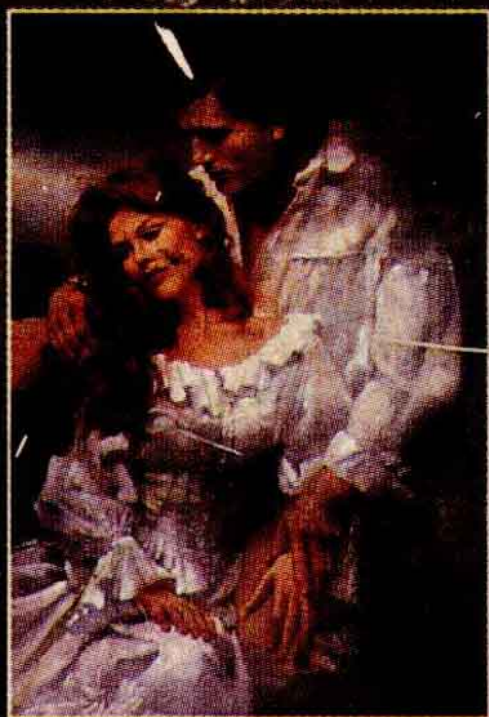


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KATHLEEN E. WOODIWISS

PETALS ON THE RIVER



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WOODHULL
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AVON BOOKS

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An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

10 East 53rd Street

New York, New York 10022-5299

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Inside cover author photo by Erol Thibodeaux

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 97-29814

ISBN: 0-380-79828-X

www.avonromance.com

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First Avon Books mass market printing: September 1998

First Avon Books trade printing: December 1997

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To my grandson, Seth Alexander Woodiwiss,
who was the inspiration for the young boy in
this book. Seth is so engaging and delightful to
be around, I couldn't help but want to convey
those kind of characteristics in Andrew.

I hope I was successful.





CHAPTER 1

Newportes Newes, Virginia
April 25, 1747

The *London Pride* chafed against the quay as the currents of a rising nor'easter slowly rocked the vessel on her cables. Close above her mastheads, errant clouds tumbled in darkening portent of an advancing storm. Gulls swooped in and out of the ship's rigging, lending their raucous cries to the rattle of chains as a double file of thin, ragged convicts stumbled up from the companionway and shuffled in unison across the weathered planking. The men, hobbled by leg irons and bound to each other by no more than a fathom's length of chain, were prodded into line for the bosun's inspection. The women were individually shackled and could move at their own pace toward the forward hatch where they had been told to wait.

Farther aft, a common swabber paused in his labors to observe the latter group. After casting a cautious glance toward the quarterdeck, he grew bold at the continued ab-

sence of Captain Fitch and his bovine wife and hastily stowed his mop and bucket before ambling across the deck. Strutting like a well-preened rooster around the shabby women, he provoked a near-solid bulwark of embittered glares with his leering grin and brash manner. The singular exception was a dark-eyed, raven-haired harlot who had been convicted of lifting the purses of the men she had bedded and of seriously wounding a goodly number in the process. She alone offered a promising smile to the tar.

"I ain't seen the bogtrotter 'round in nigh a week, Mr. Potts," the strumpet remarked coarsely, tossing a triumphant smirk toward her glowering companions. "Ye don't suppose the li'l beggar's gone an' caught her death in the cable tier, now do ye? 'Twould be a right fittin' comeuppance for biffin' me in the nose."

A small wisp of a woman with limp brown hair pushed her way out of the cluster of women and gave the harlot a crisp retort. "Ye can twist that lyin' tongue all ye want, Morrisa 'Atcher, but the lot o' us know m'liedy give ye no more'n ye deserved. The way ye jabbed her in the ribs when she weren't lookin', ye should've been the one what spent time in the chain locker! If 'tweren't for yer li'l lap-doggie here"—she indicated Potts with scathing abhorrence—"bendin' Mrs. Fitch's ear, m'liedy might've been allowed ta have her say."

