

## Chapter Twenty

## Version #1

It was early Sunday morning and Alix was in bed listening to the rain. It seemed that everyone she knew on the island was away or busy. Toby was doing the flowers for an afternoon wedding, and Dilys and Lexie were off island to do some shopping. Her dad was at the job site at six a.m., seven days a week, and Alix knew from experience that he didn't want her hanging around there.

Alix had work to do on the sketches for the guesthouse for the man from the Daffodil Festival, but she didn't want to do that. This morning she awoke with an overwhelming, impossible-to-deny urge to go to the attic and look through the material there. In spite of Jared's offer of help, Alix knew that it was time to begin searching for Valentina.

When she got up and opened the bedroom curtain, she saw the rain coming down in a steady stream. It was dull outside, colored by a mix of rain and fog. "The Gray Lady" was a nickname for the island and today it earned it.

Alix dressed quickly — no need for careful attention to her hair and face if Jared wasn't there — quickly ate a bowl of cereal, then started up the stairs to the attic. A couple of days ago she'd asked Lexie about the attic.

"That place is a mess," Lexie said.

"I'm sure it is," Alix replied, "but I need to work on this. It's why I got the house for a year. Besides, if I wait until Jared returns we'll get wrapped up in designs and never even see the attic. So where are the documents about Valentina?"

As Lexie had told her to do, Alix left the door open "for the hall light," then pulled the string on the single bulb. Even though Alix hadn't been in the attic before, she'd figured it would be full. But nothing could have prepared her for what she saw. It was a huge room that

covered the whole house and whereas the downstairs had been continuously repaired and remodeled, the attic looked to be just as it was when Captain Caleb built the house. There were big, exposed beams overhead and a wide plank floor. However, Alix was glad to see that every inch was dry and even fairly clean. It was obvious that Jo Costakes's Domestic Goddess team who came in every other week to clean the downstairs, also sometimes took care of the attic.

Not that they could do much besides dust. In front was a room-sized space with a little couch, a rickety old coffee table, and an old wing chair. Behind them was a wall of boxes, trunks, baskets, furniture, and suitcases that were stacked almost to the ceiling. Narrow walkways wove between the objects and she saw a couple more bulbs in the ceiling, but all in all, the idea of trying to find anything in this huge expanse made her want to turn and run.

She opened a door on an enormous armoire and saw old clothes that looked to be from the twenties and thirties. In front was a fur collared wool coat, some old cotton dresses, and a sparkly gown that looked interesting. In case they had a costume party she knew where to go.

So where was the info on Valentina? she wondered. Lexie had said it was all together, "to the right of the door." But when she looked at the door she'd entered through, she saw only a stack of tables.

"Maybe she meant to go down the aisle on the right," she said aloud and started edging her way through it. About halfway down was another light and she pulled the string. It was such a weak bulb that it seemed to make the place darker. Any documents she found would have to be taken downstairs as it was much too dark to read.

Before her was a six foot tall stack of old storage boxes, the kind used to put files in. On the end of each one, written in large letters, was VALENTINA. Alix stepped back as far as she could, which was about eight inches, to look at them. There had to be twenty boxes, all of them

looking to be packed full. She climbed on the top of an old steamer trunk on the other side of the aisle and stretched across to pull off the top box. She got it in her hands, but then lost her balance. For a few minutes she thought she was going to fall. With her feet slipping, she held onto the box and made a leap to the floor. She landed on her seat on the hard surface. As she hit, the overhead bulb went out.

“Perfect!” she said. Just yesterday she’d seen that the supply of light bulbs was empty and that they needed new ones. Grumbling, she picked up the box and started toward the front.

But what she saw in the shadowy alcove behind the open door stopped her in her tracks. Sitting in the wing chair, peeling an orange, was a man who looked very much like Jared — minus the beard and long hair, that is. The man was older than Jared, probably in his fifties, and he was smiling at her.

“Sorry to startle you,” he said and his voice was like Jared’s. “I had some trouble getting up the stairs so I needed to sit down.” He nodded to a cane that was propped against the chair.

Alix was holding the box and staring at him. She hadn’t heard him enter, hadn’t heard a sound from downstairs.

“I really didn’t mean to upset you,” he said. “Maybe I should go.” He started to get up.

“No,” she said, “that’s all right. Obviously, you’re a Kingsley.”

“Are we all so much alike as that?” he asked and his smile made her relax.

After setting the box on the floor under the light bulb, she turned to look at him. Between the rain outside, the dim light, and the shadow he was sitting in, she could hardly see him. “I didn’t know anyone was coming to visit today.”

“It looks like Jared forgot to tell you about me. I’m Caleb.”

“Ah yes, that’s who you look like. Captain Caleb.”

“Handsome devil?”

Alix laughed. “Yes he is. Are you a seventh or an eighth like Jared is?”

“No,” Caleb said. “In fact there are very few Kingsleys with my name. Is that one of the Valentina boxes?” He had the orange peeled now and held out a section to Alix. “Would you like some?”

“Thanks but no. I just ate.” She took the lid off the box, looked inside, let out a sigh, then sat down on the floor. The box was full of file folders of yellowing old papers. She pulled out one and flipped through it. Inside were old typewritten letters to and from museums, law offices, historic houses. Brittle newspaper clippings told of people who’d lived in Kingsley House.

If each folder held this much and each box was full of folders, Alix knew she was looking at a massive amount of work. When she looked up at Caleb, what she was thinking must have been on her face as he gave a chuckle of sympathy.

“Not a historian?” he asked.

“No, I’m not.”

“Not even if there were drawings of houses inside?” he asked.

“You’ve been talking to Jared.”

“And your father, and Lexie. She says she’s never seen Jared actually *like* a woman before.”

“Really?” she said.

“Seven is a bit of a loner. I’ve always said that was because he hadn’t found *her* yet.”

Caleb’s tone made it seem that Alix had changed Jared. She turned away so he wouldn’t see how much his words pleased her. She looked back at the box. “If people have gone to this much trouble to find Valentina, surely they read all this. I can’t figure out what *I* can

find. If I were trained in this maybe I'd know what to look for, but I'm not and I don't."

"I think Adelaide wanted a fresh mind brought in. Maybe she hoped that you would look where other people haven't."

As Alix looked around the big attic with its hundreds of containers, she gave a sigh. "I don't know if I can live up to that expectation."

Caleb smiled at her tone of helplessness. "You mind if I add my ideas to this task?"

"Please do!" she said and gladly put the folder back in place and covered the box.

"There is a specific case that I think might hold some information. I feel quite ungentlemanly in this, but the rain makes my old leg rather difficult. Perhaps you could . . ."

Alix got up. "Sure. Stay in your chair and I'll get the box. Where is it and what does it look like?"

"You are kindness itself," he said as he wrapped the orange peel in a handkerchief and tucked it beside him in the chair. "Proceed down that path, if you will." He pointed. "About three quarters down is a large black box with two red stripes on it. I know Adelaide hid something in there that she wanted no one to see and I've always wondered what it was. Since she was always so secretive about Valentina, I thought perhaps it was about her."

"That sounds interesting."

"Oh my!" Alix said. "She must have been furious."

"She told me she was relieved. By then she was in her early thirties and she was only marrying Edwin because her father wanted her to. He was even insisting that Adelaide leave the island and live in Boston. But in the end, she had her revenge on her father."

"How did she do that?"

Caleb chuckled. "Adelaide always was very clever. Her only reason for getting married was so she'd have a home — and the one she loved was this house. But she knew that her

father would leave the whole property to his son, who I might add, didn't care anything about it. But if Adelaide didn't marry, she would spend her life living at the mercy of her brother."

