

The Captain and Mrs. Vye

by MaryAnn Diorio



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Book 1: THE CAPTAIN AND MRS. VYE by MaryAnn Diorio

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“It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man.”

~ Psalm 118: 8 KJV

Chapter One

Cape May, New Jersey

Monday, February 17, 1873

As she faced her husband in the spacious sitting room of their home, Loretta Vye's fragile hold on joy slipped. Her stomach tensed as she clutched the gold cross around her neck, a gift from her late mother on Loretta's eighth birthday. She always grabbed hold of it when she was upset. "You're leaving again? When?"

"Tomorrow, my dear."

"Tomorrow?" Her voice rose several decibels.

A frown darkened his angular face. "Yes, dear." He turned away from her momentarily, clasping his hands behind his back, and then faced her again. "An urgent situation has arisen that requires I leave immediately."

Her muscles stiffened as she moved closer to him. "But, Edward, do you realize you'll miss your fiftieth birthday celebration? I've been planning it for months. I chose the date precisely because you *would* be here." She curled her lips into a pout. "You promised me as much."

Edward took her gently by the shoulders and drew her toward himself. "I'm terribly sorry, my dear."

"But, Edward, the party is this coming Saturday. Can you not wait a few more days?"

He took her into his arms. "I'm afraid not, Loretta." He dipped his brows. "I'd hoped I could avoid saying this, but if I don't go now, it could put our finances in jeopardy." He nestled his chin into her hair. "Perhaps we can postpone the birthday celebration."

Bile rose to her throat. "And place ourselves in a position of utter humiliation? Impossible! All arrangements have been made, and invitations have been sent."

"But why would it be humiliating?"

She pulled back and glared at him. "Edward, just think of it. Some people have arranged to travel quite a distance to join us. Some from as far away as Tennessee and Oklahoma. They've reserved hotels, hired carriages and drivers, purchased train tickets,

and arranged for the care of small children while they are away. Postponing would require that they undo all they've painstakingly done.”

Edward nodded. “I suppose you're right. But I simply cannot postpone my trip.”

Loretta swallowed hard. “And where are you going this time?”

“To Liverpool.”

“Liverpool?” She stepped away from him, folded her arms tightly across her chest, and walked to the window, afraid of speaking words she would later regret.

“Yes, Liverpool. I leave by carriage for New York tomorrow. My ship leaves New York Harbor at three pm the next day and arrives in Liverpool nine days later.”

Loretta's blood boiled as she turned toward him. “Oh, Edward! How could you do this to me?”

The veins in his neck twitched. “Well, I did not do it deliberately, my dear. When I last communicated with the British office, things were going well. But this sudden turn of events could jeopardize our financial livelihood for the rest of our lives.”

The concern in Edward's voice struck her with the seriousness of the matter. She forced herself to calm down. “I suppose we do need to think of our future, don't we?”

He approached her and, taking her into his arms again, caressed the back of her long blond tresses. “Darling, it is for you I am doing this. What kind of husband would I be if I did not provide for my own wife?”

Edward always had a way of turning an argument to his advantage. Loretta placed her palms on his chest. “You are a good husband, Edward. And I'm grateful for that.” She released a long sigh. “I'll manage the birthday party without you. We shall celebrate your fiftieth birthday with you *in absentia*.” A sardonic chuckle escaped her lips. “I'll ask Molly to help me entertain the guests. I don't think she'd mind earning a few extra dollars.”

Edward smiled. “That's my girl. I'm sure that Molly will be of great help to you. And that you all will have a delightful time without me.”

Loretta's heart sank. “I daresay you don't know what you're talking about. How can I have a delightful time without you? And at your birthday party, no less?”

He tapped the tip of her nose. “You will figure that out, my dear.” He gave her a wink. “Now, I must get to packing my bag. I want to be sure I take everything I'm going to need.”

Guilt gripped her. “Is there anything I can do to help you?”

“No, darling. You have enough to do planning my birthday party.” He offered another wink. “I'll finish packing in short order, and then we can have a quiet dinner on the veranda.”

In a moment, Edward was gone, obviously not noticing the tear trickling down Loretta's cheek. Of all times for him to have to leave on urgent business. For months now, Loretta had been looking forward to his fiftieth birthday party celebration, delighted that he would be home to participate in it. His business took him away so often that she was beginning to feel like a widow. With no children blessing their home, her life had become lonely and bereft of purpose.

She sighed and scolded herself for allowing even the slightest hint of self-pity to enter her mind. After all, despite her arranged marriage, she was grateful for Edward's protection and provision. He was a good husband, and she had no complaints. Other than that she rarely saw him. Yes, his business endeavors had created a very pleasant lifestyle for her. But what was lifestyle without one's loved one to share it?

