

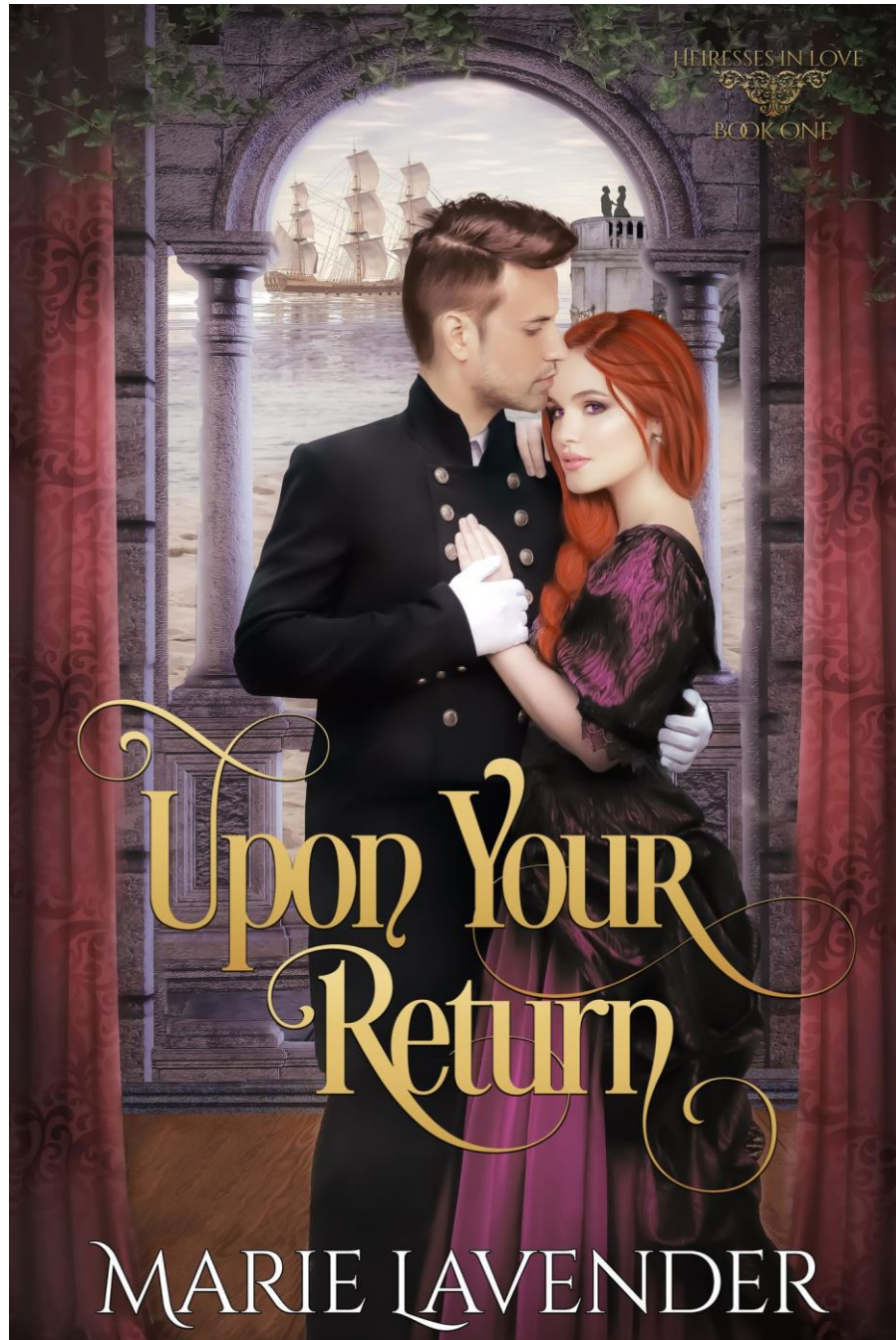
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Sample Chapters of *Upon Your Return*

Genre: Historical Romance

Time Period: Victorian

Tropes: Forced Proximity, Second Chances, Secret Baby



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by Marie Lavender
Book one of the Heiresses in Love Series

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Prologue

November 8, 1853

Fara Bellamont stepped away from the bay window overlooking the harbor. She didn't want to move; she would miss her home too much. The view of the waves rocking against the hulls of the ships in the harbor had calmed her restless soul on many sleepless nights. There was something about the greenish hue of the ocean and its gentle sway which drew her to it. It was a sight she welcomed but was not exactly in her blood. Her parents' home was but a carriage ride away from port. Her father was a businessman who had acquired many connections with the trades' captains.

Even the sea's lullaby couldn't calm the uncertain waters ahead. With a heavy sigh she crossed the room to the trunk in the middle of her chamber. She lifted the lid and kneeled, gently probing

the yards of soft, blue velvet. It was her mother's gown from the night her parents had met. They had been united by her mother's season celebration in Marseille. A woman's first introduction into society wasn't supposed to result in a love match, only certain options. A potential husband would've come in time when her mother had been to numerous parties and such. But André Bellamont had been the luckiest suitor in the crowd. Fara heard the story many times. Her parents often reflected on it, and she herself tended to beg them to tell her how they'd met time and time again. Nothing could've prevented their union. They had fallen in love despite her grandparents' insistence that Annabelle D'Aubigne was too young to be tied down.

