

Excerpt from "Indiscretions" by Gail Ranstrom

Daphne ruffed the surface of the water with her bare toe. Still water made her nervous. She had learned that it was an omen of storms to come. An errant breeze lifted her hair in a little swirl and carried the scent of rain with it as she walked the edge of the ocean.

She loved the freedom on St. Claire. Or perhaps the freedom of not being Lady Elise. No appearances to keep up, no social obligations. No hiding of bumps or covering of bruises. She could stroll the edge of the ocean at midnight in nothing but her knee length chemise with complete freedom. No one to see her. No one to care. No one to gossip.

Though she usually slept well, tonight a persistent restlessness troubled her. Every time she relaxed, her thoughts wandered back to that unexpected kiss with Lord Lockwood. How could she have known the unsettling emotions that would evoke? All day, her head had been filled with visions of a dark curl falling over a forehead above deep violet eyes and a mouth curved in a smile. Oh, that smile! It did strange things to her insides. Things she'd never felt before. Things that had kept her awake tonight and longing for something she knew she could never have. Something that was a lie at its core.

She stooped and picked up a conch shell. Wading into the water to her calves, she let the waves dampen the bottom of her chemise to weight it from rising in the wind, then retreated to the sand before it became soaked. She hummed a new tune she'd heard in town--a seaman's chantey.

The lights of San Marco shimmered across the bay, reminding her how remote her home was, for all that it was barely five miles from town. When she'd come to St. Claire, she'd wanted to hide away, keep William safe from any chance of recognition. Then he'd grown and changed, turning from a sickly boy to a strong lad. When he'd been old enough, she'd sent him away to boarding school--away from her--to keep him safe. If Barrett's brother managed to trace her, he wouldn't find William.

She shivered at the thought. Or was it the rising wind? A cloud passed over the moon and she looked upward to find the stars replaced with sudden dark clouds. A storm had whipped up out of nowhere. She glanced back over her shoulder, dismayed to find that she had wandered beyond the boundaries of Sea Whisper and would be caught in the impending storm.

"Did you miss me, Mrs. Hobbs, or are you lost?"

She gasped and whirled to the sound of the deep, amused voice. There, before her, was the cause of her sleeplessness. Lord Lockwood. Her heart thumped wildly at the sight of his bare chest. Strongly muscled, clearly defined, softly matted in dark hair and tapering into a narrow waist, it was the most stirring sight she'd ever seen. He was barefooted, dressed only in trousers, and those compelling eyes were watching her with a mixture of wariness and amusement as he twirled the stem of a white wild orchid between his index finger and thumb.

"Oh, I...what are you doing here, sir?"

"This is my land, Mrs. Hobbs. You are a trespasser, so a better question might be, what are *you* doing here?"

"You...own New Albion?" She'd heard of the absentee owner of the neighboring plantation, but she'd never expected to meet him. Indeed, she scarcely talked to the overseer, Mr. Prichard. How ironic that Fate had delivered Lockwood to her doorstep. Or her to his. "Why did you not tell me last night when you brought me home?"

"I told you that you were not out of my way."

"Oh, well I did not mean to intrude. I shall excuse myself."

"I thought for a moment that a naiad had surfaced."

She smiled at his attempt at humor. "Sorry to disappoint, Lord Lockwood."

"No disappointment at all, Mrs. Hobbs." He came closer and Daphne's heartbeat sped. "And I would be pleased if you would call me Hunt. Or Lockwood."

She started to curtsy and then realized how absurd the scene was. Heavens! She was in her chemise! She dropped the conch shell and crossed her arms over her chest. "Again, I apologize for my interruption."

He caught her shoulder as she turned to go. "A welcome interruption," he said. "I could not sleep either. Are the nights on St. Claire always so sultry?"

"N-not always."

"I like what it does to your hair," he said, lifting a strand that had curled in the humid heat, then tucked the wild orchid behind her right ear.

She froze. Under any other circumstances, his familiarity would be insulting and presumptuous. But there was something other-worldly about this night, something almost destined, and he did not seem insulting. To the contrary, his expression held admiration and...desire? Her pulse quickened and she licked her lips, gone suddenly dry with anxiety.