"I hadn't thought of that," Alix said. "So how did she end up with this house and my Jared's father didn't?"

"Your Jared," Caleb said softly.

"I meant mine to distinguish him from the six others." Alix knew her face was red.

"Whatever the intent, I like the concept," he said. "Seven needs someone to lay claim to him."

Alix and Caleb smiled at each other in mutual agreement.

"So what did Miss Adelaide do to get this house?" she asked.

"She made her father feel very guilty, and she coughed a lot."

"How did that work as revenge?"

Caleb smiled. "Adelaide pretended she was so upset by her broken engagement that she was at death's door. She was quite hysterical when she told her father that she feared being homeless. And she did a remarkable job at making him believe that she didn't have long to live. In guilt, her father rewrote his will to leave the house to her for her lifetime and he showed it to her. Poor man. He really did love her and he wanted her to feel secure during her last months. But then the next year he went down with his ship and the house was Adelaide's."

"For her lifetime."

"Which turned out to be quite long," Caleb said. "She and her mother lived here in comfort and her brother, Five, moved out of town near the water. He liked it much better there."

"Good for her!" Alix said. "And good for this generation. If Jared hadn't lived in the falling down old house in Madaket he might never have learned of his talent for designing."

"And if your father hadn't had that house to work on . . ." Caleb shrugged. "Funny how

life works, isn't it?"

"It is," Alix said. She picked up the dress. "So this was to be Miss Adelaide's wedding dress?"

"Yes," Caleb said. "But it's dated now. Today girls like those shiny dresses with uncovered tops."

"Strapless, sweetheart neckline," Alix said as she stood up and held the dress in front of her. "I like this one better." She held the skirt out and twirled about in it.

"I do believe it would fit you. Adelaide was an extraordinarily tall woman. For her time, that is."

Alix carefully put the dress over the little couch. "This isn't helping with Valentina, is it?"

"No, I guess not," Caleb said. "Maybe you'd better haul all those file boxes downstairs and start reading them."

Alix groaned. "Now I know why I was given a year to live here. It will take me that long to read everything."

"And you won't find anything new."

"You sound like Jared," she said. "Sometimes he has that glass half empty outlook too."

"I think that was before he met you."

Alix laughed. "I wish that were true." She stood up. "I guess I better get started." She looked at Caleb. "Want to help? I'll carry the boxes downstairs to the small parlor and you and I can read everything. I have scallops in the fridge so I'll make lunch for you." She wiggled her eyebrows in a way that she hoped was enticing. She needed help with this and she knew that neither her father or Jared was going to do it.

"You are tempting, but I have to leave soon. The sun comes out and I disappear." Even in the shadows she could see that his blue eyes were twinkling.

“Like Captain Caleb, the ghost of Kingsley House?”

“Exactly like him.” He smiled at her. “I told Adelaide that I thought everyone was searching for Valentina from the wrong direction.”

“What do you mean?”

“She had a family of her own.”

“So maybe Valentina ran away to them?”

All humor left Caleb’s handsome face. “I don’t believe she ever left this island.”

“Jared agrees with you. Did he tell you about the chapel he’s going to build over the old house’s cellar? He thinks he might find . . .” She hesitated. “Might find bones in there.”

Caleb looked down at his hands for a moment. “I think he could be right. Did Jared tell you about Parthenia?”

“No! He mentioned her, but he said he didn’t know who she was.”

“He probably forgot, but then it’s been years since he heard of her. There’s a box . . .” He thought for a moment. “It’s been a long time since I saw it. It’s . . . Oh yes. You wouldn’t know how to use a crowbar, would you?”

“Are you kidding? I’m Ken’s daughter.”

“So you are. In that wooden chest against the wall are some tools. I think you’ll find one in there.”

“This is becoming an adventure,” she said. “Finding out about Miss Adelaide and now needing to tear something apart.” The old chest contained tools all right, but they probably should have been in a museum. “Have the local historians seen this stuff?”

“No, but Huntley would sell his soul to go through it.”

Alix hadn’t met the director of the NHS but she’d heard him mentioned. She got the crowbar out of the bottom and held it up. “Now what do I do?”



“Ten boards east of that window, six feet south, remove the floorboard.”

“A treasure hunt!” Alix said. “How do you know about this?”

“Kingsley secret,” he said, watching her.

She counted the boards to the east, then had to move a stack of hat boxes, four shoeboxes, shove a heavy trunk out of the way, and set aside a pretty little table to get to the board Caleb spoke of. It didn’t take much to pry it up. It was short and looked as though it hadn’t been removed since the house was built.

Inside were a few centuries of dirt and dust, but in the middle she could see a small box, Chinese by the look of it. One of Captain Caleb’s boxes from the China trade? she wondered. She removed the box, brushed it off, and carried it back to Caleb.

She started toward him, meaning to hand it to him, after all, he was a Kingsley, but he waved her away.

“I put the key over there. I’d rather that you opened it.”

He seemed to be upset about something and Alix thought it might not be good to open the box. “Maybe I should leave this for Jared.”

“Please,” he said as he motioned to it. “It needs to be opened.”

She sat down on the little couch, the wedding dress beside her, took the key off a little table, and unlocked the box. Slowly, she lifted the lid. Inside were only two things. One was a small wooden case and the other was a letter. She lifted them out.

“Which one first?” she asked and saw the pain on his face. What he seemed to be feeling wasn’t physical but emotional.

“The letter,” he said. “I’ve seen it before but it’s been a while. Would you please read it to me?”

Carefully, Alix unfolded the letter. The handwriting was small and difficult to read but

she managed it.

10 February 1809

Warbrooke, Maine

My dearest cousin,

I was very pleased to receive your letter and I was most happy to hear of your new son. Your mother was weeping with joy at the news and I have never seen your father so happy. They are planning to travel to Nantucket to see you this summer.

I want to reassure you that I have kept your secret. I have told no one of your beloved Caleb. Nor have I told of your husband Obed's lie that Caleb had died. To be in the family way without a husband was an impossible situation, yet I still believe that you could have returned home without destroying your parents' hearts or their spirits.

But I do understand. Your son will now grow up a Kingsley and he will inherit all that that means on your island. And Obed can make your wonderful soap into a true business.

My comfort in all this is that if Obed was willing to jeopardize his immortal soul with such a lie, he must love you very much. However, I worry about what will happen when your dear Caleb returns and finds you and his son living with another man.

You must destroy this letter! I have told too much. If you want people to believe that young Jared is Obed's son then you must tell no one besides me the truth.

I will again come to you as soon as it's warm enough to travel. I always enjoy your island and I look forward to seeing a certain young man. You have shared so many secrets with me that I will tell you mine. Now that my mother has passed, I have decided to tell him yes. Can you bear that I will live near you on your pretty island? I shall be the wife of the school master, with an immediate family of two little girls, Alisa and Ivy. I will be Mrs. John Kendricks and glad of it.

Everything will be all right when I get there. We will be new wives together. Friends forever.

With much love,

Parthenia Taggert

For a moment Alix couldn't speak. Knowing what had happened made the letter very sad. When she looked at Caleb, she saw that he was even more upset. It was almost as though hearing the story had aged him. "Has Jared read this?"

"No," Caleb said, his voice very soft. "Before today, only I had read it. When I found it, long ago, it was still sealed. Even Valentina never read it. She was missing by the time the letter got to Nantucket. I'm the one who put it under the floorboard. Rage gave me the strength."

