

Under the Lash

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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Chapter One

Cassandra Solange Constance Mary Winthrop–Sutton clutched the big tapestry bag that held everything precious to her – and even a few more practical items – much closer to her, as she moved stealthily towards a small cove. The island was to have become her home. In truth, she hadn't been there anywhere near long enough to consider it as such – the brief tour she and her mother had been given by her stepfather when they first arrived notwithstanding. He had shown them a small village that had sprung up around the harbor, some beautiful architecture, a few historic sites, as well as the bell tower in the ornate church, mentioning in a tone that sounded downright threatening, that neither of them was ever to venture into town at night alone because of possible raids, as well as the fact that as pretty as the bell tower looked, it served a more practical purpose as a warning to the residents when they were in imminent danger of being overrun by deadly pirates.

Until then, she had been busy trying to look thoroughly bored by the proceedings, which wasn't that hard considering her mother's new husband did have a distinct tendency to drone on while her mother hung nauseatingly off his every syllable. And although Cassie was dying to learn more about the pirates – which was at least somewhat interesting, she nevertheless held her tongue, not wanting to give the false impression that she was paying attention to much of anything he said.

It wasn't that the man had been overtly cruel to her, and, in fact, if she were pushed to admit it, he had been nothing but a gentleman in the brief time since she had come to live with him. He had carefully not positioned himself as a replacement to her father, but rather seemed to be making a genuine effort to get to know her as more of a friend, which only seemed to annoy Cassie just that much more since she was hard pressed to find fault with him. In fact, he had been quite generous with her, even to the extent of ordering a whole new wardrobe of lighter dresses for her to wear once they landed at San Miguel Island, where the heavier, warmer dresses of home would have been quite oppressively hot and cumbersome.

Not that she ever intended to wear any of them, but there was no need for him to know that. She had allowed herself to be guided to the dressmaker's and let him buy her a truly beautiful wardrobe that was expensive beyond her wildest dream. Still she refused to wear anything but the black of mourning that her deep sense of loss demanded.

To Cassie's shock and dismay, however, she found that her mother had allowed herself – several months before her father had been gone a year – to be convinced to abandon proper mourning clothes in favor of wearing outfits that would entice the Don and display her charms to their best advantage. It was a blow from which Cassie was finding it hard to recover.

Other than that, though, she couldn't come up with a single thing that the Don had done to warrant her ire. He didn't seem to need one penny of their money, although Cassie knew that could have been a ruse to gain their trust. If she were to be honest with herself, which was a state of mind she assiduously tried to avoid, she was more than a little jealous and frankly disheartened that her beloved father had been replaced so easily, and by a man whom Cassie thought of as a cad and well beneath her mother's notice, despite the lack of evidence to support her theory. Her mother seemed gayer and happier

than she'd been in a long time – since even before her father passed, and there was no doubting the love and affection she saw in Duque Gregorio's eyes when he looked at Lysette, who was obviously just as dismayed at her daughter's attitude towards her new husband.

On the few occasions that they had been alone since the Don had arrived on the scene, she often beseeched Cassie to give the Don a chance, certain that if she got to know him, she would come to like him.

But Cassie didn't *want* to like him! She wanted him to be the stereotypical gold digger after a delicate widow's fortune, and did her best to paint him as such in her mind, despite ample evidence to the contrary.

Even here, alone in the dark, she couldn't keep herself from rolling her eyes at the thought of how drastically her mother had changed since her father had died. She barely recognized the sycophantic love slave that that formerly strong, intelligent woman had become. Until tonight – during their alarmingly short courtship – Cassie had had no idea just what it was that had caused such a drastic change in her mother's usually practical, pragmatic demeanor.

This night, however, she had had a very rude awakening as to exactly what it was that had drawn her mother to a man that Cassie considered to be well beneath their station – Don or not – and what she had seen had been the impetus for her midnight flight from the safety of Duque Gregorio De la Fuente's gorgeous mansion into the unknown hazards of a night that seemed to be drawing further in on her with every breath she took.

She wasn't exactly sure what it was that had her panting; there was no way that anyone would know that she was gone until mid-morning at the earliest, considering that the newlywed couple tended to skip breakfast in favor of spending their morning in more intimate pursuits.

That thought had Cassie shuddering in reaction to the shocking memory of what she had seen transpire between the two.

