

Can one find true love a second time? Follow Nathan on his adventures at sea and on land as he and Vanessa battle with constant interference to separate them. Will they be able to heal each others' hearts?

No Turning Back

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*No
Turning
Back*



Deanna Jewel

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Chapter One

North Yorkshire, England, 1775

Michael 'Nathaniel' Clairmont, the Fourth Duke of North Yorkshire, crumpled the missive he'd received from his fiancée's parents as he raked his fingers through his shoulder length hair. Fear tightened his chest as he stepped to the door and called to his squire. "Prepare Caesar, now!"

Stepping back into the room, he addressed his longtime friend, Anthony Riecher. "I'm going to see Lady Stockholm's parents. Clarissa is missing. Are you with me?"

Riecher jammed his tricorn hat atop his head. "Bloody right I am!"

An hour later, after meeting with the Stockholm's, Michael urged his bay Barb to greater speed along side Anthony's. An unnatural scattering of branches and leaves strewn about the road ahead caught his attention. He reined Caesar and dismounted for a closer look. Footprints of horses and men marred the dirt and led deeper into the woods where the underbrush lay trampled and broken.

After tethering Caesar to a branch, he motioned for Riecher to follow him along the path. A piece of green silk shimmered atop a briar bush, and Michael grabbed up the soft material. It was the color he'd last seen on Clarissa. The fragrance of jasmine assailed his senses. His eyes widened in recognition of the scent...the same one Clarissa wore!

He gripped the material in his fist. Bile rose in his throat as fear knotted his gut. Though afraid of what he'd find ahead, he pushed forward; low-hanging branches slapped at his face and caught at his shoulder-length hair. He pushed the foliage out of his way and tromped the underbrush in his desperate search.

When he reached out to block another branch, a silk stocking skimmed his face and he grabbed the stocking for inspection. Michael looked at Riecher's worried face, swore under his breath and moved on but a foreboding feeling ate at his senses, almost like being watched.

He couldn't miss a gown strewn atop the bushes. The shock that tore throughout his system stopped Michael dead in his tracks, his muscles recoiling in reaction. Meticulously arranged over the waist-high bushes, as if in preparation for wear, lay a dark green silk gown, a vicious tear low in the neckline. His gaze moved over the material. Tightness gripped his chest, feeling

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as though someone had reached in and squeezed his heart, the pain so intense it burned. He touched Riecher's arm, and gritted his teeth. "It's the gown Clarissa wore at the ball last night," he said in a gut-wrenching rasp. His gaze searched the area until the very thing he wanted to avoid seeing lay before him. His body froze.

A bare, delicate ankle peeked from beneath the underbrush.

Lunging forward like a wild beast, ravaging the area, throwing branches and uprooting ferns, he uncovered her body...clad only in her white satin chemise, splattered with her own blood.

His tortured scream echoed throughout the surrounding forest as he fell to his knees beside her battered body. Praying she might hear, he whispered her name. Touching her bruised cheek--he found it still warm. A flicker of hope ignited within his heart as he pressed his fingertips against the slim column of her throat. Moments later, finding no trace of a pulse, that slight flicker of hope extinguished itself. His mind was a whirlwind of thoughts at who could be her killer.

Michael's gaze traveled over her limp form, still denying the truth even as he assessed her injuries. Dark bruises surrounded her slender neck and covered her high cheekbones he'd admired just last night. Her auburn hair, spread in a tangled mass over the trampled bracken, was matted with blood from the cut on her temple. He lifted twigs and leaves from her hair.

The front of her chemise lay open. Tenderly he reached down and closed it. Blood covering her thighs hinted at other horrors she'd endured. Hatred for Clarissa's murderer, deeper than he had ever experienced before, ignited his soul.

Moving his gaze back to her face, red-gold lashes dusted her pale, ivory cheeks. He picked up her bruised hand and held it between his own, bringing her fingertips to his lips. The ache and longing in his chest grew stronger as he remembered her loving smile, their plans for the future and the children they would never have. Tears burned his eyes and blurred his vision. He closed his eyes, willing away the tears.

With loving care, he gathered Clarissa's frail, broken body in his arms, and with Riecher's help, he wrapped her in a blanket from his saddlebag. Once Riecher mounted, Michael handed Clarissa up to him.

Then from a distance, he heard a vicious, hair-raising laugh, so evil it penetrated to the bone. It shattered his grief. Michael snapped his head up in blinding fury, and he met Riecher's gaze. The evil laughter continued for a moment more, and then stopped.

"Next time, Clairmont, you'll not take what belongs to ME!" the deep voice echoed through the trees.

"You bastard!" Michael shouted through the woods.

The insane laughter began anew.

Hair on Michael's neck stood on end as his eyes met Riecher's a second time. He could barely contain the anger as it raged through his body like an inferno. "It could only be Langley. He never accepted Clarissa's leaving him for me. I'll bring him back to prove it; he can't be far. Take Clarissa home. I'll follow that bastard and return with his head for decoration on London Bridge." Michael mounted and urged his horse forward onto the main road that cut through a dense stretch of woods.

His thoughts raged as he headed toward the area from where the laughter came. He gripped the reins as he urged Caesar on, squeezing his thighs against the animal's ribs as the horse sped along, and images of his enemies raced through his mind. Who else could have committed such a heinous act if it turned out not to be Langley? But that voice could only have belonged to one person.

