get to know you better?"

Without a word, Solange stepped back and let him into her cabin.

Ethan could hardly wait. The next afternoon they would reach St. Louis, and he could finally marry Blythe. Although it seemed like he'd known her forever, it had only been a matter of weeks—weeks of the most intense emotions he'd ever felt. During that time, he'd suffered through everything from grief to joy. That led him to believe even more firmly that what he felt for Blythe was love. Nothing else could make him suffer as he had since he'd met her. Hopefully, making her his wife would lessen the extremes of emotional turmoil.

Staring at the portrait in his office, Ethan heard a voice again. "Come to me. Come to me." But when he glanced at the door, no one was there.

"Is that you, Angel?" he asked the picture. "Are you calling to me from wherever you are?"

What a ridiculous notion! Angel couldn't call to him. Then again, he felt awfully close to that portrait lately—much closer than he ever had. And the voice he heard was nondescript, neither a man's nor a woman's. It was merely a voice that spoke to him from a distance, one that hadn't even started until he was on the Illinois River. Now that he was on the Mississippi River, that voice seemed louder and more persistent.

Leaning back in his chair, Ethan closed his eyes and sighed. He was acting stupid about that voice. It was just his imagination, and he knew it. So why was it calling to him again? Why was it saying "Come to me" over and over until he wanted to throw another bottle of rye at the portrait. Suddenly, someone shouted, "Be careful!"

Ethan bolted upright again, frantically asking the voice, "Who is that? Who's there? Why are you tormenting me like this?"

But there was no response—only the echo of "Be careful!" racing through his mind. Hurrying to the porthole, he saw nothing except the steady rhythm of the paddle wheel that splashed the water at the stern of the River Goddess. The warning continued in his head while he ran from his office to the bridge.

Quite a distance downstream was another boat, but it was the only one in sight. Grabbing the telescope from Jennings, Ethan put it to his eye to examine the flatboat more carefully.

"What's wrong, Ethan?" Jennings asked.

"I don't know. I ... sense trouble. I don't like the looks of that flatboat up there. It's sitting too high in the water."

"It looks all right to me. It probably just dropped off a load somewhere."

"How many flatboats drop off a load and leave? They usually fill it with more freight, and you know it. I want every man who can shoot in the dining room—now!"

"You're overreacting," Jennings said in exasperation, "probably because you want to protect Blythe. That boat's just sitting there. They aren't even paddling the thing."

"I'm not overreacting, damn it! And I'm the boss here, so get all the men who can shoot in the dining room. If they're not paddling, they could be lying in wait. I think they're river pirates. Now get the hell out of here and do what I say."

"Aye, sir," Jennings agreed as he raced away.

When he was gone, Ethan turned to the pilot and ordered, "Keep this thing on course. I don't want those bastards to know I suspect them."

"Are you that sure they're pirates?"

"Have *you* ever seen a flatboat so high in the water that wasn't docked?" Ethan demanded. "Have you *ever* seen them just sitting in the middle of a river?"

"No, but ..."

"Have you ever been attacked by pirates?"

"No, sir."

"I have," Ethan proclaimed. "They make you think they're innocent until the last second. This boat is just sitting there. Maybe they want us to think they're in trouble, or maybe they are. Maybe they're a decoy to lure us into position. Whichever it is, we're sure as hell not going down without a fight. You keep this thing on course, do you hear me?"

"Aye, sir."

"I'll send up my best sharpshooter to cover you in case of trouble." Rushing away in

search of Blythe, Ethan located her in their suite, cleaning as though it were her home. "You're going to have to stop that, angel."

"Oh?" she asked seductively as she wrapped her arms around him and crushed her body against his. "Are you interested in doing something else?"

"That's right," he replied, pushing her away. "I'm interested in saving your life. I think there are pirates down-river. You get every woman and child together. Put some around the boat near the doors so they can duck inside in a second. I want everybody in the gambling parlor up top who isn't a decoy. We have to make this look like we don't suspect them. I want some outside, like I said; but I want most of them inside where they're safe. Make everything look as natural as possible. As for you, get Solange then come back here and wait."

"Why?" she asked.

"Everybody else will be your decoy. If they think all the women and children are in the gambling parlor, they won't even think about other cabins right away. I won't lose you now—not after it took me so long to get you to marry me." When he started to leave, he stopped and turned back toward her. "Oh, and two more things. Ask the women can shoot. If they can, send them to the dining room."