"But . . ." Alix began, but didn't finish. The board didn't look as though it had ever been moved. But then, if Caleb had hidden the box when he was young, it could still have been there for thirty or so years. She wanted to ask him questions about where he'd found the letter and about Parthenia, but she couldn't do it. When Caleb looked at her, he tried to smile but it didn't reach his eyes.

“I guess you’ve seen inside this,” she said, holding up the little box.

“It contains an emerald ring that Captain Caleb bought for Valentina on his last trip to China. He forgot and left it on his ship. His brother gave it to her with the will.”

Alix knew he was talking about a tragedy that had happened hundreds of years ago, but his words and tone made it seem new and fresh. The air of sadness was staying with her. In fact, the whole attic seemed to have filled with grief and misery and longing.

Alix looked at the ring box but didn’t open it until Caleb motioned for her to do so. Slowly, she lifted the lid. Inside was an exquisitely beautiful ring set with three emeralds. Even in the dim light they sparkled.

“My mother would love this,” Alix said. She had to talk about something happy or she’d start crying. “She loves anything green.”

“To match her eyes,” Caleb said.

Alix smiled. “So you’ve met her.”

“Many, many times,” he said and some of the sadness seemed to leave him. “It’s said that Valentina also had red hair and green eyes.”

“Did she? Are there any portraits of her?”

“Alas, no,” Caleb said and seemed to be coming out of his misery. “Captain Caleb wanted her to have one painted, but she was too busy making her soap to stand still long enough. She had great ambition in a time when women . . .” He waved his hand. “It doesn’t matter now. My question is if there are Taggerts and Montgomerys still in Warbrooke, Maine.”

“There might be, but I doubt if they’d know about a woman who lived in the early 1800s.”

Caleb looked at her. “Isn’t it fashionable now to find out about your ancestors? Aren’t there shows on TV about finding out where your family came from?”

“That’s true,” Alix said. “Maybe I could look on the Internet and find this woman

Parthenia.”

“She’s there. Adelaide and I looked.” He was staring at Alix in a way that she knew meant she was to figure out something, but it took her a moment.

“Names on a chart mean nothing, do they?”

“Nothing at all,” he said and seemed pleased that she’d understood so quickly.

She smiled at him. “Someone should go to this place in Maine and ask questions, shouldn’t he?”

“He?”

“Well, Jared is going to be in Vermont and how far away is Maine?”

“Mere minutes,” he said, and the smile he gave her lifted the gloom from the room.

“Look out Warbrooke,” Alix said, “a Kingsley is on his way — as soon as I tell him he has to go, that is.” She and Caleb looked at each other and laughed. And when she heard that rich, deep sound, she knew that he was the man she remembered from when she was a child. She’d know that laugh anywhere.

## Chapter Twenty

## Version #2

It was early Sunday morning and Alix was in bed listening to the rain. It seemed that everyone she knew on the island was away or busy. Toby was doing the flowers for an afternoon wedding, and Dilys and Lexie were off island to do some shopping. Her dad was at the job site at six a.m., seven days a week, and Alix knew from experience that he didn't want her hanging around there.

Alix had work to do on the sketches for the guesthouse for the man from the Daffodil Festival, but she didn't want to do that. This morning she awoke with an overwhelming, impossible-to-deny urge to go to the attic and look through the material there. In spite of Jared's offer of help, Alix knew that it was time to begin searching for Valentina.

When she got up and opened the bedroom curtain, she saw the rain coming down in a steady stream. It was dull outside, colored by a mix of rain and fog. "The Gray Lady" was a nickname for the island and today it earned it.

Alix dressed quickly — no need for careful attention to her hair and face if Jared wasn't there — quickly ate a bowl of cereal, then started up the stairs to the attic. Maybe she'd known she was going to do this because a couple of days ago she'd asked Lexie about the attic.

"That place is a mess," Lexie said.

"I'm sure it is," Alix replied, "but I need to work on this. It's why I got the house for a year. Besides, if I wait until Jared returns we'll get wrapped up in designs and never even see the attic. So where are the documents about Valentina?"

As Lexie had told her to do, Alix left the door open "for the hall light," then pulled the string on the single bulb. Even though Alix hadn't been in the attic before, she'd figured it would

be full. But nothing could have prepared her for what she saw. It was a huge room that covered the whole house and whereas the downstairs had been continuously repaired and remodeled, the attic looked to be just as it was when Captain Caleb built the house. There were big, exposed beams overhead and a wide plank floor. However, Alix was glad to see that every inch was dry and even fairly clean. It was obvious that Jo Costakes's Domestic Goddess team who came in every other week to clean the downstairs, also sometimes took care of the attic.

Not that they could do much besides dust. In front was a room-sized space with a little couch, a rickety old coffee table, and an old wing chair. Behind them was a wall of boxes, trunks, baskets, furniture, and suitcases that were stacked almost to the ceiling. Narrow walkways wove between the objects and she saw a couple more bulbs in the ceiling, but all in all, the idea of trying to find anything in this huge expanse made her want to turn and run.

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could, which was about eight inches, to look at them. There had to be twenty boxes, all of them looking to be packed full. She climbed on the top of an old steamer trunk on the other side of the aisle and stretched across to pull off the top box. She got it in her hands, but then lost her balance. For a few minutes she thought she was going to fall. With her feet slipping, she held onto the box and made a leap to the floor. She landed on her seat on the hard surface. As she hit, the overhead bulb went out.

“Perfect!” she said. Just yesterday she’d seen that the supply of light bulbs was empty and that they needed new ones. Grumbling, she picked up the box and started toward the front.

“Hello?”

She heard a male voice that seemed familiar. At first she thought it was Jared returning early, but the voice was deeper and sounded a bit older.

At the end of the aisle she stopped in her tracks, for standing there was a modern version of Captain Caleb. He had on jeans and a denim shirt and heavy brown lace-up boots, but other than that, he was the captain.

“I think I’ve startled you.” His voice was very much like Jared’s. “I better leave and return after Seven has properly introduced us.” He turned toward the door.

“No!” she said. “You don’t need to leave. It’s not like I think you could be a burglar. You look too much like Captain Caleb to be anything but a Kingsley.”

“Captain Caleb?” he said and even in the dull gray light she could see his eyes begin to twinkle. “I couldn’t possibly be that handsome. No man today could be.”

Smiling, Alix put the box she was holding down on the floor. “I have to agree, but perhaps you do have less seriousness in your eyes than he does.”

“Ah, but then, when that portrait was painted the captain had a lot on his mind. He was



trying to win Valentina.”

“From what I heard, he didn’t have any trouble with that.” As Alix plopped down on the little sofa and a spattering of dust went up around her, she gave a sigh. “Sorry,” she said as she looked up at him. “It’s just that I’m feeling a bit overwhelmed at all the data I’m supposed to go through.”

“Do you mind?” he asked, motioning to the chair across from her.

“Please.”

He took a seat in the big wing chair, the flanges casting his face in deep shadow. He really did look like the captain, she thought, but then maybe it was because his picture was what she saw every morning and evening. Whatever the reason, he seemed very familiar. “Who are you?” she asked.

“Jared didn’t tell you about me?”

“No, he didn’t,” she said. “But then he didn’t volunteer any information about his cousin Wes either.”

When the man laughed, Alix was almost sure it was the sound she’d heard as a child. “I think I’ve met you before, but you’re . . .” From the look of him he was a bit younger than Jared, which meant that he wouldn’t have had that deep, adult laugh when she was so young.

“We did meet when you were a child,” he said, smiling. “But you’ve met so many of my family that perhaps you can’t place me. I’m called Caleb.”