Fara's throat tightened with emotion as she touched the portrait of her parents, which was rolled securely for safe storage. A sense of loss overcame her. It seemed like a lifetime ago when they had left her in the care of Rosalie, her nursemaid, so that her father could finish a business agreement. Obligation had required him to travel overseas, and her mother refused to be left behind.

Though she loved them both dearly, she often wondered what might've happened if her mother had decided to stay at home. Perhaps Turkish pirates would not have overtaken the ship. André and Annabelle would still be alive. Squeezing her eyes shut, her shoulders shook silently with grief. She clenched her jaw on the ache of tears. No, she couldn't allow herself to accept it yet. There was still much to be done.

Glancing up, she caught her reflection in the mirror propped up against a wall. Wearing a pure white muslin gown, she looked little more than a limp waif in laced-up boots. Nearly the ripe age of nine, she wished she was much older—at least old enough to object to her parents' silly will. Or old enough to tear down the pale sheets enveloping the furniture in the house. It looked like a place for ghosts, not lively people. The house was dead, empty; much like her heart.

Now she was to prepare for a new life, transported to a stranger's home where her days would pass slowly, one just as grim as the next, she feared. She'd heard rumors of her uncle's disposition. She had never met him, but her parents hadn't wanted her to be around him.

She remembered one evening when she was supposed to be in bed, and she heard raised voices downstairs. Fara had crept out of her room, careful to avoid disturbing her nursemaid, and knelt at the posts on the balcony.

Her father shook his head. "He is family."

"So, he is. But I will not have him within the vicinity of our daughter." This came from her mother, still as beautiful as ever in a pale blue gown.

"And why not?"

"You see the way he has treated me. He obviously doesn't like women. How can we know he won't treat Fara the same?"

Papa muttered something incoherent. "He is my brother. I cannot think he would shun her."

"Did I say that? But he is a harsh man, love. Not the sort of man you would want around your child."

He nodded. "Perhaps you're right. In any case, it hardly matters. We live here in Marseille, and he is in La Rochelle. And he could hardly wish to visit." He sighed. "But if anything were to happen to us, who do you imagine would care for her?"

"Lina?"

"Lina has her own life. Besides, society would hardly accept that."

“She’ll be married soon. Why not? Perhaps her husband would be all right with that sort of arrangement.”

“It is hardly likely. It makes sense to leave her to Michel.”

Her mother clenched her fists. “Not whilst I am living will I expose her to that wretched man.”
Then she stormed out of the room.

Papa stared after her. “Chère, wait!” And he followed her mother shortly.

Fara rose slowly, frowning, and then went back to her bedroom.

The scene had made little sense to her at the time, but she wondered if her mother's claims were at all true. Could it be possible? Had her parents kept her away from her uncle for a reason? Because he didn't like children?

Fara shuddered. She did not wish to live with such a man.

“Mademoiselle!” Rosalie rushed into the room now, fussing over Fara's auburn tresses and straightening her gown. *“We must ready you for the trip.”*

“When is he coming?”

“Monsieur Bellamont will be here shortly.”

“He has traveled so far.”

“You are family, though.”

“Does that matter to someone like him?”

Rosalie frowned. *“You mustn't say those things in public. Someone will hear you and believe you are not a lady.”*

“Am I, Rosalie?”

“What, *Mademoiselle*?”

“A lady.”

Her nursemaid smiled with a slow spread across her features. “You will be one day, Fara.” She kneeled before her young charge and re-laced her boots. “Come. You shouldn’t keep your uncle waiting.”

“Is he as bad as they say?”

“Hush. All will be better soon, I promise.” She began to usher her out of the room.

“Wait!” Fara sidestepped Rosalie and ran to the bay window, taking in the view she was sure she'd never see again. She grabbed a gold locket and chain from a nearby table, and then joined Rosalie at the door. As they trekked down the stairs, her breath caught in her throat. At the balcony landing, she noticed a gentleman who stood below. He was dressed in a dark coat and trousers. “*Monsieur*,” she greeted him and curtsied.

A grave expression settled over his face. “You must be Fara. I am your uncle, Michel *de* Bellamont. You will be living with me now.”

Fara hesitated to meet him on the floor below. A nervous ache grew in the pit of her stomach. She'd been led to believe that her uncle wasn't a man who gave over to emotions. He was much like the stuffy gentlemen her father brought to dinner at times. She was overcome with a sense of dread.

“He's your uncle,” Rosalie whispered, urging her forward.

She reluctantly went down the last few steps and came to stand before Michel *de* Bellamont. He seemed to tower over her. Uneasy, she shifted her feet.

Raising one eyebrow, he studied her. "You look like your mother."

Fara felt the beginnings of a smile creep across her face for the first time that day, and the thought that she might truly resemble her mother brought tears to her eyes. "Thank you."

"That was not a compliment." He turned on his heel and left the house, calling over his shoulder, "Hurry along now. I have a business meeting this afternoon."

She sighed deeply, her heart heavier than before. Perhaps the man would grow accustomed to her. Would he behave differently in that case? She wasn't sure he would. She just knew it was going to be a long day and she wanted to be much older so she could decide where she was to live.