She nodded her acknowledgment. "Anything else?"

"I love you, and I'm not going to let a few bad guys keep us from a lifetime of happiness."

"I love you, too, so be careful."

"I will."

In the dining room, Ethan pulled Ray aside to enlist his special help. "Look, Bower, I know we haven't been the best of friends, but you're Blythe's uncle. I'm putting you in one of the safest places on board. There's a stairway on the lowest level—at the bow. I want you down by the boilers in case any of these pirates get on."

"Pirates!" Ray whispered in shock. "Is that what all the fuss is about?"

"Yes. Get yourself two more men who can shoot well and post them inconspicuously nearby. I want those boilers protected at all costs."

"But I thought the boilers were near the stern. That's where the smokestack is, anyway."

"Which is exactly why it's there—to make people think that's where the boilers are. I was on another riverboat that was attacked, and they made their heaviest assault on the boiler area. When I won the Goddess from your father, I had some major revisions made before I started making runs with her. That was one of them—a decoy boiler. I also had a few rooms reinforced to withstand bullets—my suite, my office, the gambling parlor, and the boiler room. You get in there and stay put. The only way they can get to you and Blythe is by getting in the door. Hopefully, that won't happen."

"Uh, Ethan," Ray said. "What about Solange?"

"Don't worry. I've noticed how close you two have been getting. She'll be with Blythe. I wouldn't let anything happen to my bride's best friend. Now find two other men and go."

For two hours, people milled around the deck. Men, women and children were outside, all told to be alert in case of a possible attack. Blythe and Solange sat silently in the suite with the door bolted against possible intruders. Each had a rifle, but neither wanted to touch it unless ...

The first shot rang out. The pair grabbed their weapons, holding them steady at the door just in case. Elsewhere on the boat women and children screamed in fear. Several men cried out in pain, apparently hit by the spray of bullets. Terror gripped the friends as they

sat next to one another on the settee which they had situated directly before the door. Within about fifteen minutes, there was only silence.

When people began to move on board, Blythe tensed even more. Was it pirates looking for more victims, or passengers going back to their rooms? Either way, it didn't matter. Ethan had told them to stay until he came for them, and Blythe wasn't going against his dictates this time. She had too much to lose if she opened the door and found pirates instead of passengers.

Time passed slowly. The thirty minutes seemed more like thirty days, until Ethan knocked on the door and shouted, "It's all over, angel! Open up!"

Blythe dropped her weapon and raced to the door. Unbolting it, she swung it open then flew into his awaiting arms. Without thinking of anything else, she jerked his head to hers and kissed him with a passion that she likened only to the first night she had seduced him. After a moment, he broke the kiss and stared down at her, his gaze filled with longing.

"I love you, too," he said as she glanced around to see Solange in Ray's arms. "But we have a few things to take care of."

"What kind of things?" she asked.

"We captured the flatboat and a few of the pirates. One of them is the leader."

"Did the others get away?"

"Hell, no. Not one of them will ever prey on another riverboat again. If we didn't capture them, they were killed."

"What about the people on the Goddess? Were any of them killed?"

"We have some injuries—a couple of them serious. But I don't think anything's life-threatening."

"I don't think so, either," Ray agreed. "I'll tell you one thing, Blythe. That future nephew of mine is one hell of a man. You couldn't find a better one—probably not even me. He had those pirates figured out and captured before they knew it was happening."

"Yeah," Blythe drawled, gazing up at Ethan lovingly. "I know he's a hell of a man."

"Watch your language, young lady," Ray chastised with a grin.

"And do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to show him how much I appreciate him—and exactly how much I love him. But I can't do that very soon if you stay here, Ethan. You need to take care of your prisoners, but do it quickly, because I can't *wait* to thank you for saving everybody's life. In fact, I think we'll have a party for you tonight. This time when I say that the champagne's on you, I'll mean you're buying. I promise."

Ethan laughed. "You'd better. I may be wealthy, but I can't afford to have you ruin all my suits. Come on, Ray. I want to find a place to lock up all those pirates so I can get back here and accept my reward."

TWENTY-SEVEN

When Blythe refused to go to their suite after the party, Ethan couldn't conceal his shock. But he was afraid to ask her why. After all the time they'd spent together, after she'd finally agreed to marry him, she was turning her back on him. The pain was almost as bad as when he'd thought she was dead. Still, she'd kissed him good night passionately when he left her at Solange's door. Even though there was a promise in the kiss, he desperately needed more. He needed her in his bed—even if they weren't intimate that night.