Setting his beefy arms akimbo, Potts faced the small, feisty woman. "An' ye, Annie Carver, might've done us all a heap o' good fillin' our sheets with wind from yer ever-flappin' tongue. Ain't no question 'bout it, we'd have run ahead soarin' free on that gale."

The sound of dragging chains drifted up from the hold, claiming the swabber's attention. His small, beady eyes took on a sadistic gleam. "Well, blimey! I thinks I hear m'liedy comin' now." Chortling to himself, he lumbered toward the companionway and hunkered down to squint into the shadows below. "Eh, bogtrotter? Be it yer own bloomin' self comin' up from 'em lower chambers?"

Shemaine O'Hearn lifted seething green eyes toward the

broad silhouette looming over the opening. For daring to defend herself against this oaf's shipboard doxy, she had spent the last four days isolated in a dank pit in the forward depths of the ship. There she had been forced to scrap with rats and roaches for every morsel of bread that had been tossed to her. If not for her sorely depleted strength, she might have clawed her way up the stairs and raked the tar's ugly visage with ragged nails, but heavy sarcasm was the most she could muster energy for. "And what other poor wretch would this smelly toad have come to fetch, if not me, Mr. Potts?" she asked, jerking her head to indicate the squat, little man who limped along beside her. "I was sure you had persuaded Mrs. Fitch to reserve those quarters for me alone."

Potts heaved an exaggerated sigh of displeasure, making much of her disparagement. "There ye go, Sh'maine, insultin' me friends again."

Her escort reached out and viciously pinched her arm for a second time since freeing her from the cable tier. Freddy was every bit as mean as Potts and needed no coaxing to take his spite out on anyone who couldn't fight back. "Watch yer manners, ye highfalutin tootie!"

"I will, Freddy," she gritted, snatching her arm away from his grubby fingers, "the very day the lot of you learn some."

Potts's gruff voice resonated through the companionway. "Ye'd better get up here an' be quick 'bout it, Sh'maine, or I'll have ta teach ye 'nother lesson."

The girl scoffed at the ogre's rapidly diminishing leverage. "Captain Fitch may have something to say about your heavy-handed ways if he intends to sell me today."

"The cap'n may have his say, al'right," Potts allowed, bestowing a cocky grin upon her as she struggled to make an ascent hindered by weighty iron anklets and chains. "But ever'body knows his missus has the final say on this here voyage."

Since being hauled in shackles aboard the bark, She-maine had become convinced that no other place on earth

was more akin to the pits of hell than an English prison ship bound for the colonies. And surely, no other person had done as much to advance that belief as Gertrude Turnbull Fitch, wife of its captain and only offspring of J. Horace Turnbull, solitary owner of the *London Pride* and a small fleet of other merchant ships.

With such a formidable reminder as Gertrude Fitch goading her to be wary, Shemaine paused to readjust a makeshift kerchief over her head. During several outings on deck, her fiery red tresses had incensed the dour-faced virago, causing Gertrude to berate the whole Irish race as a crass, slow-witted lot and to demean Shemaine as a filthy little bogtrotter, a derogatory appellation many an Englishman was wont to lay on the Irish.

"Don't ye dare dawdle now," Potts taunted. His pig eyes gleamed overbright, attesting to his penchant for cruelty as he eagerly watched for any infraction that he could pounce on.

"I'm coming! I'm coming!" Shemaine muttered testily, emerging from the passageway. The injustices she had suffered during the three-month voyage swept through her mind in bitter recall, sparking her resentment anew until she longed to spit a token of her rancor in the huge lum-mox's face. But experience had been a harsh taskmaster since her arrest in London, brutally convincing her that a coolheaded compliance was the only way a prisoner could ever hope to survive in an English court of law or on one of their hell ships.

Averse to revealing any hint of her waning strength, Shemaine managed to drag her encumbered limbs forward with a modicum of dignity. The scourging wind buffeted her, and she braced her bare feet slightly apart to steady herself and straightened her spine with tenacious resolve. The fresh air was a luxury that had become much too rare of late, and she lifted her head to slowly savor the salt-tinged essence of the coastal waters.

