



CHAPTER I

Appearances are often deceiving.

—AESOP

Northumberland, England, Spring 1819

MERCY GRAYSON GULPED for air as another cold wave battered her, pulled her under, and scraped her along the coast floor. She propelled her way to the surface, kicking and climbing through the water. *God, help me get to shore. I have nothing left.*

Sand scraped through her fingers, and then she tumbled with another wave away from it. Again and again she stroked through the water, hoping to reach solid ground.

She gasped for air, silently prayed for courage, and choked as her mouth and throat filled with saltwater. The brightness of the sun inspired hope, and she pushed on, unwilling to let the sea win.

Sand from the coast floor squished between her toes. Her knees buckled when she tried to stand, and she splashed face-first back into the water. Finally she gained a wobbly stance and forced herself to put one foot in front of the other.

She'd made it. Looking heavenward, she simply whispered, "Thank You." Once onto the beach she fell to her knees. Tears

stung her eyes as she vomited seawater. Coughing and sputtering, she dragged herself farther onto the sand.

Weary to the bone, she didn't care if anyone found her wearing trousers instead of a gown. She closed her eyes and vomited again. Vaguely it occurred to her that the trousers, her physician's attire, had saved her life, along with the prayers God had seen fit to answer. Lying limp, she had only enough energy to kiss the wet sand in gratitude before falling into an exhausted sleep.

An annoying brush of twigs drummed against her cheek.

Mercy opened her eyes to stare through several spindly branches.

She bolted upright when a crab pinched her cheek and then scuttled backward as if daring her to give chase and play. With the sound of her heart pounding in her ears, Mercy watched the creature dance diagonally away from her, but when she moved, the crab came closer. Mercy flicked some grains of sand. "Away with you, or I'll have you for dinner."

The crab seemed to consider her comment and then continued at a slower pace as if disappointed. Mercy drew in a ragged breath and focused on the now calm ocean that mere hours ago had nearly taken her life.

"Interesting little devils, aren't they?"

Mercy twisted around at the sound of a deep masculine voice tinged with humor. A large shadow fell across her, causing her to squint as she tilted her face upward. His nearness caused her to push away from him.

"Wh—who are you?" Her voice trembled, much to her annoyance. Her arms supported her from behind, and her hands and fingers splayed across the sand. The breeze on her damp clothes caused a shiver to race up her spine.

"I'm not going to hurt you, if that's what you're thinking. You're safe enough, for now, but you must be half frozen if you

were in the water for any length of time.” He took off his coat and dropped it around her shoulders.

“Thank you. Where am I?” She took her eyes off him only long enough to glance around, her gaze shifting beyond him to the desolate sea. “Where did you come from? I see no ship. Are you a pirate?”

He grinned. “Do I look like a pirate?” At that moment a breeze lifted off the ocean, whipping a strand of dark blond hair across his tanned face. She cocked her head to the side. He had at least two days’ worth of stubble and indeed sported that scraggy look of a pirate no matter what he said.

“All you need is an eye patch.”

The man’s grin widened. He took a step forward, and she drew farther back, fearful of his intentions. He loomed over her. His shirt blew open nearly to his waist. Grateful for the heat of the sun that scorched the beach, she hoped he hadn’t seen her blush. She’d thought that kind of reaction well in control now after her work of the last six months.

“What do you want?” Thoughts of danger raced in her mind.

His gaze traveled the length of her, and she remembered her male garments. She could not imagine what he must be thinking, or then again maybe she could. Finally his look returned to her face. “I hate to disappoint, but I’m not a pirate. And the ship I’m on is in a nearby cove in hopes of evading real pirates.” He sat down next to her. “I’m Lord Eden at your service. And whom do I have the pleasure of—?”

“You have the pleasure of nothing. Am I in Scotland or England?”

He blinked. “England, of course.”

He leaned near and picked a piece of seaweed from her hair, and as his thumb brushed her cheek, a jolt of fear passed through her. “Don’t.”

He ignored her and picked more seaweed from her hair.

She glared at him. "I see you are incapable of following directions."

"Not incapable, just discriminating. Do you mind me asking how an English beauty ended up on this beach with no one to defend her? And wearing pants and a waistcoat?" He arched an inquisitive brow.

She considered recent events.

"I have no intention of telling you anything." She placed both palms on her forehead and leaned her elbows on her knees. "Did you tell me where we are?"

"The coast of Northumberland."

"I'm surprised it's this warm." She stood and brushed the grit from her trousers.

"I'm surprised you didn't freeze to death in the water. You're very fortunate."

She nodded. "May I go with you? I need to get to Yorkshire."

"I'm thinking the men won't take kindly to your boarding the ship, especially the captain, who believes in vodun and is more likely to sacrifice you than provide transportation."

"What's vodun?"

"A woman in pants."

"I was hoping for a quick swim to wash off, but I guess that will have to wait." He got up and walked in the direction of where he'd said the ship was anchored in the cove.