A single rider on horseback leapt onto the road a far distance in front of him, creating a dust screen thick enough to mask his escape.

Michael curled his lip in contempt at the cowardly flight. "You'll not escape, you cur!"

Gritty dust covered his face as he rode through the cloud in hope of catching up to the man. He wouldn't rest until he caught her killer. With a clear view ahead, the road empty, Michael searched for tracks leading back into the woods. He rode for what seemed like endless hours without further clues to the man's whereabouts. Refusing to give up, he continued the search until well after dark before returning to Clarissa's home to be with her parents.

A servant led Michael into the drawing room to join Clarissa's father and his friend, Anthony Riecher. He accepted a glass of whiskey to quench his thirst and help steel his emotions.

Michael glanced at Tony Riecher and whispered, "That bloody whoreson! His blood will be shed by MY sword...whoever has done this!" Then he turned to Clarissa's father. "I'm so sorry, Lord Stockholm. There appeared to be a single rider. I lost his trail as he traveled south near York and never got close enough to identify him." The lines of tension that etched on the older man's face made his heart ache.

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Two hours later, Michael strode toward his horse with Riecher, who broke the silence first. "In all the years we've been friends, I've never known you to be in love before this, nor to give so much of yourself, to any woman...except your mother. I'm sorry for your loss, Michael."

Michael nodded in acknowledgment of his friend's sorrow, but kept quiet as they mounted and rode home.

"Do you still believe Langley would do this?" Tony Riecher asked.

Anger still consumed Michael and warred with his sense of loss. He spoke without taking his gaze from the dark road. "I've racked my brain trying to narrow down an enemy who would hate me enough to kill someone just because they were precious to me and Langley is the only bastard unfeeling enough to do this. I'd swear the voice in the woods belonged to Langley." Careful to choose his words, Michael continued. "Whoever committed this heinous crime is twisted in more ways than one. To brutally destroy another human being takes a devious mind, but to feel they had to prove their power over her first? I can't fathom a reason for that! I'll track Langley down, prove his guilt and destroy him myself should the authorities fail to accomplish the task!"

"Tell me how I can help see that bloody whoreson hanged?"

Michael raked his fingers through his hair. His muscles clenched along his jaw, and his lips took on a cynical twist. "Together, we'll catch him... somewhere, somehow...when he least expects it. If it takes forever...I will prove he's responsible!"

* * * *

Three years later in Kew, England 1778

Michael "Nathaniel" Clairmont viewed the vast colorful gardens of Kew, still wishing Clarissa were alive. They would have been married with children by this time but now that would never happen. He knew he had to quit thinking of her and what would never be. Someone entered the room and he turned away from the sunny window to face King George III. Clarissa had been his niece.

The King gave him a strong, hardy handshake. "How have your horses been faring at the track at St. Legers? They must be fast; I know my Uncle William's Herod only sired winners!"

"They, indeed, have been winning, Your Majesty. Hopefully, they'll continue and so will their offspring. Thank you for asking, but I've come to discuss the information I've gathered on Clarissa's death."

“Michael, it’s been three years since Clarissa’s death. I understand your need to have revenge on those responsible. No one has been able to locate the man you described, yet the people of York gave you specific details of the man they saw and reports of his whereabouts still make their way to you. Langley was brought in for questioning back then but nothing could be proven to link him to this. I’m sorry Michael.” A gentle, caring smile cut across the King’s face below his aquiline nose. “Do you think perhaps we’re searching the wrong locations?”

“I’ve received recent reports that someone may be following me. There’s been no clue to their identity, so I still don’t know who they are or where they’re from.”

“I’ve heard they’ve also been spotted following you here in London, is this true?” the King asked.

“Yes, and as far north as my estates in Scarborough. My men have also heard stories of them being at sea, searching ports and asking questions, but we’ve not found them yet. I’ve vowed to see them pay for Clarissa’s death, whoever is responsible, and I won’t stop until they do.” He turned back toward the gardens, not wanting the King to see how deep all this still affected him.

The King joined him at the window overlooking the royal gardens. “Do you think...if you switched identities, say, posing as the long lost bastard brother to yourself...you would be able to root these characters from hiding?”

Astonished the King would even suggest he take on a false identity, Michael stared at him, drawing his brows together, but was willing to hear his plan. “Your Majesty, you are suggesting I pretend to be someone else. You can’t be serious?”

The King met his gaze. “Oh, but I am.” The King strode away to stand before a portrait of Queen Charlotte, gazing up with love twinkling in his eye. “I’ve never been more serious. By posing as your bastard brother, you wouldn’t need to let anyone know that you are, in fact, the Duke and no one besides you and I need know of this. Clarissa was the Queen’s niece. We want her murderers captured as badly as you do. You may start this venture as soon as you like. I’ll excuse you from your duties here at court to pursue these murderers. They’ve run loose long enough. Should I find I need you for anything, I’ll contact you. Just let me know where you are as often as you can.”

Michael gave the King a slight bow. “Yes, Your Majesty. I’ll notify you often of all my activities.”

