



An Improper
Proposal

MEG CABOT

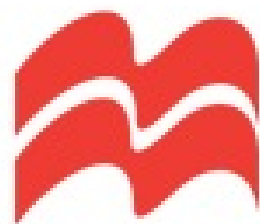
WRITING AS

PATRICIA CABOT

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AN IMPROPER PROPOSAL

MEG CABOT



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Dear Reader,

In 1994, when I was 26 years old, my father died. That's when I realized that life is too short not to try to pursue your dreams. So the day I got home from his funeral, I sent out my first manuscript. It was rejected.

But I kept trying, because as my grandmother always said, "You're not a hundred dollar bill, not everyone is going to like you!" Five years later, my first historical romance novel, *Where Roses Grow Wild*, was published under the pen name Patricia Cabot (which I chose so my grandmother, who was very religious, wouldn't know that I was writing books with love scenes in them).

My "Patricia Cabot" books have since been translated into many languages and have been widely read in multiple countries. Many of them have won awards, and I've gone on to become a *New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *USA Today* bestselling author, with two feature films, a television movie, and a television series based on my work. I was even made a lifetime member of the Romance Writers of America Honor Roll!

I've since retired the Patricia Cabot pen name and currently write all my books under my real name. But despite my efforts, my grandmother found out about my Patricia Cabot books anyway ... and to my surprise, wasn't upset at all! She read every one, and became their biggest fan.

Meg Cabot

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Thanks once again to my editor Jennifer Weis, my friend Jennifer Brown, and my agent Laura Langlie. Many thanks also to Joan Druett, author of *Hen Frigates: Wives of Merchant Captains Under Sail*, from which I gathered much of the nautical information used in this book.

Chapter One

SHROPSHIRE, ENGLAND
JUNE 1830

“Dammit, Payton,” Ross Dixon exploded. “I can’t tie the wretched thing. *You* do it.”

Payton, at too crucial a stage with her second-eldest brother’s cravat even to risk a glance at her eldest, snapped, “Wait your turn.”

“*Bleeding* turn.” Hudson, holding his chin up, had to look down the slopes of his high cheekbones to see his little sister as she worked on his necktie, and then he only saw the top of her head. “Wait your *bleeding* turn.”

“Wait your bleeding turn,” Payton said, correcting herself.

The ends of his cravat hanging limply round his neck, Ross turned away from the mirror, outraged. “Damn your eyes, Hud! Stop encouragin’ her to swear. You want her to tell the first bloke who asks her to dance tonight to wait his bleeding turn?”

“No one’s goin’ to ask Payton to dance,” Raleigh informed them, from the window seat. His cravat already tied, he’d been banished to the far side of the room by his sister with a dire warning not to stop and unloose it again. He sat in a flood of western sunlight, watching a line of carriages pull up to the front of the house. “She’s far too ugly.”

“Shut your bleeding mouth, Raleigh,” Payton advised him.

Ross ground his teeth. “Payton,” he growled. “Stop swearing. You aren’t home, and you aren’t on shipboard. Remember our agreement? You can behave like a hoyden all you want while we’re at home or at sea, but in other people’s houses you’ll conduct yourself like a—”

“You know,” Hudson interrupted. “Payton’s not *that* ugly, Raleigh. It’s just her damned hair.” Since he had an eagle’s eye view of it, Hudson felt qualified to criticize. “When you were shavin’ all our heads this past summer, Ross, why didn’t you shave Payton’s, too? It might have helped if she’d just got rid of the whole thing, and started over.”

“Why did you,” Ross countered, irritably, “hire a cook infested with lice? If you hadn’t hired him on, none of us would have needed to shave our heads, and Georgiana wouldn’t be forever needling me to purchase Payton a switch.”

“A *switch*?” Payton wrinkled her freckled nose. “What would I want with a *switch*? Wear some other woman’s hair on top of mine?” She shuddered. “No, *thank you*. I’m perfectly happy waiting until my own grows out again.”

Hudson snorted. “You love havin’ your hair cropped short. Admit it. You’re a lazy puss, and never liked combin’ out those damned Indian braids you used to wear.”

Payton turned bright gray eyes up toward him. “Careful,” she warned, tightening the cravat teasingly. “I may not have my Indian braids anymore, but I can still sever a throat with ease.”

“Bloodthirsty wench, aren’t you?” Hudson tugged on one of the short russet-brown curls that Payton had tried—unsuccessfully, she feared—to tuck into a pair of tortoiseshell combs. “You’re going to have to learn to curb your tendency toward violence, my girl, or you’ll never get yourself a husband.”

Payton made a moue of distaste. “I fail to see what I need a husband for, when I already have you

three telling me what to do.”

“Because eventually,” Ross said, “Hud and Raleigh are going to follow my example and take wives leaving you all alone.”

“What do you mean, alone?” Payton glared at him over a bare shoulder. “There’s always Papa.”

“Georgiana and I are taking care of Papa,” Ross informed her. “And neither of us cares to be saddled with my spinster sister, in addition.”

“If you would stop being such an ass and give me a ship of my own to command,” Payton said coolly, “you wouldn’t have to worry about being saddled with a spinster sister, let alone finding me a husband.”

Ross looked horrified. “Over my dead body,” he declared, “are you ever going to command a Dixon ship.”

“And why not? I’m twice the navigator Raleigh is, and he’s had his own ship for eight years now. She narrowed her eyes as she glanced in Raleigh’s direction. “For all he spent most of those years hopelessly *lost*.”

Looking up once again from the window, Raleigh informed her kindly, “I wasn’t *lost*, my dear. I was exploring previously uncharted territory. There’s a difference.”

“You were *lost*, Raleigh. Your cargo rotted while you were floundering about, trying to find your way around the Cape of Good Hope. Only you weren’t at the Cape of Good Hope, were you?”

Raleigh waved a hand at her. “Cape Horn, Cape Hope. Those capes all look the same. Is it any wonder I mistook one for the other?”

Payton turned to glare at her eldest brother, who was fussing with his shirt collar in the mirror above the dressing table. “See? You give *him* a command, but not me? At least *I* can tell the continents apart.”

“The company,” Ross explained to his reflection, as patiently as if he were speaking to a child, “is called Dixon and Sons Shipping, Payton.” At her sharp inhalation, Ross held up a hand, and said, “And kindly don’t start arguing again that we should change the name to Dixon and Sons and *Daughter*. We haven’t the slightest intention of becoming the laughingstock of the shipping industry by introducing lady ship captains.”

“What’s wrong with lady ship captains?” Payton demanded tartly. “I’ve commanded your crew often enough, and quite ably, thank you very much, when you three were too drunk to hold the wheel. I don’t see why I have to be married off like some kind of half-wit when I have at least as much experience as any of you—”

“I say.” Hudson cleared his throat. “Are you going to tie my cravat, Pay, or fight with Ross?” When her hot-eyed glare landed on him, he took a quick step backward. “Never mind. Continue fighting with Ross, by all means.”