“Of course you are,” she said. “Are you a seventh or eighth like Jared is?”

“No, it’s just me.”

He was smiling at her in a way that was making her relax. “I take it that the great cache of material isn’t making you want to dive in and explore?”

“No, it’s not. I have plans to draw for a guesthouse, a garden house, and —”

“And everything else Seven can fob off on you?”

Again Alix laughed. “That’s one way of looking at it. I rather think of it as an honor to help out.”

“Hmph!” Caleb said in a way that made Alix smile broader. “I will tell you a secret. I have read every word on those papers in the boxes.”

“Have you?”

“Oh yes. In fact, I am directly responsible for a great deal of the information that is in there.”

“If you’ve read it all and still no one knows what happened to Valentina, what use is it that I read it? I’m not good with puzzles.”

“But you see, I already know what happened to Valentina,” he said.

“Do you?” Alix blinked a few times. “If you know, then why did Miss Adelaide make a will saying I was to find out?”

“Good question,” he said and stood up. “Would you like for me to tell you the true story of Valentina and Caleb? The one the rest of my family doesn’t know?”

Alix hesitated. Perhaps she should wait until Jared was back and Caleb could tell both of them. But she couldn’t resist. She nodded.

He looked around the attic. “I think that for this story of great and deep love, we need atmosphere. I have a . . . What do you call it?” He made a circle with his hands. “It plays music. Do you have a gramophone?”

She smiled at the image of the old fashioned machine. “No, but I have an excellent laptop and it will play a CD.”

He smiled at her as though she were the most intelligent of people. “There’s a gown in a box down the first aisle. Its owner was rather tall, like you, and I believe the garment will fit

you. Perhaps you'd like to put it on and I will teach you a dance from Valentina's time."

"Oh," Alix said, her eyes wide. As a woman in a modern world that rarely bothered to dress up for anything, she started to protest. But then she glanced at the window. The rain was still coming down hard and she had nothing else really urgent to do, so why not dance with a handsome man? "Where is the dress?"

Caleb smiled at her with such warmth that Alix felt herself take a step toward him. Good grief! she thought as she stepped back. If the real Captain Caleb had this magnetism she could certainly understand why Valentina ended up pregnant before they were married. He seemed to understand Alix's thoughts, but didn't comment as he gave her directions to find the box containing the dress.

She found it easily but getting it out was difficult. She had to remove six other objects off the top of it, and drag it out. The box was the size of a suitcase and quite lightweight, as though it didn't contain much. She picked it up and took it out to the front.

Caleb was standing by the chair and smiling at her, and she wondered why she hadn't been introduced to him. Did he live nearby?

"That's it," he said.

It took Alix only moments to open the box. Inside was what looked to be a white cotton dress. She lifted it by its shoulders. "Do you think this belonged to Valentina?" Even as she said it she knew she was wrong. "No, it isn't that old."

Standing, she pulled the dress out and held it up under the single bulb of light. It was beautiful. Crisp, clean cotton, with a deep square neck, long sleeves, and a floor length skirt done in folded over layers. It was, without a doubt, a wedding dress. She looked at Caleb. "1950's?"

"Yes. Isn't there something with it?"

Alix glanced down to see an envelope, one of those heavy kind that was usually an invitation. She carefully, respectfully, draped the dress over the little couch and opened the envelope. It was an invitation to a wedding between Miss Adelaide Kingsley and Mr. Edwin Farcaster for the sixth of May 1953, to be held in Boston. It was for a wedding that never happened.

Alix read it aloud to Caleb. "That's sad," she said. "Poor Miss Adelaide. I wonder if she was left at the altar."

"No," Caleb said cheerfully. "She told me she found him in bed with another woman. She was the one who called off the engagement right there and then. Actually, she was glad because she was only marrying him to please her father. Adelaide was quite happy to remain a single woman. Besides, her father felt so guilty about it all that he willed the house to her instead of her brother. I can assure you that she liked this house much more than any man. Well?"

Alix was laughing at the story and especially at his conclusion. "Well what?"

He looked pointedly at the dress. "If you are hesitant, I could help you with the fastenings."

Alix grinned. "I bet you could." She glanced at the long white dress. There was really no reason for her to put it on, but then lately her mind had been so full of weddings and all that goes with them that she felt drawn to the gown. And then, of course, there was Jared. Hadn't she said that her wedding dress would be cotton?

As she picked it up, she looked at Caleb. "I think I'll go downstairs to try it on."

"Then you'll come back to me?" he asked in a way that made her blink. He sounded as though he'd be devastated if she said no.

"Yes, I will," she said as she ran down the stairs to her bedroom.

Once in the room, she couldn't help going to Captain Caleb's portrait. The man upstairs really did look like his ancestor! "He's not *quite* as handsome as you are," she said. "But he's a close second."

In the next minute she'd stripped off her clothes. On impulse she rummaged in a drawer and removed her best white lacy underwear and put it on. She started toward the gown but instead she went to the bathroom and put on makeup. She was glad her long hair was clean. She pulled off the tie for her pony tail and managed to sweep it up into a soft chignon. It wasn't a professional job but it was more fitting for the elegance of the dress.

At last she returned to the bedroom, wearing just her underwear, and picked up the dress. She was glad Caleb had told her that Miss Adelaide's uncompleted wedding hadn't been a misery. If it had been, the dress wouldn't have had the same good feeling as it did now.

Alix stepped into it, had to struggle with the tight, narrow sleeves, then worked to fasten the buttons up the back. Only when she had it on did she look in the mirror. If the dress had been made for her it couldn't have fit better. The neckline was low, showing rather a lot of cleavage. She made a half hearted attempt to pull it up, but then she smiled. Her breasts had never looked better! She left the dress alone.

As she went up the steep, narrow attic stairs wearing a wedding dress and carrying a laptop, she felt a little absurd, but the moment she saw Caleb she lost her hesitancy. He was wearing a tuxedo, one of those utterly perfect kind like out of a Cary Grant movie. It fit him exactly, curving in at the waist and showing his long, heavily muscled legs. She didn't know what gym he used but it should be given an award.

For a long moment he stood there staring at her and his look of admiration made Alix stand up straighter.

"Goddesses must envy you," he whispered.

His words were flattering and of course untrue, but they made all Alix's doubts leave her.

She set her laptop on a side table and inserted the CD that was on the table. The first tune was a combination of Scottish and Irish reels, with a lot of violins. It was fast paced but also lyrical. "The eighteenth century equivalent of rock and roll?" she asked.

"Ah, but this music has a tune," he answered as he held out his hand to her.

When she took it, an instant warmth went through her. His touch wasn't electrical or sexual as Jared's was, but calming — and invigorating at the same time. All her concerns about the work she needed to do fell away. All that seemed important was the present moment and what this man had to tell her.

His hand was almost cool to the touch and it felt as though she could sense it as much as feel it.

"All right?" he asked softly, his eyes meeting hers.

"Yes," she whispered. "Very all right."

He stepped back from her and bowed. Even though Alix didn't know the dance he was leading her into, she did seem to know. She curtsied, then turned and walked forward four steps, with Caleb beside her. She stopped, turned back toward him, and lifted her hands to touch his.

"How do I know what to do?" she asked.

"Sssssh," he said. "Don't think. Just feel. And listen to the story. Valentina was extraordinarily beautiful. She had red hair, green-eyes, and she was your friend. You liked each other very much. She said that if she ever had a daughter, she wanted her to be just like you."