He stepped closer still and she had to tilt her chin to look into his eyes. He slipped his hands around her waist and drew her against his chest with gentle pressure.

A reckless yearning seized her and she lifted on her toes to meet his descending mouth. The touch of his lips was gentle, tentative, neither beseeching nor demanding. He was teasing, heightening the sensation, making her want him. Waiting for her to ask for more.

A wave washed around their ankles, unbalancing her and making her cling to him for support. Lightning flashed across the sky and a warm tropical rain began to fall. The drops trickled over her face, down her neck, between her breasts. His hand, exquisitely gentle, lifted her chin and he kissed her deeply again, coaxing her, nibbling at the corners of her mouth until she opened to

him. The other hand drew her closer until her breasts flattened against his chest and a hard swelling pressed against her lower belly. Then she ached for that, too. How odd that in all her years with Barrett, she had never once felt this need.

"Oh!" she breathed, aghast at her own thoughts. Where had this wantonness come from? "I...should go. The rain..."

"Let me shelter you," he said in a dark velvet voice.

She knew what would happen if she stayed. She'd sworn not to let any man possess her again. She'd clung to her independence. But independence did not banish her loneliness and longing. In the five years since...Barrett, she hadn't been more than mildly tempted, but this man was different. There was a promise of pleasure in his eyes and a deep magic in his touch.

He stroked her spine from the nape of her neck to the small of her back, pressing her closer. "It's a dream," he whispered, his breath tickling her ear. "Just a dream. When you wake, it will be your secret. No one else's. No words will ever be spoken. Can you let yourself dream, Daphne?"

Dream? It had been so long. Did she even remember how?

"A dream," he murmured again, his lips brushing hers. "In a dream, nothing is forbidden."

She slipped her arms around his neck to drag his mouth down to hers. A moan started somewhere deep inside him and he tilted his head to nuzzle her neck as he swept her off her feet. He carried her up the steps of a cottage and across the mahogany planks to what must be his bedroom.

He placed her on her feet, lifted the chemise over her head and dropped it on the floor in a sodden heap. Heedless of her damp skin and the sand clinging to them both, he lifted her again and lay her against the pillows. She held her breath as he unfastened his trousers and let them drop to the floor.

He was lean, well sculpted and beautifully proportioned. And, heaven help her, he was twice the man her husband had been. In every way. Logic mingled with anxiety and she began to panic. What had she done? Three days ago she hadn't even met this man, and tonight she was naked in his bed. It was wrong. It was madness.

And she wanted it more than she'd wanted anything in a very long time.

Can you let yourself dream, Daphne?

He came down on the mattress beside her. A kiss--a single kiss--and she was caught in a vortex dragging her deeper and deeper. He pulled her to him, pressed himself against the length of her. She trailed her fingers down his side, enthralled by the solid strength of the man in contrast to his exquisitely gentle touch.

Lowering his head, he paused to kiss a tender spot where her neck met her shoulder and a deep shudder went through her. Then his tongue trailed to the hollow of her throat, and she could feel the heat of his lips against her flesh.

"Sweet Daphne, your sighs are an aphrodisiac."

Passion? Need? Possession? What were the feelings overwhelming her? She couldn't name them. She only knew she didn't want them to stop. And when he began stroking her, she gasped, wondering why she'd never felt such intimacy and surrender with Barrett.

And then, in the back of her mind, she heard a nagging voice--her conscience?--warning her. *If you surrender to this man, you'll never be whole again. If you let him make love to you, you are lost. He will learn your secrets and betray you, and when he does, you will truly die inside.*

"No," she sighed with the last of her will. "I cannot do this." She struggled to sit up, her limbs as heavy as if she'd been drugged.

Hunt looked confused and reached out to her. "Daphne, I will not hurt you. If you do not want this..."

Want it? Oh, yes, she wanted it with every tingling nerve, every throbbing pulse, but she could not. The memory of Barrett made it impossible. Would always make it impossible. Because his ghost always reminded her that she was a fraud. That she was a murderess and, given half a chance, that she'd do the same again. That she was hollow and had nothing inside to give.

She scooped her chemise off the floor and ran from the room.