

MY CAPTAIN JACK



DIANE DREW

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This book is dedicated to Marilyn Olson. Mom,
thanks for your encouragement,
but most of all,
thanks for introducing me to romance.

Also I'd like to give a special thanks to the writers
at Love on the River:
Tonia, Rose, Karen, Lynn, Tammy,
George, Denise, Donna and Tam.



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Chapter 1



“Hello, anyone here?” Rafe Fortier called through the back entry of the red painted schoolhouse.

No response.

He tested the knob and pushed the door open, revealing the cramped living quarters of the resident teacher. A grading book lay open on an oak secretary. Two stacks of lessons lay on each side of the desk. One pile had comments written in a careful script, the other pile had not been evaluated. The last entries in the book were dated May 10, 1875—a week ago.

On the other side of the room, an unhemmed ivory silk gown hung over the foot of the cot. A child’s dress of pale blue muslin complete with bows and accented with an ivory rosette hung beside it. Obviously, his nephew’s intended still resided in the tiny room. As Rafe understood it, the new schoolmarm was expected any day; however, nothing had been packed and Nissa Gedhaul was

nowhere to be found.

What demon had coaxed him into agreeing to take in Chase's fiancée along with the five-year-old child she claimed was her sister? Chase had planned to collect them, but an unforeseen problem delayed his departure from New Orleans. He commandeered Rafe into housing the pair until he could travel north, meeting them in LaCrosse. So where were this woman and child? Rafe had expected them to be prepared to leave.

Flexing his jaw in annoyance, Rafe recalled how his nephew had extolled the schoolmarm's many virtues. He didn't doubt she was a beauty, but Chase never saw beyond the exterior charms of any woman. Rafe's lip curled down in aggravation—women always manipulated men to their own ends. He had learned that lesson five years ago at the age of twenty-four, when he lost his eye in a riverboat explosion. Women vanished from his life, even the one who had sworn her eternal love for him.

Rafe stepped outside, gazing across the sparkling water of the Mississippi River. He ignored the pair of adolescent boys swaggering up to the base of the schoolhouse steps. With their hands balled into fists, they tilted their chins defiantly.

"Who are you?" the taller of the two asked.

"Rafe Fortier. Who are you?"

"What were you doing in there?" The towhead's prominent Adam's apple bobbed up and down.

"I'm looking for Miss Gedhaul," Rafe said. "Do you know where I'll find her?"

The boys looked at each other quizzically, then turned their gazes back to him. "What do you want with her?"

"She's supposed to marry my nephew," he answered, quite put out that these young whelps didn't seem the least bit intimidated by him. "I'm here to take her to LaCrosse for her wedding."

The two boys huddled together, whispering behind their hands. Finally, the fair-haired one pointed up the hill. "She's been with Doc since the accident."

"Accident?" Rafe asked. But the boys were already scrambling up the steep hillside. Grumbling, Rafe followed the pair through the brambles, catching up as they reached the dirt packed road.

"Miss Gedhaul was caught in a landslide, and now Doc Brown is taking care of her," the taller boy reported.

The boys crossed the road and stopped in front of a white, two-story dwelling built on the hillside. Budding pansies peeked over the window boxes, and a thorny rose bush climbed the porch trellis.

"She's in there with Doc," the towhead said. "Do you want us to get Katie?"

Rafe stood puzzled until he remembered Katie must be the five-year-old sister. He decided to postpone that vexing responsibility a while longer.

“We’ll collect the child when Miss Gedhaul is ready.”

The boys dashed down the road, stirring up a cloud of dust and hollering some silly nonsense about a Captain Jack. Rafe’s gaze followed them until they disappeared over the hillside. Then he turned his attention to the shingle hanging from a post.

“*Dr. Emil Brown.*” Struck by the familiarity of the name, Rafe hurried up the walk. He rapped his knuckles firmly against the wooden frame. A few moments later an ample, black-skinned woman answered his knock. She wiped her hands on a starched, white apron, her dark gaze coolly inspecting him.

“Does you needs to see a doctor?” she asked.

“No,” he replied. “I was told I could find Miss Gedhaul here.”

She motioned for him to come inside the paneled entry. “Doc’s a taking out her stitches. Who is you?”

“Rafe Fortier.” He bowed his head politely. “Miss Gedhaul is to marry my nephew, Chase. I’m here to collect her and her sister.”

“Don’ know nothin about that.” She shook her dark head, peering outside. “You jes wait right here. It looks like it’s going ter be a while afore you be talking to Doc Brown about taking Missy Nissa and Missy Katie wid you.”

“I’m in a bit of a hurry.” He endowed the

housekeeper with his best smile.

She gave no response save to answer someone's frantic knocking.

Rafe took advantage of the diversion. While a young man at the door tried to catch his breath, Rafe slipped up the stairwell. Inside the first room, young Doc Brown sat on a three-legged stool with a reflector strapped to his greying head. The doctor wasn't young by most men's standards, only to those who knew his elderly father who still ran a thriving practice in LaCrosse.

Doc held the chin of the young woman, tilting it this way and that as he examined her eyes. Embarrassed by his boldness, Rafe took a step back. He hesitated in the doorway fascinated by the glistening wave of honey-colored curls that tumbled down the back of the chair to dust the floor.

An excited young voice echoing up the stairwell interrupted the doctor's examination. He glanced toward the door.

"Rafe." Dr. Brown drew his brows together. "What are you doing here? And how the devil did you get by Elsa?"

"He sneaked up there whilst I was answering the door." Elsa hollered from halfway down the stairs.

"It's all right," the doctor called down. "And if that's Ricardo, tell him I won't be long." He turned his attention back to Rafe. "I can't believe

my father asked you to stop by and check up on me, so what else could have brought you here?"

"Chase's intended, a Miss Nissa Gedhaul," Rafe answered.

The woman's head snapped up, her intense reaction tipping the chair. Rafe didn't have time to ponder her response. He rushed inside the room grabbing the chair before it toppled over. She clutched the doctor's shoulders as Rafe set the chair upright.

At Rafe's touch, her head swung around, pale hair swirling in a wide mantle around her shoulders and whipping Rafe's face. Their noses almost touched as Rafe tugged the long silky strands from his lips. Beautiful aqua eyes stared at him without cringing, holding him near long enough to examine her smooth, translucent skin.

With her hand pressed against the slender column of her throat, her full, pink lips formed an 'O'. Ivory skin brightened, dusting her cheek bones and rounded chin with a becoming splash of pink. She was quite lovely. Rafe's blood warmed a bit. If this was Chase's intended, Rafe understood why his nephew was captivated with the woman.

"Mr. Fortier," she said.

"Yes." Rafe stood.

Her trembling fingers clasped a heart-shaped locket dressing her throat. "I am so sorry. Being caught up in my own problems, I never thought to

contact you. I can't go to LaCrosse."

"Why not?" The words slipped out before he could control his tongue.

Pale hands reached out, Rafe clasped them and drew her upward. She stumbled clumsily, falling against him, her firm rounded breasts pressed briefly against his chest. Clutching his forearms, she steadied herself.

Once she released him, she stared over his shoulder. "I'm blind."

Emotions rolled through Rafe's chest too quickly to identify. Unable to deal with whatever played tag in his gut, he turned to Dr. Brown. "What's going on?"

The doctor waved Rafe's question aside and placed a hand on the girl's slim shoulder. "Nissa, the blindness is temporary."

"You've said that for a week." Nissa's shoulder dipped as she withdrew from the doctor's touch. "I apologize again for not contacting you, Mr. Fortier," she said over her shoulder. "I'm releasing Chase from the engagement. You can explain why to him."

"I can?"

"Just tell him." She bumped into Dr. Brown.

Doc grabbed her shoulders. "You need Chase. Katie needs him."

"Are you through telling me fairy tales?" She straightened her shoulders. "Is it finally time I faced the truth?"

“Nissa, I explained your blindness.”

“The lump is gone.” She touched her forehead. “I no longer have terrible headaches; that means the swelling inside my head is gone too, doesn’t it?” Nissa continued without waiting for an answer. “That means there is nothing pinching off the nerve which means you’ve been lying to me.”

“If you don’t believe me, perhaps you should see another doctor, a specialist,” Doc said in a weary voice. He motioned to Rafe to follow as he crossed to the door. “I’d be willing to bet everything I own you won’t need a doctor by the time you reach New Orleans, but in case you do, I’ll give Rafe a couple names to pass along to Chase.”

“There is no need to pass anything along to Chase.” Nissa folded slender arms across her waist.

“And what about Katie? She’s expecting to see you today,” the doctor said.

Her eyes closed tightly. “I know.”

“So you’ll go with Mr. Fortier?” he finagled.

With a hard swallow, she nodded. “If he’ll be so kind as to take me to Katie.”

“Of course,” Rafe agreed.

The doctor silently motioned Rafe down the hall. “I have something I want Rafe to take to my father. Then we’ll be back for you.”