Cassie and her parents had been an inordinately close family, and her parents were – despite their arranged marriage – truly in love. They preferred nothing more than to be in each other's company, doting endlessly on the fruit of their love, showering her with the best of everything and taking her with them everywhere, despite how scandalizing their conduct was considered by their contemporaries, who believed that one must do one's duty in having children, but left the dreary task of actually *raising* them to the help in favor of as urchin-free an existence as could be managed.

When her father, the Earl of Sutton, had died suddenly during a cholera epidemic that swept through their remote village and even managed to reach their estate, her mother had been her only source of consolation. They had clung to each other in the depths of their grief. Desperate to keep from sliding into a deadly decline at the loss of her one true love, Lysette had decided after seven long, tear-filled months cloistered in their cavernous home, that they needed a change of scenery, and so the two of them set off for their London townhouse – draped, of course, as required, in yards and yards of the requisite black crepe of mourning.

Cassie had already made her debut into London society several years before. The three of them were so happy together that they weren't in the least concerned by what would normally have been considered an alarming dearth of offers for her hand. That just meant that they could enjoy each other's company for that much longer. Her parents

– unlike the majority of their peers – were in absolutely no hurry to rid themselves of their precious daughter and Cassie had less than no interest in placing herself under any man’s thumb when she had nearly unlimited freedom under her father’s roof.

One of the most treasured memories Cassie had of her childhood was being cosseted and fawned over at bedtime. Both parents would come to her room to kiss her goodnight, and often stayed for long moments while her father regaled them with familiar stories of what her mother always referred to as his misspent youth, during which he was roundly scolded at least once by his beloved wife, who considered that the majority of his stories were highly improper for a young girl’s ears – not that she ever managed to stop him from telling the tales in the first place.

Cassie was also more than free to join them in their bedchamber, which, again, unlike any of her friends’ parents; they actually shared instead of maintaining separate rooms and having the occasional physical encounter purely to fulfill the need for an heir. Many long, happy hours had been spent wedged between the two, safe from the thunderstorms that terrified her. Her parents coddled and spoiled her outrageously.

Last night, alone and lonely in her huge and lavishly appointed, but strange and impersonal room, Cassie had innocently gone in pursuit of the closeness with which she had been raised, determined to suss out her mother and try to rekindle the relationship they seemed to have lost since venturing to London, where the smarmy Don had entered their secure little world and knocked it out of orbit. But what she’d discovered instead, had been the impetus for her flight away from the sterile and somewhat sinister walls of her new home – and her beloved mother.

Her heart had lifted when she finally made it through the maze of hallways and glanced down the long, elaborately decorated corridor to see that the door to her mother’s chamber was open a few inches, as if in invitation. Not certain whether she might have fallen asleep with it open, and not wishing to disturb her, Cassie had crept quietly up to peep in, certain she’d find her Mama with an ever present book on her lap, snoring softly having fallen asleep while reading as she often did.

The sight that greeted her virgin eyes – and ears – however, had nothing to do with slumber at all, and everything to do with the depths of depravity she had been certain she’d seen in the Duque’s eyes from the moment she was introduced to him not three months ago.

Her mother was bent over the chair of her ornately tapestried vanity; the one her father had given her as a wedding gift, done in golds to echo the ornate frame of the mirror that topped it was well as the drawer pulls and legs of the chair, with a cornflower blue background decorated with touches of mauve and cream flowers. How many memories could she conjure of seeing her mother sitting in that seat, brushing her long still mostly reddish hair in the mirror while her father looked on adoringly, or even ran his fingers through those luxurious locks in a moment of intimacy she’d been more embarrassed to witness as she grew older.

But this wasn’t embarrassingly tender – it was alarmingly lewd! She could see that her mother was still in the dress she’d worn to dinner, but the skirt had been bunched up onto her back as it slanted downwards to where her hands gripped the seat of the chair rhythmically as if begging for deliverance. Cassie could clearly see the way her fingers clenched and unclenched in time with long, low moans that – if she had been asked at the time, she would have never said could have been issued from her sweet mother’s mouth.

And she was being given more than ample reason for those moans by the man who was standing tall and strong – despite his years – behind her and just to one side, viciously wielding a doubled up length of leather against that defenselessly proffered bottom. As Cassie covered her mouth and began to back away, she could hear the Don saying something that she immediately regretted overhearing, “My naughty Lysette, this will teach you to behave. When your husband commands your presence in his chambers, he means immediately – not when you decide it’s the proper time. Am I making myself perfectly clear?”