She sank into the nearest chair. So much for pleading with her husband. Pleading never got her anywhere with Edward. When he made up his mind to do something, there was no changing it. She'd best stop trying, or else she'd incur his enmity, if not his wrath.

At the sound of Molly's voice, Loretta rose from the chair, her muscles relaxing.

"A good afternoon to ya, Mrs. Vye."

"And to you as well, dear Molly."

Molly was the breath of fresh air in Loretta's lonely life. Although Molly was employed as the maid, Loretta treated her like her own child, showering her with favor she would not otherwise have granted to any other young girl in her employ.

Molly curtsied. "Mr. Vye has arranged for me to serve dinner on the veranda this evening."

"Yes, thank you."

"If it be not a problem, ma'am, may I have your permission to leave right afterward?"

Loretta pressed her lips into a playful smirk. "Does it have anything to do with that new beau of yours?"

Molly's face turned crimson. "Yes, ma'am. I must confess it does."

"Then of course you may leave early." Loretta smiled. "Far be it from me ever to stand in the way of love."

The maid's face broke into a broad grin. "Oh, Mrs. Vye! There is no finer mistress than yourself. I'm much obliged to you."

Loretta pressed her lips into a playful smirk. "I have an even better idea. Why don't you leave now? I'll take care of everything. It's been a long time since I've had the pleasure of serving dinner to my husband. Besides, he will be leaving tomorrow for Liverpool. I think it would be rather enjoyable to wait on him this evening."

A shadow passed over Molly's face. "The master will be leavin' tomorrow?"

Loretta's heart grew heavy. "Yes, I'm afraid so. And I don't know how long he will be gone."

"I'm sorry, ma'am." Molly frowned.

"I am, too. So very sorry. I fear I am quite incapable of managing without him. Mr. Vye is the decision-maker in our marriage. I simply follow his lead."

Molly furrowed her brow. "But, ma'am, may I be so bold as to venture an opinion?"

"Of course, my dear."

Molly squared her jaw. "Women can be quite as competent as men. And, if I dare say, perhaps even more so."

Loretta raised an eyebrow. “Ah, my dear Molly, you've been listening to those shouting women with their new-fangled ideas about our fair gender. What do they call themselves? Suffragists? Or something of the sort? Whatever their name, they are not only affirming their equality with men—they are trying to usurp their position.” Loretta sighed. “Besides, the Good Book says that women must be submissive.”

Molly's face flushed. “Not meanin' any disrespect, ma'am, but women are, indeed, equal to men, in value if not in function. And, as for submission, there's a difference between submittin' and submergin' oneself to the point of denying who one is.”

Loretta sighed. “Well, I suppose so. But as far as competence in making major decisions, I would say that men are much the wiser.”

Molly's face twitched before she straightened out her expression. “Beggin' your pardon, Mrs. Vye, but I think it's the other way around. Seems as though me dad relies on me mum pretty much for everything. Why, he can't even find his socks unless she comes to his rescue.” Molly giggled. “Anyway, we can agree to disagree agreeably.”

Loretta laughed. “That we can, dear Molly. That we can.”

Molly changed the subject. “What about Mr. Vye's birthday party, ma'am? Not meanin' any disrespect, but should he not be present at his own party?”

“Indeed, he should.” A hint of bitterness rode on the back of Loretta's words. “But certain things in life cannot be controlled. They must simply be accepted.”

Molly tilted her head. “That may be so, ma'am. But a lass is not compelled to accept everything that crosses her path. She has the ability to change some things.”

Loretta looked away. At one time, she herself had been as feisty and free as Molly. Once she, too, had considered herself capable and competent. But that was before her parents died. Mama had always told her she could do anything she put her mind to. Papa had encouraged her to pursue her dreams. What had changed? Had her parents' tragic death in a carriage accident and her subsequent move to live with Aunt Martha and Uncle Malcolm at the tender age of eight so crushed Loretta's spirit that she had lost her will to fight?

She gave Molly a motherly smile. “One day you'll understand. But for now, run along. And make sure you bring that beau of yours to meet me. He requires my approval, you know.”

Molly laughed. “Yes, Mrs. Vye. I will bring Sean by on the morrow, if you'd like.”

“Yes, that would be perfect. After Mr. Vye has left, I will need some distraction to ease my sorrow.”

And after that?

Loretta put her hand to her chest in a vain attempt to quell the gnawing ache.

* * * *

Tuesday morning, February 18, 1873

Jeremiah Collins unlocked the door between his living quarters and the front part of his fishing supply store. Today was the third anniversary of its opening, and he'd planned a celebration to thank his faithful customers for their support and to attract new customers.

