

AGAINST THE TIDE



ELIZABETH CAMDEN



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PROLOGUE

Boston, 1876

ydia was embarrassed to wear a damp dress on the first day of school, but it rained last night while her clothes were strung across the boat's rigging to dry. She was lucky to be going to school at all, and tried not to think about her clammy dress as she walked to the schoolhouse, her hand clasped in her father's work-roughened palm. He seemed more nervous than she was as they walked to the school, almost a mile from the pier where their boat was docked. The school was a fancy brick building with real glass in the windows. There were no windows on the boat where Lydia lived, just oiled parchment that let a little light into the cabin where the whole family slept.

Papa did not want her to go to school at all. Last night he and Mama had a big fight about it, and Lydia had heard every word. They made her and Baby Michael go beneath the hatch, but living on a boat as tiny as the *Ugly Kate* meant she could hear everything.

"That girl doesn't speak a word of English!" her father roared.

"What is the point of sending her to school if she can't understand what they are saying?"

"She will learn," Mama said. "Look how quickly she learned to speak Italian when she was just a small child. She already knows Greek and Turkish and even Croatian from the year we lived there. She is good with languages, and she will learn English. Lydia is nine years old, and it is time for her to be in school." They never stayed in one place long enough for her to go to school in the past, but that was supposed to change now that they were in America.

Lydia had been a baby when they left their tiny Greek island. Papa said they had to leave because people did not like that he married a Turkish woman. They sailed away in a fishing boat Papa had built with his own hands, hugging the coastline of the rocky Adriatic shores until they got to the islands of Italy. That didn't last very long either. From there they spent time on the coasts of Albania and Croatia.

They lived on Papa's boat, casting nets into the crystalline sea and hauling aboard prawns, bluefish, and bass. Lydia's earliest memories were of sunbaked days sorting the fish into baskets on the deck of their boat. In the evenings they pushed the nets and tackle to the side and laid their bedding beneath the stars. Lydia's entire life was on that boat, from cooking meals over the gas burner, sitting on Mama's lap to learn her letters, and twice a week washing her hair in the salty water of the Mediterranean Sea. Mama said it was the salt and sun that put coppery glints into Lydia's dark hair. "Just like a brand-new penny," Mama would say as she combed Lydia's hair to dry in the sun. Her brother, Michael, was born in Sicily. He was four years old now, and she was supposed to stop calling him "Baby Michael," but it was still how she thought of him.

Lydia wasn't sure why they had to leave Sicily, but over the summer they got on a huge ship and sailed all the way across the Atlantic Ocean until they reached Boston. Papa said things would be better here, but Lydia was not so sure. Their fishing boat wasn't nearly as nice as the one Papa had built in Greece. He tried to fix the *Ugly Kate*, but water kept seeping through the hull, and it was Lydia's job to fill cans and throw the water overboard. Five times a day she emptied the bilge, but there was always at least an inch of water on the floor of the cabin where they slept. Papa said the sloshing water meant their cabin was always clean, so they should be grateful they had such a special, self-cleaning boat. It was all part of his plan, he had laughed.

Lydia didn't care if they lived on a lousy boat. For the past three years, the only thing she had asked for every Christmas was to go to school. She had seen glimpses of other children walking to school in the village in Sicily and daydreamed about all the wonderful things they must be learning behind those closed doors.

Papa still did not want to let her go to school. He had pointed to Lydia's thin cotton smock that was six inches too short. "You want to send our princess to school looking like that?" he roared at Mama, gesturing to Lydia's ankles showing beneath the bottom of her dress. Two weeks ago her hem caught fire when she brushed too close to the cooking burner, and Mama had to cut it off. The scorch marks no longer showed, but Papa was still upset about her only dress.

"I won't have it," he said with resolution. "I won't have my princess being ridiculed by the hoodlums of Boston." His face crumpled up, and Lydia thought he might be about to cry.

She scampered across the deck and threw her arms around his waist. "Don't be sad, Papa. I'll learn English right away, and then I'll be able to teach you and Mama and Baby Michael too. We'll all be able to speak it."

Papa, whose calloused fingers stroked the hair from her forehead,

cradled her as he rocked her from side to side. "My poor little water sprite, you don't know how cruel children can be."

"I don't care if they make fun of me," she said. "And Mama can wash my dress so it won't smell, and I'll look just as nice as any of the other children."

"We will wash your dress tonight so it will be fresh and pretty for school tomorrow," Mama said. "Lydia *must* go to school. It is time." Lydia smiled when she recognized that tone. Papa usually got his way, but when Mama's voice grew firm like that, he always obeyed.

It rained overnight. When fat raindrops began spattering on the top of the cabin, she raced aboveboard to yank the dress off the rigging. She fell flat on her face when she tripped over the crab traps that slid to the middle of the deck, and by the time she pulled the dress from the rigging it was soaked. It was still damp as she walked to the schoolhouse the next morning.

Lydia sat in the hall while her father talked to a lady in an office near the front of the school. Rather, he was speaking words in Greek and gesturing with his hands, which the woman did not understand. When Papa turned around and pointed to Lydia sitting on a bench in the hallway, comprehension dawned on the woman's face. Lydia slid off the bench as the frazzled lady came to stand in front of her. The lady spoke very quickly to Lydia, then waited as if she expected Lydia to say something. The lady seemed very stern as she scrutinized Lydia's dress, especially when she reached out to feel the still-wet cloth. Now the lady was muttering beneath her breath and glaring at Papa, even though it had been Lydia's idea to wash the dress.

Lydia stared at the lady's mouth as she said the same phrases over and over and then waited, as if she expected Lydia to respond. Lydia knew only one word in English, and perhaps this was the right time to say it. She looked straight into the lady's eyes, smiled, and said, "Okay."

That seemed to satisfy the lady, who turned and gestured to Lydia to follow. Lydia knew she had been accepted into the school and felt like the sun was bursting inside her. She whirled around to wave goodbye to Papa, who twisted his cap between his hands, anxiety written all over his face as he waved goodbye to her.

Lydia darted to follow the lady down the hall. She was going to school! The hallways were wide and straight, and the floors were polished to a high shine. The air smelled so fresh it made her feel good just to breathe it.

It was obvious she was late for class, because the other students were already in their desks and a man at the front of the room was writing on one of those fancy black pieces of slate. The door creaked open and all eyes in the room swiveled to stare at her. The angry lady talked to the teacher while Lydia turned to look at the students lined up in their neat, orderly rows.