Taking his leave of the King, it still shocked Michael that King George III actually wanted him to assume another identity to track down his niece’s murderer. How incredible, but it just might prove to be rewarding in capturing

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whoever murdered Clarissa. He allowed his mind to mull over possibilities. Riecher would make an excellent assistant and partner and the places they would need to search out, the people wouldn't know who he was. Since he was also a bachelor, he could come and go as he pleased. Between the two of them, they were sure to bring about justice.

Hours later, in a dark smoky tavern, he tried to convince Tony Riecher to side with the King's plan. "Look, do you have anything else occupying your time right now that's as exciting as this? We have the King's permission. What more could we want?" He took a long pull from his mug of ale, and then laughed at the shocked expression in Riecher's whiskey-colored eyes. "I was just as surprised as you are."

Riecher's chin rested between his thumb and forefinger as he rubbed his chin then rolled his eyes before meeting Michael's gaze again. "So what type of identity do you have in mind?"

"Since we both love the sea so much and these men have been sighted on the Atlantic and Mediterranean, posing as captain and first mate in search of a position would work. What better place to gather information? Shipmates talk and may know of or have heard something. I don't need to use my own ship and you're already my right hand."

Nodding, Tony agreed with a sly grin. "We'll need to frequent the pubs on the wharf to hear of jobs aboard a ship and gossip from crewmen."

Michael couldn't help but smile. "I doubt either of us will have a problem with that."

* * * *

Michael, now posing as his younger, long lost brother Nathan, and Anthony Riecher sat in a dimly lit London pub, a week later, across the table from James Deveraux and his son, Philip, owners of a prominent shipping line. Nathan scrutinized both men; honest looking gentlemen and well dressed. "I know you have one of the largest East India Company's out there, but I haven't seen you around these parts," he commented and drank from his pewter mug.

James Deveraux didn't appear to take his comment personally. "I do understand; one has to be careful, as do I in hiring a captain for any of my ships. My home is in Ceylon, where I moved my family almost ten years ago due to problems here in London. I stay at my parents' estate, Deveraux Manor, when I'm in here in England. My son has told me of your extensive experience at sea, and that of your first mate, Mr. Riecher. Philip also gave me your paperwork of past credentials and a background check. I'm quite impressed with what you've

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done and where you've been. Being listed among those the King trusts doesn't hurt either. I'd be very interested to have you captain one of my ships."

"I would be honored to accept the job of captain for you and your crew. As I stated before, I am Nathaniel Clairmont, the younger brother of the Duke of North Yorkshire, Michael Clairmont, and am eager to be back at sea. We appreciate your trust in our knowledge. Our trunks will be aboard ship tomorrow morning."

* * * *

After uneventful months at sea, on a warm summer day, Nathan stood at the ship's railing with Philip as they docked in Ceylon. He and Philip had become close friends during the voyage and he looked forward to meeting the rest of the Deveraux family here in Ceylon. As captain of a new ship and crew, he found himself too busy at times to dwell on Clarissa and their past. He knew he needed to make a new future for himself without her, no thanks to Langley...one day he'd get the proof he needed. So far, they'd not garnered any new information at any of the ports they'd stopped in. *The time had come to move on and perhaps this was the place to do it*, he thought, as he admired the land before him and its citizens milling about the city beyond the wharf. Conveyances pulled by men carried passengers through the streets as well as those pulled by oxen.

Lush foliage and palm trees inland caught Nathan's attention. Though England's beauty enthralled him, travel to exotic locations satisfied his need for excitement. Would Ceylon prove to be just that? During the voyage, thoughts of beautiful, female companionship had drifted through his mind as the deck swayed beneath his feet. They'd been at sea for what seemed far too long, and Nathan knew his men hungered for the company of a woman as well. Soon enough he could release them for the day.

With Riecher's help, Nathan saw to the unloading of the cargo from the *Falcon* once it docked in Ceylon. He breathed in the lush smell of damp earth that floated on the warm humid breeze. On his previous trips that had taken him to the West Indies he'd purchased rich silks, spices and barrels of rum, where Nathan bought several cases for his personal use. He wondered what he might find on this trip to Ceylon; each country had its own specialties.

Rather than just watch his crew work and sweat, he lifted barrels and trunks ashore alongside his men. He'd never been a captain to stand above and watch over his crew. As he worked, he remembered a conversation he and Tony had. Riecher's comments still plagued him. Before they'd left England, Tony had obtained strong evidence that David Langley, his long-time enemy, had set sail

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from England a few weeks earlier. He and Riecher hoped they would have caught up to Langley at some port by now.

Luck still evaded him, but Langley's luck couldn't run forever; he'd prove Langley's guilt.

Philip Deveraux stopped Nathan as he lowered a barrel from his shoulder onto the wharf. "My parents would like you and Tony to spend a few days at our home until you're able to find places of your own. Once we've unloaded here, dinner awaits us there. You'll be able to meet my younger sister, Vanessa. But let me warn you, she's full of surprises and I'm not responsible for her actions."

Nathan wiped his forehead onto his shirtsleeve as they stood in the afternoon sun. "I appreciate the offer, Philip. Tony and I are grateful for your family's generosity and I look forward to meeting your sister."

Philip wiped his brow. "We can all enjoy a cool bath back at the house once we're finished here."

Nathan nodded and returned to the ship for more cargo.