Potts's eyes narrowed as he noted the girl's stance. It seemed much too proud and undaunted to suit him. "Put-

tin' on airs 'gain, are ye? Like some high-flown doxy from court." Sweeping a hand downward to indicate her tattered garments, he brayed in loud amusement, "Beggars' court in Whitefriars, I'd be a-thinkin'!"

Shemaine had no difficulty imagining how pathetic she looked in soiled rags and iron fetters. Though her green velvet riding habit had once drawn envious stares from many overly pampered daughters of wealthy aristocrats (those same who had pettishly bemoaned her betrothal to the most handsome and possibly the richest bachelor in all of London), her present plight might have caused those same ladies to laugh in haughty pleasure.

Shemaine's forlorn sigh was certainly more heartfelt than feigned. Having known only a life of comfort and ease before her arrest, she had been thrust without cause into a vile prison where the pitifully destitute found naught but hatred, oppression and utter despair. "'Tis indeed a dreadful inconvenience when a gentle-born lady must go abroad without her servants and couturier," she rejoined in satirical retrospect. "The attendants I've dealt with of late have no true ken of loyal service and cannot understand the simplest functions of a pursuivant."

Though unable to determine where an insult may have been rooted in her words, Potts was nevertheless distrustful. Her genteel way of speaking could make a bloke feel out of sorts with his own tongue, especially one who had run away from home at an early age after his widowed mother had tried to curtail his roaming with ruffians.

Closing a massive fist around the chain dangling between her shackled wrists, Potts hauled Shemaine abruptly forward until her entire vision was filled with the broad, be-whiskered face of her tormentor and a red, cyclopean eye. Even after enduring so many hardships and abuse, the girl still refused to yield him that very thing he craved most, an undeniable feeling of superiority. "Ye mewlin' Irish bitch!" he snarled, cruelly yanking her fetters. "Ye think ye're better'n me, don't ye? Ye an' yer high-minded ways!

Well, ye're wrong, ye bog-Irish dung. Ye ain't good enuff ta lick spittle from me boots."

Shemaine gagged at the rank stench of the sailor's breath and could not help wincing as the iron bracelets bit cruelly into her wrists. Almost from the first moment she laid eyes on Jacob Potts, she had felt a sharp aversion to the man. By mandate of the captain, the women's section had been restricted to all but the most trusted members of the crew, but Potts had ignored the edict and, with the pompous arrogance of a sultan perusing his private harem, had paced outside their cell, tempting the more comely ones with stolen food, fresh rainwater, and other necessities until, in desperation, some had given in to his perverted demands. Their shame and humiliation had been agonizingly shared by their cellmates, for no one could escape the realization of what the cad was forcing his victims to do. For those who had turned away in disgust, Potts had proven very vocal in his lecherous demands, painting an obscene image even in the minds of the most innocent among them.

A deep enmity had grown apace with the swabber's clandestine visits, and except for Morrissa Hatcher, who had worked her wicked wiles upon him, Potts had soon been shunned by all. But the harlot had served her own purposes, exceeding his expectations, ensnaring him in a guileful web until suddenly it was Potts doing Morrissa's bidding and appeasing her every whim.

Persecuting her most dedicated challenger, Shemaine mused with hostility. Throwing caution aside, she dared to needle the man. "If only *Mrs. Fitch* knew what you've been getting as a reward for telling your lies against me."

Potts's temper exploded. The little twit would relish setting that hag against him! "Ye'll not be tellin' her, wench! Or ye'll be gettin' more o' this!"

Laying back a brawny arm, Potts let it fly, catching Shemaine's shoulder just as she sought to duck and sending her reeling clumsily over her chains. His desire for revenge was hardly sated. He wanted to see her cringing before him in absolute terror. Spitefully he swept a canvas-shod toe

outward to snare the links trailing from the leg irons, yanking her off her feet.