As they were moving to the music toward the far wall, Alix thought it felt good for the story to be so personal, so relatable. "She sounds like she looks like my mother."

“She is exactly like her.”

“Then she must have caused a stir among the young men on the island.”

“Oh yes,” Caleb said in a voice that sounded faraway. “She turned them upside down. They all made complete and utter fools of themselves when she was near.”

“Did she and Captain Caleb fall in love immediately?”

“He did. He didn’t know it then, but he did. She . . . well, actually, at first she despised him.”

“Isn’t that always true of Great Romance?” Alix turned around full circle, then came back to face him.

“Perhaps to read about, but not to experience. You see, the captain returned from his long voyage earlier than expected.”

“Just as Izzy and I did,” Alix said. “And if we hadn’t, I wouldn’t have met Jared.”

“Are you referring to your sister?”

Alix laughed. “Now I see. You’re talking of reincarnation. I can believe Izzy was my sister in another life. I guess that next you’ll be telling me that an alternate me grew up to marry Jared.”

“And to make buildings together,” Caleb said. “A lot of the houses on this island are yours. You drew them; he built them.”

Alix couldn’t help putting her head back and laughing. “What a marvelous prevaricator you are! You *must* meet my mother. You can plot and she’ll write it all down.”

“And sell it and keep all the old houses the Kingsleys own in good repair,” he said.

“You two sound like a perfect match.”

“We were,” he said.

“Yes, of course. You couldn’t be anyone other than Captain Caleb. But how could

Valentina ever despise *you*?” She couldn’t help flirting with him. If there was ever a man made to flirt with, it was him. His eyes had a soft, bedroom quality to them, and combined with the beautiful dress, she was beginning to feel like the most desirable woman in the world. Long ago, Alix had found that with a mother like hers, she needed to be smart and talented and accomplished. When it came to pure sex appeal, no one could compete with Victoria. But right now this man was making Alix feel like she was a temptress.

“You see,” Caleb said as his arm slid around Alix’s waist, “the captain didn’t know who Valentina was. She’d arrived on the island after he left on a voyage to China, so he hadn’t seen her. He thought . . .” He broke off as he turned about, then came back to Alix with a look that said he’d been away from her much too long.

“What did he think?” she asked, her face close to his. He was clean shaven and she could smell his skin. It was salty and oh so very male.

“He assumed she was a maid, but also that she was a . . .” He hesitated.

Alix thought of how her mother was perceived when a man came upon her unawares. “That she was a lady of the evening?” she suggested.

“Exactly.”

“Captain Caleb didn’t . . . You know, did he?”

“No, of course not. I mean, not really.” A new tune began playing, this one softer and slower, and he held out his arms to her. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to slip into them. He led her into a waltz that was so light she wasn’t sure her feet were touching the ground. Around and around they went, higher and higher.

“Did you — I mean he — do this dance with Valentina?”

“Certainly not on that first night.”

Alix put her head back and closed her eyes. When she opened them she was glancing



*down* at the window, *down* at the stacks of artifacts. She and this man seemed to be high, high up, above the floor. As an architect, she knew that wasn't possible, that the ceiling was too low, but right now she didn't feel like a business person of any type. The beautiful white wedding gown swirled around her body, nearly surrounding the two of them in a soft mist. All she could feel was the womanliness of herself. All the enticing, alluring touches that made a woman what she is were coming out of her, radiating.

And this man, this beautiful man, was making it all happen.

Alix let all the feelings and sounds and smells seep into her body. The music grew louder, as though there was an orchestra around them. She smelled food and perfume. She could hear laughter and people talking. And when she looked down there was light: golden, glowing and warm. It was candlelight, flickering and radiant, and it was illuminating the flushed and rosy skin of a hundred people.

Alix seemed able to see beneath the floor. The entire downstairs was awash with light and laughter. "I can see it," she whispered and clasped Caleb's hand tighter.

"Who do you see?" he whispered back.

"My mother! The men are around her. She looks like she does in the mornings before she puts on makeup. Oh!"

"What is it?" he asked.

"Her eyebrows aren't plucked. She would hate that."

Caleb chuckled. "Who else is there?"

"Everyone. Lots of Kingsleys. That man looks like my father."

"He's the schoolmaster, John Kendricks, a widower with two young daughters, Alisa and Isolde," Caleb said. "Do you see yourself?"

"I don't know. Oh yes. The girl with the sketchpad. What am I drawing?"

“A house, of course,” Caleb said. “Do you see Parthenia? She would be with your father. They were deeply in love.”

“He wasn’t in love with my mother?” She was teasing as she knew the answer to that.

“In this life, *you* are the only link between your parents.”

“There!” Alix said. “Is the pretty woman beside him Parthenia? She seems very quiet.”

“She is.”

“Who is the gray-haired man? He looks like Dr. Huntley.”

“That’s the captain’s father,” Caleb said softly. “He would do *anything* for his son.”

Alix closed her eyes again and the music seemed to grow louder. “None of this is real, is it?”

“None at all. Do you mind?”

Opening her eyes, she smiled at him. “Yesterday I was doing calculations of cement that’s needed for a job. Now I’m wearing a beautiful gown and dancing on air. Literally.”

“With a handsome man?”

“With a *very* handsome man,” she said as he began swirling her about more. “By the way, where is the captain?” She was breathless from the dance.

“Coming home from a long voyage; he felt like he’d been at sea forever. He’s tired and hungry and he wants to see his new house. It was completed while he was away. He left the construction of the house under the supervision of Master Kendricks, who, besides teaching, likes to build things. He personally made the cabinets in the large parlor.”

“I love those!”

“You always did. You used to hide your drawings in there. Two of them fell down the back, and I think they’re still there.”

“So the luscious Captain Caleb was coming home,” she said.

Smiling, Caleb kissed Alix's cheek. "Luscious. I like that word. But that night he was anything but. As he stepped onto Kingsley Lane he saw that his new house was lit up — and he didn't like it at all. You see, John and Parthenia were getting married that night and half the island had been invited. But the captain didn't know that then. All he saw was that there were about a thousand candles, and many carriages and horses were outside. The manure was ankle deep."

"What a romantic image," Alix said, laughing. "Did the captain run the people out?"

"No, he was never like that. But he didn't want to see anyone so he sneaked inside and went up the stairs to his bedroom."

"Up the chamberpot stairs?"

Caleb shook his head. "Three made up that story."

"Oh, so then I was right and those stairs were for secret trysts in the night?" She looked at him and when he gave a movement of his eyebrows she laughed. "Did the captain stay in his bedroom?"

"He wanted to but the bed — *his* bed — was covered with ladies's cloaks. He went upstairs to the attic."

"To hide away and sulk."

"No!" Caleb said, sounding affronted, but then he swirled Alix even harder. "Yes, he did, but he had reason. On his ship he was the master, but in Nantucket he had to contend with Petticoat Row."

Alix laughed at the name. "I think I remember that that refers to the women who ran the Town while you men were fooling around in Tahiti."

"Ah, Tahiti," Caleb said. "What fond memories that brings back."

"I can imagine. So Captain Caleb was upstairs sulking, then what happened?"

“Valentina came upstairs.”

“With some young man?” Alix asked.

“No. She wanted to remove her shoes and be quiet for a moment. She had been danced off her feet.”

“I understand,” Alix said. “When Mother and I go to a dance she’s never allowed to sit down. So Valentina escaped to go hide in the attic and there she met Captain Caleb. Was it a romantic meeting?”

“Hardly,” Caleb said, a smile in his voice. “Remember that he thought she was . . .” He looked at Alix.