* * * *

At the spacious Deveraux estate in Ceylon, one of the largest cinnamon plantations, Nathan enjoyed a cool bath before a tour of the grounds. The ever-helpful servant women nearly joined him in the water, insisting they follow custom to wash his back. He chuckled at their enthusiasm as he dressed, since he'd had to force them to leave before he left the brass tub. This could be a fun adventure after all.

Glancing out the bedroom window, Nathan watched a rider race toward the stables, throw his leg over the haunches, and dismount beside the corral. After giving orders to a stable hand, the rider turned to enter the stable and Nathan's breath caught in his throat as surprise hit him.

That was certainly not a male rider! Those curves could only be female.

Even from this distance, he couldn't mistake them. As the individual turned, long, mahogany tresses hung down her back, tied with a yellow ribbon, leading his gaze to the sensuous curve of her hip in the brown riding breeches she wore.

Nathan stepped away from the window wondering who she could be. Authority and confidence accompanied the poise with which this woman moved, but a woman with authority wearing breeches? Bloody hell! Women didn't wear breeches, period. Philip could enlighten him later as to who she was but from Philip's comments of his sister, that could very well have been her.

Joining Riecher and Philip downstairs, Nathan toured the cinnamon plantation, which was James Deveraux's hobby when he wasn't at sea with his East India fleet. Comprised of hundreds of acres, the vastness of the plantation impressed Nathan. But he still wondered what made James move his family from their home in England. Only something catastrophic would cause a man of his sort to take such a drastic measure. He vowed to find out the answer one day.

Several Singhalese workers returned Philip's greeting, but their eyes lingered on Nathan and his friend. Nathan nodded and smiled back; the women covered their mouths as they giggled at his acknowledgment, and turned away. Tony only shook his head and laughed at Nathan.

Impressed with the plantation, Nathan walked beside Philip as they approached the stables. "You have your work cut out for you with all that's here."

"Father has high hopes of me taking it over one day, but I love the sea as much as he does." Philip glanced at Nathan. "I understand you know the value of good horseflesh?"

"I own a few that I keep in Scarborough. My stallions were sired by Herod, owned by the Duke of Cumberland."

"I'm familiar with Herod and that of Matchem. My sister, Vanessa, likes to oversee our breeding stock and personally takes charge of their training, though I disagree with my parents allowing her to do so. I'm glad we live here rather than England, or the women of society would never allow her to associate with them. She flaunts tradition, as you'll find out soon enough, I'm afraid."

Philip held out his arm in the direction of the stable entrance, so Nathan entered first, followed by Tony. He'd taken less than ten steps inside when he collided with a large saddle that almost landed him on his backside. Instead, he grabbed the saddle to balance his weight and this movement sent the person carrying the saddle crashing to the ground in front of him.

Holding the saddle to the side, Nathan glanced at the one responsible for the collision. She lay sprawled before him, her arms spread to break her fall. Her firm breasts protruded beneath the white, linen lawn shirt, and there were the sensuous curves he'd viewed from the window. Nathan's blood ignited. It's no wonder women weren't allowed to wear breeches.

Strands of mahogany hair framed her face as she brushed them away.

Nathan's gaze clashed with anger-sparked green eyes set in a golden, angelic face tanned by the Ceylon sun. Full lips parted in shock. No doubt, ready to reprimand him for his clumsiness.

A burst of laughter broke out behind Nathan, and he glanced around at Philip, who had no intention of aiding the woman.

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Immediately, Nathan set down the saddle and offered his assistance to the beauty that lay before him.

"I don't need your help, thank you. It's your fault I'm down here!"

"Very well," Nathan replied, again glancing with confusion at Philip, who still laughed behind him.

"You find this funny?" the woman snapped.

She stood and brushed off her delectable backside with her gloved hands. Her height surprised Nathan, but he didn't find it offensive. She was taller than most women. His heart raced at the way her outfit accentuated her narrow waist.

"Well?" she demanded of Philip who finally controlled himself.

"Vanessa, may I introduce Nathan Clairmont, father's new captain, and his first-mate, Anthony Riecher."

Though her angry eyes met his, Nathan offered friendship by way of a handshake. Vanessa glanced at his outstretched hand before taking hold of it. When she did, it surprised him how firm of a handshake he received and a heat radiated up his neck into his cheeks to think he may have misjudged her.

He held Vanessa's gaze until it softened, opening her features to show a possible friendliness in her nature. "I hope we meet again under less stressful circumstances."

Vanessa tugged on her hand again, but Nathan refused to release it yet. Her lip curled in annoyance. "I'm sure we will, Captain Clairmont."

A wide smirk cut across Philip's face. "Mr. Riecher and the Captain will be staying here as Father's guests until they find a place of their own."

"I hope you have a pleasant stay." Vanessa glanced at her hand in Nathan's. Ice hung from every word she spoke, her displeasure evident that he still held her hand.

He smiled. "I'm sure my visit here *will* be a pleasant one." He gave her gloved hand a gentle squeeze before he released it.

Pulling her hand away, Vanessa glanced at the three men, Philip last. "If you'll excuse me, *I* have work to do...while others float about the ocean in pursuit of hidden treasures."

Nathan retrieved the saddle before Vanessa could reach for it. Her hands brushed his as she touched the leather sides, and their gazes met when he paused before releasing it.

"Thank you." Vanessa turned on her heel and headed out to the corral.