It had been a long ride to La Rochelle. Her uncle hadn't said much to her. He simply sat across from her, absorbed in a pile of business documents. Rosalie wasn't allowed to ride with them in the carriage; she'd had to come separately. Fara's uncle had made it plain that her nursemaid's station was completely different from her own. So she would sit alone in the carriage with him, bored out of her wits.

He wasn't a lively man, not like her father. At least Papa had spoken to her. Her father had been protective and careful to remind her of her position in life, yet he had still made the time to appear interested in her activities, whether she helped her mother with errands in the afternoon or received lessons from a tutor.

Her uncle, though, was a very quiet man. At the same time, she sensed he was not too friendly when pushed. She was wary to appear curious about her life with him later on. She remembered how hard his face had seemed when she greeted him for the first time. Was he really as harsh as her mother had thought? She began to wonder if he would treat her as family or simply tolerate her. The man didn't seem affected by anything. She wondered if there was even a heart beneath his suit jacket. But perhaps he was more of an intellectual. She had heard of men like that.

Her father had commented about some gentlemen he had done business with once. They were scholars and taught at the university in Paris. After they had left the house and she had been standing behind him, he turned to her and claimed they were odd men, much like pieces of furniture. You could throw a valise at them, and they'd never feel it. She'd giggled at the thought of people that tense.

But now, as she glanced at her uncle from beneath her eyelashes, she considered the possibility that he was just as unmoved by all that surrounded him. She frowned. It was hard to understand how anyone, even some of the dull gentlemen she'd met through her father's business liaisons, could be so detached from everything. Her uncle was a simple gentleman, dressed in a waistcoat and slacks, and well-groomed. His age was beginning to show; the once completely black hair had begun to gray slightly. She imagined he was a bit older than her father. Papa had told her that some men were so laden with responsibility, and they couldn't enjoy life's pleasures. Was her uncle that way?

What was it that made him different from everyone else? Had he never felt pain, never broken a bone as a child, or gone off to war as a young man? Had he never looked across the room at a soiree and seen the most beautiful young lady and hadn't he wanted to dance with her, perhaps even marry her? According to the servants, he was unmarried. And he was a very important

businessman. It seemed to her that he'd felt none of the sentiments that most people did. Did he not dream of those things? He was a serious man, the sort she was not at all accustomed to. Papa had been a businessman as well, but he had always had time for her. He knew how to laugh. She wondered if her uncle ever did.

Michel *de* Bellamont shifted his feet and cleared his throat. His gaze lingered on her face for a moment. "Perhaps you should rest. It is a long ride."

She nodded absently but noticed his eyes. They were a harsh shade of brown, dull and void of life. Whenever he looked at her, he wasn't looking. It was as if he stared right through her to a place she couldn't see.

For the most part, he seemed preoccupied with his business dealings. His very lack of joy in the world made her young heart sink like an anchor.

She knew as clear as day that she would never see her uncle smile. And suddenly, she knew why she had never been told about her father's brother. Not only did he dislike children, it seemed he hated life as well. How could someone live like that, every day despising the pride and excitement that everyone else felt?

Fara had been born into a loving world, a place where duty was only a side note and laughter made the tough times better. Again, the dread seeped within her belly. She didn't wish to enter her uncle's world if it was a cold and lifeless place.

With a sigh, she knew she was powerless. An eight-year-old girl could do nothing in this world run by adults. According to her parents' will, she was to be placed in his care. It was so unfair. She'd have to go to La Rochelle, to call it home.

The carriage bounced a little as it went up a hill. Fara glanced out the window for the first time. The harbor was still there, the sea a dizzying crash of waves. Perhaps one day her restless spirit would subside, and she would no longer need the sea to calm her. She wouldn't feel the pull of the ocean, encouraging her with its peaceful cadence. The carriage veered off, moving farther away from that vista and she couldn't help the yearning she felt to be out there, somehow united with her parents once more. But it was not to be.

She tore her eyes away from the sight, sullen with a heavy, sinking feeling in her chest. "*Monsieur...*" she cleared her throat and began again. "*Oncle?*"

He lifted his head, his gaze slow to focus, like he'd never heard a child speak to him and it was somehow puzzling. "What is it?"

His irritability didn't ease her wave of grief. "What will I do once we are in La Rochelle, once I am settled?"

His eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"At home, I helped my mother with the duties of the household. My father had also hired a tutor near the end..." She blinked away her tears. If he was as harsh as she thought, emotions would be seen as a weakness.

"Oh, well, of course you will be educated. I have sent payments to an abbey in Burgundy."

"An abbey?" She didn't understand.

"You will be trained in your proper station. The nuns there know how to prepare young ladies for the future."

"You're sending me to live in a convent?" She gasped. She had heard of the girls' schools. They had all been moved to the nunneries. Rosalie had informed her that it was a possibility, a fate she

might be forced to endure. Most parents hired tutors, taught their children themselves, or settled for the latter. She had never dreamed she'd live out her days in a convent though.

He frowned. "For a while. Until they feel you are ready. When time has passed, your season will begin. And then, I will find you a suitor."

Already he was speaking of marriage? That was so many years down the road! "I'm only eight!" she cried.

"You will remember your position, Fara," he lowered his voice by degrees.

She swallowed hard. "*Oui, oncle.*"

The morning sun streamed through the doors of her new room. Fara hesitantly lifted her eyelids to the light of the day. White, nearly transparent curtains enveloped the bedposts, hanging around her like a cocoon. Caught off guard by a sudden chill in the room, she pulled the bedclothes closer to her chest.