“A lady of the evening. But if she were, she wouldn’t have been invited to the party, would she?”

“Nantucket has always been a worldly place,” he said stiffly.

“Hmmm,” Alix said. “Perhaps Captain Caleb didn’t have his thinking cap on, but just took one look at the gorgeous, voluptuous Valentina and made a pass at her.”

“Perhaps,” he said, then grinned. “I think the schoolmaster’s daughter is too clever. You’ll never get a husband that way.”

Alix smiled back at him. “My mother is also very clever and *she* got Captain Caleb.”

His laugh rang out and indeed, it was the one Alix remembered so well, so deep, coming from way inside him, rumbling upward like rich, dark, sweet molasses. “I swear I have not laughed so well since you were last here.”

“And I *do* remember you. But then I could not have forgotten someone like you.” She smiled at him with her lids half lowered.

“Perhaps you will be able to procure a husband after all,” Caleb said, his eyes glowing warmly. “Where was I in my story?”

“That John Kendricks’s daughter was too smart for her own good. Who is that young man standing by the wall and frowning?”

“The First. He’s only fourteen years old but he’s been a cabin boy since he was nine. He’s already made two long voyages. But his father died young so Jared plans to stop sailing and stay home to take care of his mother. He doesn’t know it yet, but the schoolmaster is going to teach him how to build houses.”

“When he finds someone to design them, that is.”

“They will most certainly find each other,” Caleb said, grinning. “They always do. Now if you will stop interrupting me, I will tell you about Valentina. It seems that on that first night Captain Caleb tried to kiss her. But that’s all there was.”

“How much rum was involved?” Alix asked.

“Measured in gallons or flagons?”

Alix laughed. “I get the idea. Did Valentina slap him?”

“No,” Caleb said. “In fact, she encouraged him. She . . .”

“She what?”

“She invited him to . . . to . . .”

“To do what?”

“To make love to her.”

“Did she?” Alix asked, astonished, then looked at him. “Are you blushing?”

“That is a female condition,” he said. “Men do not blush.”

“Mmmm,” Alix said. “Now, let me think. If this were my mother today and she tried to get a man to make love to her even though she didn’t really want him to . . . I fear that she just might do something awful to him.”

“She did.”

“How bad was it?”

Caleb kept dancing, holding onto Alix, and took his time in answering. “She got him to remove all his clothing.”

“You mean he was naked and she wasn’t?”

“That is how it played out, yes.”

“I don’t think this ended well.” Alix was suppressing laughter as she imagined all of it. “Go on. What happened next?”

“She . . .” Caleb began, then gave a sheepish grin. “She took his clothing, left the attic, and locked the door behind her.”

“Oh?” Alix began to laugh at what she was visualizing. “If the house was new there probably wasn’t much in the way of furniture up here, was there?”

“There was only a half empty jug of rum.” Caleb’s look seemed to be a combination of remorse and embarrassment. “And it was a cold night.”

Alix couldn’t repress her laughter. “How did he get out of this room?”

“The next morning Kendricks heard . . . well, some fairly strong words coming through the floorboards. The household was very difficult to raise after the night’s revelry.”

“Not to mention that it was the schoolmaster’s wedding night. I don’t mean to laugh at the captain, but he really did deserve what he got.”

“He did,” Caleb said. “Although he didn’t think so at the time. When he was finally released from the attic —”

“And got dressed,” she added.

“Yes, there was that. The captain put on his most impressive uniform and went to Valentina’s washhouse, where she was stirring her big pots of soap. He demanded an apology from her.”

“Did she give it to him?”

“She told him to make himself useful and grab a paddle and stir.”

“Not the way a ship’s captain was used to being treated?”

“No,” Caleb said, smiling. “Not at all how he was used to being treated.”

## Chapter Twenty

## Version #3

It was early Sunday morning and Alix was in bed listening to the rain. It seemed that everyone she knew on the island was away or busy. Toby was doing the flowers for an afternoon wedding, and Dilys and Lexie were off island to do some shopping. Her dad was at the job site at six a.m., seven days a week, and Alix knew from experience that he didn't want her hanging around there.

Alix had work to do on the sketches for the guesthouse for the man from the Daffodil Festival, but she didn't want to do that. This morning she awoke with an overwhelming, impossible-to-deny urge to go to the attic and look through the material there. In spite of Jared's offer of help, Alix knew that it was time to begin searching for Valentina.

When she got up and opened the bedroom curtain, she saw the rain coming down in a steady stream. It was dull outside, colored by a mix of rain and fog. "The Gray Lady" was a nickname for the island and today it earned it.

Alix dressed quickly — no need for careful attention to her hair and face if Jared wasn't there — quickly ate a bowl of cereal, then started up the stairs to the attic. A couple of days ago she'd asked Lexie about the attic.

"That place is a mess," Lexie said.

"I'm sure it is," Alix replied, "but I need to work on this. It's why I got the house for a year. Besides, if I wait until Jared returns we'll get wrapped up in designs and never even see the attic. So where are the documents about Valentina?"

As Lexie had told her to do, Alix left the door open "for the hall light," then pulled the string on the single bulb. Even though Alix hadn't been in the attic before, she'd figured it would



be full. But nothing could have prepared her for what she saw. It was a huge room that covered the whole house and whereas the downstairs had been continuously repaired and remodeled, the attic looked to be just as it was when Captain Caleb built the house. There were big, exposed beams overhead and a wide plank floor. However, Alix was glad to see that every inch was dry and even fairly clean. It was obvious that Jo Costakes's Domestic Goddess team who came in every other week to clean the downstairs, also sometimes took care of the attic.

Not that they could do much besides dust. In front was a room-sized space with a little couch, a rickety old coffee table, and an old wing chair. Behind them was a wall of boxes, trunks, baskets, furniture, and suitcases that were stacked almost to the ceiling. Narrow walkways wove between the objects and she saw a couple more bulbs in the ceiling, but all in all, the idea of trying to find anything in this huge expanse made her want to turn and run.

She opened a door on an enormous armoire and saw old clothes that looked to be from the twenties and thirties. In front was a fur collared wool coat, some old cotton dresses, and a sparkly gown that looked interesting. In case they had a costume party she knew where to go.

So where was the info on Valentina? she wondered. Lexie had said it was all together, "to the right of the door." But when she looked at the door she'd entered through, she saw only a stack of tables.

"Maybe she meant to go down the aisle on the right," she said aloud and started edging her way through it. About halfway down was another light and she pulled the string. It was such a weak bulb that it seemed to make the place darker. Any documents she found would have to be taken downstairs as it was much too dark to read.

Before her was a six foot tall stack of old storage boxes, the kind used to put files in. On the end of each one, written in large letters, was VALENTINA. Alix stepped back as far as she

could, which was about eight inches, to look at them. There had to be twenty boxes, all of them looking to be packed full. She climbed on the top of an old steamer trunk on the other side of the aisle and stretched across to pull off the top box. She got it in her hands, but then lost her balance. For a few minutes she thought she was going to fall. With her feet slipping, she held onto the box and made a leap to the floor. She landed on her seat on the hard surface. As she hit, the overhead bulb went out.

“Perfect!” she said. Just yesterday she’d seen that the supply of light bulbs was empty and that they needed new ones. Grumbling, she picked up the box and started toward the front.

“Hello?”

She heard a male voice that seemed familiar. At first she thought it was Jared returning early, but the voice was deeper and sounded a bit older.

At the end of the aisle she stopped in her tracks, for standing there was a modern version of Captain Caleb. He had on jeans and a denim shirt and heavy brown lace-up boots, but other than that, he was the captain.