"She enjoys being at sea almost as much as father and I do. Vanessa's not always so nasty, Nathan, just a bit headstrong. She needs a husband to straighten out her attitude."

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“Pardon my saying so, but I’m surprised she’s still single.” He knew she couldn’t be much younger than Philip and looked older than twenty-one. Most women were married by then.

“Personally, I think she’s stuck on her childhood sweetheart back in England, Blake Shyler. She’s turned down every bachelor here in Ceylon brave enough to approach her.” Philip only shook his head. “I wouldn’t want to tame her. Now let’s have a look at those mares.”

Nathan glanced back toward the entrance where Vanessa strode to the corral then he looked at Tony, who rolled his eyes. Nathan shrugged his shoulders at his friend, and followed Philip.

As they viewed the horses, Nathan’s mind was on the temperamental filly in men’s breeches. She had definitely attracted more than his attention. Thoughts of taming Vanessa would occupy his every waking minute, along with several of his lonely nights. If she looked that good in men’s clothing, what would a low-cut, silk gown do for her?

Chapter Two

Vanessa heaved the saddle over the fence rail with an exasperated breath. Anger toward Philip and his idea of a joke continued to brew. To be so embarrassed before a perfect stranger, and laughed at, was not her idea of something funny.

Thinking back, it had nothing at all to do with Philip laughing at her, it pertained to the fact that *he* had just enjoyed another voyage at sea and not her--because she was female. Women just weren't sailors; it wasn't done. So she should be punished for being born female?

Other emotions stirred within her, pushing out all the anger. She'd met handsome men before, but this seemed different. Why? Because he'd held her fingers until she decided to look into those sensuous eyes of his? When she did, a surge of heat penetrated her embarrassment, making her aware of his virility.

Glad she'd escaped when she did, Vanessa could now compose herself before anyone approached her. How would she deal with Captain Clairmont at supper? She should apologize for being so rude to a visitor, but she'd have to remain aloof. Letting him see how he affected her as a man after just one meeting could prove disastrous.

Star, Vanessa's sleek bay mare, pranced over to the fence, and rubbed her nose against Vanessa's cheek. She patted the white marking on the animal's forehead. "I suppose it is too late to ride you. I need to dress for dinner." Star stared at Vanessa with large, chocolate-brown eyes. "I know you understand. I'll see you tomorrow."

A stable hand walking toward Vanessa along the fence returned her wave. Before going to the manor, she called out to him. "Could you return the saddle for me? I don't have the time to ride any more this evening, but I will first thing in the morning."

* * * *

Dressed for the evening meal, Vanessa heard voices when she neared the drawing room door. She entered to find Captain Clairmont talking with her family.

After greeting everyone, she stepped to the captain's side. Vanessa held her head high and looked directly into his dark brown eyes, refusing to be

intimidated. "I must apologize for my earlier behavior. I didn't mean for my anger to be directed at you," she said, shooting Philip a mean look, "...though you received the brunt of my words. I am sorry. May we start over?"

Nathan Clairmont's warm smile reached his eyes. "Apology accepted. It would be cruel not to accept your friendship." Nathan swirled the amber liquid in his glass. "Philip tells me you know quite a bit about breeding horses. That also happens to interest me a great deal. Would you mind sharing some ideas with me sometime?"

"I'd be happy to discuss it."

The doors to the drawing room opened and a footman entered. "Dinner is served."

Throughout the meal, Vanessa kept quiet and listened to the adventurous stories of the journey Philip and her father made from England. On several occasions, she glanced up from her plate and met Captain Clairmont's gaze. His smile unnerved her, making her feel like a blushing debutant.

James Deveraux braced his elbows on the table and steepled his fingers once the footman cleared away his plate. "Captain, would you and Mr. Riecher care to ride around the estate tomorrow afternoon, once we're finished unloading the ship's cargo? Vanessa usually goes riding about two o'clock with her grooms. You wouldn't mind the company, would you, dear?"

Vanessa paused before raising her eyes to meet her fathers. She looked at Mr. Riecher, then at Nathan. "Of course not, but I'm sure they don't want to be pawed off onto a female when Philip could show them around."

Nathan's gaze never wavered. "Philip has already stated that he has business to attend, so we would be pleased to have you show us around."

"Splendid," James announced. "Shall we all retire to the verandah before the evening comes to a close?"

Vanessa held Nathan's gaze a few more moments and lowered her gaze to her plate. He was going to be a handful for some lucky woman.

* * * *

Two weeks later on a hot afternoon, Vanessa sat near the lagoon listening to monkeys screech to one another in the distance. She liked getting away by herself to enjoy the sounds of the island. High humidity caused wisps of hair to spiral and cling to her face. The simple, yellow linen dress she wore today allowed the slight breeze to cool her skin in this quiet spot at the back of their property, which lay nestled at the edge of the dense jungle.

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She glanced at her chaperones, the Singhalese groomsmen who rested in the distance, yet were close enough should she require their help. Her father insisted she never go anywhere without them because of the leopards that roamed the jungle. Though not much frightened her, she did allow for the need of servants with guns.

Thoughts of Captain Clairmont invaded Vanessa's privacy. She found her relationship with him had blossomed into a beautiful friendship in only a matter of weeks. She'd curbed her tongue a bit, or at least, refrained from directing it at him.

