

CHAPTER ONE

FOR FIFTY THOUSAND pounds, Nicholas Warre didn't give a damn what his bride looked like.

He curled his hand around the jamb of the tavern's side door, with Malta's night breeze at his back and a host of raucous Mediterranean drunks shoving their way past him, and glanced at William Jaxbury. "You're absolutely certain?"

Jaxbury's gaze leveled on their prize, Lady India Sinclair. His gold earrings glittered in the muted candlelight that spilled through the doorway, and his dark red Barbary turban made him look like a corsair devil. "Recognize that tricorne anywhere," he said, and ducked quickly out of view on the other side of the doorway. Amusement danced in his eyes, damn him. Always laughing when there wasn't one bloody thing to laugh at.

Inside the tavern, Nick's betrothed perched on a stool, deep in conversation with a companion who could only be Miss Millicent Germain. Lady India's full attention was fixed on something—someone?—across the room. That tricorne blocked her face, and a black waistcoat obscured her figure, but he had a clear

view of a shapely leg clad in breeches and a white stocking. Her black buckled shoe tap-tap-tapped the stool's leg.

"Second thoughts?" Jaxbury asked, eyes gleaming.

"No." A man didn't have second thoughts about a bank draft that would finally put an end to his misery. "I shall go in through the main door, while you stay here and wait for my signal." And then—

Good God.

She'd turned her head, and he found himself staring across the tavern at her profile. Even as he watched, she glanced at something over her shoulder and gave him a quick but full view of her face. His hand constricted around the doorjamb. "Jaxbury, you bloody bastard. You could have warned me she's got a mouth that'll have every man in London reaching for his breeches."

The words scarcely left his tongue before Jaxbury had his fist clenched in Nick's shirt. "Besmirch Lady India again, and you'll answer to me." There was no laughter in those eyes now.

"Did I besmirch her? I could have sworn I merely commented on her beauty." And beauty was the dead last thing he needed in a wife. He thought of Clarissa—so lovely yet so deceptive—and checked a sudden urge to lay his fist into something. Jaxbury's jaw, for example.

Even from this distance and dressed like a man, Lady India screamed sensuality. The men in that tavern were either sodomites or blind.

"Let me make one thing clear, Warre." Jaxbury's blue eyes glittered like cold sapphires. "Lady India's a virgin, and whatever else happens, you'll go easy on

her even if I have to stand by the marital bed and watch.”

Nick curled his lip. “Enjoy that, would you?”

Jaxbury’s fist tightened in Nick’s shirt. “Careful, or you may find I’ve changed my mind about this folly.”

“This ‘folly’ does not require your approval.” Enough was enough. Nick pushed Jaxbury away and started forward.

Lady India’s days of wanton adventure were about to come to an abrupt end.

“FOOL’S ERRAND IS an insulting way to speak of something as profound as my deflowering, Millie.” India took a swig of ale and studied a square-jawed, dark-haired sailor through the crowd. Finally setting foot on Malta was a blessed relief for so many reasons.

“Nothing profound originates in a waterfront tavern,” Millie said.

India felt her foot resume its tapping. The tavern roared with conversations in every language, teemed with whores, barmaids and men who were too drunk to see past her waistcoat and breeches.

But she would make sure one of them saw the truth. Tonight.

Millie gripped her tankard as though she were the one about to invite the carnal knowledge of a Mediterranean stranger. “If you’re smart,” she continued to warn above the din, “you’ll keep your flower intact.”

“*Smart* is merely another word for *prudent*, *dull* and *biddable*.” And *accomplished*, *well-versed* and *literate*, but this sailor was one person who wouldn’t care that India was none of those things. He laughed at something his hollow-cheeked companion said,

revealing an intriguing gold tooth. India leaned across the table toward Millie. “Do you think he’s Egyptian? I think I might like to be deflowered by an Egyptian.”

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

India snorted and pulled her tricorne hat lower across her eyes to better conceal her surveillance. If anyone was going to be sick, it would likely be her. Her lady’s maid Frannie had warned her that women of quality sometimes vomited after their virtues were taken.