It would be hard to live a different life than she was used to. In a few days' time, she would travel to the abbey. She shouldn't be all that surprised. With what she had gathered about her uncle, it was no wonder that he wanted her out of his hair as soon as possible. This was his chance to dispense with obligation, by letting someone else tend to her needs.

However, she wasn't too certain that the nuns would know what she needed. Her parents could not be replaced. But Fara missed her mother's easy smile and the way she would casually ruffle her hair in an affectionate manner. She yearned for her father to pick her up in his arms and hold her to his hip while he laughed at her stories. Her eyes closed on the thought. Some things she

would have to learn to live without. She couldn't forget what her uncle had said after she had spoken out to him in the carriage.

"Your father, it seems, was very lenient with you. He was always different. I didn't imagine he would be lax with conventions, however. You have not been instructed of your place. You will learn it in time."

Her uncle was wrong. She had a tendency to speak before thinking, but that didn't mean her father had not taught her in the right way. She was sure her parents had done nothing wrong. They'd loved her. It had seemed enough then.

Sighing heavily, Fara slid off the mattress and landed softly on the floor in her bare feet. She picked up the dressing gown which lay near the bed, gathered it around her, and pulled the string tight. At the basin, she splashed water on her face and toweled it dry. She finished her morning ritual by dragging a brush through her unruly length of auburn curls. Then, she reached over and pulled the cord.

Within a few minutes, a maid entered demurely. It was not Rosalie. *"Mademoiselle?"*

She tried to hide her disappointment that her nursemaid had not appeared. "I wish a gown please."

"Of course. Your uncle is expecting you at the breakfast table." The maid, an average-sized woman with plain features and brown hair shoved beneath a white cap, shuffled around, and removed a crimson-colored dress from a set of drawers. She began to shake out the wrinkles.

"Oh? I thought perhaps he'd have business to tend to."

"Usually he appears at breakfast, but rarely for dinner unless he does not have plans."

“I see.” Fara swallowed back the dread of having to appear before her uncle again. Averting her thoughts, she watched the maid working. “What is your name?”

“Marie, at your service, *Mademoiselle*.”

She smiled pleasantly and took the woman's hand. “It is good to meet you, Marie.”

The maid blushed and busied herself with helping Fara into the gown.

When she was prepared for breakfast, Fara thanked Marie and left the room. As she ascended the stairs, a chill ran over her arms, dousing them with goosebumps. Her uncle was not a terrible man, she supposed, only difficult to approach. She doubted they would ever be close.

When she rounded the corner and came to the door of the dining room, her hand rested on the knob, lingering on its cold metal. Her uncle would be her sole caretaker now. She was his responsibility until one day when he would relinquish her to another man. The very thought filled her with terror.

Why did they have to die? Why couldn't her life go back to the way it was?

She shook her head. There was no use lamenting things she could not change.

Fara would never forget her parents. But perhaps she'd learn to love her uncle in time. And he might feel the same in return one day.

Her heart clenched on the hope of future happiness, and she turned the doorknob, and then stepped into the room. She sat down with the assistance of a butler and glanced across the table at her uncle. He was reading a newspaper. When he glanced up, she thought she saw surprise in his eyes.

“Good morning, Fara.”

Her heart soared. “Good morning, *oncle*.”

Chapter One

April 12, 1863

“Oh, dear, did you see the Follets the other day? I'm surprised they have the nerve to show their faces.”

Fara Bellamont nodded to Juliet Masson and attempted a smile. The chandelier lighting cast a harsh light over the dinner party this evening. The tapestry panels about the room depicted a floral motif, huge bouquets against a crimson and ivory background. There were twelve people at the dining table, mostly comprised of her uncle's business partners and their wives and daughters. Also, a few available gentlemen whom her uncle occasionally consorted with.

She then heard an unforgivable giggle from her female companion. Focusing her attention on her plate of Chicken Almondine and roasted potatoes, she tried to ignore the ruckus the lady to her left caused. Juliet must've had too much wine; most young women her age refused to gossip at dinner parties, especially if men were present. Usually that kind of talk was reserved for the parlour or at tea.

The woman began to laugh uncontrollably. “Oh, *Monsieur*! You are too much!”

Good Lord. What is she about? Fara hadn't heard either a flattering or humorous comment all evening. Most of the talk had been about the political uncertainty, it being a time of war. The gentlemen were concerned about invasion. Surprise attacks were known to happen, especially if the emperor's ambitions were getting out of hand.

The gentleman to her right brushed against the sleeve of her dress. She saw his apologetic expression as she jerked away. When his eyes didn't leave hers, an uneasy feeling began in her stomach. She was not used to men staring at her. It had only been a year since her season celebration and though she had danced with many men that night, none had approached her uncle with an offer. She had almost forgotten the look until now.

A year had passed since she'd returned to the estate to resume her place as lady of the house. The nuns had given her uncle a full report on the progress she'd made during the nine years she spent at Cluny Abbey in Burgundy.

Fara had hated leaving Helene behind, seeing as she was the only companion she'd found at the convent. Helene Perét, a bright-eyed but dark-headed girl with quite a knack for making trouble, had to stay another year to finish her training. The nuns claimed her friend had yet to be tamed.

