

London, England  
Summer 1871

## *Chapter One* *What a Way to Go*

The evening Captain Harrison Fleming came to supper at Devon House was the night Juliette Hamilton finally made up her mind to run away.

That had been three weeks ago.

Now Juliette held her breath, her heart pounding an erratic rhythm against her chest, waiting silently in the shadows as a small group of sailors, laughing and talking in boisterous tones, walked by oblivious to her presence. *Oh, God, she was really doing this.* She was actually leaving. Leaving her sisters. Her family. Her home.

A strange thrill coursed through her veins and she took a deep breath of the briny night air to fortify her shaking legs. She peered cautiously from her hiding space on the dock behind a stack of large oak barrels filled with she knew not what. The moonlit water glistened as still as glass beside the now empty dock.

All her planning had come to this moment.

There was the *Sea Minx*, docked just where Captain Fleming had said it would be. For some reason, it looked smaller than she had imagined.

When the last sailor had disappeared up the gangway of the ship, Juliette pulled the black cap down over her head to heighten her boyish disguise and took another deep breath, before scurrying on silent feet after them, up the ramp onto the deck of the *Sea Minx*.

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Juliette had somehow managed a minor miracle by reaching the dock and boarding the ship without being detected. Now began the more challenging aspect of her plan. She needed to remain hidden until they were well out to sea, when it would be too late for Captain Fleming to turn back and bring her home. Unsure where to go next, she hesitated for an instant before she ducked through a low doorway climbed down into a narrow and dimly lit passageway. Suddenly hearing male voices and heavy footsteps approaching, she opened the nearest door in a blind panic and quickly found herself inside what appeared to be some sort of small storage room.

Once again she held her breath, not daring to move until the voices passed by, as her eyes slowly adjusted to the dimness. When the passageway quieted and she no longer heard voices, Juliette softly exhaled before daring to draw another breath. *Now what?* Her plan had not been so detailed as to exactly what she would do once she finally boarded the ship, aside from keeping out of sight until they had already set sail. Now she fumbled about in the cramped, dark space awash in briny smells until she found a small wooden crate upon which to sit. Thrilled with this bit of good fortune, she sat and nervously patted the little satchel she had managed to bring with her. She had packed enough food to sustain her a few days if she ate sparingly, a photographic card of her family which was taken at her sister Colette's wedding last fall, letters with her friend Christina Dunbar's address, a change of clothes, and money. She had more than enough funds to last her quite a while. Her brother-in-law had settled a rather large amount of money on her and she had gone to the bank that afternoon and, not sure how much she would need, she had withdrawn much of it. Once she reached New York City she would seek out her friend at her house on Fifth Avenue.

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Then her adventure would really begin.

She had finally done it! She had successfully boarded Captain Fleming's ship! She hugged herself in disbelief, a little stunned that she had actually accomplished her goal.

A rather strong pang of regret filled her at the thought of her four sisters. When they discovered the note of explanation she had left in her bedroom her sisters would undoubtedly be overcome with worry and panic at her unexpected departure, but there was no help for it. It was time. Juliette had had to seize this opportunity to leave. She simply had no choice. She wished to be free and independent and this was the only way.

As she sat in the dank and brine scented gloom, she felt the ship suddenly begin to rock beneath her and pitch forward. Loud shouts and excited cries could be heard above deck. Her heart lurched. *This was it!* There was no turning back now. The *Sea Minx* was sailing out across the Atlantic Ocean to America. Her fate was sealed, for better or for worse. For a fraction of a second she regretted her crazy desire to venture out and see the world, but then she held up her chin and grinned to herself in the dark.

She had always longed to break free, to have an exciting adventure, for a chance to visit exotic locales, to meet new people. However, she had not envisioned doing so in such furtive secrecy.

But that night at Devon House three weeks earlier she knew within an instant that Captain Harrison Fleming had unwittingly presented her with an advantageous opportunity to escape her stultifying existence.

Perhaps it was while Captain Fleming described his beautiful clipper ship, the *Sea Minx*. The color of his eyes seemed the exact shade of the ocean on a stormy gray

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afternoon. Or maybe it was when he regaled them all with tales of his life at sea and his adventures in ports around the globe. He had actually *been* to exotic and foreign lands. India. China. Africa. The Caribbean. America. Captain Fleming was living the life she had only dared to dream of and it fascinated her to hear him speak.

