

THE WEDDING



Lily struggled, trying to see over her shoulder from her position as the man she was about to marry held her over his lap. Her long red curls reached the floor, and her bottom was high over his knee. Her friend, Arabella, stood at the door with wide eyes, watching them, unsure of what to do.

Lily wiggled, but to no avail. "Oh! Let me go! This isn't fair. You've been mean to me all day!"

"And you, my darling girl, have been a brat all day. I'm tired of it, and this is my way of showing you that your behavior is unacceptable."

"I don't know what you mean. The privateer ship reeks of gold and jewels. Why could you not—"

"The gold and jewels don't belong to me, Lillianna. Most of the money I had with me went down with the *Charlotte* when the pirates sank her. The captain's safe was brought over by the pirates when they brought the supplies over; that's the only reason he's been able to pay us. But the loot on the *Arabella* is not ours to take from. I told you, when I get back to England with you, I'll have a whole new wardrobe made for you with my own money. Right

now—" He halted abruptly as Lily turned and called out for Arabella to help her.

"A warning for you, Arabella. The captain is waiting for you at the front of the church. I can hear them playing the wedding march now. If I were you, I would be out there within ten seconds. As soon as I finish here, our ceremony will follow yours."

Lily glanced backward to see that his usual smile was gone. At the uncharacteristic frown on his face, Bella hurried from the room and left them, closing the door behind her.

"And now, my love," he said, leaning down into her ear. "Are you going to behave for the rest of the day? Because I have no desire. To. Do. This. Again."

Swats punctuated each word, and she cried out. "You're a beast, sir."

"You think so? I could show you what a beast is like, but I won't. I do, however, intend to drive my point home to this little bottom of yours. Your tendency to place too much importance on titles *and things* needs to stop. *Now*."

"I know. I'm sorry." Lily brought her gaze back to the floor, inches from her nose. He was right, and she knew it. What could she do to make herself stop? Perhaps if Papa hadn't lost all his money and Mama hadn't died with the heartbreak of it, she would have grown up in a family like Arabella had. A series of swats peppering down on her backside brought her back to the present, and she began to squirm.

"Pay attention, Lillianna. I'm not saying these things to hear myself rant."

She sighed. "Yes, sir. I'm sorry."

"Are you? Or are you saying that just to get me to stop?"

"I...no, I really am, honest."

He reached under her waist and, in one move, brought her up to sit on his knee. Drawing her to him, he scowled into her face, just over an inch from his own. "I'm saddened that you had to suffer through growing up in a convent orphanage without your family. I

hate it that you were sent to a textile mill and treated badly and that you were hurt and had to take in laundry to survive. But hear me, young lady. I don't care one whit that your father gambled his money away. I don't care that he fell out of favor with the crown, and I don't care that he lost his title. All I care about is you. Can you possibly get that through your little red head? Because, if you can't, I'll pound it in through your recalcitrant little arse. Are you listening to me?"

Lily, forced to meet his eyes, gulped and nodded. He loved her. Not for a title or for money—he loved her for herself. Still...

They heard the organ again from outside the door.

"I'm not finished with you, Lillianna Collingwood. Remember that."

He stood her to her feet and kissed her soundly, bringing her to the door. "They're waiting on us, my girl. And remember this. I love you."

"You spanked me," she pointed out.

"And you deserved it. If I didn't love you, I wouldn't do it."

She appeared unconvinced, and he rolled his eyes. "Lily, you have a chance to change your mind. If you don't wish to marry me, I'll go out there right now and announce—"

"No!" she cried out. "I do want to marry you! It would break my heart if you decided you didn't want me."

His brown eyes bored into hers. "Then come, my love. And behave."

Still, as he opened the door and led her into the back of the little church, she dragged her feet.

"Lily? Do you need me to carry you down the aisle?"

"No, sir." Her lip came out in a pout.

The organ's wheeze was playing the wedding march for the third time in a row now. As they looked toward the front of the church, Lily saw that the minister was waiting at the front. He was squinting at them, perhaps to keep the monocle over his right eye from falling out. If she'd been in a better mood, she might have

laughed. Captain Smythe and Arabella sat in the front row, their ceremony over now. Lily had a pang of resentment that she had missed it. Sarah, the large woman who had stowed away on the original ship, sat next to Arabella, and Chloe, the young stowaway, was to Sarah's right.