“Don’t worry, Pay,” Raleigh drawled from the window seat. “Ross’ll have no choice but to make you a lady ship captain in the end. No bloke’s ever goin’ to ask you to marry him. You’re far too ugly.”

“She ain’t ugly!” Ross exploded, finally turning away from the mirror. “Well, at least, not anymore. Not after I paid damn near a hundred quid for that bleeding dress she’s got on.”

“Don’t forget,” Hudson reminded him, “the matching slippers. And the hat and cloak.”

“Another hundred pounds.” Ross lifted a snifter of brandy he’d placed on top of the dresser, and drained it in a single quick gulp. “And for what, I’d like to know? It’s not like there’s enough material in that dress to even cover ’er decently.”

Payton glanced down at her décolletage. It *was* a bit daring. She didn’t have a lot to show, but what was there was on rather prominent display. When she looked up again, she saw that Hudson had followed her gaze.

“Yes, Pay,” he said. “I’d noticed you’d gotten a bosom. When did that happen?”

“I don’t know.” Payton shook her head bewilderedly. “Last summer, I think. Somewhere between New Providence and the Keys.”

“I didn’t notice you having any breasts when we were in Nassau,” Ross declared. The eldest child, always irked him whenever Payton, the youngest, did anything without asking—such as grow, for instance.

“That’s because she wore nothing all summer but that vest and those dreadful striped trousers,” Raleigh, the fop of the family, heaved a delicate shudder. “Remember? Georgiana practically had to peel her out of ’em when we got back to London.”

“I wore the trousers,” Payton pointed out severely, “because I didn’t need everyone looking up my skirts every time I climbed the mizzenpost—”

“Wishful thinking,” Hudson observed.

Ignoring him, Payton continued. “And I wore the vest because I hadn’t anything to support what was going on beneath my shirt. No thanks to any of *you*.”

“Underthings.” Ross nodded. “I forgot. Another hundred quid. And for what, I ask you?”

The door to the bedroom opened, and Georgiana Dixon said matter-of-factly, “To get her married, of course.” Then, taking in the sight of her husband’s loose collar with a sigh, she added, “I don’t suppose it would have occurred to any of you that most men employ valets to tie their cravats, not their little sisters.”

It was Hudson’s turn to shudder. “I don’t want some bloke touching me, let alone my *clothes*.”

“Really, Georgiana.” Ross, Payton had noticed, was not quite as patient with his new wife as he had been but a few months earlier. After all, *then* he’d only been courting her. Now that they were safely married, and she couldn’t very well escape, he made it quite clear that the newfangled ideas she brought with her from London were no longer going to be tolerated. “There’s something ... well, *unnatural* about a man helping another man to dress. That’s women’s work.”

Georgiana nodded. She’d grown, Payton observed, quite used to the backward logic frequently employed by the family into which she’d married.

“I see,” she said. “And so poor Payton’s got to dress all of you before you’ll let her see to herself. Tut-tutting, she went to Payton’s side, and began to remove her hair combs. “You three ought to be ashamed of yourselves,” Georgiana chastised. “For heaven’s sake, learn to tie your own cravats. I’ve noticed Captain Drake can do it. There’s no reason any of you can’t. You’re not feeble.”

“Oh, well, *Captain Drake*,” Hudson said, rolling his eyes.

“Captain Drake can do *anything*,” mimicked Raleigh in a high-pitched voice, and although it was not clear who precisely he was mimicking, Payton shot him a warning look. She had a sneaking suspicion he was imitating her, in which case, she’d have to give him a taste of her fist, first chance she got.

“I met the captain just now in the hallway.” Using the hair combs, Georgiana began working the tangles from Payton’s scandalously short curls. If she applied them at just the right angle, Georgiana had found that she could almost create the illusion that Payton’s hair was longer than jaw-length, which, in actual truth, it was not. “And he looked right presentable. A good deal more presentable than *you* looked, Ross, the night before we were married.”

“Right,” Hudson said, with a laugh. “But Ross had, I believe, consumed most of a bottle of rum that night, so it’s understandable he mightn’t have looked his best—”

“I understand,” Georgiana continued, as if Hudson had not interrupted, “that Captain Drake keeps no valet, so I can only assume that *he*, at least, is capable of dressing himself.”

“Or Miss Whitby helped him,” Raleigh quipped.

Payton was so startled that she jumped, yanking her hair out of Georgiana’s reach as she whirled

around to face her brother. “She did *not*,” she declared.

~~But even as she said it, and with all the contempt she could summon, a part of her was wondering~~ whether or not it might be true. Unfortunately, that doubt must have sounded in her voice, since Georgiana said, shooting Raleigh a disapproving look, “Of course not. Miss Whitby did no such thing. Really, Raleigh, why must you provoke your sister so?”

Payton felt her cheeks growing hot, and it was not, she well knew, because the room faced west, and the last rays of the setting sun were slanting straight through the ten-foot-high window casements.

“It doesn’t,” she said, moving quickly back to within her sister-in-law’s reach. “Provoke me, mean. *I* certainly don’t care who dresses Captain Drake. He could have an entire seraglio of women dress him, for all *I* care.”

Georgiana frowned and went back to work with the hair combs. After three months of marriage, Georgiana was already quite used to the risqué talk that passed between her husband and his brothers—and sometimes even their sister—as humor. She could only do her best to discourage such talk by ignoring it, or, like now, taking it calmly.

“Well, whoever dressed him,” she said, “it wasn’t Miss Whitby. I saw her myself downstairs not half an hour ago. She was with your father. He was showing her the latest addition to his collection.”

All four Dixon siblings groaned. Sir Henry Dixon had been a very successful businessman in his day, the founder of Dixon and Sons, a merchant shipping company that had earned him a tidy fortune. But since the death of his beloved wife following Payton’s birth, he’d lost a good deal of interest in his business, and had finally turned the entire operation over to his sons. Now Sir Henry spent most of his time reminiscing about his dead wife and collecting pirate memorabilia. The pride of his life was a collection of musket balls he’d purchased in Nassau, musket balls said to have been discharged from pistols belonging to various pirate captains, Blackbeard among them. It was a collection he carried everywhere with him, and would show to anyone who had the bad luck to express the slightest interest in it.

Payton could not help but feel a fierce satisfaction that the odious Miss Whitby should have fallen into her father’s trap. Now she’d be spending the better part of an hour listening to Sir Henry drone on about calibers and the chemical composition of lead, something Payton would only wish upon her worst enemy. Miss Whitby being that enemy, she felt quite happy suddenly.

“And what,” Payton asked her sister-in-law, with deceptive nonchalance, “is Miss Whitby wearing this evening?”

“Oh, la,” Georgiana said. “A frothy blue thing, with pink rosettes. I can’t imagine where she got it. It’s much too young for her, if you ask me. And with that red hair of hers, pink is *not* the thing.” Payton was small for her age, and Georgiana had to lean down to whisper, “*Your* dress is much prettier.”

Despite Georgiana’s attempt at tact, her husband overheard. “I should certainly hope Payton’s dress is prettier, after what I paid for it,” he bellowed.