“I think I’ve startled you.” His voice was very much like Jared’s. “I better leave and return after we’ve been properly introduced.” He turned toward the door.

“No!” she said. “You don’t need to leave. You look too much like Captain Caleb to be anything but a Kingsley.”

“Captain Caleb?” he said and even in the dull gray light she could see his eyes begin to twinkle. “I couldn’t possibly be that handsome. No man today could be.”

Smiling, Alix put the box she was holding down on the floor. “I have to agree, but perhaps you do have less seriousness in your eyes than he does.”

“Ah, but then, when that portrait was painted the captain had a lot on his mind. He was

trying to win Valentina.”

“From what I heard, he didn’t have any trouble with that.” As Alix plopped down on the little sofa and a spattering of dust went up around her, she gave a sigh. “Sorry,” she said as she looked up at him. “It’s just that I’m feeling a bit overwhelmed at all the data I’m supposed to go through.”

“Do you mind?” he asked, motioning to the chair across from her.

“Please.”

He took a seat in the big wing chair, the flanges casting his face in deep shadow. He really did look like the captain, she thought, but then maybe it was because his picture was what she saw every morning and evening. Whatever the reason, he seemed very familiar. “Who are you?” she asked.

“Jared didn’t tell you about me?”

“No, he didn’t,” she said. “But then he didn’t volunteer any information about his cousin Wes either.”

When the man laughed, Alix was almost sure it was the sound she’d heard as a child. “I think I’ve met you before, but you’re . . .” From the look of him he was a bit younger than Jared, which meant that he wouldn’t have had that deep, adult laugh when she was so young.

“We did meet when you were a child,” he said, smiling. “But you’ve met so many of my family that perhaps you can’t place me. I’m called Caleb.”

“That seems appropriate,” she said.

He was smiling at her in a way that was making her relax. “I take it that the great cache of material isn’t making you want to dive in and explore?”

“No, it’s not.”

“I will tell you a secret,” he said. “I have read every word on those papers in the boxes.”

“Have you?”

“Oh yes. In fact, I am directly responsible for a great deal of the information that is in there. Would you like for me to tell you the true story of Valentina and Caleb? The one the rest of my family doesn’t know?”

Alix hesitated. Perhaps she should wait until Jared was back and Caleb could tell both of them. But she couldn’t resist. She nodded.

He looked around the attic. “I think that for this story of great and deep love, we need atmosphere. I have a . . . What do you call it?” He made a circle with his hands. “It plays music. Do you have a gramophone?”

She smiled at the image of the old fashioned machine. “No, but I have an excellent laptop and it will play a CD.”

He smiled at her as though she were the most intelligent of people. “I remember seeing a gown in a box down the first aisle. Its owner was rather tall, like you, and I believe the garment will fit you. Perhaps you’d like to put it on and while we talk I will teach you a dance from Valentina’s time.”

“Oh,” Alix said, her eyes wide. As a woman in a modern world that rarely bothered to dress up for anything, she started to protest. But then she glanced at the window. The rain was still coming down hard and she had nothing else really urgent to do, so why not dance with a handsome man? “Where is the dress?”

Caleb smiled at her with such warmth that Alix felt herself take a step toward him. Good grief! she thought as she stepped back. If the real Captain Caleb had this magnetism she could certainly understand why Valentina ended up pregnant before they were married. He seemed to understand Alix’s thoughts, but didn’t comment as he gave her directions to find the box containing the dress.

She found it easily but getting it out was difficult. She had to remove six other objects off the top of it, and drag it out. The box was the size of a suitcase and quite lightweight, as though it didn't contain much. She picked it up and took it out to the front.

Caleb was standing by the chair and smiling at her, and she wondered why she hadn't been introduced to him. Did he live nearby?

"That's it," he said.

It took Alix only moments to open the box. Inside was what looked to be a white cotton dress. Pulling it out, she held it up under the single bulb of light. It was beautiful: crisp, clean cotton, with a deep square neck, long sleeves, and a floor length skirt done in folded over layers. It was, without a doubt, a wedding dress. She looked at Caleb. "1950's?"

"I believe so." He paused. "Would you like to try it on?"

She looked at the long white dress she held. There was really no reason for her to put it on, but then lately her mind had been so full of weddings and all that goes with them that she felt drawn to the gown. And then, of course, there was Jared. Hadn't she said that her wedding dress would be cotton? "I think I'll go downstairs to put it on."

"Then you'll come back to me?" he asked in a way that made her blink. He sounded as though he'd be devastated if she said no.

"Yes, I will," she said as she ran down the stairs to her bedroom.

Once in the room, she couldn't help going to Captain Caleb's portrait. The man upstairs really did look like his ancestor! "He's not *quite* as handsome as you are," she said. "But he's a close second."

In the next minute she'd stripped off her clothes. On impulse she rummaged in a drawer and removed her best white lacy underwear and put it on. She started toward the gown but instead she went to the bathroom and put on makeup. She was glad her long hair was

clean. She pulled off the tie for her pony tail and managed to sweep it up into a soft chignon. It wasn't a professional job but it was more fitting for the elegance of the dress.

At last she returned to the bedroom, wearing just her underwear, and picked up the dress. As she stepped into it, she had to struggle with the tight, narrow sleeves, then work to fasten the buttons up the back. Only when she had it on did she look in the mirror. If the dress had been made for her it couldn't have fit better. The neckline was low, showing rather a lot of cleavage. She made a half hearted attempt to pull it up, but then smiled. Her breasts had never looked better!

As she went up the steep, narrow attic stairs wearing a wedding dress and carrying a laptop, she was hesitant, but the moment she saw Caleb she lost her reluctance. He was wearing a tuxedo, one of those utterly perfect kind like out of a Cary Grant movie. It fit him exactly, curving in at the waist and showing his long, heavily muscled legs. She didn't know what gym he used but it should be given an award.

For a long moment he stood there staring at her and the look he gave Alix made her stand up straighter.

"Goddesses must envy you," he whispered.

His words were flattering and of course untrue, but they made all Alix's doubts leave her.

She set her laptop on a side table and inserted the CD that was on the table. The first tune was a combination of Scottish and Irish reels, with a lot of violins. It was fast paced but also lyrical.

Smiling, he held out his hand to her.

When she took it, an instant warmth went through her. His touch wasn't electrical or sexual as Jared's was, but calming — and invigorating at the same time. All her concerns about the work she needed to do fell away. All that seemed important was the present moment

and what this man had to tell her.

Stepping back from her, he bowed. Even though Alix didn't know the dance he was leading her into, she did seem to know. She curtseyed, then turned and walked forward four steps, with Caleb beside her. She stopped, turned back toward him, and lifted her hands to touch his.

"How do I know what to do?" she asked.

"Past memory," he said as he turned her around. "But now is not the time for thought. Just feel, and I will tell you the story. Valentina was extraordinarily beautiful. She had red hair and green-eyes, and a waist the width of a man's hand."

They were moving to the music toward the far wall. "She sounds like she looks like my mother."

"She is exactly like her."

"Then she must have caused a stir among the young men on the island."

"Oh yes," Caleb said in a voice that sounded faraway. "She turned them upside down. They all made complete and utter fools of themselves when she was near."

"Did she and Captain Caleb fall in love immediately?"

"He did. He didn't know it then, but he did. As for Valentina, at first she despised him."

"Isn't that always true of Great Romance?" Alix turned around full circle, then came back to face him.

"Perhaps to read about, but not to experience. It all came about because the captain returned from his long voyage earlier than expected."