As the footsteps receded, Nissa closed her eyes. The rich aroma of tobacco mingled with licorice that Mr. Fortier brought into the room lingered in

his absence. She wanted to think about anything else but the fact she was blind. This wasn't a nightmare she would wake from. There would be no more hiding behind the illusion she could just open her eyes and her vision would be normal.

A year of practicing emotional camouflage after her father's fatal hunting accident helped keep the hysteria from surfacing. Though her throat ached with trepidation, there were no tears.

She pretended to be the perfect lady for her students and a proper example for her sister. Not even Chase knew her true self. He only wanted a graceful, attractive woman to call his wife.

Nissa drifted to the rear of the room until she could feel the sun's heat beneath her feet. She reached out feeling for the open window. Lacy ruffled curtains brushed her fingertips. A warm spring breeze lifted children's voices to her ears.

"She'll come out with him."

"He isn't Captain Jack."

"Bet he is."

"Jake, you always lie."

Turning her back to the window, Nissa ignored the nonsense. She grasped her hair and separated the thick mass into three equal sections to plait it.

Perhaps she had been a bit hasty in releasing Chase from the engagement. *No*, she shook her head. She couldn't force him to marry her.

She wanted to believe Chase would seek her out regardless of her impairment, but he seemed

so immature. Still she wanted him to come to her, to sweep her and Katie away. A sting behind her eyelids betrayed her reflections. Closing her eyes, she struggled to stomp out the silly dream, along with the desire to feel some inspiring emotion that would tell her she was in love with Chase Fortier.

Nissa brushed away the stray tears and proceeded to wrap the rope-like braid around her head. With one hand she groped for the dressing table, shuffling cautiously around the room. When she finally located it without bruising a shin, she searched it's surface until she touched a small porcelain container holding her hairpins. Then she fastened her hair.

The sound of approaching footfalls brought her head around. She forced a bright smile for Dr. Brown and Chase's uncle.

"How do I look?" She turned toward the doorway.

"Beautiful." Mr. Fortier's large warm hands closed over hers. "Now if Doc can direct me to your sister, we can collect your belongings and be on our way."

"Elsa will be glad to pack your things." Dr. Brown's cool stubby fingers guided her hand to the crook of Mr. Fortier's elbow. "Rafe, just walk normally. She can follow you quite easily."

As Mr. Fortier moved out of the room, Nissa quickly adjusted to his longer strides. Outside the door, Dr. Brown put her hand on the railing.

“Count the steps for her if she isn’t familiar with them. Ours have eighteen,” the doctor said, undoubtedly more for Mr. Fortier’s benefit than her own.

Nissa turned, her foot feeling for the first drop off. Once she started the decline, the stairs were easy to maneuver provided she kept count. She could hear Dr. Brown move ahead of her. Chase’s uncle gripped her elbow from behind. As she counted the eighteenth step, Mr. Fortier took her hand from the railing and tucked it back around his arm.

“It would be easier for you to take my carriage,” Dr. Brown offered.

Nissa listened as he gave Mr. Fortier directions to the Donatelli’s home where Katie had been staying. The front door squeaked open. The moment she stepped on the porch, warm sunshine showered her face.

“There are about a half dozen children at the end of the walk,” Mr. Fortier whispered. “They’re staring at us.”

“Thank you.” She waved to the children, assuming they had come to see her off.

“They must think I’m Chase,” he speculated quietly.

“Do you look like Chase?” Nissa asked.

“No.”

“Chase has been in the schoolyard several times. My pupils know him quite well.”

Mr. Fortier placed her hand on the wrought iron railing leading down the stairs. “Three steps.” His voice carried away from her as if he returned the children’s stares.

“You haven’t been around children much, have you?”

“No,” he said. “They run in the other direction when they see me.”

“Perhaps you should try smiling instead of scowling at them,” she said, cautiously descending the unfamiliar steps.

“I don’t scowl at children.” He sounded put out by her implication.

“Chase said you scowl most of the time and not to let it bother me.” Nissa voice dropped as she realized what she was saying. An apology formed on her tongue, but the doctor’s choked laughter cut off her words.

“What do you find so damn funny?” Mr. Fortier asked indignantly.

Nissa felt herself blush at the profanity as well as the anger she had roused in Chase’s uncle. She wanted to turn back and hide in the second story room which had served as her sanctuary.

“Listen to Chase, Nissa.” The doctor patted her hand, humor riding his voice. “Rafe just acts like a grouchy old man. Don’t let his scowls bother you.”

“I don’t believe they will,” she said through gritted teeth, wondering what shade of red her

cheeks must be.

The doctor only laughed, tweaking her nose. “You will see again,” he said with pure confidence that sent her hopes rising. “And before long, I predict someone is going to make Rafe smile, but his grin will probably crack his face.” He called out for Jake and Roberto to help Elsa pack Nissa’s belongings at the schoolhouse and take the bags to the steamer.

Thanks to her loose tongue and the doctor’s misplaced humor, Nissa couldn’t bring herself to move. “Stop them.” She finally managed to speak. “I can’t go to LaCrosse with Mr. Fortier, not like this. If by some miracle my condition improves, I’ll go to LaCrosse on my own.” There, she got that much out. She took a deep breath and turned toward Chase’s uncle. “But I do need to go to Katie. I would be most grateful if you could just drop me at the Donatelli’s.”

After a long silence, a finger gently traced the tender scar above her brow. “This won’t make a difference,” Mr. Fortier assured her.

“Perhaps, but I’d rather not find out.”

“I won’t take you to Katie unless I have your word that you will accompany me to LaCrosse.”

“If Chase still wants me to be his wife when he finds out I’m blind, he can find me. I’m not likely to go very far.”

“If Chase found out I left you helpless—”

“I am not helpless.” Nissa jerked away,

stumbling back a couple of steps. His large hands caught her wrists and tugged her upright. A split second later, she tipped against his chest. Several gasps reminded her they still had an audience. “I can’t take Katie to LaCrosse, not when I’m like this.” Nissa turned away from the tempting aroma of tobacco and licorice. She felt herself gently pushed backward until she was once again standing on her own. “She would probably get lost or worse.”

“Katie will be just fine. I swear, I won’t scowl at her.”

Nissa gave him a derisive snort. “She’d just scowl back.”

A large, warm hand wrapped her fingers around the sturdy fabric on his arm. “If I left you behind, Chase would be quite devastated. He would never believe you begged off without telling him yourself. Would you send me to LaCrosse to explain to my heartbroken nephew that the joy of his life, his reason for living simply doesn’t trust him? I can’t imagine a little thing like eyesight should make a difference to true love.”

Nissa heard bitterness underlying the teasing but had to agree. If Chase loved her as much as he claimed, her blindness should not make the least bit of difference. “How bad is the scar?”

“In a few months you’ll never notice it.”

“I don’t notice it now,” she retorted, not caring

if she did sound vain. Nissa had known it was her face that attracted Chase, pulling him in like a big catfish. But she had hoped Chase would one day see beyond her features to her inner being. Now, she was blind, and her face, the only asset he may have ever noticed, damaged. She wanted to take the coward's way out and not face the possibility that Chase's love was just a boyish infatuation. Unfortunately, even if she could manage without Chase, Dr. Brown was right. She had a five-year-old sister to raise. Katie needed him.

"How long before Chase will return to LaCrosse?" she asked guardedly.

"A few weeks."

"Do you know how many things I could break around your home in a *few* weeks? Vases, plates, lamps?"

"There isn't much to break."

"I doubt if Mrs. Fortier will feel the same way."

"Mrs. Fortier?" he said as if surprised. "There hasn't been a Mrs. Fortier in twenty years."

"Oh." Nissa pressed her hand against her throat. Another apology formed and burst to her tongue. "I'm truly—"

The clip clop of hooves interrupted her.

"Please take me to Katie." She waited for Mr. Fortier to guide her inside the buggy. When he didn't, she attempted to get in herself. Missing the step, she fell forward, bumping her head against

the wooden frame.

“Are you ready to go to LaCrosse?” A steady hand grasped her elbow.

Sighing, Nissa wondered how she would ever care for Katie when she couldn’t climb into a carriage without assistance. She hoped Mr. Fortier was correct in his assessment of Chase’s devotion. Doubts swelled her heart, but she couldn’t disappoint Katie. Her sister had suffered too many losses in her young life. She nodded. “I suppose I do owe it to Chase to trust him that much.”

Next she knew, large hands spanned her waist, effortlessly lifting her into the buggy. Now that Mr. Fortier had bullied her into submission, his guiding hand continued to support her as she seated herself.

Turning her face toward the sun’s heat, she heard Mr. Fortier’s footsteps move behind the buggy. The warm leather seat dipped when he took the space beside her. A moment later the carriage moved forward, the sudden motion throwing her back. The pressure of a muscular arm dropped around her shoulders and drew her into a warm, supporting embrace.

“Are you all right.”

“Yes, thank you.” Nissa pulled herself upright and resituated herself.