The next morning, he became even more desolate when Solange told him that Blythe had decided to eat in her cabin. Something had changed in their relationship, and the thought that she had decided against marrying him sent him into despair. It wasn't until Ray appeared around noon that he finally understood Blythe's new attitude.

"What's wrong with you this morning?" Ray asked when he saw how upset Ethan was. "Having second thoughts about getting married this afternoon?"

Ethan shook his head sorrowfully. "No, but Blythe is. She wouldn't sleep with me last night, and Solange said she won't come out of her cabin today."

Ray chuckled. "Relax. She's only being superstitious. She doesn't want you to see her before the wedding."

"How else are we going to find a church?"

"When we dock, you and I will go find one while she and Solange get dressed. Then I'll come back here and get them."

"Are you sure?" Ethan asked.

"Positive. You're just the typically nervous bridegroom. What time are we scheduled to dock?"

"Around three."

"Well, try to relax. Blythe's as nervous as you are. I know what I said in the beginning, but I've changed my mind. I think you're good for her. You'll do just fine together."

Finding the church didn't take long at all. They found the tallest steeple and kept an eye on it while they made their way through town. After convincing the priest that they were sure of their feelings for one another, Ethan sent Ray back to the River Goddess and paced the sanctuary until Blythe, Solange, and Ray arrived almost a half an hour later. By five o'clock, they were husband and wife and had consummated their marriage in a hotel room bed.

"Well, Mrs. Lucas," Ethan said after a long silence, "now that everything's official, do you have any regrets?"

"Not yet," she teased. "Give me until morning and ask again."

"You mean you might change your mind?" he asked in shock.

She giggled and snuggled closer to him. "Never. Don't worry so much. If I can't tease you, I won't have any fun."

Ethan sighed in relief. "Next time try not to sound so serious, because I couldn't tell you were teasing. There's something we didn't discuss before we said our vows."

"What's that?"

"Where we're going to live."

"I assumed that we'd live on the Goddess. Don't you want to?"

"I wouldn't complain," he said, "but I thought you'd want to build a house somewhere. I could run the business from one place like a normal businessman."

"You don't want to keep traveling?" she asked in surprise.

"If I did, I never would have gotten married—to you or anybody else. Very few marriages can survive when one half of the couple is gallivanting around the countryside and the other is home taking care of the children."

"Now you're saying that you want children. I thought you were so set on making sure I didn't get pregnant."

"I didn't want you in a family way before you were my wife. I was afraid that you'd leave and take our baby with you. I can't go through life like your grandfather did—loving a woman but not being able to be with her all the time. We're only going to ride the River Goddess two or three times a year to see that things are going the way they should. Otherwise, we're settling down in one city and living the rest of our lives together. I don't care what city it is, as long as I'm with you."

"Let's decide that later," she suggested. "I want to see what happens in New Orleans before I make any decisions about where we'll live."

"That makes sense. Of course, it also means that we hold off on making a baby until you decide. I won't have you traipsing around the rivers of America when you're carrying our child."

"I suppose you're right. I don't want to endanger it, either. And Ethan?"

"What is it, angel?"

"I love you even more for offering to give up your life of travel for me and our family. I don't think I could have borne the loneliness of being separated from you for weeks on end."

"That's exactly why I offered. I would feel the same way. Now why don't we get dressed and get something to eat. We can come back later and play newlyweds again, but right now I'm starved. I was too nervous to eat this morning."

They'd been in the French Quarter of New Orleans for two days. Even after Ray and Solange separated from them, they made little progress in finding Angelique Fabre. To their mixture of joy and disappointment, the local cemeteries didn't have any graves that had been marked as hers. On their third day, an older woman saw Blythe on the street and gasped in shock.

"You!" the woman shouted as she raced up to the newlyweds. "The woman with the red hair! Who are you?"

"Me?" Blythe asked in amazement.

"Yes. Who are you?"

"My name is Blythe Lucas," she answered.

"No. You must have another name. What is it?"

"Her name was Blythe Bouvier until I married her a few days ago," Ethan explained with a note of suspicion in his deep voice. "Do you think you've seen her somewhere be-

fore?"

"I know a woman who used to look just like her. Her son was stolen from her almost forty years ago."

"*Mon Dieu!*" Blythe exclaimed. "It must be Angelique Fabre. Oh, Ethan! We've almost found her. Where is she, ma'am? Please, tell me where I can find her."