"Just as Izzy and I did," Alix said. "And if we hadn't, I wouldn't have met Jared."

"Are you referring to your sister?"

Alix laughed. "I can believe Izzy was my sister in another life. I guess that next you'll be

telling me that an alternate me grew up to marry Jared.”

“And to make buildings together,” Caleb said. “A lot of the houses on this island are yours. You drew them; he built them.”

Alix couldn't help putting her head back and laughing. “What a marvelous prevaricator you are! You *must* meet my mother. With your plotting and her writing you'd be a perfect match.”

“We were,” he said.

“Yes, of course. You couldn't be anyone other than Captain Caleb. But how could Valentina ever despise *you*?” She couldn't help flirting with him. If there was ever a man made to flirt with, it was him. His eyes had a soft, bedroom quality to them, and combined with the beautiful dress, she was beginning to feel like the most desirable woman in the world. Long ago, Alix had found that with a mother like hers, she needed to be smart and talented and accomplished. When it came to pure sex appeal, no one could compete with Victoria. But right now this man was making Alix feel like she was a temptress.

“You see,” Caleb said, “the captain didn't know who Valentina was. She'd arrived on the island after he left on a voyage to China, so he hadn't seen her.” He turned about, then came back to Alix with a look that said he'd been away from her much too long.

Her face was close to his. He was clean shaven and she could smell his skin. It was salty and oh so very male.

A new tune began playing, this one softer and slower, and he held out his arms to her. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to slip into them. He led her into a waltz that was so light she wasn't sure her feet were touching the ground. Around and around they went, higher and higher.

Alix put her head back and closed her eyes. When she opened them she was glancing



*down* at the window, *down* at the stacks of artifacts. She and this man seemed to be high, high up, above the floor. As an architect, she knew that wasn't possible, that the ceiling was too low, but right now she didn't feel like a business person of any type. The beautiful white wedding gown swirled around her body, nearly surrounding the two of them in a soft mist. All she could feel was the womanliness of herself. All the enticing, alluring touches that made a woman what she is were coming out of her, radiating.

And this man, this beautiful man, was making it all happen.

Alix let all the feelings and sounds and smells seep into her body. The music grew louder, as though there was an orchestra around them. She smelled food and perfume. She could hear laughter and people talking. And when she looked down there was light: golden, glowing and warm. It was candlelight, flickering and radiant, and it was illuminating the flushed and rosy skin of a hundred people.

Alix seemed able to see beneath the floor. The entire downstairs was awash with light and laughter. "I can see it," she whispered and clasped Caleb's hand tighter.

"Who do you see?" he whispered back.

"My mother! The men are around her. She looks like she does in the mornings before she puts on makeup."

Caleb smiled. "Who else is there?"

"Many people. That man looks like my father."

"He is John Kendricks, a widower and the schoolmaster, but he also built the house while the captain was away," Caleb said. "Do you see yourself? Perhaps you're John's daughter. There on the window seat."

"Oh yes. The girl with the sketchpad. What is she drawing?"

"A house, of course," Caleb said. "Do you see Parthenia? She would be with your

father. They were deeply in love.”

“There!” Alix said. “Is the pretty woman beside him Parthenia? She seems very quiet.”

“She is.”

“Who is the gray-haired man? He looks like Dr. Huntley.”

“That’s the captain’s father,” Caleb said softly. “He would do *anything* for his son.”

Alix closed her eyes again and the music seemed to grow louder. Opening her eyes, she smiled at him. “Yesterday I was doing calculations of cement that’s needed for a job. Now I’m wearing a beautiful gown and dancing on air. Literally. By the way, where is the captain?” She was breathless from the dance.

“Coming home from his long voyage; he felt like he’d been at sea forever. He’s tired and hungry and he wants to see his new house.”

“So the luscious Captain Caleb was home at last,” she said.

Smiling, Caleb kissed Alix’s cheek. “Luscious. I like that word. But that night he was anything but. As he stepped onto Kingsley Lane he saw that his new house was lit up — and he didn’t like it at all. You see, John and Parthenia were getting married that night and half the island had been invited. But the captain didn’t know that then. All he saw was that there were a thousand candles, and many carriages and horses were outside. The manure was ankle deep.”

“What a romantic image,” Alix said, laughing. “Did the captain run the people out?”

“No, he was never like that. But he didn’t want to see anyone so he sneaked inside and went up the stairs to his bedroom. But his bed was covered with ladies’s cloaks, so he went up to the attic.”

“To hide away and sulk.”

“No!” Caleb said, sounding affronted, but then he swirled Alix even harder and gave a

little smile. “Perhaps he was, but for whatever reason, he was there when Valentina came upstairs.”

“With some young man?” Alix asked.

“No. She wanted to remove her shoes and be quiet for a moment. She had been danced off her feet.”

“Was it a romantic meeting?”

“Hardly,” Caleb said, a smile in his voice. “You see, he didn’t know her and from the look of her, he believed that it was quite possible that she was a lady of the evening.”

“It sounds me that Captain Caleb had just returned from exotic ports, took one look at the gorgeous, voluptuous Valentina and made a serious pass at her. I don’t think his mind was involved in that meeting.”

“Perhaps,” he said, then grinned. “I think the schoolmaster’s daughter is too clever. You’ll never get a husband that way.”

Alix smiled back at him. “My mother is also very clever and *she* got Captain Caleb.”

His laugh rang out and indeed, it was the one Alix remembered so well, so deep, coming from way inside him, rumbling upward like rich, dark, sweet molasses. “I swear I have not laughed so well since you were last here. Now where was I in my story?”

“That John Kendricks’s daughter was too smart for any man to handle.”

Caleb laughed. “It is true that on that first night Captain Caleb did try to persuade the beautiful Valentina to kiss him. But that’s all there was.”

“How much rum was involved?” Alix asked.

“Measured in gallons or flagons?”

Alix laughed. “Did Valentina slap him?”

“No,” Caleb said. “She . . .”

Alix looked at him. “Are you blushing?”

“That is a female condition,” he said. “Men do not blush.”

“What did Valentina do to the captain? Who, by the way, might have been a bit tipsy.”

“She played a bit of a trick on him. You see, she pretended to invite him to make love to her.”

“What does that mean?”

Caleb kept dancing, holding onto Alix, and took his time in answering. “She got him to remove all his clothing.”

“You mean he was naked and she wasn’t?”

“Yes.” Caleb gave a sheepish grin. “Once the captain had removed everything, Valentina took his clothing and left the attic. She locked the attic door rather securely behind her.”

“Oh?” Alix began to laugh at what she was visualizing. “If the house was new there probably wasn’t much up here, was there?”

“There was only a half empty jug of rum.” Caleb’s look seemed to be a combination of remorse and embarrassment. “And it was a cold night.”

Alix couldn’t repress her laughter. “How did he get out of this room?”

“The next morning Kendricks heard . . . well, some fairly strong words coming through the floorboards. The household was very difficult to raise after the night’s revelry.”

“Not to mention that it was the schoolmaster’s wedding night. I don’t mean to laugh at the captain, but he really did deserve what he got.”

“He did,” Caleb said. “Although he didn’t think so at the time. When he was finally released from the attic he put on his most impressive uniform and went to Valentina’s washhouse, where she was stirring her big pots of soap. He demanded an apology from her.”

“Did she give it to him?”

“She told him to make himself useful and grab a paddle and stir.”

“Not the way a ship’s captain was used to being treated?”

“No,” Caleb said, smiling. “Not at all how he was used to being treated.”