"Wait." The thought of relying on this man irritated her no end, but after surveying the area, she chose what she hoped was the wisest of decisions. "You will take me with you... won't you?"

"We'll soon find out." He nodded toward the cove and kept walking.

Seagulls walked the beach, and in the distance puffins dove into the ocean and returned to the sky with their catch. She

watched Lord Eden striding away from her in black breeches, boots, and a white linen shirt hanging loose.

She took a deep breath and swallowed back panic, running to catch up with him. “Wait.” He didn’t stop.

“Please, wait.” She trotted along beside him. “How do I know you can be trusted?”

He stopped and turned to look at her, quirking a brow. “You don’t know if you can trust me or not, but I guarantee you that you can’t trust them.” He pointed down into the cove.

She sucked in a breath. Her heart hammered in her chest at the sight of nearly a dozen ebony-skinned men performing some kind of pagan dance with masks and movements that looked uncivilized indeed. Several small boats decorated the shore, and farther out she saw the ship.

“Is there no other way?”

“What’s in Yorkshire?”

“Home.”

“You can walk until you find a village. Perhaps someone will take pity on you and offer you a ride.”

“But—”

“I’m going to London.” He pointed out to the sea just beyond the cove. “On that ship. So make your decision now, for soon they will see you and then there will be no turning back.”

“Surely you wouldn’t leave me here without an escort?”

“I’m not in a position to take you anywhere. But if you wish to come with me, I’ll do my best to keep you from harm.”

“Your best? That is not very honorable for an Englishman. Is your best going to be good enough? Are you quite certain you are English?”

He sighed and pulled a knife from his boot.

She took several steps back. “What do you intend?”

“Are you coming with me or not? I’m offering you

transportation to London and only to London. The accommodations will be rough, and you will need to remain in my cabin at all times. Is that understood?”

“That depends on what you plan to do with that knife.” She took several more steps away from him. She’d never get far if he really wanted to do harm.

“I’m going to disguise you as a lad. You’re already dressed for the part. If you’re willing, I have to cut your hair.”

“My hair?” Her hands immediately felt for the long strands of hair that had come loose in the water. “No. You will not cut my hair.”

“Then how do you propose to look like a lad? Did you not get a good look at the men I travel with?”

“There must be another way. Perhaps I could tie it up.” But even as she said it, she knew it wouldn’t work. Not in these circumstances. She had no hat to tuck her hair into and no other means to disguise her femininity.

She squeezed her eyes shut. *Lord, I do not think this wise, but running off on my own could be just as risky.* She opened her eyes. “All right. Cut it.”

He drew near and grabbed a handful of her thick, dark hair. “This may hurt, for although the knife is sharp, it’s sure to tug at your scalp. It will have to be short. Are you ready?”

“Do it.”

“Stand very still.” He sawed away at her hair. “I am sorry. You have the most beautiful hair.” He continued his assault.

She bit her lip to keep from crying out. When she thought of all she’d endured in the past months, she considered crying over the loss of her hair absurd, but she still had to fight back insistent tears.

Finally he stopped. The ground was covered with what had once been her crowning glory. Gingerly she put a hand to her

head. Her cropped hair felt shorter than his looked, which fell unfashionably below his ears and yet was not long enough to be pulled back in a queue.

Before she could say anything, he stuck the knife back in his boot. “There now. Pull your shirt out of your pants and cover your backside.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s obviously female, and if you are going to be my new—” He cleared his throat. “—valet, you must look like a man, albeit a young man, even a boy.”

Her eyes grew round. “Your what?”

“Well, it’s not like I’m asking you to be my mistress. I’m trying to help you without knowing the details of your family or your position. Do you want to tell me who you are now?”

She lifted her chin. “I don’t believe so.”

He looked at her and frowned. “Be clear that when we get to the ship that you don’t open your mouth to speak. Your lips are far too tempting even without saying a word and—” He picked up a glob of mud and smeared it onto her cheeks and chin and over her lips.

“What are you doing?” That was a mistake. Now she had mud in her mouth as well. She tried to spit the mud off her lips and out of her mouth. “This is the most unladylike of situations.”

“I’m making you presentable to a shipload of men who will not hesitate to take advantage of a woman. I suggest you follow my lead and my orders once we enter the cove and again onboard.”

He started down the rocky trail.

Gritting her teeth, she followed him.

As they grew closer to the sailors, she realized they were naked from the waist up. The dancing and celebrating—if that’s what it was—stopped the moment they saw her behind Eden.

A tall, lean black man wearing a necklace of ivory approached them. “Who this?”

“I found him, Fox.”

“Share him.” The man rubbed a hand through Mercy’s newly cropped hair, grabbed a handful, and pulled her head back to study her face.

Eden smacked the man’s hand away. “Not bloody likely. I’m taking him to the ship.”

“Get in that boat, boy,” Eden directed her. “Now!” he growled.

She scrambled into the small boat, and when she looked out over the ocean, she saw the ship’s masts quivering in the wind. Mercy swallowed hard. She’d just been thrown overboard before daybreak from one ship, and now she was about to board another. When she looked back, the men onshore were already racing to get in the other boats.