Payton tugged self-consciously on the puffed sleeves of her white satin evening gown. She longed to tug on the points of her corset, too, which were digging uncomfortably into her thighs, but didn’t dare, with her brothers in the room. The ribbing she’d receive if they learned she was wearing one would be merciless, and, knowing them, they’d feel compelled to share the information with every single person they met at dinner. Payton had never worn a corset before, let alone hair combs, earrings, or even perfume. She couldn’t help marveling a little at her own transformation. Really, the addition of a sister-in-law to her family had not turned out the detriment Hudson and Raleigh had assured her it would. Sisters-in-law, Payton found, knew all sorts of things, and weren’t the least bit reticent about sharing that knowledge.

The information about Miss Whitby’s dress, for instance. Payton couldn’t have hoped any of her

brothers would have been observant enough to deliver *that*. Raleigh might have got the color right, and Hudson might have had something to say about the size and shape of Miss Whitby's breasts, but that would be all. How useful women could be! Having lived the entirety of her life almost exclusively in the company of men, Payton was quite astounded by the discovery.

"So she's full rigged, is she?" Payton frowned at her reflection in the mirror above the bureau. "What's she got on her masthead?"

"By that I suppose you mean how is Miss Whitby wearing her hair." Georgiana shook her head. "Well, I'll tell you. Down."

"Miss Whitby, Miss Whitby," Ross thundered. "Am I to hear of nothing but Miss Bloody Whitby for the rest of my eternal life? Isn't anyone going to tie my damned cravat?"

Georgiana tucked the last of Payton's curls into the tortoiseshell comb. "Really, Ross," she said mildly. "Must you swear so?"

"Yes, Ross," Payton said, eager to follow her sister-in-law's ladylike example. "Shut your bleeding mouth."

Hudson, who happened to be taking a sip from his own snifter of brandy, sprayed the contents across the room in his amusement over Payton's indignant declaration. A few droplets of the amber stuff landed on the sleeve of Raleigh's new evening coat. He leapt up from the window seat with a oath even more colorful than Payton's, and the two men began instantly to wrestle, while Ross continued to demand loudly that his wife—or his sister, he didn't care *who* did it, as long as it was done—tie his cravat. Georgiana commenced to insisting, for the thousandth time, that the Dixons employ a manservant, while Payton, to get Raleigh back for mimicking her, threw herself upon his back, and reached around his neck to destroy the cravat she'd so carefully tied a half hour before.

Raleigh let out a growl and put up both hands to seize hold of her wrists. Too late, it occurred to Payton that she might have thought first, and acted later, an axiom with which her sister-in-law often admonished her. Wrestling with her brothers in her current state of dress was a bit different from wrestling with them in breeches. As she clung to Raleigh's back with her knees, knowing that he was doing his best to unseat her, the stays of Payton's tight corset dug into her ribs and thighs; the tight lacings restricted her movement more effectively than the most impassioned embrace—not that Payton was at all familiar with embraces, impassioned or otherwise. Small-boned and weighing less than half what her brothers weighed, Payton had always heavily relied upon her flexibility to get her out of whatever torture they thought up for her. The ironlike grip of her corset, however, now made such flexibility impossible.

Her sister-in-law must have realized this, since behind her, Payton heard Georgiana calling frantically, "Raleigh! Put her down. This isn't amusing. Someone might get hurt. Put her down, Raleigh!"

"I'll put her down," Raleigh asserted. "Head first into the privy."

Then, with a diabolical laugh, Raleigh made as if to pitch her over his head and shoulders.

Payton refused to beg. She was a Dixon, after all. Biting, scratching, and begging for mercy were all considered beneath the dignity of the Dixons—as was kicking one's assailant in his private parts. Something Payton had learned early on in her life was guaranteed to unloose her from any man's hold, but tended to engender in him a most unforgiving rage. She could only hope that Raleigh might realize, from the fact that she hadn't yet escaped, that she was not exactly in her usual top fighting form. Closing her eyes, Payton silently cursed the day she'd allowed her sister-in-law to talk her into wearing a corset, and resigned herself to landing in an ignominious heap on the hard parquet floor beneath her ...

Until a long, strong arm circled her waist from behind. Oh, good, Payton thought. It's Ross. Thank God *one* of her brothers, anyway, had noticed her predicament, even if it was only because his wife

was making him.

But when the man who had hold of her waist spoke, Payton realized it wasn't Ross at all.

"How many times do I have to warn you, Raleigh?" Connor Drake inquired in his deep, rumbling voice. "Hands off your baby sister."

"Baby my arse," Raleigh asserted, keeping Payton's wrists locked in iron grips. "*She attacked me* I'll have you know."

"Nevertheless, you'll release her."

"Why should I?" Raleigh sounded peevish. "She—"

"Because," Drake said, "I said so."

Payton couldn't see what Drake did with his free hand, but whatever it was, it caused Raleigh to let out a bark of pain. Suddenly, her wrists were free. The next thing she knew, Payton was being lifted from her brother's back by the strength of the single arm around her waist. An arm that was pressing her closely against the body to which it was attached. A very hard, very large, very masculine body. A body that Payton, over the past few years, had gotten to know very well, indeed—through observation only, unfortunately. To feel that body, now, molded against her—even if it was only for a second or two, and through a good many layers of petticoats and whalebone—made Payton feel as if Raleigh had succeeded in his boast, and that she was reeling from the impact of the floor to her skull.

But it was really only the impact of Connor Drake's body against hers that was causing her head to spin.

"And you," she heard Drake say, his warm breath tickling her ear. "I thought I warned *you* to stick to picking fights you can win, with people your own size."

As soon as her feet touched the parquet, Payton felt Drake withdraw his arm. *No*, she thought, with regret as sharp as an actual physical pain.

But she couldn't, for the life of her, think of any way she could induce him to keep that arm there. Miss Whitby would certainly have swooned, or pulled some other such stunt, to remain in his arm. But Payton had never swooned before in her life, and hadn't the slightest idea how to fake it, either.

So she had no choice but to turn toward her rescuer and say, as tartly as she could, "Thank you for your help, but I can assure you, it was unnecessary. I had the situation entirely under control."

Or at least, that's what she thought she said. When she actually raised her gaze to look Drake in the eye—and she had to tilt her chin up pretty far to do so, since he was so outlandishly tall, taller even than her brothers, and they had been considered giants in some of the distant lands they'd visited—a rational thought fled, and she could only stare.

Leaning casually against one of the bedposts, Drake had folded his arms across his chest, and was looking down at her with a smile playing at the corners of his wide, expressive mouth, his blue eyes very bright. He appeared quite devastating in a new black evening coat that fit his broad shoulders a little too well, in Payton's opinion. In addition to the jacket, there was a new waistcoat of white satin and a pair of breeches that, when she lowered her gaze to take them in, struck her as being perhaps a little too tight—to the point of being *extremely* distracting to a young lady like herself, who was interested in such things—in the front.

Then again, she seemed to think that about *all* of Captain Drake's trousers; her sister-in-law had assured her that, actually, the captain's pants were of quite a loose cut, and had suggested that perhaps Payton needed to direct her attention elsewhere.