"She *is* Angelique Fabre, but she is very ill. She is dying and has been crying for her son for several weeks. Do you know him?"

"Yes. He was my father, but he can't come to her. He died eight years ago. Won't you please take us to her?"

The woman led them to a house about a half a mile from where they were and disappeared into a room. A few minutes later, a young man exited with her and introduced himself as Dr. Reuben Talman.

"Is she strong enough to see me?" Blythe asked in concern. "I traveled all the way from France to find my lost past, and she's the only direct relative I can find. I'd like to talk with her if I can."

"She's losing ground fast, Mrs. Lucas," Dr. Talman admitted. "Frankly, I'm not sure how she held on this long. She has a will to live stronger than I've ever seen. It's almost like she's holding on just for her son."

"I'm not her son."

"But you're probably her granddaughter, right?" When Blythe nodded, he smiled. "I'm not sure she can talk to you, Mrs. Lucas. And you need to keep in mind that she might not be able to tell you anything. If I let you in, you *must* promise not to make her say more than she can. Is that understood?"

Blythe nodded her head in affirmation. "Yes, sir. I won't ask any more questions than she wants to answer. And I'll stop asking her if she wants to or gets too tired."

"All right. Go on in."

"What about me?" Ethan asked. "I'd like to be with my wife right now."

"Of course. Just don't get involved with their conversation unless Miss Fabre wants you to."

"Whatever you say, doctor."

In the dimly lit bedroom, Blythe and Ethan sat down on the edge of the bed and studied the woman silently. She looked like she should be Blythe's mother, not her grandmother. Angelique examined the young woman as silently as Blythe did her. Finally, she raised her hand toward Blythe, who took it tenderly in both of hers.

"My granddaughter," Angelique said weakly as tears seeped from her pale green eyes. "My beautiful, beautiful granddaughter. Where is my son? Where is my baby Jack?"

"He died, Grandmother—about eight years ago."

"Was he happy?"

"Oh, yes! He was *very* happy. He had a wonderful wife and four children."

"What are their names?"

"Francois was the oldest child, but he died before he was a year old."

"Francois," Angelique said dreamily. "The only man I loved was Francois. He died, too."

"I know. I met his family. He was my grandfather, right?"

"He was a wonderful man. He would have been so happy to know he had a beautiful granddaughter like you."

"I'm no more beautiful than my grandmother."

"Are there more granddaughters?"

"I'm afraid not. I had two younger brothers, but they died, too. Benjamin was fifteen,

and Daniel was thirteen.”

“You are the last with Francois’s blood,” Angelique declared with a hint of pride.

Again, Blythe nodded. “So far, but there will be more. I promise. This man is my husband, Ethan Lucas. We’ll have many babies for you and Grandpa Bower.”

“Is that what you call him?”

“Yes.”

“He would be happy. He wanted to be Bower, but he never made it legal.”

“I know. Oh, Grandma!” Blythe said, speaking against Angelique’s fingers. “I’m so glad we got here in time to talk to you. I feel like my past that was missing is complete now.”

“Your name,” Angelique suddenly said. “I don’t know your name.”

“Blythe Angelique Lucas.”

“Angelique,” she repeated softly. “Did he name you after me?”

“I don’t think he realized it, but he probably did. Dad told me that he’d heard that name when he was a small child and had always wanted to name his first daughter that. Mother wanted Blythe, so they compromised. I think he heard somebody call you Angelique and remembered it. Even if he didn’t remember *you*, he remembered your name.”

“You are a beautiful, young woman. Are you happy?”

“Oh, yes, Grandma. I’m happier today than I’ve ever been in my entire life, because I have my grandmother and my husband by me. I have a lot of love today.”

Angelique’s eyes slid shut, then she opened them abruptly. “I’m tired now.”

“Then we should let you sleep. We’ll come back later.”

“No,” she said as frantically as her weakened state would allow. “Stay. I want my beautiful granddaughter—my beautiful Blythe Angelique—with me.”

“All right, Grandma, but only if you promise to sleep.”

Blythe hardly left her grandmother’s side for the next five days and was with her when Angelique finally took her last breath. After the funeral, Ethan took his wife aside to speak privately with her.

“How do you feel, angel?” he asked in concern.

“I’ll be all right,” she answered as they wandered along the boardwalk. “I’m just happy that I got to be with Grandma as long as I did. We had several good talks—even if they weren’t very long.”