The strap rose and fell relentlessly and each explosive crack had Cassie flinching for her poor Mother, and despite how committed she had been to retreating as far as she could in the opposite direction when she’d first come upon that little scene, she immediately became just as fervent about rescuing her precious Mama from even one more stroke so full of such raw humiliation. So instead of yielding to her first impulse and scurrying back to her room like a frightened mouse, Cassie instead ran to grab a pike from one of the many suits of armor the Don liked to display about his mansion, returning to her former position to fling the door open and storm into her mother’s room, intent on rescuing her from this senseless beating. No one had ever laid a hand on her mother before, and she wasn’t about to let this no account Don hurt her in *any* way – no matter the fact that he was half again her size and conditioned by years of fighting for his King.

But despite her fervor, after her first untrained attempt at skewering the man through the middle, she found herself relieved of her weapon after only having gotten a few steps into the room, and now both she and her mother were at his mercy as he chuckled and hefted the lance once or twice, before turning to place it carefully against the wall behind him, well out of Cassie’s reach.

Putting her ignominiously quick defeat behind her, she nevertheless stormed up to the man whom she considered the usurper of her mother’s affections, to say nothing of an abusive lout who seemed to take great pleasure in inflicting pain on weaker beings, and spat in his face, shouting for him to stop beating her mother and let her go.

But again, the Don was too quick for her, and he captured her forearms and held them well away from him, neutralizing this threat as well, without much thought, holding her until she’d exhausted herself physically, although she continued to rain invectives down on his head.

“Enough!” he roared, and Cassie flinched, finding herself unexpectedly turned loose while the Don produced a pristine handkerchief with which he wiped his face. Instead of renewing her attack, all she could think to do was to rub her arms where his hands had restrained her, as if his mere touch had sullied her, somehow.

During all of this, a very distraught Lysette had tried to stand up, but one look from her new husband had her back in place seconds later. She couldn’t hold her tongue as her face blushed nearly as furiously as her backside. “Cassandra! Go back to your room this minute!” she ordered.

Cassie wasn’t listening. All of her attention was focused on the man in front of her. She was determined to rescue her mother from his lascivious clutches. But when she opened her mouth again to let loose with another stream of invectives that called not only his own honor but that of his ancestors’ into question, he cut her off merely by taking a step forward.

Despite her inward castigation of herself as a coward, Cassie couldn't prevent herself from snapping her mouth shut and taking a corresponding step back at the same time, although she did manage to keep her eyes locked with her opponent's.

The Don was to be commended for keeping the vitriol that Cassie knew had to be lurking somewhere within him from showing in his calm, almost but not quite soothing tone. "I know we don't know each other very well yet, Cassandra, but you should know better than to come bursting into your mother's room uninvited. To say nothing of the fact that you should have been taught to think twice – and then twice again – before deciding to interfere with what transpires between a man and wife," he said, surprising her by taking several steps back himself. "Do as your mother suggested and return to your room. And don't go venturing out of it again once you've gone to bed or you might find yourself even more appalled at what you discover happens between men and women in their bedchambers."

Cassie swallowed and stood her ground although she could see how tightly his jaw was clenched the longer she remained in place.

Seeing that his more gentle speech was not having any effect, Gregorio said almost off handedly, "Not that it's any of your business, but you might consider the fact that your mother isn't bound or restrained in any way. What does that tell you about her part in this little tableau, hmmm?"

"Gregorio!" her mother gasped, looking up at him as Cassie began to back away, not in obedience to her mother's – or the Duque's – order, but because the reality of the situation was just hitting her: her mother was a willing participant in this horrifying pursuit.

As much as she didn't want to, after a few backward steps, Cassie simply turned tail and ran. She couldn't possibly get away from that bedroom fast enough, but before she made it to the safety of the hallway, she heard her stepfather say, "Maybe we need to find you a man who can do the same for you, Cassandra – keep you firmly in line, where you belong."

Cassie refused to listen to what he was saying, although the words seemed to seep in despite the fact she was doing her best to ignore them. "Your parents have spoiled you; and like your mother, you are sorely in need of a husband who's not going to be anywhere near as indulgent."