While this was probably very sound advice, Payton had lately found it impossible to follow.

"Is that so?" Drake said with a drawl. "Well, I hope you'll beg my pardon, then. To me, you appeared to be in some distress."

"Nonsense." Payton tossed her head, and realized, to her dismay, that one of her combs had slipped out during the tussle with Raleigh. It was hanging loose, dangling just above a bare shoulder. She

lifted a hand to it, and tried to shove it back into place. "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself ..."

Payton's voice trailed off, and not because her brothers were continuing to wrestle loudly behind her, but because Drake's gaze, when she'd raised her hands to adjust her hair comb, had suddenly dipped away from hers and down to the neckline of her gown, which, as Ross had been lamenting a little while earlier, was already quite daring. A quick glance downward revealed that now it was not only daring, but downright obscene: while nothing absolutely *crucial* was showing, a good deal more than was supposed to had escaped from the lace cups of that treacherous corset during her wrestling match with her brothers.

Payton immediately began tucking her breasts back where they belonged. She hadn't much in the way of a bosom—it seemed as if every other woman in the world had a good deal more up front than she did—but what she had was really getting to be quite unmanageable ... at least to a girl who was used to having nothing there at all.

But her sister-in-law's sharp intake of breath told her perhaps she ought to have left well enough alone—at least while she was in the presence of gentlemen who did not happen to be her blood relations.

"Oh, Captain Drake," Georgiana cried, rushing forward and seizing the captain's arm. "Did you disturb you? Just another Dixon family disagreement, I'm afraid." When the captain's gaze still did not leave the vicinity of Payton's chest, Georgiana gave his arm a tug, pulling him back toward the open door through which he'd managed to stroll so completely unnoticed moments before. This, Payton supposed, was a strategy Georgiana had devised with the hope of distracting the captain long enough to give Payton time to put things to rights beneath her bodice, and she took advantage of it by giving her corset a violent tug.

"They are such *boys*, aren't they, Captain?" Georgiana said, with a tinkly laugh, as they stepped over the prone bodies of her brothers-in-law—who had continued to wrestle with one another long after Payton's rescue, finally falling together to the floor with a mighty crash. "I can't think how you put up with them for so many years. Raleigh, Hudson," she sang. "Our host is here. Do get up."

Raleigh got up first, pulling his waistcoat back into place. "Host," he muttered. "It's only *Drake*, for pity's sake."

Hudson echoed his younger brother's sentiment. "Really, Georgiana," he said, miffed. "You're going to give the fellow airs, calling him a host, like that. Next thing you know, he'll be going around insisting he's a baronet, or something."

"Actually," Drake said, "I *am* a baronet."

Hudson regarded his sister-in-law sourly. "See what you've done," he said.

Georgiana looked pained. "Hudson," she said. "Captain Drake *is* a baronet. Remember, I explained to you in the carriage that he inherited the title when his brother died—"

"Don't believe it," Hudson declared.

"I *won't* believe it," Raleigh insisted. "We don't have to *sir* you now, Drake, do we? Because I know one won't stand for it, not after all we've been through together."

"I don't think," Hudson agreed, thoughtfully, "that I could *sir* a man I've beaten at cards as many times as I've beaten Drake."

Drake gave a low bow. "Gentlemen," he said with mock gravity, "I have full faith that neither of you will allow the change in my social status to tarnish the respect I know you've always harbored for me."

"Kiss my arse, Drake," Hudson suggested, and Raleigh made a rude noise with his lips.

"Oh," Georgiana said, opening her fan and applying it to her burning cheeks with energy. "Dear."

Drake rose from his bow with a smile across his face—one of those smiles that made Payton, even

when she wasn't wrestling with her brothers, feel a little breathless.

"It's nice to know," he commented, "that while a good many things may change, some things will always stay the same."

"I say, Drake." Ross fingered his still-open collar. "Georgiana says you tied that knot yourself. Is that true? You've got to show me how to do it, old man. I can't quite seem to get the hang of it."

"The gentlemen are gathering in the billiard room," Drake replied, still smiling. "I'll join you there and happily give you what cravat-tying advice I can."

"Billiard room," Hudson echoed. "The blighter's got a billiard room. There's something to that baronet stuff, Ral."

"I wager there'll be whisky there," Raleigh said. "There's always whisky in a billiard room."

There was no doorway in the world wide enough to admit all three Dixon brothers when they were on a quest for whisky, and the doorways of Daring Park were no exception. Payton watched with raised eyebrows as her brothers elbowed and jostled one another in their haste to exit the room. It wasn't until they were gone that Drake, his own eyebrows similarly raised, turned to Georgiana and said, as mildly as if nothing unusual at all had occurred since he'd entered the room, "Mrs. Dixon, the ladies are gathering before supper in the drawing room, I believe."

"Oh." Georgiana fanned herself frantically, not having quite recovered from Hudson's suggestion that Connor Drake kiss his posterior. "Thank you, Captain. That's quite—it's very kind of you to stop by, personally, to let us know—"

"It was my pleasure, Mrs. Dixon. I'm delighted to have you all here at Daring Park. I trust you find your rooms comfortable?"

"Oh," Georgiana said. "Very. The house is charming, simply charming."

Georgiana seemed quite anxious to get out from beneath the captain's penetrating gaze. Payton could understand the inclination. She'd been the recipient of that cool, calculating gaze more times than she liked to remember.

"Come along, Payton," Georgiana continued nervously. "We had better get downstairs, before your brothers get themselves into even more trouble ..."

"I'll be along," Payton said, "in a minute."

Payton realized that she'd suddenly been presented with a golden opportunity. She hoped she injected her voice with enough syrupy sweetness that her sister-in-law wouldn't guess she hadn't the slightest intention of following any time soon.

She succeeded. Georgiana disappeared into the hallway, too upset by her new family's bad manners to pay much attention to what that family's youngest member was up to. Which was just as well, since she would hardly have approved of what Payton did next, which was seize the baronet by the arm as he attempted to stand aside, allowing her to pass through the doorway first, and hiss, "Thanks for blood nothing!"

Drake looked considerably surprised at being thus addressed. He raised his tawny eyebrows again and said, with a little indignation, "I beg your pardon?"

"How am I ever going to convince Ross to give me my own command if you're forever interfering?" Payton demanded hotly.

"Interfering?" Comprehension finally dawned over the captain's face. "Oh, I see. You mean by me keeping your brother from hurling you over his shoulder, I was interfering?" The corners of his lips curled into a very definite grin. "I'll have to beg your forgiveness, then, Payton. I rather thought I was saving you from a crushing blow to the head. Terribly ignoble of me, I realize now."

Payton refused to be swayed by either the captain's charming manner or devastating good looks. This was excessively difficult just at that moment, since the sun slanting into the room had brought out the highlights in his golden hair. It almost made it look as if there were a halo behind Captain

Drake's head, as if he were a saint—or the archangel Gabriel, perhaps—in a stained-glass window. Thankfully, Captain Drake had not been on the lice-infested clipper, and so his fine hair had been spared from Ross's sheers. It hung as long as his shirt collar. Sometimes he wore it tied back in a black ribbon, a style which Payton approved of highly.