“Have you given any more thought to where you want to live?”

“Grandma and I discussed that, too. She thought I should live where I have relatives, and I agree. She didn’t have any animosity toward Ray and his family, Ethan. She just wants me to be surrounded by love, and I think they’ll give it to me—eventually. I think that, once they realize I truly am their niece, they’ll accept me just as Ray has.”

“You want to live in Peoria?”

“Yes. Do you mind?”

“I told you before that *where* doesn’t matter to me. I just want us to be settled. We’ll leave as soon as we have a full boat.”

“We have to do something else first. Ray and Solange want to get married, and Solange wants you to give her away. Will you?”

“Ray gave you to me, didn’t he? It’s only fair that I return the favor.”

Ethan and Blythe stood in front of the large frame of a house with Pete at their side. This was much more than Blythe had expected when she learned that the Bouvier siblings were her aunts and uncles, but she was thrilled with their ready acceptance of her.

"What do you think of your future home so far?" Pete asked.

"When you have a surprise for somebody," Ethan said with a chuckle, "you *mean* it. But how much is this going to cost us?"

"Nothing. When Ray telegraphed me from St. Louis and told us that you two had married, the rest of us got together and decided you needed a wedding present suitable for a Bouvier."

"But you didn't even want to believe that I was related," Blythe said.

"That was before I saw the painting on the River Goddess."

"Which painting?"

"The one of Father and Angelique in their young years. Didn't you see it?"

"I don't even know what my grandfather looked like, Pete. You'll have to show us which one it is so we can hang it in our home when it's finished."

"I'd be happy to. Let's go back to my office so I can show you the architect's picture of your house—with the rooms. That way you can decide which one you want to put that portrait in."

"What I'm worried about is decorating it," she admitted. "I don't know anything about furnishing a house."

"Don't worry. Your aunts have had plenty of practice with decorating—and all of them love it."

"Except for Solange, but then I guess she'll have enough to do decorating her own home the way she wants it."

"That's another thing. How in the world did you ever dissuade my brother from courting you?"

"I had a ring on my finger by the time the trip to New Orleans started, but I knew that he and Solange would be wonderful together. I pushed the romance a little."

"A little!" Ethan laughed. "She practically *forced* it on them."

"Before we go to my office," Pete said seriously, "there's something I have to know. I have some papers that need your signature. When Father died, he had a stipulation in his will that said one-fifth of his estate was to go to Jack or his heirs if they appear within ten years of Father's death. We all know that you deserve the money more than we do because you're from his blood, and we all want you to have it—all of the children that is. Mother will never recognize you, but I don't think that will bother you if you stay away from the house."

"You're right. It won't. But I didn't come here for Grandpa Bower's money, Pete. Honest."

"We know that, and we *want* you to have the money. You're a Bouvier, Blythe—one of the most respected families in Peoria. And we want everybody to know that you're one of us. Giving you the money is what Father wanted. If he had known he had another granddaughter—one who looked exactly like the woman he loved the most—he would have loved you as much as he did the rest of us. You're due his good name, and you're due all of the things that go with it."

Tears came to her eyes as she gazed up at Ethan. For years she'd felt like part of her past was missing, and now she knew why. She'd come from a very loving stock of people, whether they were by blood or adoption. If her grandfather's widow couldn't accept her, so be it. She had all the love she could possibly want from her aunts and uncles. If they be-

lieved she was entitled to the inheritance, she would take it.

“All right, Pete,” she said, “I’ll accept the inheritance. But I’m only doing it because I’ve found something I thought I’d never have again. I found a family that actually wants me. Ethan once told me that I was a passionate person, that obsessions were passionate, too. And he was right. I was obsessed with having a family. Now that I do, I don’t ever want to lose it again. Thank you, Pete. Thank you for not turning your backs on me.”

“When I saw that painting on the riverboat, I accepted you in an instant. And when I told the rest, they were equally eager to have you in the family. We know you aren’t looking for fortune, Blythe. We know the only fortune you want is family.”

Ethan took Blythe from her uncle’s arms and embraced her. “And if I have my way, that’s going to be the biggest family this town has ever seen. As soon as we get back to the Goddess, we’re going take care of an obsession I’ve had since I met your beautiful niece. We’re going to start the next link of the bloodline of Francois Bouvier and Angelique Fabre. One thing’s going to be different from now on, though. There’s never going to be another case of separation like they went through. From now on, all members of this family will stay together—even if I have to force the issue.”