He and Philip seemed to have become close friends, which likely was the reason he had remained a guest in their home and not obtained a room in town. The captain now joined her and Philip on their daily rides, periodic walks into the jungle with their Native guards, or ventures to watch the elephants. She enjoyed his company and carefree attitude. Of late, he teased her as often as her brother, Philip.

Vanessa turned at the sound of approaching horses.

"What are you doing out here alone? Don't you know leopards feast on young women by themselves?" Philip teased as he dismounted.

"You know I don't believe that story any longer. You tease so often I don't know when you're telling the truth," Vanessa said.

"Then you don't need to pay attention to the snake in the tree above you."

"I won't fall for that trick either, Philip." Just then, a gun sounded, and a five-foot brown spotted viper dropped beside her. She bounded from the ground, tripped on a protruding tree root, and to her amazement, landed in Captain Clairmont's arms.

Shocked, Vanessa pushed herself away from him.

"That was a close call," Captain Clairmont stated.

She stared at the dead snake, thinking what could have happened if she'd been bitten and looked back at the captain.

His brows drew together in concern. "I think you should sit down over here with us for awhile. That incident would disturb anyone; viper bites can kill a man."

Vanessa sat with her back against a rock, as did Captain Clairmont. Philip sat across from her discussing a shipping matter with Nathan. Careful not to be caught by Philip and teased later, she observed Captain Clairmont as he relaxed his broad shoulders against the boulder, his long legs stretched out before him, crossed at the ankles. His dark eyes contrasted well with his dark, tanned features; the sculptured line of his chiseled jaw adding to the mystery in his character. Her gaze dropped to the flexing muscles of his forearms as his fingers

fondled a long blade of grass. Vanessa bit her lower lip. Apparent strength exuded from his being even while he rested. She breathed in deep to clear her thoughts, but it didn't seem to help.

What was Captain Clairmont like? Did he have a wife and children? Where was his home?

"Nathan and I are going to ride down the coastline later this afternoon if you'd like to go with us, Vanessa."

She glanced at Philip and at Captain Clairmont. He moistened his lips; she couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to kiss him.

"I would enjoy your company," he said. A smile tipped one side of his mouth. "Being with Philip all the time gets boring."

"At least I don't give you a tongue lashing every time something goes wrong like she does," Philip exclaimed.

Warmth flooded Vanessa's cheeks. Philip thrived on embarrassing her. "If Philip plans to harass me all day, I'm afraid I wouldn't be good company."

Captain Clairmont raised a seductive brow. "We could always leave him behind."

"I don't think so, my friend," Philip retorted. He waived a hand in Vanessa's direction. "Leave her alone with a rake like you? Not likely."

Vanessa met Captain Clairmont's gaze, rather enjoying their discussion.

"I'll be there to protect my sister's honor," Philip teased, winking at her.

Vanessa rolled her eyes heavenward, shaking her head, wondering if Philip would ever get tired of teasing her.

* * * *

Later that afternoon in the stable, Nathan checked the saddle on the stallion Philip gave him to ride as he thought about Vanessa. Her green eyes had captured his heart the day they'd met; how could it be that she was still single? Beautiful women always married young, but society in Ceylon differed from England.

Granted, the men here weren't of Vanessa's station, and Philip did tell him she'd already refused several offers. Was she looking for a rich, titled husband? What of Blake Shyler, back in England? Philip had called him Vanessa's childhood sweetheart. Was he titled and rich? Did she have feelings for him? If so, were they strong enough to withstand the past ten years she'd lived here? He found that amazing.

NO TURNING BACK

Out of habit and his need for safety, Nathan slipped his fingers beneath the saddle's cinch to check the tightness, and then went to check Star's saddle for Vanessa.

Women in his life had been few and far between these last few years, some wanted only his money, not caring to know the person he was inside. Maybe the time had come for him to settle down. He would enjoy getting to know Vanessa better; they'd become friends and she *had* quit being so testy.

"Hello, Captain."

The soft lilt of Vanessa's voice caressed Nathan's ear. When he turned toward her, he took a quick breath. The smile that played about her mouth drew his attention to her full lips. Mahogany hair fell in waves, framing and adding color to her delicate features. Much to his pleasure, she wore breeches rather than a riding habit, which he was used to seeing English women wear when they rode. He hoped she hadn't noticed his quickly in-drawn breath.

God, she was a beautiful woman.

"Hello. I'm glad you decided to ride," Nathan said, dropping the stirrup of Star's saddle.

Vanessa held her riding crop beneath her arm as she pulled on her kid skin gloves. "Where's Philip? I thought for sure he'd be here by now, knowing how adamant he was about going with us."

"He had some urgent business in Colombo, but gave the grooms strict orders to join us. If you'd rather not go—"

"Don't be absurd. I'm sure you'll be the perfect gentleman. We don't need Philip." Vanessa finished with her gloves, and then looked up at him. "He'd just tease me while we ride, and I don't need anymore of that today."

"I've learned not to tease you the way Philip does," Nathan offered, gesturing toward Star. "Shall we?"

Vanessa reached for her saddle. With her back to him, Nathan grasped her slender waist and lifted her. She swung her leg over the saddle and placed her feet into the stirrups. He liked her strong personality and the way she did what she wanted, regardless of what the society women might think of her. Chuckling to himself over the way Vanessa flaunted society by not riding a side saddle, Nathan mounted and they rode from the stable.