Good Lord! What was she doing, standing there, admiring his hair?

Placing her hands on either side of her narrow waist, Payton glared up at him. "It isn't funny," she informed him. "This is my future we're talking about. You know Ross has this ridiculous idea of marrying me off, instead of doing the sensible thing, and letting me have the *Constant*."

"Right," Drake said. He appeared to be attempting to school his features into a suitably serious expression, but was having some trouble. "The *Constant*. The newest and fastest ship in the Dixie fleet. And you think your brother should give you command of it."

"And why not?" Payton tapped a daintily slippered foot. "I'll be nineteen next month. Both Hudson and Raleigh got their own ships on their nineteenth birthdays. Why should I be treated any differently?"

Once again, Drake's cool blue gaze dipped below her neck. "Well," he said. "Perhaps because you're a—"

"Don't say it." Payton held up a single hand, palm out. "Don't you dare say it."

"Why?" Drake looked genuinely puzzled. "There's nothing wrong with it, you know, Payton. It has its advantages, you know."

"Oh? Name one. And if you mention the word 'motherhood,' I swear I'll start screaming."

Drake hesitated. He either could not think of anything advantageous to being born female, or did not feel that what he had thought up was appropriate to mention in Payton's presence, since he abruptly changed the subject. "Perhaps your brother feels he's already given you your birthday gift. Isn't that one of the new gowns Ross has been complaining about? It's quite lovely."

Payton's jaw dropped incredulously. "What? A gown? A bloody gown? You must be joking. I'm supposed to be satisfied with a new gown when I could have command of a *clipper*?"

"Well," Drake said. "I don't suppose that seems fair to you. But to be honest, Payton, I'm not sure I disagree with Ross about your commanding your own ship. It's one thing when you go to sea with your brothers. After all, then they're there to protect you. But for a young lady to go to sea all by herself, with a crew of men she doesn't know—"

"Protect me?" Payton's voice dripped with disgust. "Since when has any of my brothers ever protected me? You saw them back there. Protecting me was hardly foremost in Raleigh's mind. Killing me was more like it. No—" Here she laid her hand upon his arm once more, hoping he wouldn't notice that this very mild gesture was enough to cause the pulse in her throat to leap spasmodically. Still, she didn't feel she had any choice. This might well be her last chance. "Promise you'll help me to convince Ross to give me the *Constant*. Please, Drake. Ross listens to you, you know. Please will you promise to try?"

Determined that this one time, she was going to look him in the eye and not blink or turn away unless he did, Payton raised her gaze to meet his. It never failed to unnerve her, the unnatural blueness of his irises, so like the color of the water off the shoals of the Bahamas. The only difference was that the water was so clear, she was able to see all the way to the ocean floor. She could not—had never been able to—read what lay behind Drake's clear blue eyes. They might as well have been black as pitch, for all she could see through them.

How he might have answered her, she had no idea, for she could not read his expression, and they were interrupted before he could reply.

"Connor?" The musical voice drifted from the open doorway, quite startlinging them both. Jerking his hand from Drake's arm, Payton turned, and saw in the hallway a pretty redheaded woman in a pale

blue dress trimmed with pink rosettes. Matching rosettes adorned her slippers and hair.

~~“I thought I heard your voice, Connor,” the woman said sweetly. “Good evening, Miss Dixon. I just had the loveliest chat with your father. He showed me the latest addition to his musket-ball collection. He’s such a dear man. I quite adore him.”~~

Payton managed a tepid smile. “Oh,” she said. “I’m so glad.”

To Captain Drake, Miss Whitby said, “Are you coming down, dearest? I understand your grandmother has just arrived, and has been asking for you.”

Captain Drake’s smile, which he’d seemed to have so much trouble controlling a moment before, had entirely disappeared. Now, instead of bringing out the golden highlights in his hair, the fading sunlight brought into extreme relief the lines in his face, of which, Payton noted, there were a great many more since she’d seen him last. Two particularly deep lines stood out from the corners of his mouth to the tips of his flaring nostrils. He looked, suddenly, like a man much older than his thirtieth year.

“Of course,” he said to Miss Whitby. “I’ll be down momentarily.”

Miss Whitby, however, didn’t move. “I do think we ought not to keep your grandmother waiting for my love,” she said brightly.

Captain Drake said nothing for a moment. He seemed extremely interested in the pattern on the carpet. Then, suddenly, he looked up, and pinned Payton where she stood with the full intensity of his unbearably bright gaze. “Will you accompany us downstairs, Miss Dixon?” he asked.

Payton, still a little alarmed by the transformation his face had undergone since Miss Whitby’s appearance—and completely transfixed, as always, by his stare—could only shake her head. “Unfortunately, thank you,” she murmured, through lips that had gone quite dry. “But no. I ... I need a moment.”

To her relief, the captain lowered his gaze.

“Very well, then,” Drake said, and he offered his arm to the redheaded woman.

“Good evening, Miss Dixon,” Miss Whitby said very sweetly. And then the two of them turned to go, and Payton watched as Miss Whitby slipped her gloved fingers into the crook of the captain’s arm and smiled sunnily up at him. “I imagine,” she said, “that your grandmother must be very curious to finally meet your fiancée.”

“Yes,” Payton heard Drake reply. “I imagine that she is.”

Chapter Two

Crossing the room after the captain and his fiancée had left it, Payton went to the mirror hanging above the bureau.

The tortoiseshell comb her brothers' horseplay had knocked from her hair dangled behind her ear in a woeful manner. It had probably been there the whole time she'd been talking to Captain Drake. It had most certainly been there while she'd been talking to Miss Whitby.

Sighing, Payton reached up and tried to tuck the comb back into place. But as hard as she tried, she couldn't get it at the same angle as Georgiana had had it. When she was done, the comb ended up sticking out rather comically from the side of her head. Rolling her eyes, she turned away from the mirror in disgust.

Really, Payton thought to herself. Her hair was the *least* of her problems. Even with her freckles and sunburned nose, her small stature and relative lack of bosom, she knew she was not, as Raleigh had so diplomatically put it, *ugly*. If she'd been truly ugly, her brothers would not have been so cavalier as to joke about it. But she also knew perfectly well that she looked nothing like other girls her age. She certainly didn't look a thing like Miss Whitby, with her creamy white skin—not a freckle to be seen—and her waist-length auburn hair. Payton looked nothing like Miss Whitby, and *acted* nothing like her, either.

Take just now, for instance. Never in her life would Payton have been able to say, "Are you coming down, dearest?" to Connor Drake, and keep a straight face. Connor Drake was infinitely more dear to Payton than he would ever be to Miss Whitby—and anyone who said otherwise would get a taste of Payton's knuckles—but she'd have sooner cut out her tongue than actually *call* him dearest. Of course, that might be because, had any of her brothers heard her calling their friend Drake dearest, she'd never have lived to hear the end of it.