They looked so *clean*. All of them had their hair combed and wore socks under their shoes. Did they always look so tidy, or only today because it was the first day of school? The teacher pulled Lydia's hand to lead her to a desk at the back of the room. Her very own desk. It had a matching seat and she wouldn't even have to share it with anybody! The man started speaking to her, but she didn't understand. His face was kind as he knelt down beside her desk and repeated himself more slowly this time. It didn't make any difference. She didn't have any idea what he was saying, but she knew he was friendly and was waiting for some kind of answer from her.

She smiled broadly. "Okay," she said, and once again it seemed to be the answer he wanted to hear.

The teacher returned to the front of the room, and the class began.



Lydia ran as fast as her skinny legs could carry her. She hurtled through the air as she rushed to the pier to meet Papa after school. It didn't take long to spot him pacing along the pier, his face still drawn and worried. Lydia could tell the moment he saw her because he whipped the cap from his head and came striding across the pier in those giant steps of his. She thought her lungs would burst as she raced even faster to fling herself into his arms. "Oh, Papa, it was *perfect*!"

The word seemed so puny to describe the joy that bloomed inside her. She should tell him how wonderful the school was, how kind the teacher had been to her. There was so much more she wanted to say, but her throat clogged up when she tried to speak. Why was she crying when she was happy? But a fat tear rolled down each side of her face, and it was impossible to talk through the lump in her throat.

"The teacher's name was Mr. Bennett," Lydia told her parents once they were back on their boat. "I saw the letters of his name written on the blackboard, and at lunch he sat with me and repeated it over and over until I understood. He was very nice, and he even gave me part of his sandwich for lunch."

Mama had not realized that children were supposed to bring something to eat for lunch, and she said that tomorrow Lydia should bring Mr. Bennett a nice piece of fresh cod to thank him for being so nice.

"And what about the children? They were nice to you?" Papa asked, guarded worry in his eyes.

Lydia wasn't stupid; she had seen some of the girls laughing at her short dress and whispering behind their hands. Not that she cared. Why should such a little thing bother her when she had a sturdy desk all to herself and when there were so many fascinating things in the classroom to look at? Maps on the walls showed the outline of all the countries in the whole world, and in one corner there was a stuffed eagle with its wings stretched outright. But her father was worried, and he was waiting for her answer.

"No one said a single bad thing to me," she said truthfully.

And it didn't really matter that she didn't speak English, because the next day Lydia learned that two of the children in the class spoke Italian, and there was another little girl who spoke only Russian. She made friends with them and sat beside them at lunch every day, easily picking up a number of Russian words to add to her repertoire of languages.

And as the weeks rolled by, Lydia learned more and more words in English. Mr. Bennett seemed particularly pleased with how quickly she was learning. "Clever girl," he said as he patted her on the top of her head. Lydia wasn't certain what "clever" meant, but she knew it was good and she loved it when Mr. Bennett called her a clever girl, which he did a lot.

But on this particular chilly day in October, Lydia did not feel so clever as she stood at the pier to wait for Papa. Normally, Papa and the *Ugly Kate* were already waiting for her after school. It was a windy day, so getting sail power back to the harbor should not have been a problem. Lydia sat on a bench, swinging her legs and kicking at a discarded pile of rope to pass the time until the *Ugly Kate* got there.

By the time the sun started to set, hunger gnawed at her tummy and it was starting to get cold. Papa would not forget to come get her after school, so that meant something bad must have happened to the *Ugly Kate*.

She didn't know what to do. As the sun sank lower, boat after boat pulled up to the dock. The sailors unloaded their tackle, secured the rigging, then slung their haul over their shoulders and left the pier for their homes. By now Lydia was shaking so badly she didn't really know whether it was from the cold or from the fear. Maybe she would have to spend the entire night here on the dock.

It wouldn't be the first time she slept outside. When they first came to Boston they spent two weeks living in a public park while Papa looked for a boat to buy. He told them it was a grand adventure. "Think how lucky we are not to live in a smelly old tenement when we can sleep under a cathedral of the stars," he had said. At the time, Lydia would have preferred the smelly old tenement, but her father assured her that sleeping under the stars was all part of his plan. "Breathe in that clean American air!" he had said. "Sleeping outside is the only way to experience it, and we would not want to miss out on it!"

Lydia tried to savor the clean American air as she sat huddled on the dockside bench, but it was too cold to draw a deep breath. There was a big difference between sleeping outside in August and sleeping outside in October. She found a piece of discarded sailcloth near the end of the wharf and wrapped it around her shoulders.

It was stupid to be worrying about Papa. He was the best sailor in the world. He had built the boat they lived on in Sicily with his own two hands, and he had fixed up the *Ugly Kate* to make her sail again, even though Mama called it a "floating heap."

Once or twice she started to doze, but she always jerked awake as soon as she relaxed the grip on the sailcloth and the cold air pierced her thin dress. As the weak light of dawn illuminated the bay, Lydia scanned the dozens of boats lashed to the docks, praying the *Ugly Kate* had sailed into port overnight and she had missed it. Her father would laugh and tell her how foolish she had been for thinking, even for an instant, he would not come for her.

She stood on the bench and scanned the pier, filled with dozens of boats coming in and out of the harbor. As far as her eye could see, none of the boats resembled the *Ugly Kate*.



Lydia fought to understand the words that were being spoken around her, but all the grown-ups were speaking so quickly and no one took the time to help her understand. Mr. Bennett, her teacher, was there, and so were two men wearing police uniforms. Another man had a funny shirt with a white notch cut into the collar, and Lydia thought he must be some kind of minister.

Certain words she heard over and over. *Orphanage* was one of them. *Deportation* and *Greece* were the other words they kept saying. She had no idea what *orphanage* meant, but she thought it must be a good thing, because Mr. Bennett seemed to be in favor of the orphanage. He got red in the face and shook his head when the others spoke of "deportation."

It had been five days since that awful night she spent outside, and her family had not returned for her. She knew Papa would never abandon her, and that meant the *Ugly Kate* had probably sunk at sea. Which meant Papa and Mama and Baby Michael were all dead, and Lydia refused to believe that. They must have lost their way, and they would come back soon.