An hour of warm conversation and riding along the shoreline took them to a small cove. Nathan helped Vanessa down and they walked toward the back of the inlet, followed at a distance by three mounted groomsmen who also took advantage of the break. Nathan led the two horses to a grassy area, and returned to sit on the sand with Vanessa.

He followed her gaze out toward the frothy white caps, watching them float inland as they rode the undulating waves. Nathan inhaled the warm salty sea breeze mixed with Vanessa's scent of jasmine, attempting to stir past memories he chose to ignore. Glancing sideways at her, the air blew Vanessa's hair away from her face. Her strength and stamina seemed at odds with her slender body. "You enjoy living here, don't you?"

Sparkling green jewels glanced at him from beneath dark lashes. "Yes. But father's planned a trip back to England soon and I'm very anxious to go. There are things I need to know for sure. Living here for the past ten years, I wonder if it's possible for certain feelings toward someone to remain the same after such an absence."

"Many things are possible."

Vanessa looked back over the water. "Long ago, a boy from my childhood captured my heart even at a young age. We used to tease that one day we'd be married and have several children. I still have strong feelings for him and think of him often. Yet...can one ever go back?"

Nathan watched her expression sadden as she talked of her past. "Does he have a name?" He almost wished this childhood love didn't exist; he would have loved to be that boy. Nathan found himself quite interested in Vanessa.

"Blake Shyler. He's Philip's age. They were friends and Blake would visit often back in England. The three of us were inseparable then. I rode as well as they did and beat them in several races around Deveraux Manor, our grandparent's estate."

"Has he written to you since you left England?"

"Yes, he writes quite often, when his letters finally get here. His work takes him to America much of the time right now, with the talk of war there, it scares me. I wrote to let him know we'd be home soon. I'm all packed for the voyage but I'll miss the island." A moment passed before she spoke again. "Captain Clairmont, you are very easy to talk to."

"Please, call me Nathan, at least when we're alone. I'm not one for such formalities."

"All right...Nathan it is."

Vanessa sat in silence for a long time; he didn't prod her, but rather, shared the peace of the ocean with her. How deep did her feelings go for Blake? The voyage back to England could prove to be a long one, he mused, though they wouldn't leave for a week or so yet. He looked forward to spending time with her aboard his ship.

NO TURNING BACK

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Nathan stood at the helm of his ship, now just one week from England's shores. Vanessa leaned against the rail, enjoying the afternoon sun in her yellow-striped gown. Yes, a gown looked just as good on her as those bloody breeches. She obviously could be tamed, even if only for a short time.

A variety of colors burned in her hair as the sun reflected from the water, causing a dancing effect in the waves that cascaded down her back. Stepping away from the rail, serene happiness exuded from her being as she strolled about the deck, never once faltering when the ship dipped with the ocean's reflex. She was a natural at sea. Her cloak billowed behind her, but she held tight to the front.

"You shouldn't be quite so obvious, my friend."

Nathan turned slowly to glance at Philip as he leaned back against the mizzenmast with his arms crossed over his chest. Vanessa had been correct when she stated that Philip never gave up his penchant for jesting. "I've always admired beautiful women," Nathan said, looking back toward Vanessa.

"As I said before, I think she's still in love with Blake Shyler. She's never given up hope that he feels the same way. But I *will* give you a ray of hope."

"And what might that be?" Curious, Nathan stared into Philip's teasing blue eyes.

"I've seen the way she watches you when she thinks no one is looking. Perhaps I should have a talk with her."

Nathan narrowed his eyes on Philip who held up his hands in protest. "All right, all right. But don't say I didn't warn you."

"I've been warned," he acknowledged.

Later that night, Nathan escorted Vanessa on deck while two deck hands worked on a carriage gun at the opposite end of the massive vessel. "I hope our friendship continues once you arrive in England. I've enjoyed our discussions of horse breeding and I'd like to continue those."

"So have I. Our friendship means a lot to me, too...Nathan. I know I haven't known many men while I've lived in Ceylon, but you and I seemed to have connected in some way; I would hate to lose your friendship."

Nathan stepped closer to Vanessa than he'd ever been, and she didn't retreat. Searching her eyes, he looked for a sign of her feelings. He'd wanted to kiss her ever since the day they'd met.

She gazed up at him with parted lips, as though she was going to speak again. When her tongue moistened her lips, Nathan lowered his head.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, he gently embraced her; his mouth captured hers.

Vanessa's warm lips responded, her hands pressed against his chest yet not hard enough to push him away. Nathan spread his fingers over her back, memorizing the sensuous curves, her body feeling right against his own, but he didn't want to frighten her. He withdrew from the kiss, tasting Vanessa's lips one last time before releasing her. "I won't apologize for that. I've dreamed of nothing else since we met. If it never happens again, I'll remember it always."

Rounded eyes looked back at him; her face blushed. Her fingers touched her lips. "I should get back to my cabin."

"Let me see that you get there safe and sound."

Vanessa leaned against the closed cabin door for what seemed several minutes. Did Nathan stand on the opposite side yet, or had he returned to the helm? Thundering blood pounded in her ears. The beat of her heart refused to slow. She touched her fingers to her lips again and relived the kiss. The scent of spice, *his* scent, wafted up from the front of her cloak to assail her senses.