An indignant yelp of pain escaped Shemaine's lips as she sprawled backward against the deck's planking. In actuality the moored ship swayed only slightly against the quay, but for Shemaine, dazed and weak, the creak of timbers seemed to increase apace with the strengthening gusts and the heaving swells that passed beneath the hull until it seemed as if the deck had come alive. Casting a wary glance aloft to where the masts and spars spun in a dizzying blur against the whimsical countenance of a darkly brooding sky, she shuddered as her stomach convulsed at the strangely conflicting motions. Leery of heaving up what little she had eaten, she rolled over and lowered a clammy brow in the crook of her arm as she waited for her queasiness to ebb.

The bosun had turned from his inspection of the male convicts in time to witness the incident and, snatching up his cane, stalked forward irately. "Here now, Potts!" he barked. "Leave that wench be!"

"But, Mistah 'Arper!" Potts protested. "I was only tryin' ta protect meself afore this here adder sank her fangs into me hide."

James Harper blew out a loud snort of derision. "Aye, Mr. Potts! And the sun sets in the east!"

"I gots witnesses, I do!" Seeking support for his fabrication, Potts glanced around for Morrisa.

"I'll hear no more lies from you or your lickspittle mate!" Harper retorted, raising the cane threateningly to lend emphasis to his words. A symbol of his authority, the stick had been used on many occasions to smarten dimwits and laggards. "Now listen well, you worthless swabby! I've had enough of your buffoonery! If the captain can't sell that prisoner for what she's worth, you'll be getting the best of this stick. Now help her up, damn you, and be gentle about it or you'll have a proper knot on your noggin."

Large hands slipped underneath Shemaine before she had fully regained her reason, but reality came washing hotly

over her as the greedy hands cupped her soft breasts. With an outraged shriek totally unbecoming a lady, she rolled and kicked out sharply with a bare foot. Her haphazard aim was momentarily calamitous for the heavily endowed Potts. His pained yowl coincided with his backward, splaying fall, and as Shemaine scrambled to her feet, she had the satisfaction of seeing the fellow writhing in agony on the deck.

Prudence dictated that she remove herself swiftly out of sight and reach of the boor, and Shemaine saw a chance to accomplish that objective as some of the women hurriedly beckoned to her. Slipping quickly through their midst, she settled on the hatch cover as they closed ranks around her, concealing her from casual notice. Drawing her legs to her chest and pressing her face to her knees, she made herself as inconspicuous as possible.

Potts staggered to his feet and glared about him, consumed by a vengeful quest to vent his wrath upon the girl. Like an injured bull preparing to charge, he swung his straw-thatched head from side to side as his eyes flicked about in search of her. Through the drab, mundane hues of the women's tattered garments, he caught sight of a long red tress fluttering like a brightly hued pennant on a buffeting breeze. Curling his lips back from gnashing black-stained teeth, he growled and plowed toward Shemaine with evil intent.

"*Potts!*" James Harper bellowed sharply. He stalked forward several paces, for it seemed he would have to carry out his threat and beat the hulking loggerhead into submission. "You lay a hand on that wench and I'll see you flogged until your back is stripped of its hide! That much I promise you!"

The bosun's shout greeted Captain Fitch as the latter climbed to the quarterdeck behind his wife. Even as the call boy blew his whistle and announced, "Captain on the bridge!" Everette Fitch paused beside the rail to observe Potts's unfaltering advance on the main deck. Then his gaze swept outward, searching for the intended recipient of the sailor's assault until he spied the young beauty who had

once rebuked him for what she and the other prisoners had regarded a deplorable injustice to one of their number. She had successfully claimed his notice with her scolding that day, but she had also, in her fervor to argue for another's rights as a human being, unwittingly kindled his lusts. From that moment on, Captain Fitch had found himself driven by a fierce yearning to enjoy all the delights Shemaine O'Hearn could offer a man. If not for Gertrude's stout stamina and iron-clad stomach resisting the doses of laudanum he had surreptitiously mixed in her wine, the girl would have surely paid the price demanded by his passion. His failure had only made him more desirous of having her, and Fitch had promised himself that upon their arrival in port he would covertly claim the wench for his own and ensconce her in a haven totally removed from his domineering wife. To disguise his infatuation, he had deemed it prudent to modify the punishments heaped upon Shemaine by his wife only when it became apparent that her life would be in jeopardy, but after Harper's warnings, it seemed reasonable to add his own thundering threat as a further deterrent.