She had been staying at a place called a convent, where a lot of women wore all black, but there were no children and the ladies in black did not know what to do with her. Yesterday they brought a Greek fisherman to the convent to translate for her. He had massive gray eyebrows and the skin on his face was like leather, and he asked all kinds of questions about her family back in Greece.

"I don't have any family in Greece," she said.

The man scoffed. "Everyone in Greece has family," he said.

"Big families. Huge families. You will like it in Greece. Now tell me about your family in Greece and where they live."

Lydia tried to remember any family names she heard her father mention, but she could think of none. "Papa said he had to leave Greece in a big hurry."

The man quirked one of those thick brows. "A big hurry, eh? Why was that?"

"Papa said it was because Mama is a Turk."

"Oh," the fisherman said with sad understanding. "That would do it." He turned to the policeman standing behind him and spoke in English. The words were simple enough even for Lydia to understand.

"This child has no family," he said.



Mr. Bennett seemed pleased that she was going to an orphanage. It was on the other side of Boston, and the policeman was going to take her there and she would never be coming back to this wonderful school with its nice sturdy desks and clear glass windows. Mr. Bennett hunkered down so he could be at eye level, but she could not bear to look at him when she knew he was saying goodbye to her forever. Mr. Bennett was the only person left in the world who cared about what happened to her, and now she was losing him as well. He took her hand in his and gave it a little tug.

"You will do well," he said slowly. "You are such a clever girl."

Her eyes clouded up when he called her a clever girl. She didn't feel clever right now; she felt weak and scared and alone. But maybe Mr. Bennett was right. Maybe the orphanage would be a wonderful place where she would be able to learn and find a new family.

It did not take long for Lydia to learn there was nothing wonderful about the Crakken Orphanage.



FIFTEEN YEARS LATER, 1891 THE BOSTON NAVY YARD

I t looks like the Russian navy has just launched a new gunship," Lydia said.

It was hard to tell from the grainy photograph, but the ship looked different from the others reported in the Russian newspapers. Lydia rose from her desk and walked across the office to show the newspaper to Willis, whose encyclopedic memory of warships was astounding. She only hoped he would be willing to help her. She had been working at the research wing of the United States Navy for more than four years, but it still irked Willis that a woman had been hired for this sort of work.

Lydia handed Willis a magnifying glass to better scrutinize the photograph. "I don't remember the Russians ever having a rotating gun turret," she said, "but it looks like they have one, don't you think?"

Willis Colburn was so thin it looked possible to shred cheese

off the blades of his cheekbones. He pushed his spectacles higher as he studied the picture. "You know, Lydia, you are supposed to be the expert on Russian," he said pointedly.

Actually, Lydia was the expert on Russian, Greek, Turkish, Italian, Albanian, and Croatian. Her job was to scan journals, technical reports, and anything else sent from southern Europe in search of innovations in ship design. When she first saw the job advertisement looking for someone with multiple language skills and an intimate knowledge of ships, she nearly levitated with excitement. Her first two years after leaving the orphanage were difficult, laboring at the fish canneries and packing tins with salted mackerel until she couldn't see straight. It was monotonous, smelly work, and at the end of the week she was barely able to pay the rent on a room in a boardinghouse, which was why she was so eager to land the job at the Navy Yard. The position called for someone who could read foreign documents and make sense of developments in ship design.

Lydia remembered everything about the sails, tack, and rigging of fishing boats, but when she first saw the imposing battle frigates in the Navy Yard, she wondered if she had overestimated her knowledge of ships.

Admiral Fontaine did not seem to care. A ruggedly attractive man who seemed far too young to have attained the status of admiral, he merely shrugged. "I can teach you the particulars of warships easier than I can train someone in half a dozen languages," he had said. "You are hired."

Who could have believed it? The little girl from Greece who grew up on rickety fishing boats and never had a decent pair of shoes was now a trusted assistant to an admiral in the United States Navy. Each day she walked past acres of towering ships docked in the Navy Yard before reporting to work. The office had a view over

the dry docks where navy cruisers and battleships were overhauled and refitted for service.

And Lydia knew her job was vitally important. At the end of the Civil War in 1865, funding for the U.S. Navy had been slashed to the bone as resources were funneled to the army for a massive westward expansion. Other than providing basic coverage of domestic ports, the government lost interest in maintaining a navy. In the midst of one of the greatest technological booms in history, the U.S. Navy became stagnant while the maritime nations of Europe poured funding into ironclads, steamers, torpedoes, and long-range artillery.

It was only after an embarrassing incident when the United States was forced to back down from the Chilean navy that Congress was driven to act. A bureau to collect intelligence on foreign naval technology was created. Naval attachés were sent all across Europe to research shipbuilding technology. Most of the research was aboveboard, but some of it was clandestinely gathered. Whenever those officers found printed material of interest, they sent it home to Admiral Fontaine for a complete translation into English. Each week Lydia received stacks of newspaper clippings, product manuals, and technical journals. She translated, cross-referenced, and indexed every scrap of it.

Watching and trying to play catch-up with the great maritime powers was hardly the way to achieve naval superiority, but at least it provided funding for the team of translators sitting directly outside Admiral Fontaine's office.

"This Russian turret looks a bit like what the British use, don't you think?" Lydia asked Willis, turning the page of the pamphlet to show him the rest of the article, but he cringed and clasped both hands to his forehead.

"Lydia, please. The noise of that paper crackling is like knives

across my skin." Yesterday the scent of the juice she had been drinking made him dizzy, and last week he complained that the weight of the air was making him suffer a rash. Yet when Admiral Fontaine was in the room, Willis always seemed to be as hardy as a mountain goat.

Lydia lowered the tone of her voice, which often placated Willis, and tried again. "Is this turret the same as what the British have, or is it something entirely new?"

"It is not new," Karl Olavstad said from his desk on the opposite side of the office. "The Norwegians have had such a turret for at least three years."

Karl handled the translation work from northern Europe and Scandinavia, while a young man named Jacob Frankenberg tracked western European developments. Willis was a naval historian from London, and his command of shipbuilding throughout the world was unparalleled. He kept track of developments in the British navy and provided insight for everything the team of translators brought to him.

"The Norwegians copied it from the British," Willis said in a tired voice. "The Norwegian navy would sink to the bottom of the sea if they could not emulate the British."

Lydia propped her hip against the side of Willis's desk, eager to see how Karl would respond to the salvo. When she first started work at the Navy Yard, the jousting between her officemates had confused and alarmed her. At the Crakken Orphanage when disagreements broke out among the children, Lydia ran for cover in the broom closet, but she soon learned Karl and Willis enjoyed matching wits.