Closing her eyes, Vanessa leaned her head back against the wooden door. Other men had kissed her; she wasn't a child. But the end result never affected her like this. Her heart still raced.

God, help her, she prayed.

The mere touch of his warm hands on her back had seared through her cloak. Sprinkles of excitement rushed through her as she remembered the way his velvet lips brushed against her own, tormenting her emotions. The deep timbre of his voice had caressed her senses, dulling her knowledge of proper etiquette. How could she face Nathan tomorrow without blushing red enough to alert Philip that something had taken place between them?

Stepping away from the door, Vanessa paced the small expanse of the cabin, stopping long enough to place her cloak on a peg. She moved to look out the porthole, the moon high above reflected off the water. As soon as she arrived in England, she wanted to see Blake, to touch him, to know he was real and not one of the many dreams she'd had of him. Their love had been there as children and she'd clung to it for ten long years; it seemed to come through in his letters too. He had to still love her. The love she felt for Blake had to be there--to withstand the emotions Nathan had disturbed. Her hand covered her mouth to smother a sob lodged in her throat. She needed to see Blake; to know they still shared what they once had.

NO TURNING BACK

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English soil sank beneath Nathan's boots as he left Deveraux Manor after seeing Vanessa and her family safely to her grandparents. Now he only needed to wait a short time to see what transpired between Blake and Vanessa. Would he still have feelings as persistent as Vanessa's love? And if so, what then? Nathan wouldn't intrude on a love that had held strong over so long a time. He would give up hope of courting Vanessa, though the emotions she stirred within him would never die. Their time together had been short, but so many feelings had taken root in Nathan's heart.

Glad to be riding Caesar again, he full out galloped him along the open road through the late afternoon, ignoring the fact that Anthony's horse was trying to keep pace with his own. His mind was on Vanessa, what they could share in a future together, though he knew better. Gripping the reins and tightening his thighs around the stallion's barrel, he raced on, wishing he could wipe away the feelings for her that had grown since they met. Yet he wanted a woman in his life again, to make a future with and he hated that it could never be Vanessa.

* * * *

Six months later at the engagement ball for Vanessa and Blake, Nathan stood with Philip, watching the guests enjoy themselves. His gaze centered mostly on Vanessa. "Blake's a lucky man. I wish him well with his headstrong future wife," Nathan mumbled, knowing his anger was evident in his tone.

"I'm sorry, Nathan. But Blake's not so bloody jealous that he will destroy Vanessa's friendship with you. You just need to get to know him better," Philip consoled.

Nathan glared at Philip, aware of his anger inside. "I should be glad tonight, that soon, another man will make love to the woman I wanted?" he snapped in a low growl.

Philip raised a dark, aggravating eyebrow to him. "You're the one who said you would allow Vanessa to make the decision. Why didn't you let her know how you felt about her?"

"Because I don't break up relationships if I can help it. One lives longer that way." Nathan swallowed the amber contents of his glass.

"So set yourself up for a lifetime of misery?"

Philip sounded almost sorry that Nathan had not forced Vanessa to listen to his feelings. But what good would it do if she would always want Blake in the end? "Let it go, Philip."

"Aye, aye, Captain," Philip replied in a sarcastic tone.

Nathan again glared at Philip, whose mocking attitude was taking its toll on him and he turned to watch Blake and Vanessa. His laughter carried across the room as others made teasing comments about getting married. Comparing Blake's body structure to his own, Blake stood a few inches shorter, though his shoulders were nearly as broad. Blond hair, just touching his collar, complemented his amber-colored eyes. Vanessa had made a good choice.

Philip had pulled Nathan into conversation and was soon joined by Blake and Vanessa. Blake smiled and held out his hand.

Nathan shook his hand. "Congratulations, Lord Shyler. You're a lucky man." Nathan's gaze fell to Vanessa, and his emotions twisted his heart. He'd lost the only woman he'd cared for since Clarissa's death. "I wish you all the happiness."

"Thank you, Captain Clairmont," she replied.

"Vanessa tells me you two became close friends in Ceylon. I hope your friendship will continue; we look forward to your visits," Blake offered.

"I'll make it a point to drop by Deveraux Manor in a few weeks to check on Vanessa then." Nathan winked at her.

Blake patted his shoulder. "We'll look forward to it."

Nathan tried hard to dislike Blake but there wasn't anything he could find wrong with the man. Blake had made a point of stopping to talk with him, a gesture Nathan found commendable. He appeared to genuinely care for Vanessa.

After the two walked away, Nathan assumed Philip would start in with his jabbing remarks again. He was wrong.

"Did Vanessa mention the fact that she and I were followed last week?"

Nathan stopped in his tracks, his fingers gripping his empty glass and he stared at Philip.

"We overheard the men talk of some "captain" wanting the woman unharmed and that they should find her – now," Philip stated, drawing Nathan's full attention.

"Did you see their faces?"

"Yes, but I didn't recognize any of them. I brought Vanessa home right away that day."

Can one find true love a second time? Follow Nathan on his adventures at sea and on land as he and Vanessa battle with constant interference to separate them. Will they be able to heal each others' hearts?

No Turning Back

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