Fara had learned how to be a lady in the years she was at the convent. She also learned that her fate, to be a wife and a mother, was inevitable. She remembered the nights in the mission as she lay in bed, staring up at the barred window which stood too high for any human being to reach.

She had lain awake and wondered if there was more to it all than what she'd been told, if perhaps somewhere, even away from French boundaries, there was a better reason she was alive. A purpose. She dreamed that the sea held her fate, like her parents; perhaps it was the only place she would ever feel free.

Then came the nights she and Helene would stay up, scheming an escape from the convent, planning their whole lives and filling them with excitement and adventure. Helene would go on about how Fara could become a seamstress and she'd sell the dresses. However, Sister Marguerite would click down the hallway in her black polished heels and peek in the doorway for a head

check. The girls would squeeze their eyes shut, covered up in sheets, and as the nun turned away, they would as well. Deep down, they both knew there'd be no escape from the lives planned out for them

There was only marriage. Sometimes she still caught herself dreaming of a way out of her life, or at least a distraction. Perhaps an adventure of some kind that would make this lifeless futile.

Fara startled at the tinkle of metal tapping glass. Her uncle, seated at the head of the table, cleared his throat, and then stood and bowed to his guests. He cleared his throat again. "Let's turn the conversation to a lighter note, shall we? I would like to propose a toast to *Monsieur* Le Croix, my fair niece, and their coming nuptials."

She nearly choked on the bite of chicken. As she reached for her wine in a panic, there was a rumble of agreement from the guests and a few ladies chattered quietly after this announcement.

A sudden shiver came over Fara as she took in the unexpected news. Just like that, he decided her future. She was given no say in the matter. She didn't even have time to devise a plan of escape.

Her uncle had obviously been planning this announcement for some time. But why had he not stated the point of tonight's dinner? He had simply instructed her to plan a meal which would be fit for some well-known ladies and gentlemen, nothing more. She had taken it upon herself to be sure the silver was polished, the dishes sparkling, and the dining room was laid out with fresh flowers adorning the long table. New tapestries had been hung, and the white silk tablecloth could hardly go unnoticed. She had not, however, imagined it would be for this sort of event. If she had known, she could've done more, or less, she supposed depending on her feelings concerning the matter.

She turned to the man at her left, her supposed fiancé. He nodded to the gentleman across the table with whom he engaged in conversation. Fara regarded him beneath the cover of her eyelashes. He wasn't tall, yet his looks held a peculiar innocence. He seemed rather young for a suitor, perhaps a couple of years above twenty, but well-endowed financially. Le Croix was a known name in La Rochelle, and rumors that the family had ties to the crown. Her uncle had chosen him, she supposed, because he was among society's elite in France. Beyond that, she knew nothing else about him; however, her uncle would certainly have something to say if she made an issue of it.

“Fara?”

She jerked to attention at her uncle's tone and focused on his set face. “*Oui, oncle?*”

“Will you not escort the ladies to the parlour for tea?”

She nodded, “Of course,” and rose to fulfill her duties as lady of the house. She detested the inane chatter and gossip which masqueraded as conversation. She could remind her uncle that dessert hadn't yet been served, but it was pointless too. She'd lost her appetite.

In the parlour, *Madame* Masson continued her grating laughter as she found humor in one of the servants who had dropped a tray. After the mess was cleared, Fara waved the girl away. She shook her head at Juliet.

Mademoiselle Fournier, who had attended the dinner with her mother, leaned forward. “*Mademoiselle* Bellamont, you must tell us more about Jean Le Croix. How did you meet?”

“I am afraid there is very little to tell. I don't know the man.”

Most of the ladies nodded. Women were often raised with the knowledge that their future husbands would be chosen for them. It was not anything new.

Madame Masson scoffed. “Surely you must have something to tell. Perhaps he took you into a corner, and your uncle discovered it? You cannot be so innocent, *chère*.”

Fara clenched her jaw before scolding her. “*Madame*, please. This isn’t at all appropriate. And I have only entertained him in the presence of my uncle.”

Other remarks were made, some more obscene. Her cheeks flamed.

After she'd endured enough of those women, their ravings and cruel gossip, her fiancé appeared in the doorway. Desperate for a distraction, she strode to him, calling over her shoulder, “*Pardonnez moi, Mesdames...*” She reached him and muttered, “*Mon Dieu*, you do not know what a bore these ladies have become.” She eyed the sudden pallor of his face and wondered what he was thinking.

“*Oui*, I can imagine. *Mademoiselle*, I must speak with you.”

She smiled. “Surely we shouldn’t be so formal now. We are to be married, after all, Jean.”

His lips thinned until they were pale and then he took her elbow. “Accompany me to the veranda, Fara...”

As he led her away, her eyes searched his face for something her uncle must have overlooked...malice, perhaps. When they reached the gallery, she pulled away from his biting grasp. “You're hurting me.”

He stepped back, studying her face. “I am sorry, *Mademoiselle*. It is only that we are to be wed in two weeks.”

“*Oui*,” she replied, feeling numb all over by his sudden show of violence and his apparent perplexity of the situation.

“I want you to be honest with me, Fara. I'm going to ask you a question and I want you to tell me the truth.”

“All right.” She looked up into his face and saw panic and desperation. But what was causing it?

“Do you love me, Fara?” he asked softly.