"Let us hope the Norwegians don't start emulating British cuisine," Karl said. "They would perish from the sheer monotony of boiled cabbage, boiled peas, and boiled beef."

From his desk beside the window overlooking the dry docks, Jacob set down his German newspaper and joined the fray. "Don't forget boiled tongue," he said with a shudder. "The only time Willis invited me to his home, his wife served boiled tongue and pickled onions. I had only been in this country two weeks, and it almost sent me rushing back home to Salzburg."

Lydia knew it would never happen. Every person in this office was an immigrant, and yet each of them had already planted roots as tenacious as those of a mighty oak tree into the rich Boston soil. Was it because she had never had a place to call home that Lydia was so fiercely loyal to Boston and her employment at the Navy Yard? Her respect for Admiral Fontaine certainly had something to do with her pride in working here, but it was more than that. After years of anxiety and loneliness, first at the orphanage and then at the canneries, she had at last found a sense of belonging within the bustling harbor of the Navy Yard. Jacob, Karl, and even the maddening Willis were like a family to her, and she thrived amidst their unconventional friendship.

"What is the proper name of this gun turret?" she asked Willis. "And can you tell me if the gun is smooth-bore or rifled?"

Willis pinched the skin at the top of his nose. "Just tell the admiral it is a Hotchkiss quick-firing gun, modified for shipboard use. That will be adequate for his purposes."

Lydia fidgeted. She didn't want her reports to be merely adequate; she wanted them flawless. The report was due by the end of the day, and she needed Willis to cooperate. His teacup was empty, and she knew how much the man adored his Earl Grey blend.

"How about I brew you another cup of tea?" she asked Willis. "By the time I have the water heated, perhaps you can have a list for me of every British and Norwegian ship with the same type of Hotchkiss gun?"

"Deal," Willis agreed, as she knew he would. The office had a coal-heated burner in the corner of the room, which helped satisfy Willis's roaring dependency on Earl Grey tea. Lydia opened the trapdoor of the heater and added a few more coals.

"You could afford to ease up a bit, Lydia," Jacob said. "Not every report needs to be footnoted, cross-referenced, and triple-checked. You'll make the rest of us look bad. Besides, maybe the admiral fancies a girl who can relax for once."

Heat flooded her cheeks. That was the second time this month Jacob teased her about liking Admiral Fontaine a little too much. Which was ridiculous. "Jacob, your adolescent imagination is running away again."

"Come on, Lydia. Plenty of girls are carrying a torch for Admiral Fontaine," Jacob said. "The lonely widower. Powerful. Rich as sin. Half the girls in Boston are crying into their pillows over him."

She closed the door of the burner with a clang. Okay, maybe she had a tiny case of hero-worship for the admiral, but never once had she toyed with any ridiculous fantasies. Besides, the admiral's office was directly behind her, and for all she knew, he could be listening to every word. "First of all," she said tightly, "I never cry. Ever. And I haven't prepared my reports for the admiral with any more care than the rest of you."

Karl did not even lift his nose from where it was buried in the open pages of a Norwegian newspaper, but his voice was pointed. "You learned Albanian for him."

Jacob pounced on the opening. "Yeah, Lydia, you learned Albanian for him!"

She gritted her teeth. She hadn't learned Albanian for the admiral; she did it because they had a language deficit in the office and she was the one most likely to quickly master the language. It didn't mean she carried a torch for the admiral, and she couldn't

afford to let this sort of talk get out of hand. She set the water in the kettle to heat, then moved to stand beside Jacob's desk. "Please, *please* don't tease me about this," she said, her voice uncharacteristically serious. "You don't know how hard it is for a woman to find professional employment, and any whiff of gossip could cost me my job. Can you understand that?"

Jacob blanched. He didn't have a mean bone in his scrawny body and never considered what his teasing could do to her. "Okay, sorry, Lydia," he quickly agreed, pushing his round spectacles higher up on his nose. "I'm sorry if I said anything—you know—stupid."

Now Lydia felt guilty for scolding. "No man who reads six languages is stupid." She gave him a cuff on the arm. "You idiot."

She returned to tend to the teakettle and added more water. "Make a whole pot, please," Karl said. "The Adonis is coming this afternoon, and you know how surly the admiral is after those meetings."

Her hands froze on the kettle. It was never a good thing when *that man* came to see the admiral.

His name was Lieutenant Alexander Banebridge, but Karl had dubbed him "The Adonis" because of the man's ridiculous beauty. None of them understood his mysterious business at the Navy Yard, but after each visit, the admiral was always grim and pensive. Moody, even. Anyone who caused the famously even-tempered Admiral Fontaine to become surly was someone Lydia instinctively mistrusted.

Lydia suspected Lieutenant Banebridge might be one of the foreign attachés funneling them reports about overseas ships, but there was no way for her to know. The man never said a single word to her. He merely breezed into the admiral's office and left a pall behind him with each meeting.

She couldn't afford to worry about the admiral's mysterious

visitor. After setting the kettle over the burner, she opened the canister of tea and let the scent soothe her. If she lived to be one hundred, she would always love the mild scent of Earl Grey tea. Was it because it reminded her of the office? For the first time in her life, she had a job she loved and earned a respectable salary that allowed her to afford a safe apartment of her very own. That apartment had a solid floor, a ceiling that did not leak, and allowed her to fall asleep without fear of vicious children stealing her shoes if she took them off before going to bed.

The door of the office flew open, banging against the wall with a crash. Lydia was stunned to see Big John, the man who owned the coffeehouse on the ground floor of the building where she lived. His face was flushed, and he was barely able to get enough air into his lungs.

"Lydia, you are being evicted," he said on a ragged breath.

Lydia dropped the canister, scattering loose tea leaves across the floor. "What?" The word escaped from her throat in an ungainly screech.

"Workmen just arrived," he said. "They started putting your furniture on the street outside the building. I told them they can't evict you yet, but they started anyway."

"They can't do this! I have papers saying I can stay. Admiral Fontaine drew them up himself." Panic flooded her at the thought of losing her home. It was more than mere sentimentality tying her to her modest fourth-floor apartment in a building improbably named the Laughing Dragon. That apartment was her *sanctuary*, the first home in her entire life where Lydia felt completely safe.