Already the ale soured a little in her stomach, but she couldn’t help smiling. There was little of quality left of her, so she’d likely come through the event without disgracing herself.

Ha. *Disgracing herself* was the beginning and end of the entire endeavor.

The Egyptian sailor lifted his glass with a large hand that was no stranger to rope and canvas. Gold gleamed from the fingers that would unlock the last door to her freedom.

For freedom, she could endure a bit of vomiting.

She drew in an unsteady breath heavy with salt air and tobacco smoke, sailors and alcohol, and slipped a crust of bread to a brown-spotted mongrel who sat begging beneath the table. A loud trio of men jostled her from behind, sloshing a bit of ale onto her hand.

She licked it away and shifted on her stool but couldn’t quite make herself stand. “You’ll send the longboat back to shore for me?” she asked Millie.

“By the devil, India—” Millie huffed. From beneath her giant, misshapen peasant’s hat, she frowned at India through a carefully applied layer of grime that almost completely hid her gender. “You cannot do this.”

A Wedding by Dawn, Alison DeLaine

She could, and she would. Now, before she lost her nerve completely. "I shall meet you back at the ship."

"I'll not return to the ship without you!"

"You can't stay here by yourself!"

"India..." In Millie's eyes India saw all the arguments Millie had already made against this plan: pain, pox, pregnancy.

The sailor didn't look like a brute, and Millie swore all men were poxed, anyway. As for the third...

"I've got my vinegar sponge in my pocket."

"For God's sake, India—"

"Must you be so bloody contrary about everything? Always?" India's palms began to sweat. She forced herself to her feet. Even now, Father's lackeys could be afloat in the Med looking for her. He would have dispatched them the moment he'd learned she and Millie had borrowed Katherine's ship. They would very likely find her, but she would not allow them to drag her back to England to marry whatever disgusting, fleshy fishbelly Father had paid to wed her.

If her father's men succeeded, she could well find herself with Millie's three *P*'s in spades regardless.

"If you catch his eye dressed like this," Millie warned, "it won't be deflowering that's on his mind—at least, not the kind you're thinking of."

"I have a plan." *Pardon me, sir*, she would say, *there's a gentleman outside asking to see you*. Once outside, she would whisk off her hat, let her blond hair tumble free and tell him what she wanted.

On hearing this, Millie grabbed her arm. "We're leaving. I absolutely will not allow you to commit such a folly. An utter stranger, who could have any manner of disgusting ideas—"

A Wedding by Dawn, Alison DeLaine

“Don’t be such a pill.” India wrenched her arm free. “Auntie Phil beds whomever she pleases. It can’t be so terrible and disgusting.” It probably could, but she’d already told herself to stop remembering the more shocking details Frannie had described.

“Your aunt’s deflowering took place in a marriage bed,” Millie hissed.

“Which can hardly happen to me as I have no intention of marrying.”

“I’ll never know how you’ve survived being such a dullard.”

The accusation stung more than Millie had intended. “Perhaps I shall marry the Egyptian,” India laughed. She might be a dullard, but she would soon be a dullard whom her father could marry off to absolutely nobody.

An especially rowdy bunch at a table in the far corner exploded in guffaws. The dark sailor punctuated his conversation with the kind of dramatic gestures that always accompanied an exotic tongue.

India reached for her tankard to take one last swig and hoped a deflowering didn’t take much time.

Millie grabbed her arm. “I’m serious, India. Ruining yourself won’t solve anything.”

“But it will most certainly solve one thing.” She set the tankard on the table and fixed her gaze on the sailor. “I have nothing to lose and everything to gain.” Every nerve came alive in an alarming swarm of anticipation.

“Nothing to lose! You’ll throw yourself away—”

“Oh, fie.” Virginity was the last virtue she had left to throw away. Everything else—her friends, her reputation, her popularity—was already gone. “I’m a woman of the high seas now, Millie. What does it matter if I give my virtue to a handsome sailor?”

A Wedding by Dawn, Alison DeLaine

But suddenly Millie wasn't looking at her anymore. She was looking past India's shoulder, and her eyes had grown as big as silver crowns.

"It matters, Lady India," came a cold voice from behind her, "because you are betrothed to me."