"Cast that swabby in irons if he will not obey!" Fitch bellowed. Then he lowered his voice to a caustic rumble. "And should the blighter damage the wench, stripe his back with a score of lashes for every bruise she bears."

The stern warning finally penetrated the tar's thick skull, and Potts stumbled to a halt. Glowering at Shemaine, who had braced herself for flight, he ground out a garbled oath. "Mark me words well, bogtrotter. Be it a fortnight or even a year from now, I'll make ye rue the day ye laid me low, that ye will."

Shemaine kept her expression carefully passive, lest the slightest twitch push the man beyond the brink of control. She had escaped injury this time, but once she left the ship, if her new master couldn't defend her against this churlish lout, she would likely be found and severely punished.

"*Potts!*" James Harper shouted, commanding the sailor's attention.

Potts faced his superior, making no attempt to present a guise of respect. "Aye, Mistah 'Arper? What be ye wants now?"

The seaman's surly tone ignited Harper's temper, and he lashed out with a cutting retort. "A hanging from the yard-arm for insubordination if I had my way!" He gestured angrily with his cane. "Now, you useless grog-sucker, get below! You've earned a three-day stint cleaning the mud-hook's chains!"

"Come on now, Mistah 'Arper," Potts cajoled, wagging his head from side to side. "Here we be, 'bouts ta be given shore leave, an' I gots an itch in me crotch ta finds meself a doxy or two ta scratch meself 'pon."

"You'll stroll no further than the limits of the cable locker for the next five days," Harper rumbled, seething with rage. "Now, Potts, have you anything further to complain about?"

The pig eyes narrowed with almost tangible hostility, but the swabber had no choice but to obey or see his sentence lengthened by several more days. "Nary a thing, Mistah 'Arper."

"Good! Then report to the cable tier at once." Scowling darkly, James Harper briefly marked the huge swabber's progress, then signaled another seaman to follow and lock Potts in the forward compartment. Curtly dismissing the tar from mind, Harper faced the bosun's mate and lent his consideration to the matter at hand.

"The male prisoners've been accounted for, sir," the younger man announced as he handed over the list. Then he added for Harper's ears alone, "Minus the thirty-one what died en route."

"'Tis an uncommon loss the *London Pride* has suffered, Mr. Blake," Harper muttered.

"Aye, sir, an' seein's as how ye begged the cap'n not ta let his missus limit the prisoners' rations afore we left, I figures ye gots good reason ta fret. Another week at sea an' there wouldna've been enough o' them poor devils alive ta pay for the crew's vittles, much less our wages."

Harper's jaw tensed as he recalled the numerous times he had been required to order the convicts' bodies hurled overboard, all because the ship's owner, J. Horace Turnbull, had grown suspicious of the *Pride's* accounting from previous voyages and had insisted his daughter accompany her husband on this particular crossing to make a proper evaluation. Having given Gertrude unprecedented authority to examine the ship's ledgers, the old shipping baron had further instructed her to curb whatever costs she might consider superfluous, a mandate which had reaped dire consequences.

"One must imagine that when Mr. Turnbull gave his daughter leave to use her own judgments, he had no idea he'd be losing more on this voyage than in the last five years we've been delivering prisoners to the colonies. In her eagerness to save her father a few shillings, Mrs. Fitch has mindlessly managed to murder no less than a fourth of the prisoners. *That* should shorten the old man's profits by several hundred pounds, at least."

"If Mr. Turnbull thought there was thievin' goin' on afore this here voyage," Roger Blake mumbled grimly, "ye can bet he'll be thinkin' it for certain this time."

"And will no doubt send his precious daughter on the following voyage to take another accounting." Harper frowned at the gloomy prospect.