She gasped. “We've barely just met. We don't know *anything* about each other...”

“Answer the question, *Mademoiselle*.”

His fingers once again pinched her flesh, and she felt a surge of pity for this man she didn't know. “I don't love you, Jean Le Croix.”

“Truly?”

Her breath caught. How could a man expect that kind of feeling at a moment's notice, without having had some kind of affiliation beforehand? Was he mad? Then again, perhaps he held romantic illusions, and believed, as very few did, in love at first sight. She swallowed past the lump in her throat. “I cannot. Not now, at this moment in time.” She knew it would hurt him but didn't know how to fix it without lying to him. It was true, however; she couldn't love a man she did not know or felt absolutely nothing for.

“*Mon Dieu!*” Jean's eyes closed briefly, he let out a long string of curses and turned away, striding back the way he came.

Fara winced and lowered her eyes to the floor. She had seen the shock entering his eyes and the pain which followed thereafter. She felt poor for how honest she'd been toward him, but he deserved the truth. It was up to him whether he blamed her for it or not.

She felt the imprint his fingers left in the flesh of her arms and attributed it to his reaction to her admission. She might well have bruises by the morrow, but she no doubt deserved that. Fara had been very honest with her fiancé, and ladies were supposed to ply gentleman with smiles and ready agreements. At the same time, she couldn't imagine why he would ask her such a question when they barely knew one another. Something about the exchange was very odd.

The following evening, Fara sat reading from *Madame Bovary* when Rosalie knocked on her door.

She lifted her head. "What is it?"

"*Mademoiselle*, a messenger brought this for you." The woman entered the room and approached her mistress. "It is from *Monsieur Le Croix*."

"*Merci*, Rosalie." She retrieved the letter from her nursemaid and opened it once she had left the room. Inside was a scrawling script which she had to squint to read.

Dear Fara,

Would you accept my apology concerning what happened last night? I don't know what possessed me. I would like to make up for my poor behavior to you. I would be very grateful if you met me at the harbor tonight on pier two at nine o'clock. If you are not up to appearing, I will certainly understand.

Your fiancé,

Jean Le Croix

She read over the note once more. It was an odd request, to be sure. She frowned, bit her lip a little. At the same time, she felt some amount of guilt for being so honest, even though saying otherwise the evening before would've been worse, and she had to trust that Jean meant well by his apology. Perhaps it would be all right to meet him. Besides, they needed to overcome this dilemma before the wedding. She made certain she had enough time to get there, wrapped a shawl about her shoulders, and exited the house quietly. "Pierre!" she called.

The man appeared as he rounded the corner from the stables. He frowned. "*Mademoiselle?* It is late. Is something wrong?"

"I wish to take a ride tonight. Would you escort me to the harbor? I am to meet someone."

His face hardened and he frowned as if he didn't approve of the idea, but since she was his mistress, he had no choice. He nodded and helped her inside the carriage. Pierre climbed up on the seat and propelled the conveyance forward.

It was dark as she looked out the opening of the carriage. Men hung about the local pubs, no doubt in search of their own pleasures with women like *dames de nuit*. Somehow the atmosphere about the town grew darker. It was different from when she visited in daylight. Here, there were all kinds of things to watch for. She wasn't that naïve. She had often found herself browsing her uncle's personal stash of literature, which included even nefarious titles and questionable illustrations.

She knew she should let Pierre accompany her inside the docks for safety's sake, but she needed to speak to Jean alone. Finally, they reached the harbor and she called ahead, "Pierre, stop here at the entrance."

“*Mademoiselle*—”

“Do it.”

He complied, parking where she'd told him. He stepped down and then helped her to step down as well, offering her his arm. “I will escort you.”

“No, Pierre. Stay. I must go alone to this meeting.”

“But *Mademoiselle*—”

“You heard me.”

He frowned. “*Monsieur* Bellamont will not be pleased if I don't accompany you.”

“I am aware.”

He nodded grimly. “If anything happens...”

She lifted an eyebrow in inquiry. “Alert my uncle at once.” Then she turned and proceeded to find the right pier.

Pier One. Fara passed it and shivered in her evening dress. The wind picked up. April was always a chilly month. Fara felt the same eeriness at the docks as she had felt going through town. Desolation crept inside her as she glanced about her. Distantly, she heard the occasional shout of men working on the ships docked there. She passed one once in a while, moving crates while others held lanterns to see. They looked worn and their clothes held the grime of days of soil and the lack of bathing facilities. She wrinkled her nose. She caught some leering glances but sidestepped them well enough. Of all the places to meet, why had Jean chosen here?

She had to stay focused. When she reached pier two, she wasn't sure whether she should walk the pier or wait at the entrance. She did know the ground was filthy and her slippers were soiled.

She sighed and hoped her fiancé would soon show. He was a young man. Could he be naïve as well? Truly know nothing about the peril surrounding the harbor and its inhabitants?

She still envisioned his sad eyes, seeing the pain she'd inflicted when she couldn't tell him what he wished to hear. She didn't love him, but she could've softened her admission with gentler words. At least she should've avoided being so definite with her answer, or perhaps have offered him hope of the possibility of love in their future. He might be more of a sensitive man. She didn't know him at all. What was her uncle thinking, suiting her up with a man she barely knew? And how well did *he* even know *Monsieur* Le Croix?