Juliette's brilliant scheme had come to her in bits and pieces throughout the lengthy eight-course meal. She could not quite pinpoint the exact moment that the idea to stow away on his ship popped into her head, but by the end of that intimate supper party at Devon House, the beginnings of her plan had everything to do with the charismatic Captain Fleming. As soon as she learned that the adventurous sea captain planned to return to New York shortly, Juliette knew just what she had to do. She might never have this chance again.

He was her only means of getting to New York. She had to sail with him.

She had barely been able to finish her dessert for containing her wild excitement at this revolutionary idea.

"Look at Juliette, would you? She looks like the cat that ate the canary," Lord Jeffrey Eddington had remarked to everyone gathered around the dinner table, an amused smile lurking on his boyishly handsome face, his merry eyes dancing. "Tell us now what is going on in that pretty head of yours, Juliette. Whatever are you scheming about now?"

Juliette had flashed him an irritated glance while trying to maintain an innocent expression. Leave it to Jeffrey to notice the slightest bit of change in her. In spite of being her dearest friend, he could be quite exasperating at times. If Jeffrey even

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suspected what she was plotting to do he would see to it that Lucien had Juliette locked in her bedchamber and under twenty-four-hour guard for the rest of her life.

She had to be very careful with Jeffrey. He could easily spoil everything.

“It’s exciting listening to Captain Fleming’s adventures of life at sea,” Juliette had answered Jeffrey coolly, glancing toward the tall and rugged looking man who sat to the right of her sister, Colette. They had all just been introduced to Captain Fleming that evening, because her brother-in-law, Lucien Sinclair, the Earl of Waverly, had invited him to stay at Devon House while he was conducting business in London. Apparently the two men were good friends, although Juliette had a difficult time imagining her staid and very proper brother-in-law fostering a friendship with the rather daring sea captain.

At her remark to Jeffrey, Captain Fleming questioned her across the long and elaborately set table. “Is that so, Miss Hamilton? And just what part of my story did you find so exciting?”

His exotic accent added to his charm, Juliette acknowledged. He sounded very American, which, of course, was only natural considering he was born in New York, but she found it intriguing nonetheless. He was vastly different from any man she had ever met in London, and Juliette found herself staring boldly into his silver-gray eyes. “I believe it was the part where you described your journey from New York to San Francisco. It was as though I were on your ship. I could hear the waves. I could feel the excitement and the freedom of sailing on the ocean.”

Captain Fleming smiled at her, and Juliette felt her heart flutter erratically. How peculiar! She had never met a man who made her heart race before. Nor had she ever expected to. At least not here at Devon House.

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But she had always held out a vain hope that she would meet one. All through the Season last year, when her Uncle Randall had forced her and Colette to find husbands, every man she had met had bored her to tears. While Colette had been fortunate enough to fall in love with the handsome and wealthy Lucien Sinclair, the Earl of Waverly, and rescue the family from financial ruin and save the family bookshop, Juliette had had a more difficult time. Aside from becoming fast friends with Jeffrey Eddington, she had not met a single gentleman who held her interest for more than a minute. To be completely honest with herself, she knew she scared the trousers off most of the men who met her and she took a perverse delight in doing just that. All she had to do was say something even remotely opinionated or slightly out of the ordinary and they did not know what to do with her. Despite her behavior, most of them became besotted with her anyway, declaring their love in the most embarrassing manner. The rest saw her as a challenge, something that they could tame or subdue. Juliette despaired of ever meeting a man who lived up to her expectations. Not even her darling Jeffrey.

No. She had to leave London.

Not that her life in London was at all terrible. Leaving was something she simply had to do. Because she always felt smothered, she had harbored this unappeased restlessness inside of her as long as she could remember. If she didn't get away from London, away from the tightly bound rules of society, even away from her family as much as she loved them, she knew she would go mad. Stark, raving mad.

So she had left.