She needed to get home right away. "Tell the admiral what is happening," she called to Jacob as she raced out the door, then clattered down the office staircase and into the street. She hauled

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up her skirts and ran as if her life depended on it . . . which it rather did. Since the morning she left the orphanage, she had devoted every hour of her day to earning enough money to create a stable home for herself. Now that she finally had it, she would battle all the plagues of Egypt to keep it.



ydia shouldered through dense foot traffic as she ran across the Charlestown Bridge, then cut through the lawn of the Old North Church. A stitch in her side pinched harder as she ran down crooked alleys and twisty cobblestone streets toward home. It was a mile before she reached the Laughing Dragon, where her armoire was on the street alongside wadded-up piles of her bedding. Two workmen were navigating her mattress out the front door. Mrs. Brandenberg stood on the curb with a notebook, making notations as she scanned Lydia's belongings.

"What are you doing?" Lydia managed to gasp as she skidded to a stop. She was panting so hard she could barely stand upright. "You can't throw me out; we have an agreement."

Mrs. Brandenberg tightened her lips. "Miss Pallas, you have not lived up to the terms of our agreement and are therefore a trespasser. You are being evicted."

Last month the Laughing Dragon had been sold to the Brandenbergs, and they had no interest in leasing either the apartments or the coffeehouse on the ground floor. The tenants needed to purchase their unit or leave immediately. Since Admiral Fontaine had a law degree from Harvard, she had instinctively run to him for help the moment she saw that awful notice. He scrutinized the eviction notice and found a loophole the new owners had failed to close. The admiral helped Lydia negotiate for additional time to come up with the funds to purchase her apartment, and in exchange she was to provide minor clerical services for the new owners. She still had four months to come up with an additional six hundred dollars to purchase her apartment, or else she would lose the only decent home she had ever known.

Her desk had not been brought down yet. The papers proving she had until December to buy the apartment were in the top desk drawer. "I've done everything outlined in the agreement. I'm going upstairs to get the contract."

Mrs. Brandenberg's beefy arm shot out to block her path. "Not if it requires entering the building. This is private property and you have no right to enter the premises. Mr. Brandenberg paid a visit to your bank this morning, and there is no evidence you are anywhere near securing the necessary funds to purchase this apartment."

It was true, her odds of earning six hundred dollars in the next four months were slim. She earned thirty dollars per week at the Navy Yard, but after expenses, she could save no more than five dollars each week. She had been taking in extra translating work wherever she could find it, but it was unlikely she could earn enough money before the end of the year, and the Brandenbergs knew it.

"Now step aside, Miss Pallas," Mrs. Brandenberg said. "It will be easier on all parties for you to leave the apartment today."

"Easier?" Lydia asked. "I think you will *sleep* easier if you abide by the document you signed last month." But as another workman tossed a heap of drapery beside her mattress, a wave of anguish swelled inside. She had sewn those drapes with her own two hands, and her cherished possessions, the symbols of all she had managed to achieve in the years since leaving the Crakken Orphanage, were dumped on the dusty street like mounds of abandoned trash. Perhaps in a few months she really would be forced out of her home, but she wasn't going to surrender yet.

And then she saw him coming. Pedestrians moved to the side of the street and children stopped to stare as a fine black stallion moved toward them at a brisk trot. Admiral Eric Fontaine, dressed in full military uniform with epaulets and a high starched collar, was riding to her rescue. With those fierce eyes and his crisp military bearing, the admiral was the sort of commander who could glare down legions of invading Persians at the pass of Thermopylae. He was a bit too rugged to be considered classically handsome, with dark hair and a weather-beaten face so deeply tanned it made his pale gray eyes gleam like chips of ice.

Lydia watched as Mrs. Brandenberg's confidence shriveled like autumn leaves in a gale-force wind. The supercilious look fled, replaced by fawning deference as the admiral drew near.

"Mrs. Brandenberg, perhaps there was a misunderstanding as to the terms of the agreement I drew up for Miss Pallas," the admiral said as he swung down from his horse. His tone was faultlessly polite, but there was iron beneath the words.

Mrs. Brandenberg smoothed a lock of hair that had slipped from its moorings and cleared her throat. She gave a fawning little curtsey. "Good morning, Admiral. Commandant. Sir."

As Commandant of the Boston Navy Yard, civilians were often unsure exactly what to call Admiral Fontaine, but he preferred to be known by his rank. With over two thousand sailors and civilians employed at the Navy Yard, the fact that Lydia was even personally acquainted with Admiral Fontaine was unusual, but the office of foreign translators had been his idea, and with office space in the

Navy Yard scarce, they had been tucked into the reception room immediately outside his office.

The expression on her employer's face did not waver as he surveyed the sorry heap of her belongings piled in the street. "It would be a shame if you suffered the consequences of an unlawful eviction. Miss Pallas has full legal right to maintain her current place of residence for . . ."

The admiral struggled to remember the details of the contract he had worked out for her, so Lydia stood on tiptoe to whisper in his ear. "For another four months," she supplied.

"Four months," the admiral said. "And at the end of four months, she is entitled to . . . "

"Another two weeks to clear the premises," Lydia whispered.

Admiral Fontaine nodded. "She is allowed another two weeks to clear out. She must be served official notice as well, so don't neglect that, or we can reopen the case. Are we clear on that, Mrs. Brandenberg?"

Mrs. Brandenberg struggled to maintain a serene expression on her face. "Of course!" she said brightly. "You and I are in agreement as to the dates of the contract. *Complete agreement!* The problem is Miss Pallas's lack of cooperation with the rest of the agreement. In exchange for additional time to purchase her unit, she was to provide clerical services to Mr. Brandenberg. She has not done so, and we are *forced* to take this action."

The admiral's gaze swiveled to Lydia. "Miss Pallas? Is this true?"

Lydia worked hard to keep the anger from her voice. "I have done every bit of clerical work requested of me. I have also walked their dog, gone to the market, baby-sat the children, and ironed Mr. Brandenberg's shirts. Last night I declined Mrs. Brandenberg's invitation to bathe her children. I believe this might be the cause of the trouble."

The admiral said nothing, just turned his piercing gray eyes to Mrs. Brandenberg for her response. When it did not immediately come, he arrived at his own conclusion. "Your husband agreed to provide an extension on Miss Pallas's lease because his original eviction was illegal and he knew it. The agreement was for Miss Pallas to provide *minor* clerical services. You cannot break the contract by making unreasonable demands of Miss Pallas. Is that clear?" Up until then, the admiral's voice had been calm and methodical. When Mrs. Brandenberg failed to answer, his voice lashed out like a whip. "Is that clear, ma'am?"