Running a store was quite different from plying the high seas seeking his fortune in scaly silver, as he'd done for twenty-five years. After he'd married his beloved Anna Mae, he'd had to leave her behind for days, even weeks at a time.

A lump formed in his throat at the memory of her.

The injury he'd sustained when an anchor had fallen on his foot had forced him to leave behind his profession as a North Atlantic trawler captain to seek an easier trade. A constant limp attested to the brutal, if necessary, exchange.

He'd grown accustomed to the slower-paced life, yet, truth be told, he missed the adventure and excitement—and maybe even the danger—of the hunt.

He entered the front of the store, gently closing the door behind him. The musty smell of closed quarters struck his nostrils, eliciting a cough. He pulled up the shade and turned the sign in the window to indicate the store was open for business.

Burrows, his Calico cat, greeted him with a loud purr and a rub against the shin.

Jeremiah reached down to scratch her neck. “Good morning, Burrows. I see you're up bright and early.”

The cat looked up with questioning eyes.

“I know. I know. You're wanting your breakfast. Give a man a minute to settle in, will you?” He sighed. “You're like every other woman I know. Demanding and manipulative. Except for Anna Mae. I'm glad you're only a cat.” Jeremiah chuckled.

Burrows hunched her back and hissed.

“See? Just as I said. Demanding and manipulative.”

With a huff, Jeremiah made his way to the tiny kitchen at the back of the store. He reached into a cupboard, withdrew a small handful of scraps, and placed them in Burrows's bowl. “Here you go. Now, that should hold you over for a good while—at least, until I get myself settled.”

Jeremiah put on a pot of coffee and then went to the front of the store. Despite the cold temperatures, the day was brisk and clear. That meant people would be encouraged to come out and celebrate. He'd planned a few games for the children and a few prizes for the adults. He'd also put several items on sale.

As he placed the discounted items on the counter, the bell over the front door sounded.

“Mornin', Jeremiah.” Tom Brogan entered with a smile.

“Well, if it isn't my favorite customer.” Jeremiah grinned.

“Aw, you say that to every customer.”

Jeremiah feigned insult. “I do not.”

“It don't matter, my friend. I know I'm your favorite customer.”

“Well, I must be doing something right for you to feel that way.”

Tom gave Jeremiah a pat on the back. “You and I have been friends for comin' up on three years now, Jeremiah. You know I love joshin' you.”

Jeremiah chuckled. “Yes, I know.” He put his hands on his hips. “How about a cup of coffee? I just brewed it.”

“I smelled the aroma as soon as I walked in. A cup would suit me just fine.”

Jeremiah motioned to Tom to follow him to the back of the store. After preparing two cups of coffee, Jeremiah invited Tom to sit at the small kitchen table.

Jeremiah stretched his long legs in front of him, being careful to position his limp leg underneath his good one.

Tom took a sip of his coffee. “I got somethin' to show you.” He withdrew a small knife from the back pocket of his trousers. “Got meself this here knife for scalin' fish. Even had my initials engraved on it.” He handed the knife to Jeremiah.

Jeremiah turned it over in his hand a few times, examining its intricacies. “Nice-lookin' knife. Have you tried it out yet?” He handed the knife back to Tom.

“Yeah. Caught some flounder yesterday and skinned it with this knife. Did a pretty good job.”

“A pocket knife is a handy tool to carry.”

Tom replaced the knife in his back pocket. “So are you ready for the celebration?”

“I think so. The event will start at ten o'clock this morning and run until four o'clock this afternoon. I hope you can stick around for part of the time, at least.”

“I plan to. If you need any help settin' up or with the customers, I'm available until noon.”

“Well, that's mighty generous of you, Tom.”

Tom looked around the store. “Seems to me you could be usin' a woman's touch in here.”

Jeremiah furrowed his brows. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I don't see any flowers anywhere.”

Jeremiah smirked. “Tom, this is a fishing supply store, not a flower shop.”

“I know. But ain't the men bringin' their families today?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I don't know of a woman alive who prefers the smell of fish to the smell of flowers.”

“But the women don't shop here. Their men do.”

“But the women influence their men. And you can be sure that if a woman likes your store, she'll be tellin' her lady friends who'll be tellin' their husbands.”

Jeremiah scratched his head. “I should put you in charge of advertising.”

Tom laughed. “If I ever need a job, I'll be sure to come to you.”

Jeremiah gulped the last swallow of his coffee and rose. “Well, I'd better get to work. Ten o'clock will be here soon enough. How about giving me a hand moving the table

out front to the center of the room? I have some free information for people to take as they enter.”