Fara shifted uncomfortably on her feet. Her stomach churned. She'd been waiting a while for him. It seemed at least ten minutes had passed since she'd been left at the entrance to the docks. Surely Jean Le Croix wouldn't desert her, leave her alone in this place?

But then, he might be capable of anything. What if he'd asked her to come and decided against going himself? No, he wouldn't. She was being silly. But how to be sure? The man had only visited the house three times before the announcement of their betrothal. And she'd had no idea she was supposed to marry the man at the time. She simply thought she was entertaining one of her uncle's acquaintances. The time she'd spent with him was enough to discern any kind of opinion about him.

Jean Le Croix, son of two deceased parents, survived on his father's estate. René Le Croix, Jean's late father, had been a successful merchant. Jean would know his way around the harbor, considering his father's profession. But these were just details. They said nothing about the character of the man her fiancé was. Of that, she knew nothing.

Why in God's name would Jean Le Croix ask to meet her here of all places? She had heard tales about what happened to good people who dared set foot around the harbor at night. Theft, rape, death. This was a very bad idea. Surely *Monsieur* Le Croix knew the dangers. What if he was a rascal indeed? What if he'd meant for her to be alone at the pier?

A shiver slowly crept up her spine. It wasn't the implications of that thought which plagued her. It was the sense of something or someone close by. Were those footsteps she heard behind her or on another pier?

"Jean? Is that you?" She tried to slow her breathing, which came in rapid pants. "Jean?" She stiffened. "Jean Le Croix, are you there? You'd better come out." As she turned, her elbow brushed something and she recoiled, falling against a wall. *No, not a wall*. Terror ripped through her as she realized a pair of arms enclosed around her.

"Lovely lady. You're looking for someone, I presume? Well, *Monsieur* Le Croix thought you'd be better off in our hands."

Our hands? She tried to jerk away from him, but he was too strong. "Let me go, I-I demand it."

Laughter erupted nearby and a figure loomed before her. Another man appeared and licked his lips lasciviously. "*Oui*, Le Croix believed us quite capable once he dished out the finances required. We may have gotten a poor bargain, Bernard. She could be worth far more."

The man grunted in agreement.

Mon Dieu, she thought. Jean had hired them! For what exactly? To kill her? Her stomach rolled as she imagined all the things they might do to her.

"Please, I'll do anything. Not this..." She shook her head.

"The lady is smart, Bernard. We must watch her."

“Please. My...m-my uncle,” she stammered.

“I’m terribly sorry, *chère*. Your uncle has nothing to do with our pleasure.”

“But...” She swallowed her fear. “Ransom...if you ask for a ransom, he’ll give it to you. I promise. Anything.”

“No doubt your guardian is a wealthy man, and you might fetch a fair price. But what we’re looking for you cannot buy.” He laughed. “In most circumstances.”

No, they couldn’t buy it. But they could take it. Her virginity. She could not fight them if they tried. Men were naturally stronger than ladies.

Anger heated her face and a red haze filled her vision. She struggled harder. “Damn you! You’ll pay for this!”

He laughed. “I suppose so. But what else can you do? There is an alternative now, a position with *dames de nuit*...”

She clenched her fist. Now she was likened to a prostitute? No, it wouldn’t be done. She tried to play at her innocence. “Please...this can’t be happening.”

“Oh, but it is, my lovely lady. It won’t be so bad—”

“No!” She slammed the heel of her foot in her captor’s shin and spun away.

“Bernard!” called one of the men.

She heard footsteps behind her, and she turned, lashing out with her fingernails. He howled in pain, lowering his head to reveal red claw marks over the bridge of his nose. Then the man she’d first wounded came at her, tackling her.

The impact jarred her and she went down. “No!” Her escape didn’t come to fruition.

She rolled to the ground in a maze of skirts and a heavy thigh was thrown across her knees, leaving her immobile. She squeezed her eyes tight. His touch on her face and breasts was repulsive. Tears threatened to overcome her, and they ran like tracks into her hair. "Please," she whispered, shaking her head.

"Ah, gentlemen, what have we here?" An unfamiliar voice sounded and Fara lifted her head weakly to see a new face, a different man. She wondered if he was an ordinary spectator. He didn't look ordinary. He was big, intimidating but not frighteningly so. There was something about him she wanted to trust. She thought it might be his eyes, as she detected a hint of concern when he glanced at her briefly. But of course, she might be wrong. She had been before.

The man who pinned her disengaged himself and got to his feet. He looked down at her uneasily. "To your feet, *chère*," he ordered.

She dizzily stood in response, and he clutched her to his side as if to claim her as his possession.

The stranger frowned. "She's quite a catch, gentlemen. Are you sure she's not off-limits?"

The man at her side stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"She appears to be a lady."

Hope sprang from inside her. The man was no innocent bystander. He was a man with a purpose, but deep down she knew he couldn't be with these rogues.

"And if she is, *Monsieur*?"

"Then I would be curious as to why a lady is here with the two of you."

The one called Bernard replied derisively, "Perhaps we are just too irresistible."

The man laughed. “Hardly.” He sighed as her captor chose to resume his place behind her and blocked all attempts of escape with an arm across her chest. “Release her, gentlemen. Let's settle this in a civilized manner, shall we?”