Mrs. Brandenberg nearly jumped from her skin. "Yes, of course!"

"Excellent. Have your men return Miss Pallas's furnishings to their proper place. I'm sure I do not need to state the legal remedies she will be entitled to should any damage to her belongings occur between here and her apartment, do I."

It was a statement, not a question.

"No, sir." After a brief, heated glare at Lydia, Mrs. Brandenberg ordered the workers to carry Lydia's belongings back up to her fourth-floor apartment.

Admiral Fontaine was already mounting his horse when Lydia walked up to thank him. This was the second time he had come through for her. When she had first seen that awful legal notice tacked to her front door, she had panicked and instinctively rushed to him to interpret it for her. Not only had he explained the mass of legal intricacies, he had offered to represent her for free in negotiating additional time to purchase her apartment. How many employers would have performed such an act of sheer human decency? Lydia shaded her eyes as she looked up at him.

"I hope it is not becoming tedious, saving me at the last moment like this," she said. "You must be getting awfully tired of riding to my rescue." "Indeed. Next time I shall shriek and flee in the opposite direction."

Lydia bit her lip, never quite certain when he was joking. Lydia was about to respond, but her gaze was snagged when a workman hoisted her bedside table over one shoulder while scooping up a pile of her bedding under a thick arm. She tried not to wince, but it was painful to see her belongings treated so carelessly.

"Take a few hours to put things to right," Admiral Fontaine said. One corner of his mouth tilted in an almost infinitesimal smile. "I know your quirks will render you completely useless in discerning the finer points of naval armaments until your belongings have been restored to meticulous order. Good day, Miss Pallas." With a flick of his heels, the horse sprang into a trot as he turned the stallion back toward the Navy Yard.

Lydia noticed that every female eye on the street was trained on the admiral. There was no doubt he was the most eligible bachelor in all of Boston. Or all of New England, for that matter. Maybe even the United States, if one wanted to be very precise. The admiral was attractive, but he was also the most formal, rigidly proper man in all of Boston. Karl once said the navy must have used so much starch in his uniforms that it seeped into the admiral's skin. And even though everyone in the office teased her about her hopeless case of hero-worship, Lydia never truly had any designs on the admiral. Frankly, she was too in awe to ever feel comfortable around him.

Nevertheless, she was grateful for the time he had given her to restore her possessions to their proper place, for the admiral had read her correctly. Order was important to Lydia, and she drew a steadying breath before opening the door of her apartment. She cringed at the sight of her clothing piled in an ungainly heap on the sofa, but at least her furniture was back where it belonged.

She clutched a volume about the travels of Lewis and Clark to her chest before setting it back on her bookshelf. In her two years working at the canneries, books had been her only luxury. The noise and stench and monotony of packing salted mackerel was bearable only because at the end of the day she could escape into the wilds of the Dakota Territories with intrepid explorers. Or gaze at her book of great architecture of the world, with countless etchings of castles, cathedrals, and mighty fortresses. These books had been her salvation during those bleak years, and she handled them gently as she set them back in their proper place.

On her windowsill she arranged her bottles. Two bottles of perfume in squat little flacons in the center, then the jar of skin cream for cold New England winters. And then a dark blue bottle of her headache medicine. She uncapped the bottle and took a sip of the syrupy liquid, hoping it would ease the pounding headache caused by the prospect of losing her home.

She clutched the bottle in her hand as she looked out the window to the street below. The three flights of stairs she walked up each day were no bother, for where else would she have such a spectacular view of the harbor? She loved every weather-beaten flowerbox lining the tidy shops, the lobster boats bobbing in the harbor, and the sound of herring gulls on the morning air. From this window she could see the ships sailing in and out of the harbor. They came from Antwerp, Rotterdam, Cuba, and Quebec. Some came from the sparkling waters of the Adriatic, which Lydia once called home. It had been years since she had longed for the warm waters of the Mediterranean islands. Boston was her home now. She had no sense of wanderlust nor any desire to venture outside of this neighborhood. This was her *home* and she would do whatever was necessary to preserve it.



It was after lunch by the time Lydia returned to work. The walk was over a mile, and she was tired after making the journey for the third time in one day.

Willis weighed in immediately. "I should have thought Admiral Fontaine would have provided you with transportation back to the shipyard." Which showed Willis was not the best judge of human character, as Admiral Fontaine would never do anything to cast a shadow on his sterling reputation. Riding a horse with an unmarried woman clinging behind him would definitely qualify as improper.

"He thoughtfully allowed me a bit of time to restore my apartment to order," Lydia said as she lowered herself into her desk chair. She went through the ritual of straightening her dictionaries, ink bottles, and pictures, and was prepared to get back to work, but both Karl and Jacob gathered beside her desk.

"Is everything all right, Lydia?" Karl asked gently, just a trace of a Norwegian accent lingering in his voice.

"Perfectly fine," she said with more confidence than she felt. Everything was perfectly fine *today*, but she would be in this same situation in December if she could not earn an additional six hundred dollars.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Karl asked. Everyone in the office knew her situation, and Karl had offered to loan her fifty dollars if it would help, but Lydia would never accept it. Karl had a wife and four children, and that fifty dollars was probably the only buffer he had. Jacob had offered a few dollars as well, but he was saving every dime so he could bring his parents and sisters over from Salzburg.

"Thank you for the offer, Karl, but I'll be fine," she said. Karl nodded and returned to his desk, but Jacob lingered. He had always been like a brother to her, and she could not truly hide her feelings from Jacob.

He squatted on his haunches beside her chair. "You'll tell me if things get really bad, won't you?" he asked quietly. "There is a rooming house near the canneries that accepts women, and maybe I could help you find a place there."

"I'll find the money somehow," she said with more confidence than she felt. She knew the tenement of which Jacob was speaking, and the specter of sliding back into a life of squalor was too wretched to contemplate. She pulled the Russian pamphlet toward her and was relieved to see that Willis had provided the list of British and Norwegian warships as she had asked. In the corner, someone had cleaned up the tea leaves she had scattered. Everything was back to normal, and if she moved quickly, she still had a chance of completing this report before the end of the day. She would probably need to stay late, but she did not mind. A cup of tea would help keep her energy alive through the long afternoon. She walked to the corner table and was about to pour a cup when the door banged open.