"Was Mr. Turnbull right, sir? Be there a thief among us?"

James Harper heaved a laborious sigh. "Whatever the truth, Mr. Blake, I prefer to keep my suspicions to myself." He shrugged as he added, "Still, if I were to discover the identity of the culprit, I'd be loath to ferret him out for Mrs. Fitch. She's made it evident she suspects us all of swindling her father."

"Aye, ta be sure, sir," Roger Blake heartily agreed. Mrs. Fitch definitely had a way of making an honest seaman feel less than worthy of respect and trust. Even the captain wasn't excluded from her criticism. She had, however, seemed peculiarly inclined to lend an attentive ear to the

babble of Jacob Potts, although that vile tar had the distinction of being despised by their small company of officers and a goodly share of his shipmates.

Casting a glance toward the bridge, Roger Blake mentally laid odds that he would find the older couple locked in another verbal fray and smiled ruefully as he won his bet. The portly pair were at it again, and he knew by experience that Mrs. Fitch would not desist until she had gotten her way. Thankful that he was not encumbered with the likes of that great white whale for a wife, Roger returned to his duties.

Shemaine was able to enjoy a vague sense of relief after the banishment of Potts, but it was not long before the murmuring voices of the other women began to intrude into her awareness. Their fretting comments and morbid speculations on what further hardships they would experience under the authority of their new masters began to trickle down into her consciousness, heightening her dread with a pungent taste of grim reality. Despite the adversities she had been forced to endure since leaving England, she had sought to bolster her courage by clinging to a frail fragment of hope that, by some miracle, her parents or even her fiancé would find out where she had been taken and arrive in time to save her from the fate of being sold as an indentured servant. But as yet, no beloved face had appeared and only a few moments remained before that humiliating event was set to begin.

Shemaine ran her slender fingers beneath the iron band that encircled her wrist in an effort to ease the constant chafing. It was cruel irony that she was even there, but after sipping the bitter draught of English justice firsthand she had ceased to believe that she was the only prisoner aboard the *Pride* who had been unjustly condemned. Others had received equally harsh sentences for nothing more dastardly than stealing a loaf of bread or expressing a political view, which some of the young Irish hotbloods were wont to do. In spite of the frailty of their crimes and the sheer absurdity

of their convictions, their departure as unsavory rabble from the shores of England had been expedited by pompous, bewigged magistrates who had enjoined the gaol keepers to offer royal pardons to any and every felon who would agree to a term of indentured labor in the colonies. The alternatives had made such proposals seem magnanimous. It was either bound servitude beyond the shores of England or a choice between two extremes: a hanging at Triple Tree for more grievous crimes or, for lesser offenses, the probability of rape, murder, or mutilation in the foul pits of Newgate Prison, a place where absolutely no attempt was made to distinguish between or to separate prisoners by gender, age, or severity of offenses.

It was impossible for Shemaine to forget the trauma of being snatched from her family's stable and, like the foulest offender, hauled into a court of law by an ugly slip of a man who had identified himself only as Ned, the thieftaker. A short stint in Newgate had taught her the futility of tearful supplications and desperately spoken promises of reward to anyone who would travel to her father's warehouses in Scotland and take her parents news of her arrest. It had been absurd to think that anyone would believe her guarantee of a weighty purse when she had been confronted by no kinder visage than the stony faces of criminals, gaolers, and their helpless victims.

Later, after she had come aboard the *London Pride* and witnessed firsthand the travails of others, she had lost all hope of ever finding a sympathetic benefactor. She had seen suckling babes torn from the breasts of desperately pleading mothers, like Annie Carver, who had not foreseen the possibility of her infant being snatched from her arms and sold to a passing stranger. Mere children, with haunted eyes and runnels of unchecked tears streaking down their thin filthy faces, had been left behind on the docks while they watched their only kin led across the gangplank in chains. Other youngsters, convicted of fretfully feeble crimes, had been shackled alongside hardened whoremongers and thieves. The only two to board the *Pride* had not survived.