Although she had already turned the corner and continued to run as fast as she could away from that disturbing scene, her keen ears could still pick up her mother's indignant squeak of "Gregorio!", as well as what she was rapidly coming to recognize as the crack of something unyielding against flesh, which prompted her to continue her sprint with her hands firmly over her ears, lest they hear anything worse than they already had.

With the abhorrent visions of what she had just witnessed racing through her mind, Cassie did exactly what she had been expressly told not to do. First, she changed into her rattiest dress, knowing she wouldn't want to sully any of the nicer ones, and filled the largest valise she thought she could carry – and not with the most practical of items at that, preferring to take remembrances and mementos from her father rather than the warm cloak and more sturdy shoes she was feeling the acute absence of right now.

Luckily for her, as the Don lived a more countrified life here, away from civilization, and her maid, Mary, hadn't made the long voyage yet, there was little need

to sneak around as she slipped boldly out the front door, although she still did her best to make sure that no one saw her, especially as she was out in the open as she crossed the courtyard.

Once she found the entrance to the path she sought at the edge of the jungle-like woods, she started at the sound of some wild animal or bird, plastering herself against the side of the tree. She knew she would end up somewhere near the beautiful beach she'd found while wandering about on her own one day. But she had neglected to bring a lantern, and she wasn't really sure that that wasn't a good thing, since she had neglected to notice that the night was intermittently overcast and she was only given occasional glimpses of the shoreline as she was headed down a steepish hill. At least she could smell the water and knew she was headed in the right direction.

The problem was that she didn't really have a plan as to what to do once she got there. She headed there because in the short time that she had been on the island, it had become her haven away from the house she was rapidly coming to hate, but she only knew the one way in or out. And regardless of where she ended up, she was trapped on an island that her stepfather governed. Her only hope was to stow away on a ship bound for somewhere – anywhere – but she knew that none was in residence at the moment because Duque Gregorio had mentioned that they would have to wait for the next ship to arrive to post the letters with instructions for the staff at both of their houses that her Mother had written recently.

For the moment, once she felt sand shifting beneath her feet, she stayed relatively close to the path that had lead her here, allowing her eyes to adjust to the darkness. But as soon as she realized that she'd been staring at more than the empty cove, she turned as quickly and quietly as she could, knowing that it was even more important that she remain undiscovered, considering what she'd already had the misfortune of seeing.

A large ship – larger by half again than the one on which they had sailed from England – had slipped silently into the unprotected cove and a boat had already landed not three hundred feet from her, its men scurrying about like rats, whispering harshly to each other only when it was absolutely necessary. Not a light was lit on the entire vessel, and this behavior had even the innocent Cassie alarmed. Her fears were confirmed when a large party of ruffians gathered and lit huge torches, then began marching towards what she was concerned was the exact path she was standing next to. It was then that she could see the skull and crossbones flying high and proud at the top of the mast of the ship where it lay anchored just off shore, and she knew that her worst fears had been confirmed: pirates were raiding the town, and she was the only one who seemed to be aware of that fact. And if she could see them, they could probably see her, as well.

She knew she had to get to the church to send up the alarm, but she wasn't even sure she knew the way there, especially not in the dark and not from this tiny cove. She'd only ever seen it that one time when the Don had shown it to them, and she certainly hadn't been expecting that she would ever need to find her way back to it. But despite what she'd seen transpire tonight, Cassie had absolutely no interest in losing her mother so soon after watching her father waste way, so she headed uphill, remembering that the church was on a high point, overlooking the harbor.

She didn't question her luck, however, when minutes later she ended up exactly where she needed to be. The doors to the church were enormously heavy but unlocked,

and she just managed to pull them open enough to slip inside, then felt her way across the altar to a set of stairs that must lead to the bell tower.

The chamber was small enough that, once she'd climbed to the top of the stairs and taken two steps, the bell pull brushed the top of her head. Cassie reached up to grab onto it, then pulled with all her might, feeling a tremendous sense of relief when the old bell clanged to life, even though she felt herself lifted entirely off her feet as it swung back.

Until someone's alarmingly strong arms closed tightly around her midsection, and she found herself relived both of the rope and the ability to do what she wanted most in the world to do at this time – scream – as a huge hand clamped itself over her mouth.

“Move and I'll kill you,” came the rough promise from lips that were pressed much too intimately against her ear.