The man who held her grunted. “Why don't you go about your business, *Monsieur*? A simple matter like this shouldn't interest you.”

“A woman's reputation may be at stake. Of course, I'm interested.”

“We might share her, *Monsieur*.”

His gaze swept over her body, and she shivered. Why, surely, he wouldn't take them seriously...he couldn't take the offer. For God's sake, he was her only hope. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she cursed herself for her maiden's sensibilities. Where had her strength gone?

“You think I would participate in something so lewd? You mistake my character, gentlemen.” He pulled a rapier from its sheath. “The question is, what risks will you take? Let me see...two men against one. Of course, if you still want to keep the lady, it will take one of you to hold her. She looks fairly strong despite her size...why look at that mark on your face. She has fought you. She could be deadly, if given the chance. That makes one against one. Do you intend to fight me for her obvious favors?”

“Take out the girl, Bernard.”

The command came too quickly and before she could struggle away, a fist slammed against her jaw and she fell into blackness.

She lifted her head sometime later, unsure of how long she'd been unconscious. Her vision gradually returned, and the damp of the ground seeped through her dress. She shuddered with the chill of air upon her body. She heard the scrape of a footstep and a grunting sound above her. Still

disoriented, Fara raised her head to see the man who had come to her rescue fighting off the two rogues.

He fought them with expert wrist and arm techniques. He seemed to be in top physical shape as compared to Jean Le Croix, who was soft for his obvious youth. She grimaced. Her wound caused her to be silly. So, he was attractive and strong...strong enough to fight these men off and break her neck all in the same moment.

Then the man thrust his rapier forward swiftly. When the one called Bernard, who had a white scar down the side of his face pulled away, he revealed a small but bloody wound on his arm. With a ragged breath, he looked at her rescuer as if weighing the consequences of his decision. He then turned on his heel and his accomplice soon followed him away from the docks.

Fara watched their retreat with a deep sigh. Her rescuer pivoted on his heel and approached her. He looked much larger than before. Trembling, she levered herself up on one elbow and waited for him to speak.

He knelt and looked her over. "I guess they gave up the chase..."

Fara nodded, swallowing hard. "*Oui, Monsieur.*" He touched her cheek, and she felt the warmth emanate from his hand. She was afraid, but she didn't pull away from his touch. She found it strangely protective, even affectionate. Though she barely knew him, she wanted to believe he cared for her welfare. Her vision clouded with tears as rich longing swept through her. To be cared for completely, to be loved. But he was a stranger. She couldn't forget that.

Distantly, she knew her physical state was far from normal at the time.

"Are you all right?"

She shook her head, feeling herself grow weaker by the second. Nothing could keep her alert at that moment. “*Monsieur...*” she murmured, falling into the inviting darkness.

Chapter Two

Fara fought the blackness to the coming light. It was so easy to stay in the dark. It was comforting like a warm blanket. But the light held such possibilities. She knew she must rouse, as if something significant lay in wakefulness. She stirred and felt a pair of arms holding her. Then she heard a heartbeat beneath a rough fabric, felt a coarse texture of chest hair. It was so secure within that embrace.

When she finally realized it was a man who held her, she gasped and tried to retreat from the cord of muscles. She glanced up to be temporarily blinded by the lamplight to her left.

“Don't move,” said a soft but deep voice.

He spoke with the assurance of authority, likely used to ordering people around. Well, he wouldn't command *her*. She lifted her heavy head and whimpered as a stab of agony sliced through her skull. Fara squeezed her eyes shut tight. It was so much easier to be left in the dark for it was as if her head was being cut with so many knives.

“I will have you more comfortable in a moment. Please don't move.”

How could she possibly move with all this pain and that large man rendering her limbs useless?

Suddenly, she felt a light cushion beneath her. The glare from the lantern came across her vision again when she opened her eyes and was then replaced by the outline of a man towering above her. On a panicked breath, she crawled away from him, but his hold on her waist hauled her back. Her head hurt so as he studied her face.

“*Madame*, the pain will lessen if you stay still. I promise I didn’t bring you here to harm you in any way.”

She gradually settled back on the pillows and looked at her keeper. He was an attractive man if one liked the rough, indignant kind. Dark layers of soft waves covered his head and ended at the nape of his neck. He was large, but slim in the right places...it spoke of years of hard physical labor.

His eyes captivated her as she studied him in such proximity. The shade of his eyes...a charcoal color; they were the most intense and unreadable eyes she'd ever seen. It was an odd, yet strikingly beautiful color for a man.

Oh, you silly girl, she thought. Really...how ridiculous for her to be wooed by only a pair of eyes. “May I ask you a question?”

“I insist you do, if you are not too unwell.” He gestured to her jaw.

Fara nodded, acknowledging the wound provided by the man named Bernard. She imagined what he referred to must indeed be a hideous sight. She looked around the room. It appeared to be a cabin of sorts. “*Monsieur*...how did I get here? Are we on a yacht?”

“A clipper ship. My ship, *La Voyageur*,” he announced firmly with a lifted brow.

She faltered at the damning tone in his voice. It gave the impression that he was accustomed to some ridicule, but she couldn’t fathom the reason for it. “You are a captain?”

“*Oui, Madame*.”

“*Mademoiselle*.” She blushed.

“Ah. I knew you were too young to be saddled to one man, but thought it safer to say you were.”