

He was supposed
to protect her heart,
not lose his own....

My Fallen Angel



PAMELA BRITTON

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Pamela Britton



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Dedicated in memory of my own heavenly angels:

Joe Leib
1911–1995

D. J. Leib
1979–1996

Carrie Anchondo
1961–1996

And my earthbound angels:

Jennifer Skullestad, Nanet Fisher,
and
Jack Britton

*All of whom never cease to amaze me with their
love and courage. God bless you.*

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Barbary Coast
May, 1818

Garrick Asquith-Wolf was fighting for his life, and loving every moment of it.

Rain ran in rivulets down his face, his shirt a cold second skin. The ship lurched beneath his feet, making it difficult to stand. Yet through it all a grin split his face from ear to ear. He thrust his sword at his opponent, missed, drew back and thrust again. All around him men fought similar battles, but Garrick ignored the stench of blood and fear. Every muscle ached, his arms burned, sweat mingled with the rain trickling down his face. This was what he lived for, his mission in life: ridding the seas of pirate scum.

"Give up yet, Tully?" he jeered at his opponent.

Tully St. Clair, one of the most feared pirates on the Atlantic Ocean, sneered right back, his black eyes

gleaming in the cloudy light. "I'll see ye in hell first, Wolf."

Fat drops of rain pelted Garrick as his grin widened. He swiped them away with a blood-spattered hand. "Let me know what it's like, then."

"You'll know first," Tully shot back, sword raised.

Garrick had just enough time to lift his own before Tully swung. His palms stung at the clash of the two blades. Once. Twice. Then again and yet again Tully lashed out. Garrick took a step back.

And slipped on the rain-slick deck.

His breath escaped him as his back hit the deck. He couldn't breathe, fought to take in even the tiniest sip of air. Tully grinned evilly. His blade glinted as he raised it above his head.

Garrick rolled. Tully screeched. The blade sunk into wood.

"Damn ye," Tully cried.

"It's you who's damned," Garrick managed to wheeze. Blade in hand, he pulled himself to his feet with a strand of frayed rope that hung from the mast.

They charged each other. Bits of sail and splintered wood littered the deck amidst the bodies of fallen comrades. Garrick pushed the images from his mind. Thrust. Swing. Parry. The rhythm blurred.

Then he noticed a subtle difference in Tully's fighting: His blade wobbled in the air, the hilt moved in his palm, the tip hung a little lower.

His opponent grew weak.

The realization was power. With renewed strength Garrick brought his blade down. Tully's eyes flicked

with momentary fear as he was backed against the ship's rail. One more jab and Garrick had him bent over the blood-splattered wood.

"Arghh," Tully bellowed a heartbeat later. His free hand clutched at the ragged gash across his cheek. "Ye'll pay fer that!" But the fear in Tully's scurvy gaze belied the words. So did the blood on his hand. He knew he was a beaten man.

Garrick knew it as well. He swung his blade in a wide arc. The two swords connected with a bone-rattling crack and Garrick saw Tully's grip loosen. Wielding the sword with all his expertise, he closed in for the kill.

Tully's sword flipped through the air and disappeared over the rail to be swallowed by the frothing waves below.

Stunned disbelief contorted his opponent's face. Garrick threw back his head and roared with confident, victorious laughter. Drunk with power, he raised his sword above his head. Before he could bring it down, Tully grasped a piece of rigging, swung himself over the rail, and dropped into the churning sea.

Garrick's laughter turned full blown—it rang out over the white-tipped waves. "Let that be a lesson to you," he yelled at Tully, who quickly disappeared from view. Garrick's sword glistened above him. "No one can beat me! No one! I am invincible!"

The clouds echoed his bellow and a great clash of thunder rang out.

Only a few saw what happened next, and their words became infamous in the annals of pirate history.

Time and again the story was told of a luminescent bolt of lightning that streaked down from the heavens, captured the Wolf's upraised blade, then traveled down his arm and into his body—knocking him clean off the deck.

Apparently, the Wolf was *not* invincible.

Part 1

Two loves I have, of comfort and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still;
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman colour'd ill.

—*Shakespeare*



June 1818

Miss Lucy Hartford wondered at the wisdom of breaking into the Earl of Selborne's mammoth estate on such a cold and dank evening. More specifically, she questioned her degree of intelligence in general. Scaling a tree in the dead of night while somehow managing to hold a small lantern to light her way, all for the sake of helping one adorable, outspoken little boy named Tom, was certainly *not* one of her better ideas. And though the earl and his evil second wife were on holiday, she still ran the risk of discovery. In fact, she would rank this idea right up there with the time she'd disastrously experimented with gunpowder. Fortunately, the only casualty that day had been the chamber pot.

She grimaced as her booted foot slipped off the branch, knocking a combination of leaves, bark, and twigs to the grass-covered ground nearly thirty feet

below. A gentle puff of wind caressed the branches around her and caused the lantern to sway and the candle inside to flicker. She held her breath as she waited to be plunged into darkness, but, with a hiss, the candle flared to life again.