With the wind blowing in her face, her exuberance of life reawakened. Closing her eyes, images of the doctor’s white house with black shutters on

her left and the red and white schoolhouse below came to her. She could picture the sparkling water of the Mississippi River as it flowed steadily south. Across the lazy river, craggy hills thrust skyward.

Nissa found herself bracing her feet as the front of the carriage tilted downward. She visualized the steep decline lined with whitewashed houses, each yard with its profusion of yellow daffodils and brightly colored tulips. The fragrance of lilacs, apple blossoms and spruce trees mingled in the air. With her eyes closed, she could see the small village of Genoa nestled in the valley of towering hills overlooking the mighty river. Yet the moment she opened her eyes, blackness closed in.

Her shoulders tensed. She forced herself to believe she would see again. As long as Katie depended on her, she could survive anything.

“What has Chase told you about me?” Nissa asked.

“That you were the most beautiful woman on the Mississippi.”

She swallowed a strident retort. “He obviously told you that I have a younger sister.”

“Yes. But he fell in love with you the moment he saw you.”

Exasperated, she folded her arms. “That’s not love.”

The seat creaked. “Perhaps not. But it’s close.”

Close, Nissa bit her tongue to contain her outrage. “Since we agree that in all likelihood he doesn’t love me, why do you insist on taking me to LaCrosse?”

“I never said I doubted he loves you.” Mr. Fortier said in a much gentler tone. “I know my nephew. Your blindness won’t change his feelings.”

She knew him, too. And she wished she believed Chase’s emotions ran deeper than a simple infatuation. “I believe you’re suffering from delusions.”

The buggy slowed. An unexpected turn pulled her to the right, landing her shoulder to shoulder with Chase’s uncle as the carriage stopped. Running steps and breathless voices told her that a pack of children had raced behind the buggy. Mrs. Donatelli’s lightly accented voice called for Katie. Mr. Fortier’s weight shifted as if he intended to exit the carriage but with Katie’s jubilant squeal, his movements stilled.

Happiness rose in Nissa’s heart. A moment later, the carriage rocked and tiny arms slithered around Nissa’s neck. Katie hugged away all Nissa’s doubts about leaving Genoa and marrying Chase. Closing her eyes, Nissa held the child tightly and recalled each adorable line of Katie’s cherub face. Her sister was the very reason she had agreed to marry Chase. The precious bundle on her lap needed a firm guiding hand.

“Are you all better now?” Katie held Nissa

around her neck.

Nissa squeezed her eyes shut, embracing Katie in the same manner. She offered silent prayer—to be able to see the child in her arms. Her eyes opened to blackness. Unwanted tears rushed in and stung her eyes.

“No, Katie.” Nissa choked. She searched her sister’s tiny face with her hands. “I can’t see you.”

“Really?” Katie leaned back.

Fascinated by their interplay, Rafe watched as Nissa’s hands ran down the child’s pale braids. She curled the ends around her fingers, then let them slip free. He sat back noting the suspicious tilt of the child’s head. Soon a little pink tongue poked out of her heart-shaped mouth. Sea-blue eyes danced as the tongue wiggled back and forth. She scrunched her small face.

“That’s all right. I’ll take care of you,” the child said brightly.

Tears spilled from the corners of Nissa’s eyes. Rafe removed his handkerchief, reaching over to offer it to her, but the child took it.

“Do they hurt?” She dabbed the tears from her sister’s face.

“No.” Nissa smiled. “I just can’t see.”

Katie turned to him. Rafe sat perfectly still and waited for her to back away.

“Are you Captain Jack?”

Nissa choked.

“Who’s Captain Jack?” Rafe asked, having

heard the name twice since he had arrived in Genoa.

“Katie.” Nissa tried to interrupt.

“Nissa said you were Captain Jack.”

Rafe laughed. Half of what the child said made no sense. “I’m Chase’s uncle. And I don’t know this Captain Jack.”

“Are you a pirate?” She leaned toward him.

“Katie! Of course he’s not!” Nissa’s face turned brighter red. “Behave yourself.”

“That’s quite all right.” Rafe’s fascination grew. “I’ve come to take you and your sister to LaCrosse, so go collect your belongings.”

The child hopped off, giving the buggy a lively bounce. Without a backward glance, Katie raced up the path to the front door, while he and Nissa sat in the buggy.

“You’ll have us on your hands for weeks,” Nissa whispered, leaning so close the mint lingering on her breath teased his nostrils. “That was an example of her best behavior. You don’t know what it’s like to have a five-year-old underfoot all the time.”

He laughed. “Do you think that little scrap of a girl is going to make me turn tail and leave you behind?”

“You don’t know what you’re asking for. Ask Mrs. Donatelli.”

“I hardly knew she was here.” A plump woman with peppered hair patted Nissa’s dimpled

hand with her work roughened one. “You know we adore having her visit. Oh, I almost forgot. Mrs. Gallo brought a kitten by yesterday to cheer her. I said Katie could keep it here until it was time to go.”

“Perhaps she’ll forget it.” Nissa pressed her fingers to her lips. “I think it would be best if you would just send the cat back to the Gallos.”

Rafe sighed in relief until he noticed that Katie stood within hearing distance holding a little yellow tabby beneath her chin. Rafe felt a tug of pity as Katie elbowed the girl beside her and handed over the animal. Then Katie opened her bag and motioned to the girl who promptly put the kitten inside. Rafe smothered the laughter tugging at his innards.

Katie started to climb into the buggy beside Nissa then stopped, looking up at him in contemplation. She gave a quick grin and rushed behind the buggy, appearing on his side with an engaging smile. The little sprite actually reached up to him.

Dubiously raising his brows, Rafe stepped down to retrieve the squirming bag holding the kitten. The most beguiling smile he had ever seen beamed up at him. A laugh rumbled somewhere deep in his chest as Rafe settled the bag behind the seat. He waited for the little sprite to climb in, but she reached up with tiny hands. The guileless movement momentarily sent the breath from him. He could have easily swung her into the seat

beside Nissa, but he held her on his hip and waited for her frightened retreat. Her arm wrapped around his neck instead.

“Do you like kittens?” she whispered in his ear.

“Do you like dogs?” He matched her hushed tone.

“Do you have a dog?”

Rafe nodded.

Her eyes widened. “Does he like kittens?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged doubtfully. “But I think you will find out.”

With a nod she pressed a small finger to his lips, casting her gaze behind him toward Nissa and whispered. “She can’t see him.”

Although Rafe tried not to smile, he quickly lost the battle. His chest quaked with startled emotions—emotions which had laid dormant for so long they were unidentifiable.

“Katie, my girl,” a pepper-haired man said between chuckles as he approached the buggy. “You’re going to have more hearts than your sister before you’re ten.” He leaned forward and kissed the child’s cheek.

Katie loosened her hold around Rafe’s neck. A pang of disappointment speared his middle as he watched her hug first Mr. Donatelli, then Mrs. Donatelli.

“You take care of Nissa,” the woman ordered Katie. “And you.” Mrs. Donatelli’s stern gaze

shifted to Rafe. "See that you take proper care of them both."

"I promise." Rafe set his young charge in the buggy and climbed in beside her.

Katie turned and perched on her knees, facing the children as Rafe drove away. From her backward position, the child waved to the crowd of well wishers until they were out of sight.

Before they reached the river, the small yellow tabby crawled out of Katie's bag and onto Rafe's shoulder, rubbing soft fur against his cheek. Katie captured the wandering kitten, then positioned herself on Rafe's lap. Startled, he adjusted to the trusting child leaning against his chest. It wasn't that he objected. It just felt strange.

It occurred to Rafe as he held the child stiffly on his lap, he would make a lousy father. This little sprite had taken hold of him in less than ten minutes, her little finger already tugging at his heart strings. He shrugged away the fact. Katie and the cat were only fleeting concerns; eventually they would be Chase's problem. Giving the child a hug, he decided to spoil this little one tirelessly until Chase returned. It would serve his nephew right to inherit the most spoiled child Rafe could create.

Rafe glanced at Nissa. The wind tugged a few pale strands from her braid, the stray hair dancing around her lovely face and the hollow of her throat. Rafe heaved a sigh; he could never taste

that intriguing spot along her collarbone or touch her the way her slender body inspired him to. She was Chase's fiancée, forbidden, and he best remember that. He had to admit, Chase found a choice target for his affections.

Nissa tried to relax with the sound of the horses' hooves beating against the dirt road. Though she should be thankful her sister was quiet now, Katie's silence generally bespoke mischief. A tremor of alarm crept up along Nissa's spine. Running her hand along the seat, she grazed Mr. Fortier's thigh. She snapped her hand back.

"Katie," she called.

"What?"

"Where are you?"

"Here."

"What are you doing?" Nissa patted the empty space beside her.

"Just sitting," Katie said.

"No need to worry about your sister." A large, warm hand covered hers. "Katie's just fine."

The buggy slowed and stopped with a bounce. A muffled thud told her Katie had hopped down.

"Is that your riverboat?" Katie's voice seemed far away.