But still, Payton didn't think men really *liked* being called dear. It certainly hadn't looked to her as if Drake had much appreciated it. At least, his face, when Miss Whitby had uttered her "dearests" and "my loves," hadn't changed a bit, except maybe to get a little harder and more stern-looking.

Then again, Ross never looked any different when Georgiana called *him* dear. But that was probably because his wife only called him dear when he was doing something of which she disapproved. Payton rather suspected that behind closed doors, Ross and Georgiana were quite different with one another—*definitely* different with one another, since she'd once walked into the parlor unannounced and overheard Ross calling Georgiana his little monkey, a pet name to which Payton would have had definite objections, had anyone—even Captain Drake—ever used it on *her*.

But perhaps, she thought, Captain Drake and Miss Whitby, like Ross and Georgiana, were different with one another when they were alone. Maybe when they were alone, Drake enjoyed being called dearest. And Miss Whitby enjoyed being called his little monkey.

The image of Captain Drake and Miss Whitby alone with one another made Payton feel a little insecure, so she hastily put such thoughts out of her head.

Turning back to the mirror, Payton spread her skirt wide and fluttered her eyelids, mimicking, in a stilted little voice that was much more highly pitched than her normal tone, "*I imagine your grandmother must be very curious to finally meet your fiancée.*"

Rising from the curtsy, she made a violent motion, as if she were kicking something—or someone. But the sudden movement caused her corset stays to pinch, and she immediately regretted the action.

and put a hand to her hip to rub the tender spot there. "Bloody hell," she murmured, to make herself feel better.

Judging that the captain and his bride-to-be were well down the stairs by that time, and that she could, without fear of running into either of them, descend, Payton did so, looking about her with interest. She felt a certain curiosity about the house, which she had never visited before that day. In fact, though she'd never have admitted it aloud, she'd slept little the night before, so excited had she been about their impending visit.

And, except for the fact that the master of the house was marrying a woman whom she could not abide, Payton couldn't say she'd been disappointed. Daring Park was the estate upon which Drake had been raised, where he'd lived most of his life before a disagreement with his family about his future had sent him to London to seek his fortune. The rambling, three-storied house was over a hundred years old, and filled with lovely old furniture that Georgiana assured her were all priceless antiques. This was very different indeed from the Dixon town house in London, where all the furniture had been bought new soon after Payton's father had made his first five thousand pounds. It still looked new since the Dixons were never at home for more than a few weeks a year, spending the rest of their time at sea.

Still, Payton quite liked the look of Daring Park. It was one of the few places on land where, she fancied, one could safely walk around barefoot and never fear stepping on something sharp.

And although she could see no telltale signs of Drake ever having inhabited it—no initials carved into the balustrade, or portraits of him hanging in the Great Hall—she could still picture him tearing about the place as a young boy, tormenting his tutors and making his elder brother, with whom he never got on, cry. She liked the place all the better for that.

These were of course completely fabricated imaginings: Drake never spoke much about his childhood, which had apparently been somewhat unhappy. Still, Payton's overactive imagination filled in what she did not know, until she had him leaping about the roofbeams overhead with the same energy he leapt about the rigging on board the *Virago*, the ship he'd been commanding for Dixon and Sons for the past half a decade, and would presumably continue to command for a decade more to come.

Not that Drake needed the job, let alone the salary. His brother's untimely death nearly eight weeks earlier had left him a wealthy man, indeed. In fact, he needed never to go to sea again ... at least, not in order to earn his keep. Whether he chose to continue sailing was entirely up to him ...

And the woman he was to marry upon the morrow, of course.

But from what Payton had gathered, Miss Whitby had no great love for the sea. She had once stated with a sideways glance in Payton's direction that one would have to have been blind to have missed that she thought salt air was rather hard on the complexion.

But if Payton's complexion had suffered from the years she'd spent accompanying her father, and then her brothers, at sea, evidently Mr. Matthew Hayford failed to notice it. Either he liked a woman with a tan, or he wasn't shallow enough to let such incidentals get in the way of his friendship. Because as Payton reached the landing, she saw that Matthew was waiting for her at the end of the stairs, looking quite different in evening clothes than he did in his first mate's uniform.

"Ahoy, there, Miss Dixon!" he cried, obviously pleased to see her. "The captain said you were on your way. And I must say, it was worth the wait. Don't you look a picture!"

Payton, a little taken aback by this enthusiastic greeting, glanced around to make certain it was really she to whom it had been addressed. But there was no one on the stairs behind her. Unlikely as it seemed, the admiration on the young man's face appeared to be for *her*. But she'd known Matthew Hayford for years, and he'd never told her she looked like a picture before. Could it be the corset? She glanced down at herself. More likely it was the décolletage. Men were strange creatures, indeed.

Perhaps she ought to heed Drake's advice, and think twice about being alone aboard an entire ship with them ...

Still, Payton greeted Matthew with a sunny smile and an outstretched hand.

"Well met, Mr. Hayford," she said, giving his callused fingers a hearty shake. "When did you arrive?"

"Only just," Matthew said. "Isn't this place posh? Did you see those swans in the lake out back?"

"Oh, that's nothing." Payton pointed to one side of the Great Hall. "Look at those suits of armor. Georgiana says they're *real*. *Real* knights bashed about in them. Drake's ancestors, I suppose. Can you imagine?"

Matthew followed her gaze. "Lord," he breathed. "Captain Drake's ancestors were right short, weren't they?"

"They were not," Payton cried defensively. Then, seeing that quite a few of the suits would have fit her, she said, "Well, they didn't know anything about proper nutrition back then. You couldn't expect them to grow much."

Matthew turned his admiring gaze back upon her. "Is there anything you *don't* know about, Miss Dixon?"

She gave the appearance of giving this question thoughtful consideration. Really, if she were to be perfectly honest about it, Payton would have to admit that there wasn't much she didn't know. She certainly considered herself better educated than most girls her age. What did *they* know about, except hair arranging and gossip? *She* knew how to bring down a sail during a squall, chart a course using only the position of the sun and stars in the heavens as a guide, and kill, skin, and cook a sea turtle with no other utensils than a knife, a few rocks, and some dried-out seaweed. If she hadn't seen it for herself from the deck of one of her family's ships, then she'd heard about it from Mei-Ling, the Cantonese cook who had accompanied the Dixon children on almost every voyage they'd ever undertaken. It was only since Mei-Ling had returned to her native land to enjoy her well-earned retirement—and Ross had brought Georgiana into the family as a sort of replacement—that Payton had begun to realize how very lacking her education had been on one subject in particular: love and marriage.

What, for instance, would Mei-Ling have made over the fact that, when he could have had any woman in the world, Connor Drake had chosen to marry the odious Miss Whitby? Payton had a feeling Mei-Ling's thoughts on the matter would have been quite illuminating.

But since she wasn't prepared to share with anyone her dissatisfaction over the upcoming nuptials, let alone admit her ignorance in matters that involved the heart and not a compass, Payton simply shrugged her shoulders and said, "No."