“Are you all right?”

Mercy nodded.

“Take one oar and I’ll take the other. Make it look good as we near the ship so you don’t look as inexperienced as you are. The others are following to see what the captain does.” He pushed the boat into the water and jumped in, picking up an oar and cutting through the waves with skilled strokes.

As they approached the ship, Mercy wondered if she shouldn’t have just refused Lord Eden’s hospitality, if one could call having her hair chopped off hospitality. She did her best to copy his movements with the oar and tried to appear as though she knew what she was doing.

“Don’t say a word.” Lord Eden pushed her ahead of him to the ladder she had to scale to gain access to the deck.

Mercy didn’t dare cause trouble. She’d never heard of Lord Eden or vodun, but she desperately wanted to get home—not to London, for a number of reasons she didn’t care to think

about yet, but to York. She was grateful that she wore trousers since he climbed up behind her. When she reached the top and peered over the edge, her blood seemed to still in her veins, but her feet kept moving. She slid over the rail and fell to her knees on the deck looking up into the eyes of a half-naked white man squinting hard at her through bloodshot eyes. His crew surrounded him to see what would happen.

“What’d ya catch, Lord Eden?” Skinner asked. He grabbed her chin in his massive hand and studied her face. “Look me in the eye, boy.”

Mercy raised her mud-caked lashes to his scrutinizing assessment and nearly choked with fear. She thought he must have seen through her disguise, but she prayed God would show him only courage reflected in her eyes. She gulped and waited for what would happen next.

Lord Eden grabbed her by the back of the shirt and away from Skinner. “He’ll clean my cabin and serve as my personal valet. It’s been a long journey.”

“I imagine your cabin needs cleaning, Lord Eden.” The man snickered, and the deckhands roared with laughter when he said something in a language she’d never heard.

Eden kept his hand firmly on her neck and guided her into the depths of the ship to his cabin. He opened the door into a room that held a narrow bed, a table and chair, and two trunks.

“This will be very close quarters. I’ll leave you alone as much as possible.”

Mercy looked at the tangled bed sheets. “Where will you sleep?” She looked up at him, and his eyes danced.

“With you, of course. I can’t have Skinner presuming you have time on your hands. He can think whatever he wants, but I guarantee you his thoughts are from the devil.”

She shivered.

“You’re cold.” He grabbed the dark wool blanket from his bunk. “I suggest you get out of your wet clothes and wrap yourself in this.” He tossed the blanket to her.

She gaped at him as she caught it. Could he really be that dim-witted? “And what would I wear?”

“Your clothing after it dries.” He grinned. “Lock the door behind me. I’ve got a key.” He left and pulled the door shut.

“But—” Mercy let out a long, low sigh of irritation, locked the door, put her back against it, and sank to the floor of the cabin. The effects of her near drowning, as well as all that had led to her being aboard the other ship and then tossed overboard, crowded in on her. Lord Eden, Captain Skinner, and his ship of unusual sailors had opened a floodgate of panic and despair. She wanted her family, needed them more than ever.

She pulled his coat tight and realized if she didn’t get out of her clothes soon, she was likely to get sick. Exhaustion taunted her, and she closed her eyes, wanting everything that had happened to go away. Common sense and the need for comfort drove her to her feet, and she shed her damp clothing. The salty wetness of the sea and . . . She breathed in the scent of the blanket while she wrapped herself in warmth. Cinnamon, clove, and the natural scent of . . . him.

She eyed the two trunks, looked toward the door, and wondered when Lord Eden might return. Guilt flashed through her. Need won out.

The aroma of sandalwood lifted with the lid of the first trunk. She gently searched through the first layer to find something to wear while she slept. Perhaps a shirt of Lord Eden’s would do. She picked up several pairs of trousers, all too big for her to consider. A black silk shirt caught her eye. She pulled it from the trunk, and a box—light in color, oak, no, olive wood—fell to the floor, making so much noise that she glanced to the door, fully

expecting Lord Eden to fill the doorway with a dark frown upon his face.

Mercy held her breath in fear of being caught snooping. When nothing happened, she let out the pent-up air. She was only looking for something to cover her under these extraordinary circumstances. She refused to sleep nude under a blanket with this man in close proximity. It was beyond the pale. She didn't ever sleep nude. No self-respecting English woman would dare to be so brazen.

Mercy picked up the box decorated with gold designs or symbols. It was heavier than it appeared. And then she reprimanded herself, thinking this was something her sister Victoria—whom the family affectionately referred to as Snoop—would do, but not her. She respected others' privacy, and she expected others to respect hers. Perhaps she'd spent too much time in London last year with her sister. That memory brought a smile to her face.

Her hand followed the smooth grain of the box until her finger found a rough edge. *A lock of some sort?* She felt along the edges, nothing. She pushed on the area with her thumb and gasped when the heavy head of what looked to be an ancient spear slid from the box and landed on the cabin floor with a thud.