"That's it," he said.

"Nissa," Katie squealed as a baby cried softly. "It's the one he was on before."

"Who?"

"Captain Jack."

Katie's racing footsteps clattered across the wooden landing.

"Miss Gedhaul's trunks are stowed," someone announced as weight shifted from the buggy. "Will there be anything else, sir?"

"Just this."

Mr. Fortier must have given him Katie's bag.

Nissa tipped her head to the side, studiously listening for her young charge. "Mr. Fortier, where is Katie? I can't hear her."

"She ran ahead and is already on the steamer. She'll be fine." He lifted her from the carriage.

Her fingers slipped around his arm. Following him across the dock, she tripped over an uneven board and stumbled against his side. Grasping his jacket, she steadied herself.

"I'm going to carry you."

"I'm quite capable. . . ."

She was lifted and cradled against his chest before she could finish, her arms locked tightly around his neck. A damp breeze kissed Nissa's cheeks and tickled her nose with the scent of cool water. She felt herself borne forward, boards squeaking in protest. A few moments later, he lowered her to the deck.

"Look at me," Katie's voice came from somewhere above.

Nissa's arms dropped to her sides. She staggered back a step. Rafe caught her wrist, staying her tumble.

“I’m going on top,” Katie announced.

“No,” Nissa gasped, clumsily pivoting toward Katie’s voice.

“She’ll be fine,” he claimed. “Just sit. I’ll go fetch her if you like.”

“I would be most grateful.”

Rafe hurried after the child, muttering under his breath. “Grateful.” Had he lost his senses? He was supposed to be piloting the boat, not chasing down a child! And where had his mind been when he agreed to drag along that dammed cat? The dog would probably have it for lunch, and Katie would likely scream for a week. He should have settled the business in New Orleans personally and sent Chase ahead to collect his own bride.

Rafe climbed the stairs, peering over the upper deck. Katie and the cat stood on the rounded guardrail. All thoughts melted away. Stifling the urge to bellow out, Rafe leap up the remaining stairs and rushed across the deck. In a matter of seconds Katie was safe in his arms.

“What do you think you were doing?” he berated, shaking her for scaring the breath out of him.

Huge tears sprouted and poured down Katie’s flushed cheeks.

“I’m sorry.” He hugged her close. “But, Katie, you can’t walk on the railing. It’s dangerous. You could get hurt. It’s a long way to fall if you should slip.”

“What about Mate?” She sniffled against his collar. “He could fall, too.”

“The cat?”

She nodded.

“He has claws to stop him from falling.” Rafe picked up the kitten. He squeezed a forepaw to show her the razor-like protrusions. “Those could dig into almost anything and hold him up. Even if he did fall, cats always land on their feet.”

“They do?” Katie’s eyes widened in amazement.

“Sure they do.” He dropped the cat on the deck beside him. “But little girls don’t. Little girls can get hurt, and hurt very badly.”

“I’m not a baby.” She scowled. “I’m almost six.”

Rafe smothered a laugh. “Nissa wants you to come down to the main deck.”

“She’ll make me sit still.” With a pronounced pout, Katie squirmed out of his arms to retrieve her kitten. “Then she’ll hear Mate. He meows too much.”

“The problems that arise when keeping a secret.” Rafe shook his head in mock sympathy as he escorted her down the stairs. “I would truly love to help, but I have to go to the pilothouse and navigate.”

Her brows drew together. “What’s navigate?”

“I have to keep the boat on course, steer it so we don’t hit any snags or floaters,” Rafe answered, inadvertently opening himself up to a

barrage of questions that didn't subside until they were standing next to Nissa.

Nissa's hands flexed around the arms of the white lacquered chair, her knuckles bloodless. Rafe's first urge was to kneel beside her and rub the circulation back. He shook the ridiculous notion from his head. Hell, if he wasn't careful, he'd be sniffing around his nephew's intended like a rangy old tom cat.

"Katie, sit beside me and behave." Nissa reached toward the child.

"I can't." Katie grinned at Rafe. "I have to navigate the boat."

Speechless, Rafe stared after the bold child as she hurried toward the pilothouse, a place she had no business being. He turned to Nissa to explain that Katie had to stay with her. The words stuck in his throat. After all, how could he tell this blind woman the child was more than he could manage?

Chapter 2



A rhythmic voice drifted back on the winds calling out river depth. Nissa swallowed her self-pity. Something more precious than her sight had been taken. Her independence had been snatched away along with her ability to care for Katie.

“What are you fretting about?” Mr. Fortier’s deep voice broke Nissa’s musings. The chair beside her creaked.

“Where’s Katie?”

“Steering the boat,” he said.

Nissa gasped.

He chuckled. “She’s doing quite well. I’m thinking about hiring her on as a pilot. Actually, I came down to see if you had changed your mind about joining us? The pilothouse is out of the wind.”

“The breeze feels good,” she declared. After being relegated to a sick room for a week during the unseasonably hot, humid weather, Nissa was thankful for the cool breeze. “I’m quite comfortable here. Is Katie behaving?”

“Doesn’t she always?”

Nissa dubiously raised her brows. “Not since she was able to walk.”

This time Mr. Fortier’s chuckle grew into a hearty laugh, a deep rumbling sound that warmed her being.

“There are times when I sincerely doubt she knows how to behave,” Nissa muttered. “I don’t want to put you to any more trouble. You don’t have to entertain Katie for me.”

“Actually, I’m enjoying myself.” A large finger, strong and gentle brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. The amusement in his voice quieted her fears. For a brief moment, she allowed tranquility to settle over her.

“Eek!” Katie’s shriek pierced the air.

Nissa leapt to her feet.

“I’m sure it’s nothing.” Firm pressure forced her back into the chair.

As soon as he left her, she rose and tried to follow, but his steps blended in with too many others. She angrily pounded the rail, waiting in frustration until she recognized the smooth, unhurried stride returning. “What happened?”

“She’s fine.” A thoughtful pause followed. “She saw a snake.”

Suspicious, Nissa raised her brows. “A snake?”

“It was rather large,” his voice sounded uncertain.

“What don’t you want me to know? She’s done

something, and you're protecting her."

Another long pause. Katie's steps scurried near. "It was a monster." She gasped for breath. "His green head moved up and down. And . . ." Her voice trailed off as Nissa folded her arms across her waist.

Nissa cocked her head alerted by the mewling cries of a tiny baby. The sound emanated from somewhere near Katie.

"You scream at snakes," Katie quickly defended the claim. "And boys like you."

The child's footsteps faded before Nissa could catch her breath again.

Mr. Fortier choked before he erupted into full ripe guffaws. "I can see I'm going to have to visit you and Chase in New Orleans often. Or perhaps you'd consider leaving Katie with me?" He choked on his laughter. "Tell me, is she always so entertaining?"

Most men including Chase considered Katie bratty. Nissa's brows drew together. "Did Chase ask you to keep her?"

"No," he said, suddenly serious. "Why would you believe he'd make such a request?"

Relief washed over her, and she wrapped her arms tightly about herself to ward away her fears. "Most suitors lose their sense of humor where Katie is concerned. This wouldn't be the first time a man proposed to me, then asked me to send Katie away."

“I assure you, I was joking.”

“I can’t lose her.” Nissa clasped her locket. Katie was all she had left of her family. The rest had either died or vanished. “I hope Chase understands.”

“I’m sure he does.” The familiar warm hand closed around hers. “Are you certain I can’t convince you to join Katie and me in the pilot-house?”

Nissa shook her head.

“Then I should go see we reach LaCrosse safely. If there is anything you need, just let one of the crew know. I won’t be far.”

“Thank you. I assure you I’m quite comfortable.” *Or as comfortable as possible.* She maintained a convincing smile.

Mr. Fortier’s footsteps headed off into the fresh spring breeze. Nissa settled back in the chair. A silly vision of the riverboat pilot she had dubbed Captain Jack crept into her mind. He stood tall and proud on the foredeck of a grand riverboat. His black eyepatch stood out prominently in the sunlight. He was dressed in black, the wind blowing his dark shoulder length hair away from his face except where the straps of his eyepatch held down the gleaming black strands.

The first time Nissa had seen him, she had been sixteen. From that moment, she fancied herself in love with the dashing pirate. As she grew older, she began to think his image was only a figment

of her imagination. Then last autumn with Katie at her side, she saw him again, tall and proud. Nissa had been foolish enough to point him out to her sister. Apparently to Katie, any man who wore an eyepatch was Captain Jack.

Nissa chided herself for getting caught up in her girlish dreams. Rafe Fortier was certainly not Captain Jack. He was not taking her away to some grand estate where they would live happily ever after. He was Chase's uncle. The man had to be at least forty years old, probably older. He had only agreed to house her and Katie until Chase returned.

Rafe Fortier didn't fit Chase's description. His warm voice and rich laughter hardly bespoke a bitter cynic. And just what was it that made her stomach buzz and flutter when he was near?