The most oddly annoying man Lydia had ever encountered strolled into the office. The Adonis. She knew his name was Alexander Banebridge, although Lydia thought she had heard the admiral call him Alexander Christian once.

He was in full dress uniform. Blond hair framed a perfectly molded face that looked like it belonged to a warrior angel. Most arresting were the lieutenant's icy blue eyes, set above impossibly high cheekbones.

"Good afternoon, everyone," the lieutenant said as he weaved through the desks of the office, flashed a brief smile to Lydia, then rapped a quick knock on the admiral's door. Without waiting for an answer, he slipped inside and closed the door behind him.

Willis suppressed a delicate shudder. "I find the sight of that man's posture aggravating. It makes my spine ache just to look at him." Lydia tried not to laugh as she returned to her desk with her tea. She was about to sit down when she noticed something wrong. Her Russian pamphlets were where she left them and the foreign dictionaries were in precise order, tilted at a perfect forty-five-degree angle . . . but the ink bottles were wrong. She always kept them with blue first, then black, then red, but they were entirely out of order from the way they had been only moments ago.

"Did you touch my ink bottles?" she asked Jacob, who looked at her as if she had lost her mind.

"I would not dare disturb the fastidious order of anything on your desk," Jacob said.

Lydia glared at the closed door of the office where Lieutenant Banebridge had entered. Every time that man was in the office, something turned up askew at her desk. A picture was upside down or her dictionaries were no longer in alphabetical order. She had been staring straight at the man as he crossed through their office, but he still managed to tamper with her belongings and escape her notice. Lydia's mouth narrowed to a thin line as she rearranged the ink bottles, knowing it would be impossible to concentrate until they were in proper order.

"I really don't like that man," she muttered under her breath.

Karl looked up from the document he was translating on the far side of the room. "I have heard some strange things about him," he said. "My sister lives near the Canadian border in Vermont. She said the governor of Vermont wanted to build a bridge that would link up to Canada, but that Banebridge fellow showed up and objected. When the governor refused to stop the bridge, the crew who was building the bridge walked off the job. The governor brought in another crew, but Banebridge showed up a week later, and then they quit too. After that, no workers in the entire state were willing to do the job."

Lydia stared at Karl's grave face. What kind of power would it take to intimidate an entire team of workers to walk off their job? Lieutenant Banebridge did not seem physically big enough to threaten anyone. He was not that much taller than she, but he still seemed dangerous. A panther was not terribly large, but none of the other animals in the forest wanted to tangle with it.

"Why would the Adonis object to a bridge to Canada?" Jacob asked.

Karl shrugged. "Who knows? The following year the governor lost his bid for reelection and that bridge was never built."

Lydia stared at her ink bottles, the sun from the window casting a little glint along their shiny glass surface. She was almost embarrassed to ask, but the question came out before she could stifle it. "Has Lieutenant Banebridge ever tampered with anything on your desk?" she asked Jacob.

"I don't have anything on my desk worth stealing."

Lydia shook her head. "He has never stolen anything," she said. "He just disturbs things. Moves my pencil cup where it does not belong, turns a dictionary upside down. That sort of thing." She looked at Karl and Willis to see if they had experienced anything similar and got the same blank looks. She threw up her hands in frustration. "I have never exchanged a single word with that man, so why does he pick on me like this?"

"You are prettier than Willis?" Jacob offered. "Perhaps the Adonis is carrying a torch for you."

Lydia rolled her eyes. She supposed she was attractive enough, with red glints in her dark hair and cinnamon-colored eyes that people often complimented, but she was nowhere near the splendor of Lieutenant Banebridge's perfection. "Men like him have no interest in mere mortals," she said. "Besides, any man with feelings for me ought to go paint the cabinets in my apartment. *That* would

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get much better results." She glowered at the closed door leading to Admiral Fontaine's private office. How was it possible the man sent her off-kilter merely by striding through her office? Other than his bizarre quirk of tampering with her desk each time he came to see the admiral, they had no communication whatsoever.

Then again, even Admiral Fontaine seemed to be in a foul mood each time the man darkened their office. Perhaps Lieutenant Banebridge simply had a talent for sowing discord wherever he went.



he numbers did not add up. No matter how many times Lydia tallied the figures or trimmed her budget, she simply could not make the numbers work. Which meant that she needed to start earning twice as much money as she currently made or face eviction from the only decent home she had ever known.

"Let me top off that chowder for you." A gnarled hand reached across the surface of the mahogany counter as Big John took her empty bowl to the cooking pot for a refill. "It's on the house," he said as he slid it back to her.

Lydia tried not to smile. "I'm not that poor."

"The new owner will never know," Big John said as he flashed her a wink. Last week Big John's purchase of the Laughing Dragon Coffeehouse had been finalized, but he had taken on a hefty debt to make the deal go through. As he pushed the bowl of steaming clam chowder across the counter toward her, Lydia knew it would be rude not to accept the gesture of kindness, even though she cringed at the implication.

She and Big John shared the same dilemma. Both of them had

lived in this waterfront building for years. John operated the popular coffeehouse on the first floor, and Lydia lived in one of the many apartments on the top floor of the building.

Big John had been sweating bullets for weeks, but he had at last succeeded in getting a loan to buy the coffeehouse. The Laughing Dragon was more than a place for a mug of coffee or a quick dinner. It was a place where merchants sold cargo, politicians planned strategy, and off-duty sailors played chess and traded stories. The century-old coffeehouse was lined with dark mahogany and old brass fittings. The walls of the public room were covered with schedules displaying the arrival and departure of ships. The Laughing Dragon also served the best New England clam chowder in town, with just the right amount of hickory-smoked bacon to season the thick broth of cream and potatoes. Lydia's apartment had no kitchen and she took all her meals at the battered mahogany countertop of the Laughing Dragon.

She turned her attention back to the figures. She was used to working amidst the steady din of background noise of the coffee-house, so it seemed strange when the noise dwindled away. The drone of laughter and conversation tapered off, a busy waitress stopped her order in midsentence, and even the fiddlers in the corner stopped playing. Lydia looked up to see what had caused the drop in conversation.

Oh my, my.