Now she found herself aboard a ship captained by a man she barely knew. What would Harrison Fleming do when he discovered her, which at some point he undoubtedly

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would? Would he be angry with her? Most likely. Would he punish her somehow? Perhaps, but she doubted it. Most men were full of bluster but would never dare to lay a finger on her. Would he immediately turn the ship around and drag her back in humiliation to face Colette and Lucien? Perhaps. She could bear almost anything rather than that. She had come so far. She could not return now. She also knew that Captain Fleming had a schedule to keep and needed to arrive in New York before the end of the month, so she had doubted he would lose valuable time by sailing back to London simply to return her.

At least Juliette fervently hoped he would not.

She presumed he would be forced to keep her until they arrived in America with a plan to send her back on another ship, but by then she would have arranged to stay with her friend Christina Dunbar. It was a good plan. In fact, it was the most daring she had ever come up with. Now she only hoped that it worked.

She sighed heavily wondering how long she would have to remain in this dark, cramped space, but she would stay there a month if she had to. If that were what it took to get her to America, she would gladly do it. Her legs were slowly falling asleep and her lower back was beginning to ache. With some rearranging, she managed to lean her satchel behind her as a sort of makeshift cushion for her back. That helped a bit. With nothing else to do but to sit there in the dark, she closed her eyes. Allowing the gentle sway of the ship to lull her, she drifted asleep, dreaming of her new life in New York.

A long time later, the door suddenly flung open. Startled from her sleep by the unexpected intrusion, Juliette screamed shrilly, covering her mouth with her hand in a belated attempt to silence herself. She could not be found yet! It seemed too soon, but

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she had no idea how long she had slept. Were they far out to sea by now? Filled with bitter disappointment, and admittedly fear, she glanced up at the person responsible for exposing her hiding space.

A young man, his freckled face awash with disbelief, stood in the dim lantern light of the passageway, startled speechless by her presence in the storage room. They stared mutely at each other for a moment before he recovered his senses. With a disapproving scowl, he cried in outrage, "Hey now there, lad! We don't allow stowaways on board the *Sea Minx*."

Juliette did not dare to move, but she was pleased that she had fooled him with her disguise. Having sweet-talked one of the shorter stable boys from Devon House into giving her his old clothes, she had donned trousers, a shirt, and a tweed cap. She had even smudged her face with ashes. And wearing trousers was most freeing, making her feel even more reckless and independent. No wonder men wore them! She thought she looked quite passable as a young boy, and just as she had planned, this sailor naturally assumed she was one.

"You'll have to come with me to see the captain." The young man grabbed Juliette's arm and yanked her roughly to her feet.

Instinctively, Juliette resisted him, pulling her arm away and retreating further back into the closet.

"Hey!" he cried, reaching for her once more. Angry, he grabbed her tighter and pulled her forcefully into the passageway.

As they tussled, Juliette stumbled forward and her cap fell off her head. Her long dark hair fell in soft waves to her waist.

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As the light fell across her face, he shouted, "Bloody hell!"

"Let go of me!" she cried, taking advantage of his stunned state and breaking free of his hold on her.

"You're a girl!" He stepped back from her in astonishment, his eyes round.

"Of course, I'm a girl, you simpleton," she snapped at him, irritated that she should be found out so soon by this mere slip of a boy. She snatched up her cap from the floor in a swift movement, but did not bother to put it back on.

"Wait until the captain sees you," he whispered, shaking his head in disbelief.

Reaching down to grab her tapestry-embroidered satchel, she thought to herself, "*Yes, just wait until the captain sees me.*" Juliette cringed inwardly at the thought of facing Captain Fleming, but there was no help for it. Besides, he was merely a man. Like all the other men she had ever known. She could handle him easily enough. There wasn't a man yet that she hadn't been able to control.

With a remarkable shift in his attitude toward her, the young man said, "You'd better come with me, miss."

Juliette squared her shoulders and followed the young sailor down the narrow passageway toward the captain's cabin.

The door opened into a gorgeous anteroom with wood-paneled walls and gilt-framed maps. A round table with six leather-backed chairs dominated the room. Another door opened partially to reveal the captain's private quarters. She could see a large bed within. Her eyes flashed back quickly to the oak desk, behind which sat Captain Harrison Fleming.

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In an excited and incredulous tone, the young cabin boy explained Juliette's presence. "Captain, I found a stowaway aboard, hiding in the locker room with the oilskins. A *girl* stowaway."