Her present sensations, however, had nothing to do with Chase's uncle. She was in immediate need of feminine companionship. Although she tried to concentrate on something else, the fullness in her bladder grew more uncomfortable. Where was Katie? She could easily escort her to the privy, but Nissa hadn't heard from her mischievous sister since the suspicious snake incident, and hours could have drifted by.

Nissa sniffed back the feeling of helplessness and pushed herself from her chair. Tentative steps took her part way across the deck until Mr. Fortier's familiar stride alerted her to his presence.

"Did you want something?" he asked.

Mercy sakes! He had been watching her. Heat flooded her cheeks. “I just wanted to stand for a while.”

“Would you join me while I stroll the deck?” A strong hand captured hers, placing it on his arm.

“I would like to stretch my legs a bit.” Then she wondered how she could bring up her delicate problem. The pressure was almost unbearable. “I do need to freshen up a bit.” She hoped he would understand.

Firm fingers covered hers holding them securely against his arm; she felt herself guided a few steps across the deck. Hinges squeaked, and her hand was placed on the doorjamb.

“There’s a basin to your right, and if you have need of the facility, it’s straight back. Would you like—?”

“I’ll be fine.” Nissa stepped inside without guidance.

The boat’s movements remained smooth. She groped for the basin then ahead of her toward the commode, smacking it with her knee. She swallowed a yelp of pain but didn’t pause. Her skirts rose in an instant.

Nissa never thought a simple act could feel so good. A relieved sigh purred from her throat until she recalled she hadn’t closed the door behind her. He had, hadn’t he? She hadn’t heard the door click.

“Sakes alive.” She tugged at her skirts. He

could be watching her this very moment. She moaned while her face burned with mortification.

Her head sank to her knees. The door had to be closed now. It just had to be. He certainly wouldn't watch her, would he?

The moment she finished, Nissa stood, her skirts dropping to the floor. She hobbled to the door. *Closed*. She leaned against it, heaving a deep sigh before bending down to adjust her unmentionables and shake out her skirt. The heat slowly left her face, and she flattened her hands against the front of her skirt and adjusted her bustle. All seemed fine.

Her hands moved over the tabletop, feeling for the basin and pitcher. After splashing her cheeks with cool water, Nissa tried to gain a measure of composure before dredging up the courage to step out into the passageway. When she finally did, Mr. Fortier took her hand and placed it back in the crook of his arm.

Nissa bit back the urge to ask if she looked presentable. Uncertainty stalked her. Elsa had been there for the past few days to help her dress and to tell her if something wasn't quite right. Here, there was no one to ask.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" he asked.

"Not at all," she murmured. The breeze ruffled her bustle and pulled at her hair. "I hope Katie hasn't been too trying."

"Katie's fine." A match hissed, then crackled

in the air, its sulphur stinging her nostrils.

“Steering the boat?” she asked as the faint aroma of his cigar tickled her nose.

“Or something.” He led her into the wind. The breezes grew stronger as they walked, the forceful gusts tugging at her hair. Small tufts escaped her braid and danced around her face. She reached to pull a few strands from her mouth, but Mr. Fortier brushed them away.

Nissa’s face turned to the warmth of his hand. Her lips brushed his fingers. A vibration rumbled in the pit of her stomach. Or was it the hand on her waist making her insides go a little crazy? It must be the boat or was it the silly privy incident? She had heard of people becoming sick when they traveled the sea. So why not the river? His hand tightened around her waist a split second before the boat bumped against something. A heated coil shot loose in her stomach, bouncing around like a broken spring while his warm hands held her against him. The time had gone by so swiftly, they must already be in LaCrosse.

The moment he released her, a baby’s cries took her attention. She turned toward the sound. “Do you hear that?”

Mr. Fortier placed her hand back on his arm. “What?”

“It sounds like a baby crying.” She tipped her head toward the disturbing noise.

“I don’t hear a baby. Do you, Uncle Rafe?”

Katie's voice startled her. Nissa clumsily pivoted, pressing a steadying hand against Mr. Fortier's chest.

"Uncle Rafe?" Nissa asked.

"I hope you don't mind." The deep voiced resonated apologetically. "It seemed appropriate."

"Of course, I don't mind." Nissa reached out to touch Katie. Mewling cries sounded again. Her hand paused in midair as she heard Katie scamper toward the sound.

"And if you don't mind," Mr. Fortier's voice drowned out the pitiful cries. "I would rather you call me Rafe instead of Mr. Fortier," he suggested. "After all, we're almost family."

"I'd like that." She turned, still distracted by the mewling whimpers. "If you'll call me, Nissa."

"My pleasure, Nissa. For now, you may as well rest." Rafe guided her back to the chair. "It will take the men a while to secure the boat."

Nissa sat. The squeaks and groans from the boat and crew faded in the background. She wondered again why she had felt so odd. Rafe was the common thread to her sensations. She felt strange around him even before the privy incident. It might simply be the fact that she couldn't see him and was forced to trust him? Or was it Katie's ludicrous fantasy that Rafe was Captain Jack?

"Are you ready?" Rafe's voice came from beside her.

Nissa reached out, accepting his guidance. Her heart pounded a beat faster. She was being silly. Rafe was Chase's uncle—period. With her hand tucked securely in the crook of his arm, she followed his lead.

“Step up,” he warned her.

Nissa easily crossed to the pier. Unfamiliar noises buzzed around her. She concentrated on recognizable sounds: a horse nickering, carriage wheels squeaking, hooves trotting against the dusty earth. A bell rang in the distance announcing the ninth hour. Men called to each other while a piano strummed a lively ditty in the distance. The nearby growl of an angry cur whipped a warning across Nissa's shoulders.

“Katie.” Nissa reached toward her sister's footfalls, feeling a need to protect the child. Her charge happily chirped ahead of her, just out of Nissa's reach.

A moment later Katie's giggles tickled Nissa's spirit. Solid hands closed around Nissa's waist as Rafe lifted her inside the carriage, guiding her to her seat beside Katie. Then he took the space beside her. Once she relaxed for the ride, Rafe released her. Faint cries mewled close by, but something clanged. Soon the noise faded under the clamor of the busy street.

Nissa chastened herself for being so concerned with someone else's baby when she should be concentrating on her precocious sister. Katie's

muffled yawn brought a smile to her lips and warmth to her heart. A few minutes later Rafe's soft chuckle startled her. The leather upholstery squeaked.

"It's all right," he whispered in a voice tinged with awe. "She's sleeping."

Nissa suppressed the desire to lean against his shoulder. "Thank you, Rafe."

"For what?"

"For bringing us to LaCrosse."

"I wasn't aware you wanted to be here."

"Sometimes I have to be pushed," she admitted. "You are certain about Chase? That my blindness won't make a difference? He'll still want us even if I don't recover?"

"How could he not want you?" A knuckle tenderly brushed her cheek. "I've never been more certain of anything in my life."

Nissa turned a smile in his direction and pressed her cheek against his hand.

"That's better."

His hypnotic voice could make Nissa believe anything. Her eyes fluttered shut; the tension left her body. An inner peace swept through her, leaving a feeling of security. Then something furry scampered across her foot. With a shriek, Nissa snatched her feet from the floorboard, hugging her knees to her chest.

"What was that?" she gasped.

"My doll fell." Katie plopped down on the

floorboard, apparently to retrieve it.

“Doll?” Nissa asked doubtfully as the carriage slowed. She reluctantly lowered her feet. “It felt like a rat.”

“Goose,” Katie teased, then breathed in awe. “It’s a castle, like in my storybooks. Uncle Rafe, is this your castle?”

“It’s just a big house,” Rafe said with a hint of sarcasm.

“With towers high in the sky,” Katie said enthusiastically. “Are we going to live here?”

“We’ll stay here with Rafe until Chase comes for us.”

Katie hopped down with a light thud. Her footsteps pattered away while Nissa slid across the seat, reaching out for Rafe. She found his shoulders as her foot searched for the carriage step. His large hands spanned her waist, solicitously guiding her near. Then he lifted her from the conveyance and lowered her beside him.

“Do you live here by yourself?” Katie called back.

“Me, Captain the dog and Mrs. Witson, my housekeeper.” He guided Nissa across a bumpy walkway. “Are you ready to meet Captain?”

“Will he like us?” Katie asked in a trembling voice.

“You’ve never been afraid of a dog.” Nissa touched a gentling hand to the side of the child’s head. Although the silky feel of fur brushed the

back of her fingertips for only a split second, Nissa suddenly recognized the cries she'd been hearing all day. "Give me the cat."

"How did you know?" Katie sniffed.

"And how long did the two of you think it would take for me to figure it out?" Nissa demanded. Her lips quivered. She had been hoodwinked by a five-year-old.

Katie placed the squirming, furry bundle in her outstretched hands. Nissa shifted the small kitten to her arm. It nuzzled up against her breast, settling against her with a contented purr. Warm emotions stirred her heart as she stroked the soft fur. She could feel the tiny head stretch and tilt to take full advantage of her fingers stroking its jaw. Soon the furry creature nestled its head in the crook of her arm.