She was a little startled when Matthew let out a horse laugh that was so loud, it echoed about the massive chamber. In fact, she had to smack him rather forcefully upon the shoulder to get him to be quiet.

"It wasn't *that* amusing," she said. It was truly baffling to her how men seemed to go right out of their heads whenever there was a hint of bosom showing anywhere. Well, some men, anyway. Connor Drake had, unfortunately, seemed to remain in perfect possession of his wits when her bodice slipped.

"Listen, Miss Dixon," Matthew said, when he'd recovered himself sufficiently to speak again. "I was talking to the captain a minute ago, and what do you think he said?"

Fumbling with her hair combs again, Payton said, "I can honestly say I haven't the slightest idea what the captain said, Mr. Hayford."

"Oh, only that after dinner, there's to be dancing. Real dancing, with an orchestra, not just some bloke playing his accordion."

Payton nodded. "I saw the musicians pulling up out front," she said.

“Well, Miss Dixon, would it be too forward of me to ask that you please save a dance for me? Would you mind?”

Payton nearly stabbed the hair comb directly into her scalp. Turning her astonished gaze toward the young man, she stared at him, her mouth slightly ajar—not an attractive look, she realized, and one Georgiana had warned her to avoid at all costs. She remembered too late, and snapped her lips together like a grouper sampling air for the first time.

Good Lord! A man had just asked her to dance! For the first time in her life—nearly nineteen years of life, to be exact—a man had actually asked her to dance. Payton couldn’t believe it. Hudson and Raleigh had been proved wrong in one swift, brilliant stroke!

Struggling to remember what she was supposed to do—Georgiana had warned her this might happen, despite Payton’s assurances that she was far too boyish for any man even to consider asking her to dance—Payton chewed on her lower lip. She quite liked Matthew Hayford, a young man who, twenty years of age, had a promising career ahead of him, and a rather nice head of thick dark hair—he had not been on the clipper with the lice infestation.

Still, it was only as a *friend* that she liked him. He was quite handy with a sail, and played a clever game of whist, a favorite shipboard pastime amongst the officers. She certainly would never hesitate to hire him on as a mate when she finally got her own command. But *dance* with him? That was different.

Still, it *was* only an invitation to dance, after all. He wasn’t asking her to *marry* him, for pity’s sake. So what was she waiting for?

For *him*, a voice whispered in her head. For *him*.

Right, she said to herself. *Well, he is marrying Miss Whitby on the morrow, so you’d better bloom well set your sights elsewhere, missy.*

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Hayford,” she said politely. “That would be lovely.”

“Oh.” Matthew looked a little astonished, but pumped her hand up and down quite emphatically anyway. “That’s champion, Miss Dixon. Just *champion*. Till dinner, then?”

“Till dinner,” Payton agreed.

The two young people parted ways, Matthew heading for the billiard room, and Payton for the parlor where the ladies were said to be gathered. She had no trouble finding this room, since she could hear the tinkling of a pianoforte drifting out from behind the solid door, and recognized Miss Whitby’s lilting soprano as she sang a rendition of “The Ash Grove.” This song was a particular favorite of Miss Whitby’s, though Payton couldn’t think why, since it had a rather nasty narrative to it, about a young man finding his love lying dead beneath a tree. But then, Payton tended to find love ballads as a whole morbid, and vastly preferred sea chanteys, most especially those with beats that made one want to stamp one’s foot very hard upon the quarterdeck.

The parlor, she found, when she opened the door to it, was decorated in only a little less masculine style than the rest of the house, with fawn being the color most primary. Slipping into the room quietly enough to attract no attention—everyone was too engrossed in Miss Whitby’s performance to pay any mind to *her*—Payton sat down on the first vacant seat she found, a luxuriously soft, but somewhat worn, leather sofa.

““The ash grove, how graceful,”” warbled Miss Whitby.

She had a nice enough voice, Payton supposed, but she had a feeling that’s not why Miss Whitby loved to sing. She loved to sing because she looked so good doing it. Every time she took a breath to swell her song, her bosom rose to startling new and dramatic heights. She made quite a picture there with her blue skirts billowing about her and her bosom puffed up so much that it looked as if at a second it might all spill out of the daringly cut gown she wore. Looking down at her own bosom, Payton felt rather depressed. She wondered if Miss Whitby hadn’t, by any chance, stuffed

handkerchiefs into the cups of her corset to add padding to what was already naturally there.

“The dear ones I mourn for, again gather here,” sang Miss Whitby.

Payton was rather surprised to see Miss Whitby wasting such a fine performance on a lot of women. Surely her time would have been better spent saving her song for after dinner, when the gentlemen would be gathered round. Her bosom would be put to much better use *there*.

Then again, Miss Whitby’s bosom had already done its work: it had snared her the finest catch in England. Or at least, that’s what Payton supposed had attracted Drake, since it didn’t seem to her that the odious Miss Whitby possessed anything *else* that would be of interest to a man.

The ash grove, how boring, Payton thought, as she began to look about the room. She recognized quite a few of the women gathered there. There was Georgiana, of course, pretending to look engrossed in Miss Whitby’s performance (Georgiana had confided to Payton that she found Miss Whitby’s insistence on employing vibrato when she sang in front of company a bit affected). There were the wives and daughters of some of the officers with whom Captain Drake had sailed in the past. In fact, except for the rather grand-looking old woman who was entering the room just then, there wasn’t a single person she didn’t recognize. Where, Payton wondered, were Miss Whitby’s guests? Even if she hadn’t any family, surely the bride-to-be had invited *someone* to join her on such a momentous occasion ...

But not, evidently, the old lady who’d just entered the room. After a casual glance through a pair of lorgnettes at Miss Whitby, the woman moved with decorous intent toward the empty cushion on Payton’s couch. It was only after she’d lowered herself onto it—with the help of a handsome cane—and arranged her voluminous skirts around her legs that she leaned over and inquired of Payton in a creaky whisper, her eyes very bright behind the lenses of her spectacles, “Who is that, pray? That creature singing so abominably?”

Payton, who’d been thinking something very much along the same lines, couldn’t help bursting out laughing at such an unexpected observation. She clapped a hand over her mouth to keep from interrupting the performance, but even so, Georgiana heard her, and turned in her chair to shoot her a warning look.

The old woman beside Payton, however, seemed to possess not the slightest qualm about conversing during Miss Whitby’s musicale.

“Is *that* the one he’s marrying tomorrow?” The old lady’s hands—which were quite elegant, despite their being flecked with age spots—clutched the handle of an ornately carved ebony cane. “That one singing?”

Payton, recovering herself, nodded. “Yes, ma’am,” she whispered. “That’s Miss Becky Whitby.”

“Whitby?” The old lady flicked the songstress a skeptical glance. “I never heard of anyone called Whitby. Where do her people come from?”

“She hasn’t any people, ma’am.” Payton had to lean close to the old woman’s shoulder in order for her whispered responses to be heard. “Everyone in her family is dead.”

“All dead?” The old woman raised her fine silver eyebrows. “How convenient. I expected as much. Well, marry in haste, repent at leisure, I always say. Go on. You seem to know all about it. Where did he meet her?”