What was Lieutenant Banebridge doing at the Laughing Dragon? His crystalline blue gaze sliced through the dwindling twilight that illuminated the coffeehouse as he scanned the occupants. The man was not particularly tall. Indeed, compared to the oversized longshoremen who filled the room, he seemed almost slight, but he radiated a calm sense of power as he navigated through the cluster of tables and barrels, and headed toward the serving counter.

Lydia's eyes widened as his gaze riveted on her. A hint of a smile lifted the corner of his perfectly shaped mouth, and Lydia's breath froze as he strode directly to her.

"Lydia Pallas?" he asked as he slid onto the vacant stool next to her. How did he know her name? It was the first time he had ever spoken directly to her, and she wondered how he knew where she lived. All she could do was nod.

"I hear you read Turkish," he said as though that were an entirely natural opening line. "Eric recommended you as someone who was willing to pick up a little translation work on the side."

It took her a moment to process what he had said. "Eric? Do you mean Admiral Fontaine?"

"Yes, Admiral Fontaine. He said you have a remarkable ability with languages."

"I've never heard anyone refer to him as 'Eric' before," she said. "It would be like calling Queen Victoria 'Vickie." She glanced at the insignia on his uniform. "And I certainly did not think that lieutenants ever called admirals by their first name."

That lazy smile could probably slay damsels at a thousand yards. "I don't report to Eric. He is a friend, not someone in my chain of command. I am Alex Banebridge, but everyone just calls me Bane. Eric said you might be able to help me with these."

The lieutenant reached inside a satchel and pulled forth a foul-looking heap of papers that seemed to have been pulled from a pile of garbage. They smelled that way too, but the lieutenant was quite charming as he apologized for the state of the papers—his housekeeper had accidentally tossed them out before he could rescue them—and said he needed a translator and was willing to pay her extra, given the shoddy condition of the papers.

Ever since that awful eviction notice had been tacked to her front door, Lydia had been taking in extra translating work wherever she

could find it. The work usually came from a local newspaper that wanted to reprint stories about the Italian opera or the never-ending conflicts between Greece and Turkey. It was odd for a complete stranger to approach her with work. Especially a man so attractive and who stared at her as if she was an object of immense fascination. Men that stunningly handsome simply did not pay attention to girls like her.

Then she caught herself. Was she actually considering turning down a job merely because the man was *attractive*? She straightened her shoulders and pulled the ratty stack of papers toward her. A glance at the top sheet revealed a tidy row of Turkish script.

"Certainly I can translate these. When do you require them back?"

"Tomorrow. I'm leaving for Philadelphia tomorrow night and I'll need these before then."

Her heart plummeted. "Impossible. The very soonest I can have them for you is sometime this weekend."

And that was because she was committed to be at the Brandenbergs' doing clerical work until ten o'clock tonight, leaving precious little time to work on translation. Thumbing through the stack of Turkish documents, Lydia figured the job would require around six hours. But if this man needed them in a hurry . . .

"How much will you pay me?"

"Five dollars. Plus an extra two on account of the shabby condition."

Lydia shook her head. "Not possible. I'll need at least twenty dollars if I am to forgo a night of sleep over this."

"Twenty dollars would pay your salary for an entire week!"

"It will also pay for an overnight translation." She needed that money and was determined to fight for it. With a casual glance she scanned the other customers in the coffeehouse. "Perhaps someone else could do it? Let's see. Paddy O'Malley, playing chess in the corner, is always looking for work. Perhaps you can ask him. Or better yet, there is a school of architecture just down the street. Perhaps they've got some Turkish translators with a bit of time on their hands."

The way the lieutenant lounged against the side of the counter and kept his blue gaze riveted on her reminded her of a cat watching a canary. "Careful, Miss Pallas," he said. "I'm starting to get the impression you might be a bit on the miserly side. And such a fetching young lady. What a shame."

"I prefer to call it thrifty."

"Mingy is what they call it in the navy. You've got it written all over you." She really ought to take offense, but he was so charming as he said it she was tempted to laugh. She forced herself to remain calm.

"Twenty dollars will persuade this mingy young lady to forgo the comforts of sleep tonight. Nineteen dollars will not." She pretended to savor a spoonful of chowder, silently praying she had not pushed too hard. She was demanding a shocking fee, but modesty was not going to accumulate six hundred dollars before the end of the year.

"Come now," he said in a coaxing manner. "I've seen ten-yearolds forgo a night of sleep in order to see Santa Claus. Surely you are up to the task."

"Did any of those ten-year-olds read Turkish?"

She had him there, and the lieutenant's eyes narrowed in amused frustration. What a shocking shade of crystal blue, with the tiniest bit of light gray around the irises. There was no doubt this man could charm the birds out of the trees, but she still didn't quite trust him. She was certain he sometimes used another surname, and what sort of honest man needed more than one name?

"Why does the admiral sometimes call you Alexander Banebridge and sometimes call you Alexander Christian?" The question

popped from her mouth before she could call it back. She needed the twenty dollars more than she cared about his use of an alias, yet the lieutenant did not seem to mind her impertinence; he just sent her a lazy smile and leaned in a little closer to her.

"Now, Miss Pallas, we were discussing the flaws in your character, not the trivial inconsistencies in my life story. Tragic, the way young people today are so obsessed with money. I am surprised you are able to sleep at night. Fifteen dollars for an overnight translation." He nudged the stack of papers a few inches closer to her.

Lydia would have taken the job for five dollars, but she could not afford timidity if she wished to save her home. She pushed them back. "I'm trying to eat, and those pages smell like they were used to collect cat droppings." She feigned an air of nonchalance, knowing he would never meet her price if she appeared too desperate for the cash.

She took her time to polish off the chowder, then rose to her feet. "It's been a pleasure finally meeting you, Lieutenant Banebridge. Or Bane, if you prefer. I'm sure you will be flattered to know that my co-workers call you 'The Adonis,' so you can add that to your string of names if you choose." She held her breath as she began walking toward the door, hoping she had not driven too steep a bargain.

She walked only three steps when he slid in front of her, pushed the stack of papers into her hands, and reached for his billfold. Lydia tried to suppress the surge of triumph from showing as he extracted a ten-dollar bill. "Ten now, ten tomorrow evening," he said. "I'll meet you here to pick up the work."

He leaned a little closer and his voice was as warm and smooth as chocolate. "I'll be praying about your mingy ways," he whispered into her ear.

A completely irrational shiver raced through her, but before she could respond, the lieutenant straightened and Lydia stared at his ramrod straight posture as he strode from the room.