"May I keep him?"

Nissa gave no response save turning her back to the conspiring pair.

"It just seemed like the easiest way to keep her occupied," Rafe mumbled in a contrite voice.

"I thought it was a rat," she snapped.

"May I keep him?" Katie tugged on her skirt.

"It's not for me to say." Nissa absently caressed the tiny bundle. "You'll have to ask Chase."

"Will you ask him? He'll say no to me."

"Then Rafe can keep the cat," Nissa responded without the least bit of sympathy.

"I'll live with Uncle Rafe. I don't like Chase

anymore.” Katie spat.

“Fine,” Nissa said through gritted teeth.

“If Katie and the cat are staying, perhaps I should take the cat and introduce him to the dog,” Rafe suggested.

His warm hand slipped beneath the tabby, brushing her bosom. Feeling the heat rise to her cheeks, Nissa turned away. Rafe’s free hand touched her waist. She slapped it away to avoid the irritating rush of blood that stole her common sense and made her trust him so readily.

Katie wrapped her arms around Nissa’s waist and pressed her face against her stomach. “I’m sorry. I had to bring Mate. We might never go back to Genoa. We never went back to the farm.”

Nissa sighed. Most of her anger fizzled with Katie’s reminder. She gently stroked the child’s cheeks, brushing aside the tears. “No point in crying. What’s done is done.”

“May I keep him?” Katie dug her chin into Nissa’s belly.

“It’s not for me to say.” She stroked the damp face.

Katie’s lip thrust out against Nissa’s palm. The child swung around, her braids whipping Nissa’s hip. She grabbed Nissa’s hand and tugged forward.

Nissa’s toe cracked painfully against a rocky surface.

“Sorry.” Rafe was at her side again. “There are five steps up to the porch.”

She took his arm and followed his directions. Three more paces, then they stopped. A latch clicked, and Nissa was guided inside.

A dog's muffled steps lumbered across the room.

"He's as big as me," Katie said jubilantly.

A monstrous furry head slipped under Nissa's hand, demanding her attention. Katie's stroking hands rubbed against Nissa's as she petted his head. Rafe momentarily brushed against her skirts. With a mournful bark, the dog nestled his big head against her leg.

"Coward," Rafe muttered.

Katie yawned.

"Come here, little one," Rafe said.

"Mr. Fortier." A startled feminine voice unnerved Nissa.

She stumbled and would have fallen if Rafe hadn't caught her waist. Footsteps creaked from somewhere overhead, descending as they approached. Katie's giggle rang down from Rafe's height. Nissa put her hand out, steadying herself against a table. As the woman's muffled steps neared, the scent of beeswax and lemon grew stronger.

"Mrs. Witson," Rafe introduced his housekeeper. "This is Chase's fiancée, Nissa Gedhaul, and her sister, Katie. Do you have their rooms ready?"

"Of course."

Nissa felt herself prodded toward the woman's voice. Her footfalls now muted by a thick carpet.

Then her hand was placed on a banister.

“Twenty-four steps and to your right.” Rafe’s breath teased her temple.

“Right here,” the woman said.

“I’ll put Katie in the room right across from you,” Rafe announced.

“No.” Nissa reached toward his voice. “Katie can stay with me. If she wakes during the night in a strange room, she’ll be frightened; I might not be able to find her.”

The housekeeper’s footsteps moved inside a room. Nissa followed with Rafe’s guidance.

“Mrs. Witson will help you with anything you need. I’ll go get your bags.”

“This little girl’s just plumb tuckered out,” the housekeeper spoke with a steady drone, making it easy to figure out where the bed stood. “I’ll just take off her shoes and stockings and slip this dress off. She should be fine for the night.”

In the dim light, Rafe’s gaze landed on the bags the driver had left outside his door. A warm spring breeze showered him with the fresh scent of the river, which blended with the delicate fragrance of his neighbor’s lilacs. The sweet smell reminded him of the woman in his guestroom. He shook his head, wondering why had ever agreed to Chase’s request. He didn’t have the time to entertain a blind woman and a child even if he had the inclination to do so.

With a sigh, Rafe picked up the bags and returned to the guest room. Nissa sat on the edge of the bed bent over Katie. She pressed a goodnight kiss to her sister's tiny forehead.

Rafe glanced away. How many times had he envisioned this spectacle? But in his vision the woman had dark mahogany hair and a voluptuous figure. Regardless, he ached to lean across the other side of the bed and kiss Katie goodnight before escorting Nissa to his room, to his bed.

He shook his head to clear away the delectable fantasy. Backing out of the guest room, Rafe bid his formal goodnight. Mrs. Witson could care for the pair.

Slowly, he crossed to his own room. Once inside, Rafe stared at the polished oak door, which led to the bath and privy. He didn't ponder the modern wonders to be found there. His mind passed through the adjoining door to the woman and child just beyond his reach. His steps dragged across the room, and he faced the mirror hanging over his chest of drawers.

Dark stubble shadowed his face. His black hair fell forward and lay unkempt against his left brow. Just below it, a scar cut at an angle beneath his patch. The white line had faded after six years, leaving a groove across his nose and eyebrow. Had the glass shard struck him an inch higher or lower, he would still have both eyes.

With his black hair and silk eye patch, he did

look like a pirate. As he recalled Katie's bold reaction to him, his lips curved into a smile. She immediately saw beyond his pirate's mask to the man beneath. He was an easy touch for a childish bit of fluff.

Captain's mournful bark caught his attention. The huge dog rubbed up against his leg, seeking protection from the playful kitten swatting his tail. The corners of Rafe's eyes crinkled in amusement.

"Frightened of a scrawny cat?" Rafe shook his head, scooping up the golden tabby. Captain hopped up on the bed, taking his usual place near the curved footboard. Razor sharp claws and teeth attacked Rafe's fingers. He nearly tossed the furry viper away, but as suddenly as it bit him, Mate's rough pink tongue licked the wound.

Rafe scratched the tiny animal under the chin. "How long's it been since you've eaten, little fella?" He carried the kitten downstairs to remedy the situation. Once in the kitchen he found a jar of pickled fish on the bottom shelf. Rafe pried the lid open, wrinkling his nose at the tang of fish and vinegar that assaulted his nose as he dug out a juicy piece. The tabby bit into it savagely, nearly taking Rafe's finger with it.

Rafe set the hungry kitten on Mrs. Witson's work table and reached inside the oak cupboard for a saucer. Placing it on the table, he emptied the remaining fish in it.

A shriek ricocheted across the room, dislodging

the jar from his fingers. Rafe grabbed blindly, recapturing the vessel before it shattered on the floor. No one needed to tell him his housekeeper glowered at him from the doorway.

“How long has she been blind?” she asked in a surprisingly calm voice, indignantly eyeing the cat.

“A week more or less.”

“Your nephew doesn’t know?”

“No.” Rafe pumped some water as he reached inside the cupboard for another saucer.

Mrs. Witson rushed in and found a chipped earthenware piece. She filled the bowl with water and placed it on the floor, then dumped the pickled fish in another old bowl and moved it to the floor. When the kitten jumped down, she turned her gaze back to Rafe.

“I don’t mind critters as you well know. But they aren’t eating off my table or out of your good china.”

Amused by her warning, Rafe gave her a mock salute before he started to leave her to tend the kitten.

“Your nephew is awfully young to be caring for a blind woman and a small child.”

“He loves her.” He shrugged. “Besides the doctor in Genoa said she will recover her sight before long.”

“That’s good.” She bobbed her head. “Is there anything special I should be doing for her?”

“Feed her carrots.”

Chapter 3



Nissa snuggled into the softness of the mattress, the fragrant aroma of baking bread infiltrating the mist of sleep. She blinked her eyes several times to clear her vision, but there was nothing to clear. Blackness cloaked her.

A breeze rushed over her from the wrong direction. Someone hummed outside her window, but she didn't recognize the voice. Clutching the bedpost, Nissa realized the frame was thicker than she remembered. Suddenly reality roused her like a cold splash. She was no longer in Genoa under Dr. Brown's supervision. Now, she and Katie resided with Rafe Fortier, Chase's uncle, a stranger. Sinking into the luxurious mattress, she reached to her side for Katie but discovered only a cool indentation on the pillow beside hers.

Nissa inched herself off the edge of the bed and planted her bare feet on a thick carpet.

"Good morning," a cheery, matronly voice drew her attention. "I thought you were going to

sleep all day.”

“What time is it?”

“Quarter of eleven.”

“Eleven!” Nissa shrieked. She had never slept so late. “Where’s Katie?”

“Pretending she’s a princess locked in a tower,” came the amused reply. “The dog and cat are helping her to escape.”

“As long as she doesn’t try to climb out the window.”

“I don’t think so,” Mrs. Witson exclaimed. “She’s on the third story.”

Nissa’s face drained of color. “Take me to her now.”

“She wouldn’t.” The woman grabbed her hand, towing Nissa behind her.