Payton *did* know all about it, much to her displeasure. She would have much preferred to have known nothing about the matter at all. It had occurred to her shortly after Ross’s wedding that her other brothers, and even their friends, might one day marry, as well. But it had never entered her mind that the next wedding she’d attend would be Connor Drake’s. Even thinking about it now caused an uncomfortable knot in her stomach that she was very much afraid might never, ever go away. At least it hadn’t gone away, not even for a few minutes, since she’d first heard about the impending nuptials between Captain Drake and Miss Whitby. She’d even been to see the ship surgeon about it, and he

baffled, had declared the discomfort to have no *physical* cause that he could find. Was it possible the might be an emotional cause?

But Payton had indignantly denied any such possibility, and put it down to a bad batch of oysters she'd consumed in Havana. She would continue to do so too until the day she died.

"We were in London," Payton explained, keeping her voice low enough so that she would not be the recipient of any more disapproving stares from her sister-in-law. "We'd just got back from the West Indies run. Drake had—I mean, *Captain* Drake—had learned upon our docking that his brother had died, and he was supposed to meet some solicitors at an office near Downing Street. Well, no one liked for him to go alone, because it was such a sad thing, even though he hadn't liked his brother much. So we all up-anchored and went with him, and as we were coming out again from the solicitor offices, we heard some screaming, and saw that there was a great row outside this inn across the street. A woman—Miss Whitby, as it turned out—was being shanghaied by some galley rats, and so of course we went to help her. I boshed a fellow flat on the head with a bagatelle cue—"

"I beg your pardon?" The old woman raised her lorgnette to get a better look at Payton.

"Well, there happened to be a bagatelle table in the inn—"

"Of course," the old lady said. "A bagatelle cue. How stupid of me. Do go on."

"Well, in any case, we managed to drive the galley rats away—well, except for that one Hudson killed—and then we took Miss Whitby inside, because she was fainting. When we'd revived her, she told us the men had stolen her reticule, which contained all the money she had in the world, because she's an orphan and hasn't any family."

The old woman stared down at Payton with an inscrutable expression on her face. Her eyes, behind the lenses of the lorgnette, were a very bright blue, and seemed strangely familiar to Payton, though she couldn't, for the life of her, think why.

"You," the woman said, finally, "must be the Dixon girl, then."

"Payton Dixon, ma'am," Payton said, extending her right hand amiably. "How d'you do?"

"Payton?" the woman echoed. "What kind of name is *that*?"

Used to the question, Payton replied, "The name my father gave me. He called me after Admiral Payton, ma'am. All of my brothers and I are named for seafaring explorers or naval heroes. Ross named for my father's good friend Captain James Ross, who was killed by hostile natives whilst he was looking for the Northwest Passage, and Hudson for Henry Hudson, who—"

"I ought to have known straight off." The old woman ignored her hand. "You're quite disgraceful, Payton. Still, the freckles led me to think you were much younger. Are you really eighteen?"

Payton put her hand down. She supposed that, once again, she'd managed to offend someone with her mannish forwardness. Oh, well. She hoped the old lady wasn't anybody important, or Georgian, or would skin her alive. "I'll be nineteen next month."

"Extraordinary." The blue eyes raked her. "You don't look a day over twelve."

Payton hadn't taken any offense at the old lady's interrupting her, her reference to her freckles, or her refusal to shake her hand. But to accuse her of not looking a day over twelve—now *that* was just too much.

"I may not be as filled out as *some* people"—Payton cast a baleful glance at Miss Whitby, who was still pounding away at the keyboard—"but I assure you, I'm full grown."

The old woman made a tsk-tsking noise with her tongue. "Well, then, your father hadn't ought to be letting you go about—how did you put it? Boshing people on the head with bagatelle cues. You ought to be concentrating on the kinds of activities girls your age normally pursue."

Payton looked disgusted. "If you mean finding a husband and all of that, you needn't worry. Ross—my eldest brother—has already informed me that I'm to come out this year, and that I hadn't ought to count on sailing again anytime soon."

The old woman nodded approvingly. "He's perfectly correct."

"Well, I don't think so," Payton grumbled. "I've been at sea for most of my life, and I've turned out all right."

"That," the old woman sniffed, "is a matter of opinion. I've heard about you, Miss Dixon."

Pleased to hear that her seafaring skills were being so widely discussed, Payton inclined her head modestly. "Well," she said. "I *did* once make the West Indies run in under seventeen days, but I admit I had my brother Hudson's help—"

"That's not what I meant. I mean that I understand you possess some rather ... forward-thinking opinions."

"Oh." Payton nodded. "Well, if you mean that I believe there's no job a man can do that a woman can't do as well or better, then yes, I suppose I do. Ross says I oughtn't get my hopes up, but I fully expect that for my birthday next month, I'll be given a ship of my own to command. I'm hoping for our fastest clipper, the *Constant*, but I suppose I could settle for something a little older, to practicality, you know, until I—"

The old lady gave the floor a sharp rap with her cane. Fortunately Miss Whitby was too absorbed in her performance to notice. Several other guests, however—Georgiana included—looked in the direction of the sofa.

"Young woman." The grande dame eyed Payton severely over the tops of her lorgnette. "Only a person who had spent the whole of her life trapped on a ship with a lot of men would aspire to something like *that*."

Payton said, "Oh, but I think I'd make a fine captain. I mean, except for the heavy lifting, which I admit, because of the way we're shaped, is harder for women, there really isn't anything men can do that we can't. On top of which, we have the added advantage of being able to give birth—"

Another rap of the cane. This time, the look Georgiana shot in their direction was decidedly alarmed.

"Miss Dixon." The old woman's lips were quivering, and not, Payton thought, with amusement. "I must say, I think it quite negligent of your family, allowing you to go about discussing such topics. Not to mention boshing people on the head."

"But if I hadn't boshed him on the head," Payton said, "he'd have hurt someone."

"Despite what you might think, Miss Dixon, it isn't at all attractive, this declaring yourself equal to men. Nor do I think it particularly wise of you to go about helping your brothers to capture—what do you call them? Oh, yes. Galley rats."

Payton raised her eyebrows. "And what was I supposed to do, pray, while they were under such an insidious attack?"

"You ought to have been fainting, like Miss Whitly."

Payton flashed the old lady an annoyed glance. "It's *Whitby*, and what good does fainting ever do? It only causes everybody else a lot of bother, while they run around looking for smelling salts and other things. Besides, if Miss Whitby had had the sense to up-anchor and seize a bagatelle cue, like I did, she might have been able to hang on to her money."

"Yes," the old lady said. "Well. Be that as it may, men prefer women who faint over women who wield bagatelle cues."

"That isn't true," Payton drew breath to insist, but the old woman lifted an imperious finger to silence her.

"It isn't *you* the captain is marrying, is it?" she said pointedly. "It's *her*."

Payton followed the old woman's gaze. Miss Whitby had finished singing about her revolting discovery under the ash grove, and had moved on to describe how her love was doing her wrong by casting her off so discourteously.

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