But the room full of crewmen from the *Arabella* were all standing to their feet.

Her groom tugged on her arm. "Lily? They're waiting on us."

"Don't rush me!" she grunted at him, continuing to drag her feet.

They had taken only three steps, when she found herself slung over his shoulder and carried the rest of the way. She gave a small shriek, trying to ignore the merriment on the faces of the crewmen in the aisle. Her face grew crimson, both from embarrassment and irritation at being carried this way.

"Put me down!"

He did. Suddenly, she found herself on her feet and smacked on the bottom once more. The commander was holding her in front of him and, without warning, turned her to face him. He pulled her into his arms and planted a passionate, powerful kiss on her mouth.

As the kiss went on, the minister cleared his throat once and then again. When the commander raised his head and stared down into her eyes, she found she was too weak to stand. His expression slowly changed to the smile she had grown to love.

Lily couldn't take her eyes from his face. The cheers of the crewmen were dying down, and the minister barked, in his chirpy little voice, "That part comes later, young man."

The commander's surprised glance moved from Lily to the comical little man, and he turned Lily to face the front.

"Ahem." The minister looked out over the group. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together..."

Lily heard little of it. She limped along, saying her vows as her groom prompted, until she murmured softly, "I do."

The minister was scowling now. "Ladies and gentlemen, I introduce to you..." He scrunched up his face and pulled his notes closer

to his face. "The Right Honorable, the Viscount..." He adjusted the distance of his notes from his monocle. "And Lady Darby."

Her husband grinned down into her face. The crowd was cheering now, and Lily felt as if she was about to faint as he brought his mouth down to hers again.

The church was fading. The crowd was gone. It was only the two of them, and her husband was kissing her with all the passion he possessed.

His voice brought her back to the present. "Lady Darby?" The usual grin was back.

Lily found her voice again, at last. "Lord Darby?" she fumed, her voice growing more intense by the minute. "You are the *son* of an earl? You let me believe all that time that you were a commoner, and yet you were nobility all the time."

He grinned. "And you are a lady now. It's time you acted like one."

But the minister had moved his scowl from the bride and groom and glanced back down at his notes, muttering the entire time...



DARBY LOOKED across the small table at his bride as they dined together at a quaint restaurant located behind the town's inn off the South Carolina port. He blended in well; the area was used to servicing all manner of men from ships. Lily, however, drew a great bit of attention.

There were many glances passing her way. Her red hair, flawless skin, and saucy attitude captured the admiration of all of the males in the vicinity. Her husband smiled. He didn't need to worry about Lily. She seemed completely unaware of it. She was his.

When he noticed the interested glances toward her, he reached out and touched her in a way that showed his possession. He knew deep down that he was able to handle his spirited new

wife; however, he didn't care for the way the men were looking at her.

"You must eat, my love," he whispered to Lily when he noticed she had not taken so much as a bite of her roast.

Her eyes darted away from him as she fidgeted with the napkin in her lap. "It's only...I find my appetite is a bit off."

Darby studied her curiously, hoping she wasn't showing signs of illness. Could it be that she was fretting over the coming wedding night? He knew he was wise in the manner of protecting her from the harsh realities of the ocean, but he had to admit he was completely lost when it came to reading her mind this evening.

"Then let me settle our debt," he voiced, finally. "Perhaps I should take you to bed."

Lily's cheeks paled slightly as he paid, but by the time he returned, she had turned a delightful shade of pink. She reached for his hand, tugging at it to get him to sit down again.

"I'm really all right, Earl—Lord Darby." She shook her head. "I'll never get used to that. I still don't understand why Captain Smythe calls you Earl? It's so confusing."

He smiled. "Gregory and I were friends at school when he started calling me that. It was a nickname he gave me, because my father is the Earl of Darbyshire, to remind me of my future. I hated it then. I've wanted to be a sea captain and own my own ship for as long as I can remember. Gregory ranks above me on the ship, even though I rank above him in society. Earl was never my name but my father's title. I've become accustomed to him calling me that." He leaned forward and kissed her on the nose.

"You couldn't have been afraid I would turn you down," she teased. "Is that why you kept it from me for so long?"

He raised an eyebrow. "No. But you place entirely too much importance on titles, sweetheart. I wanted to be sure you married me because you loved me, not because of who I am."