Though Nissa stumbled several times, she managed to keep up with the older woman. Then Katie’s padded footfalls rushed up the steps. Relief spiraled across every nerve in Nissa’s body.

“Katie.” Nissa breathed. The moment she felt the brush of Katie’s skirts, she hugged her to her stomach. Then her nose twitched. “And just what are you doing with licorice? You’ll spoil your lunch.” Nissa removed the sticky whip from a tiny hand.

“How did you . . . ?” Katie’s voice trailed away. “Are your eyes all better?”

“No.” Nissa turned Katie toward their room. “I can smell it on you, and your hand is sticky. You

need to clean up.”

“You need to get dressed,” Katie retorted with equal exasperation. “Or Uncle Rafe will see you in your unders.”

Heat flooded Nissa’s face and throat as she fingered the chemise she had slept in.

“Do you want me to help you?” Katie asked.

“Yes.” She pushed Katie ahead of her, forcing the child to lead.

Mrs. Witson followed, showing Nissa the bureau and the wardrobe where she had stored their belongings. Nissa felt inside each drawer to identify her items, then went to the wardrobe. The back of her hand brushed against cool silk—her wedding gown. The hem still needed to be done. Mrs. Donatelli had volunteered to pin it up before her accident. Perhaps Mrs. Witson would see to it in a less hectic moment.

“It’s a beautiful dress,” Mrs. Witson said.

Nissa realized she held the cool fabric to her cheek.

“Would you like me to take you to a seamstress and have it finished for you?”

“No,” Nissa blurted out. She had already spent two month’s salary on the material and lace, but the dress was the one part of her dream she couldn’t give up. “But if it wouldn’t be too much trouble, would you pin the hem for me so I can finish it before Chase returns? I plan to wear this on my wedding day.”

“Mine’s finished,” Katie said. “See. I can’t wear it until we marry Chase.”

“He’ll be feeling like the luckiest man alive when he sees the two of you.” Mrs. Witson chuckled.

“Probably,” Katie retorted a disgruntled tone in her voice. “But I think we should marry Uncle Rafe.”

Nissa choked, wondering where that idea had come from.

Mrs. Witson laughed. “Your Uncle Rafe needs someone to take care of. Too bad he didn’t meet the two of you first.”

A mournful bark in the hallway sent Katie off in another direction.

Turning to Mrs. Witson, Nissa clutched her hands together. “Please don’t encourage her. She doesn’t want me to marry Chase, and I don’t want her thinking I can marry another man just because she wishes it.”

“I’m sorry, dear,” Mrs. Witson mumbled. “I didn’t realize.”

“It’s quite all right.” Nissa feared she had spoken too harshly.

“I’ll mind what I say from now on,” the house-keeper said. “If you like, I should have time tomorrow afternoon to help you with the hem. I’ll press and baste it for you. But don’t you think it will be difficult to finish until your sight returns?”

“I suppose.” Nissa shrugged. “But what else

do I have to keep me busy?”

“True enough,” Mrs. Witson agreed. “And if there is nothing else, I’ll go down and fix up something for lunch.”

For the remainder of the morning Nissa concentrated on learning her way around the conglomeration of rooms and halls, identifying each room by the type of furniture ensconced within. She found two large sitting rooms, a study with an attached library, a kitchen and dining room on the first floor. Upstairs, she only traveled as far as her own room and the adjoining privy. She taught herself to maneuver about the house by counting steps. It worked as long as her strides remained even. The house lacked many of the usual pieces. One room had never been furnished as far as she could tell.

After lunch, Nissa wandered through a sitting room, colliding against a camel-backed sofa. The polished wooden frame smarted against her hip. She took note again; it was only three steps to the sofa. Moving along the back, her fingers explored the rosebuds carved into the wood. Feeling her way along its side, she counted two steps and reached to her left until she felt the matching frame of a balloon-backed chair. Through the leather soles of her shoes, Nissa could feel the late afternoon sunlight heating the carpet. She wondered if Rafe would be home soon. From the room behind her, Nissa heard Mrs. Witson setting the table.

Excited calls from an upper story heralded Rafe's approach. Nissa hurried into the hall, where a mixture of paws and feet pounced down the stairs. Nissa paused, but the glancing blows knocked her off balance. Hurried foot steps rose rapidly up the stairs and strong fingers clamped her flaying hand a split second before an arm snaked around her waist, pulling her up against a chest that smelled deliciously of tobacco and licorice.

"Rafe."

"Are you all right?" He held her steady.

"I'm fine."

"I should have stopped by at noon to see how you were getting along."

"It's true that I've run into my share of doors and furniture, but this would have been my first fall," she recounted with a smile.

"Uncle Rafe."

Suddenly aware she still leaned against him, his hand resting familiarly on her hip, Nissa felt herself blush. Rafe cleared his throat and set her right, and turned his attention to Katie.

Nissa stood on a stool while Mrs. Witson tugged at the silk wedding gown. The kindly woman's knees creaked.

"Mr. Fortier is acquainted with a young milliner. Are you quite certain you don't want me to send your gown to her?" Mrs. Witson asked again.

The air stirred around Nissa's ankles. "I want to finish it myself."

"Young Mr. Fortier would surely pay—"

"It's not the money," Nissa interrupted. "I just want to do it myself. It will keep me busy."

"I thought just finding your way around the house kept you busy."

"The house is huge," Nissa admitted. "Sometimes I think I'm lost, but it's not hard to walk around. Rafe told me I didn't have to worry about breaking things here, but I assumed I would be running into the furniture."

"Not much of that either," Mrs. Witson said. "It makes short work of dusting the place, not that he would notice the difference."

"He doesn't spend much time at home?"

"Since you and Katie have been here, at least he's been home for supper. There have been days I didn't know whether he'd been here at all."

The scuffle of feet against the carpet circled around Nissa. A tug on her bustle caused her to teeter.

Mrs. Witson's plump hand caught Nissa's until she regained her balance. "Careful, dear, I won't be much longer."

A few minutes later, Mrs. Witson groaned. Her knees creaked again. A guiding hand helped Nissa step down. Efficient fingers unfastened the tiny row of buttons running up the back of the gown.

“I’ll have it pressed and ready for you before dinner,” Mrs. Witson said.

“There’s no hurry. I won’t need it for another week or more.”

“Did young Mr. Fortier say he’s coming back in June?”

“Yes.” Nissa clasped the sturdy bedpost.

“Do you need help, dear?”

“I’ll be fine,” Nissa assured her, counting the steps to the rocker. On the fourth step she stubbed her toe again. She pushed the chair out of her way. The brocade fabric along the back felt new like everything else in the room. “What color is this?”

“It has dark pink flowers and lime green stems. The ivy is a darker green.”

“Did he just buy it?”

“It’s been here longer than I have. Actually, it was still in a crate out back when Mr. Fortier hired me.”

“A crate?” Nissa cocked her head.

“The carpets were still rolled up when I came. He had planned to sell the house but needed to get it cleaned up first.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t hear much, just that the house had been standing empty for a year after the explosion.”

“What explosion?”

“His riverboat. When he lost his eye. Poor boy.” The housekeeper sighed sympathetically.

“He lost his eye, his intended and a riverboat in an instant. He almost lost his house, too. And not even twenty-five-years-old at the time.”

“Don’t you mean his wife?” Nissa asked, recalling Rafe telling her that his wife died twenty years ago.

“I never knew he was ever married.” Mrs. Witson clucked her tongue. “He must have been awfully young. That boy’s been through more tragedies...oh dear, I think I smell my cake. It’s going to burn if I don’t get it out right now.”

Boy? Nissa shook her head in amusement. She wondered how old Mrs. Witson was.

While Katie daily went searching for younger playmates, Nissa finished hemming her dress. Her fingers felt like they’d done battle with the pins and needle. Every time, a pin or needle pricked her, she had to wait to make certain blood wouldn’t get on the gown. What would have normally taken her an hour had kept her busy several days. Now it hung behind her bedroom door, completed. Each time her thoughts or fears depressed her, she pressed her cheek against the cool silk and allowed the dress to reassure her.

At odd moments, the cruel finger of doubt tapped into Nissa’s senses. The possibility that Chase would reject them left her shivering. Katie’s security could disappear in a wisp of smoke.

Nissa tried to prepare herself. Katie was young and needed a father. When Nissa thought of a father, however, she thought of an older, gentler man. The image of Captain Jack came to mind.

The knob at the back door rattled. Katie and Captain raced to meet Rafe. This time Nissa remained out of harm's way. Delighted squeals and wet smacks echoed in the hall. A moment later the light patter of Katie's footsteps scrambled back up the stairs.

Katie's happiness penetrated Nissa's senses. She prayed her sister would grow to love Chase even half as much as she adored Rafe.

"It's good to see you're still standing today," Rafe greeted her.

"I've learned to stay out of their way." Nissa cautiously moved toward him, guessing he was hanging his hat over the hall table. "How was your day?"

"Fine," he responded in a voice tinged with amusement. "Are you practicing?"