At that moment she contemplated turning back. Contemplated, but decided against it. Her glance darted from the window that was her goal, to the ground, then to the window again. Her friends always told her she had more courage than sense. Lucy looked at her surroundings and grinned. They were right.

Still, that didn't change the fact that she knew this would be her one and only chance to gather clues, perhaps even evidence, proving Tom was really the long-lost son of the earl of Selborne. Unfortunately, in her experience, knowing something to be a good idea and actually implementing the notion were two different things.

Bother.

Leaves and small branches tangled in her hair, which she had tied behind her head. She swatted them away, then gasped as the hot lantern glass scalded her breeches-clad leg.

Rot and bother. There were at least thirty trees dotting the gently rolling hills that surrounded the earl's Tudor-style home, many of which looked far easier to climb—not that she could see much outside the rim of the light—but with her luck tonight, she'd probably fall out of this one.

No sooner had the thought sprung to her mind than something creaked. Undoubtedly the sound of her stays

popping as her chest heaved up and down in agitation. Then she remembered she wore men's clothes. Her eyes widened. She heard one last, loud, ominous crack.

And screamed.

It didn't help, not that she'd expected it to. It felt as though she sailed through the air forever, colliding with something as she landed, a something which grunted in a very masculine way.

"Bloody hell," she finally groaned as she sat there, stunned, and took a mental survey of her limbs to assure herself nothing had broken.

"Not hell," the man gasped beneath her. "Not yet."

Lucy stiffened, suddenly realizing she sat across a man's chest as primly as a lady sat for tea. Good heavens. She pushed herself to her feet, too hastily as it turned out, for her foot thrust into him in the process. In horror she heard him gasp, then let out a long, agonized moan. She clasped her hands over her mouth, for it was the same groan her brother had emitted the time she'd accidentally struck him in his unmentionables with a billiard cue.

"Oh dear," she squeaked.

Something snapped. She turned toward the sound, her hair having escaped from its bonds to partly shield her face. She shoved it away impatiently.

Things went from bad to worse in that instant . . . very bad.

The grass had caught on fire.

"My lantern!" she wailed, watching as a great puff of smoke wafted overhead.

Flames shot up toward the sky like a bonfire on All Hal-

low's Eve. She clapped her gaping mouth shut and began to stomp, but the bloody fire refused to cooperate.

She stomped harder, broken glass crunching beneath her feet. Yet the flames grew bigger. She shrugged out of the coat she'd pilfered from her brother and tried to smother the inferno with the black superfine.

The fabric proved more flammable than the grass.

The coat caught fire. She dropped it to the ground and groaned as she watched the beautiful fabric turn into a textile torch which, in turn, lit a nearby shrub, which then set some dried branches aflame, and then started the trunk of the tree on fire.

It was the strangest thing about those flames, for they were quickly approaching gargantuan proportions when, suddenly, amazingly, they just disappeared. *Poof*. They were gone.

Lucy widened her green eyes in surprise as she stared first at the smoking embers on the ground and then up at the sky. She expected to feel raindrops on her face, but felt only the soft touch of ashes alighting on her cheeks and the persistent heavy dankness which always accompanies fog.

"What . . . ?" She turned back to her companion. "Did you see that?"

"If you are referring to the blazing inferno, then yes, I did catch a glimpse of it."

She ignored the sarcastic edge to his voice and turned back to the smoking embers. "It just disappeared." She scratched her head, absently tugging out a few stray leaves before dropping her arm back to her side. "Maybe it burned itself out."

"Perhaps so," the man grumbled.

She whirled to face him, suddenly realizing she had no idea who he was. "Well, thank you for your assistance Mr., er, ahh, whoever you are. I'll . . . I'll just be on my way now." She took a hasty step away from him.

"I don't think so."

"You don't?" she asked warily.

"No."

Lucy gulped as a truly horrible thought penetrated. What if he'd been hired by the evil Countess of Selborne to kill her because she knew who Tom really was? Indeed, if the countess had hired someone to kill Tom all those years ago so her *own* son could inherit the estate, what was to stop her from hiring someone to kill nosy Lucy Hartford?

She heard a soft rustle, and her terror increased as he got to his feet. For the first time that night Lucy wished she hadn't ventured out of her aunt's home alone. Never before had one of her "adventures" gotten her into such a fix. She dove to the ground, her hand searching frantically for something, *anything* to use as a weapon. When she felt the rough texture of a long-dead tree branch, she clasped it gratefully, then shot to her feet. She hefted the branch above her head and braced her booted feet.

Warily she eyed the dark form making its way toward her. A very *large* dark form, she amended. When she gauged him near enough, she swung.

Her victim never saw it coming.

It must have taken him a moment to realize what had happened for it was two swipes later before he