She leaned into his arms. "You know I do."

"And something else. It's very important that you not refer to me as 'Earl' at home."

"But—"

He laid a finger to her lips to silence her. "With any luck, Lillianna, my father will hold on to that honor for decades to come. Call me Darby if you wish; you could even get away with calling me Charles, in private. People at home will expect you to refer to me as Lord Darby." He gave her a wide grin. "My mother still calls me 'Charlie' on occasion, when no one's around. When we're alone, you can call me anything you want, *except* Earl. That's my father's title, not mine."

"But I have called you that for so long now, sir, it will be so strange not to."

"Strange or not, when we return to England, it would be most inappropriate for you to address me as Earl, even in private."

She seemed to have relaxed a bit, and he tilted her chin upward and kissed her again, this time on the forehead. "You'd better eat, sweetheart. It will be a long night for you if you don't."

She blushed. "I can't. I'm sorry. But I'd like to see a few things before we retire for the night. I doubt we'll have a chance to visit this region again."

He studied her face, giving her a knowing glance, before jumping to his feet to hold her chair. "All right, sweetheart. I'll take you for a quick walk. But it does worry me that you haven't eaten."

The cool evening air was pleasant, and the breeze blew Lily's hair back gently from her face as Darby took her toward the hotel he had secured for the night. It wasn't far. His worry about her subsided when he tried to draw her quickly past the saloon.

There were ladies lingering outside dressed in indecent clothing. Their underthings peeked out beneath their altogether too-short skirts, revealing their ankles. One in particular, whose chest was barely covered by the gown she wore, called out to them, "Looking for a little fun, sir?" Her gaze lingered over Lily, who was quite elegant in the wedding dress he'd helped her pick out. "After

playing nursemaid to your lady, come back here." She leaned forward, daring to flash a good portion of her ample chest. "I can give you more pleasure with my mouth than that uptight lady can with her high class—"

"Ignore her, my darling." Darby attempted to intercede before Lily tried to pull away and move toward the woman. Her sharp intake of breath had warned him. But he barely managed to get an arm around her waist before she turned, putting out her female claws.

"You might want to keep your mouth closed, lest you chance having a few teeth knocked out." Lily fought against her husband's restraining arm around her waist, but he managed to hold her fast.

"Lillianna," he said sternly in her ear, to get her attention.

"I've dealt with people like her before," she growled back. "When Mama and Papa died, I learned how to survive the hard way."

"And they're trying to survive the only way they know how, my darling. I'm not condoning it. But be nice."

"Niceties be damned. I'm not about to let her steal you away."

"No one is going to steal me away from you. And I certainly won't allow anyone to steal you from me. But I also won't allow you to get into a catfight in the middle of Charleston."

She appeared penitent as well as frightened, as he studied her face. A moment passed, and she glanced up at him. "Where are you taking me?"

"You'll see. We're not returning to the ship tonight. This will be the first night as husband and wife, and I want it to be special. I rented a room in the inn. Our first time together won't be in my cramped cabin aboard the *Arabella*."

"The captain is renaming the pirate ship?" she asked, surprised. "I knew he had great plans to repaint. And I heard him say he was going to make some improvements to her. But I didn't know he planned to rename her."

"She is no longer a privateer's vessel, and Gregory felt compelled to christen her with a more honorable name than the

Mermaid's Revenge. Everyone associates that name with Jean Luc Poche who attacked our ship—and a good many others—and sank them." Darby smiled at her. "One day, my lady, I plan to be the captain of my own ship, and it will be your name which will grace her prow."

Lily sighed, as if picturing the image he suggested, and looked up at him, locking eyes with his. He reached down to capture her lips in a deep kiss, taking advantage of her momentary silence. "I will take great pleasure in claiming you aboard your namesake time and again, but our first encounter would be more memorable for you in a private room, far from sailors and the other ladies aboard the ship."

His consideration of her needs overwhelmed her, and Lily allowed her husband to lead her toward the inn. The room he'd selected earlier was at the far corner of the building, slightly apart from the other rooms occupied by travelers. A young man showed them the way and promised to return with a tray of food later.

"Much later," Darby announced, handing the man a few coins of appreciation. "If you would be so kind as to knock three times and leave the tray outside the door, I will be most grateful."