"Practicing what?"

"Wifely questions."

"Oh." She smiled shyly as a blush heated her cheeks. "No. It just seemed the natural thing to say."

"Uncle Rafe," Katie called, bounding down the stairs. "I found it, see."

"*The Adventures of Captain Jack.*"

"Katie, what are you doing in my things?"

Nissa took measured steps to the staircase, walking straight into Rafe's back. A solid arm wrapped around her waist. For a moment it felt like a tender embrace until Katie's giggles broke the spell and Rafe stepped away.

"Uncle Rafe wants to read it," Katie said.

"Katie said you wrote this during the school year."

"The tales seemed to be a better way to teach geography and vocabulary than some of the books provided." Nissa held out her hands. "However, it's not much more than notes of places and vocabulary words I wanted to review in class. It didn't seem to matter much, no one knew where New Orleans was at the end of the year."

"Because no one likes Naw 'leans," Katie responded.

Nissa sucked in her breath, momentarily speechless. "Some of us do."

Rafe looked at the two sisters. They each looked ready to cry. Nissa finally walked away. Katie threw herself against his chest, her tears wetting his collar, her small trembling body clinging to him.

"I don't like Naw 'leans. Can't we stay with you?" she choked out between sobs.

Rafe hugged the child. It could never be. He hadn't the heart to steal Nissa from his nephew no matter how much he wanted to keep Nissa and Katie in his life. Rafe shifted Katie in his arms

and carried her to his study. Sitting behind his desk, he held the little sprite while she clung to him. Gradually her sobs abated.

“Why don’t you like New Orleans?” he asked.

She hiccupped against his collar. “Chase doesn’t like me anymore.”

Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, Rafe dried Katie’s tears and settled her more comfortably on his lap. “Why would you say that?”

“He likes Nissa, not me.” She hiccupped against his shoulder. “He’s mean to me now.”

“Mean how?” Rafe asked.

“He tells me to go away.” She sniffled. “He won’t play with me. He wants to play with Nissa.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t realize he’s hurt your feelings.” Rafe pressed a kiss to her damp cheek. “He loves you and Nissa very much, but he loves Nissa in a different way than he loves you. He wants to spend time alone with her.”

Pouting, Katie folded her arms across her chest. “He wants to kiss her all the time.”

“Yes, I can imagine he does,” Rafe said steadily, envy clutching his insides. “People in love tend to do that.”

“He isn’t sleeping with us,” she complained.

“Married people normally sleep together.” He managed to keep his voice even.

“Why?”

Rafe groaned. This wasn’t a topic he had intended to discuss with a five-year-old girl.

“That’s just what married people do.”

“Then you marry Nissa. And you sleep with her.”

He exhaled slowly. Every night since they had arrived he had to leave the house for an hour’s swim in the chilling river water.

Katie leaned back and looked up at Rafe. “Well?”

“Nissa loves Chase,” Rafe repeated the litany he told himself whenever the urge to take Nissa in his arms beset him. “And if you love someone, you should marry the person you love.”

Katie mulled that bit of wisdom over a minute. “We shouldn’t marry Chase. I don’t like him anymore. We’ll marry you. I’ll tell Nissa.”

“No,” Rafe said as she pulled a book off his desk. He stared at the volume of fairytales, trying to ignore Katie’s childish insight, then laid the book back on his desk. “I’ll read to you later. It’s time you cleaned up for dinner.”

Rafe set Katie on her feet. He gave her bottom a gentle pat as she scampered from the room. Rubbing his face with his hand, he leaned back.

Katie was only five years old. She didn’t know what she was talking about. Nissa was a rare woman with an open heart. She was in love with Chase, or she would never consider marrying him.

Drawing his hand away, Rafe discovered the object of his contemplation standing across from him with her hands spread out on his desk. The

top buttons of her high-collared blouse were undone, affording him a generous view of her creamy breasts. He clutched the arms of his chair. It would be so easy to slip his hand inside the enticing opening and push aside the fabric covering the tips. The mere thought sent him into full arousal, and it took him a moment to realize she was speaking to him. Blinking, he forced himself to concentrate on her words.

“I don’t mean to bother you, but is Katie feeling better?”

Giving himself a shake, he focused his thoughts on the child. “I think so. She said Chase doesn’t want her.”

“In the beginning he tried so hard to make her like him.” Nissa reached for the chair behind her. “He used to dance with her and she adored him. Since we’ve been engaged, she’s turned into a viper. I know she’s afraid he’ll ask me to send her away. After Papa’s accident, a neighbor assumed I had no choice but to wed him and send Katie west on the orphan train. Other suitors I had usually shunned her.”

“Does Chase?” Rafe stretched his legs beneath his desk to gain a smidgen of comfort.

“Of course not.” Nissa slumped back against the leather chair. “But Chase and I have had so little time together. Ofttimes, he reacts to her the way she acts toward him. I had hoped she would quit fighting this. If we weren’t moving so far away.”

She shrugged. "I never really wanted to leave the area. Perhaps she senses it."

"You still don't, do you?"

"No." The admission came out in a husky whisper.

Nissa sighed, wishing she could curl up on Rafe's lap as Katie probably had. She wanted to feel the comfort of his arms around her while he told her everything would be all right. In the short time she had known Rafe, a bond of trust had been formed. It was so strange to feel this close to a man she barely knew. He gave Katie security and understanding. He gave her the same, but there was something else, something Nissa couldn't define.

Rafe's chair scraped across the floor. His steps neared. Her pulse leaped as she rose from her chair. Suddenly her lips felt thick and dry. She licked them to abate the need for them to be touched. Warm fingers tipped her chin and teased her jaw. Her pulse raced as her head pressed against his shoulder.

"Stop fretting about Chase," his voice rasped in her ear as he stroked her arm. "The condition of your eyes won't alter his affections."

"Older men see things differently," she whispered and then stiffened at his unexpected laughter.

"I'm twenty-nine. I don't think that qualifies me as an older man."

"But you're Chase's uncle." Her heart pounded

wildly. “Besides, you said your wife died twenty years ago. You must be forty.”

There was a short pause. “It was twenty years ago that Chase’s mother died. It was a few days after he was born. I’ve never been married.”

His warm breath bathed her face, tempting her with forbidden desires. Her stomach churned with leaping spasms. It was one thing to imagine Rafe as an older man but quite another to be told how young he really was. Small wonder being held in his arms felt so wonderful.

“Supper.” The word faded as muffled steps scrambled away.

“Katie!” Nissa broke the embrace. “I thought I heard Katie.”

“She’s not here, she didn’t even come into the room a moment ago.”

Relief weakened Nissa’s knees, and she leaned against the most comforting thing in the room, Rafe’s chest. The strong thud of his heart beating beneath her ear was as frenzied as her own.

“I—I must apologize.” She stepped away, her cheeks burning. “I shouldn’t be troubling you with my problems. I know everything will work out when Chase returns.”

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Diane Drew

Diane married her first love. After twenty-four years of marriage, she believes that romance is what drives the world and always has. She lives in a quiet community about twenty miles from the Mississippi River. Both her children live nearby. Her son, Chris, has provided her with a grandson, BoJesse, and a granddaughter, Dreona. Her daughter, Carrie, is working toward her business degree.

With the support of her husband, Diane quit working and pursued her second love, writing. She acquired a BA in English at twenty nine.

Diane decided to learn the game of football when she couldn't take her husband's attention away from the Super Bowl three weeks into their marriage, and became an avid fan. She discovered one could enjoy anything if they understood it. Since then she's also discovered baseball and hockey.

Her favorite pastimes are sitting by the Mississippi on a quiet day and walking in the woods. Golf has become her favorite active sport, although she feels keeping score is annoying. She also enjoys cross-stitch and her flower garden.

Having lived nearby, she has always been fascinated with the Mississippi and the history of the area. The Cass Street Castles captured her attention as a child and again as an adult when the story of My Captain Jack began to take shape.

You can email her at DDrew@pcii.net.



Photo by Glamour Shots

Diane Drew

A tender love blossoms between a sight-impaired heroine and a rogue riverboat captain.

Nissa Gedhaul can't support herself and her sister on a schoolmarm salary. She sets aside her romantic riverboat fantasies to marry Chase Fortier, a handsome, young businessman willing to also accept her five-year-old sister. Blinded by a recent accident, Nissa learns Rafe Fortier, Chase's uncle, has arrived to escort her to the waiting arms of her intended groom.

Rafe's instant attraction to his nephew's blind fiancée set him at odds with himself. To compensate for the attention he can't bestow on Nissa, he lavishes fatherly attention on her little sister, Katie. Unknowingly, he wins both their hearts.

Nissa's first mistake was to believe Rafe's assurances of his nephew's love. Her second was to attempt independence, as evil forces are eager to place her in an asylum. With Katie in tow, Rafe and Nissa flee from the law. She plays the role of Rafe's wife hoping he will make the falsehood right. But, he is not ready to accept her as his own, not when she can't see the scars that cost him his eye and first love.