"Yes, so I see."

Ignoring her rapidly beating heart, she stared at the imposing figure who was in charge of the *Sea Minx* and now apparently Juliette's fate as well.

"Thank you for bringing our unexpected visitor to my attention," Captain Fleming said with an even-toned voice, although his intent silver colored eyes never left Juliette's face. If he were surprised by Juliette's presence on his ship, he hid it well. "You may leave us now, Robbie."

As the young boy respectfully nodded his head and quit the room, Juliette was left alone with Captain Fleming for the first time. She had been in his company on many occasions during the past few weeks while he visited her home in London, but never had she been with him alone. Each time she had thought him quiet and somewhat disinterested in her, which had been surprising. Every man she had ever met could not seem to help but lavish her with attention, even the painfully shy ones. Now it seemed that the aloof Captain Fleming was finally giving her his undivided attention.

And that made her uncharacteristically nervous.

He continued to stare at her. His stormy silver-gray eyes, with startlingly long lashes, bored into her. She waited in silence, a strange tingling sensation building within her.

Juliette suddenly came to the realization that he was made of sterner stuff than she was accustomed to seeing in most men. He had the bearing of a pirate and beneath his

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cool surface he seemed to possess a sense of tightly leashed desire as if he kept his emotions on a close rein. With a high forehead, aquiline nose and rakish mouth, he exuded a rugged, very masculine handsomeness. He was quite taller than average, with broad shoulders, sun-streaked blond hair and those amazing eyes. His bronzed skin declared boldly that he spent much of his days out of doors. Yet for all his commanding presence, there was nothing aristocratic about him.

“Well, Juliette, it seems you have put me in an awkward position.”

She raised one eyebrow at him for stating the obvious while noting he had dispensed with any formality by not addressing her as Miss Hamilton. Being that she had brazenly stowed away on his ship, she supposed the need for propriety had passed.

“I merely wish to go to New York to visit a friend.”

“Then why didn't you simply ask me to take you?”

Most men she knew would be beside themselves with anger by now, yet Captain Fleming seemed remarkably cool and calm at her presence. That impressed her. “My family would never allow me to go. In fact, my mother expressly forbade my going to New York under any circumstances.”

“Ahh, I see,” he nodded his head, crossing his arms across his broad chest.

His white shirt was partially unbuttoned and Juliette could not help but notice the bare expanse of tanned skin. She swallowed and forced herself to focus on his face. But that also was dangerous. He was a very handsome man. Yes, he was. Definitely.

“I should take you home directly.”

“I wish you wouldn't,” she managed to respond. If he took her back now, she would die of disappointment. She could not go home.

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“Your family must be sick with worry about you by now.”

Once again guilt surged within her at the thought of leaving her sisters in such a manner. But truly, she had no other recourse. “I wrote them a letter, explaining what I was doing and telling them not to worry. They won’t find it until the morning when I don’t appear at breakfast.”

“Well, it seems as though you have thought of almost everything.”

She challenged him. “Almost?”

“Everything except one.”

They waited in tense silence, regarding each other with undisguised wariness. Her heart hammered erratically in her chest. Oh, she *had* definitely underestimated Captain Fleming. Of course he would never harm her. He was a friend of her brother-in-law and had been a guest in their house. Still, a strange sense of nervousness engulfed her at his masculine presence and she trembled. Odd, she had never felt nervous with a man before.

Standing up and stepping from behind his desk, Captain Fleming moved closer to her and she sucked in her breath at his nearness. He loomed over her and the mysterious scent of him made her weak-kneed.

“It seems you overlooked something important in your little scheme to flee to New York,” he breathed. He leaned in closer to her face.

Unconsciously she inched away from him. He pressed closer, his intense gray eyes on her, his lips hovering near her cheek. The heat of his breath made her shiver and his whispered words left her speechless. She had backed up against the table and could retreat no farther. She had no choice but to face him.

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“You did not factor me into your plan, Juliette.”

She stared helplessly at him, this handsome sea captain who held her fate in his hands. This man who embodied all the adventurousness she harbored in her soul. He was close enough to kiss her and for a wild, panicked moment Juliette hoped he would.

His whispered words brushed her lips, causing her to stop breathing altogether.

“Or what I plan to do with you.”