Was Tom right about a woman’s touch? He hadn't known a woman's touch since his beloved Anna Mae had passed away during childbirth, their only child dying with her. His heart twisted at the agonizing memory.

The worst of it was that he'd been at sea and had not even been able to say goodbye. He'd never risk that sort of pain again.

* * * *

Tuesday morning, February 18, 1873

Loretta squeezed the tear-soaked handkerchief in her right hand. The first light of dawn filtered through her bedroom window. She stood at the foot of the four-poster bed in their bedroom as Edward secured his luggage.

“Oh, Edward! I wish you didn't have to go.”

He straightened and took her gently by the shoulders. “But I must, darling. It is a matter of the utmost importance.”

She rubbed her nostrils with her handkerchief. “When will you return?”

“If all goes well, I shan't be more than a fortnight in England, my dear. Including my time at sea, I shouldn't be away more than a month.”

“A month! Oh, Edward, a month seems like an eternity.”

He wiped a tear from her eye with his thumb. “But it isn't, darling. When I return, I shall take you for a carriage ride along the beach followed by dinner at Congress Hall. How does that sound?”

She angled away from him and crossed her arms. “It sounds totally uninteresting.”

He turned her toward himself. “Then I shall think of something more interesting while I am gone.” He gave her a peck on the cheek and grew serious. “Loretta, if I do not attend to the situation in Liverpool, we could fall into bankruptcy.”

Loretta's muscles froze. “What are you saying?”

“I'm saying that our entire fortune rests on the success of this trip.”

Her insides tightened. “Our entire fortune?”

He released her and looked her in the eye. “Yes, our entire fortune.”

“But, Edward, how did it come to this?”

He cupped her face in his hands. “Loretta darling, I don't have time at the moment to explain all the details. But I shall upon my return. My carriage will arrive momentarily. I need to carry my luggage to the front door.”

Loretta's heart plummeted to her feet. “I shall see you off, then. Please do write while you're gone.”

“Most certainly, darling, I shall write. But my letters may reach you after I return.” He caressed her cheek. “Now, let me give you a proper farewell kiss and then I must be gone.” Edward kissed her soundly.

The touch of his lips upon hers warmed her blood. Oh, how she would miss him!

“Enjoy my birthday party.” He chuckled.

“I will be a good hostess, but I cannot promise you that I will enjoy your birthday party without you.” How he could think otherwise lay beyond her comprehension.

“And don't fret while I'm gone, do you hear?”

“That will be easier said than done, Edward. You know me. I depend too much on you.”

“That you do, my dear. That you do.” He laughed. “But I must confess that I rather enjoy your need of me.”

Her body stiffened. Edward might enjoy it, but she certainly didn't. Ever since her parents died, depending on others had been the story of her life. She hated that it was so. Even while living with cruel Aunt Martha and Uncle Malcolm, she'd despised the thought of having to depend on them for her sustenance. She'd vowed that when she grew up, she'd depend on no one but herself. She would call the plays for her own life, her own way.

Yet her vow had fallen by the wayside, for here she was, depending on Edward. Despite his kindness and generosity, being beholden to him for her every need was somehow beneath her dignity. Not that he treated her disrespectfully, but he was fully aware of his financial power over her.

And so was she.

For once, she wanted to be free. Self-sufficient. In need of nothing and no one. Why should a woman have to depend on a man for her every need? Indeed, the Proverbs 31 woman owned her own business. Perhaps one day she would too.

Loretta sighed. A caged bird needed to fly.

She stifled the annoyance. “Please take care of yourself while you're gone, Edward.”

“By all means. There's nothing like British tea and crumpets to strengthen one's body and soul.” Edward liked to tease her during difficult moments. It was his way of relieving the tension.

She placed a hand on his chest. “Be sure to include some brisket and roasted potatoes as well.” Her attempt at humor paled against his. Humor for a breaking heart was like putting salt on a wound. Choking back tears, Loretta buried her head in Edward's chest. “I'll be eagerly awaiting your return.”

He stroked her hair. “I will as well, my dear, though I'm relieved that Molly will be staying with you until I return.”

Loretta nodded. Having a companion would ease her loneliness, not to mention quell her fear. Ever since her parents' death, she found herself in dread of the worst that could happen.

At the sound of the oncoming carriage outside, Edward took a step backward. “The carriage has arrived. I really must be going.” He picked up his luggage.

Her heart overflowing with misgivings, Loretta accompanied him down the staircase to the front door.

He gave her one last perfunctory kiss and was out the door.

From the front porch, Loretta's gaze followed the carriage to the end of the driveway until it disappeared completely.

She turned back toward the front door, a cold sensation settling in the pit of her stomach.

The Captain and Mrs. Vye

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