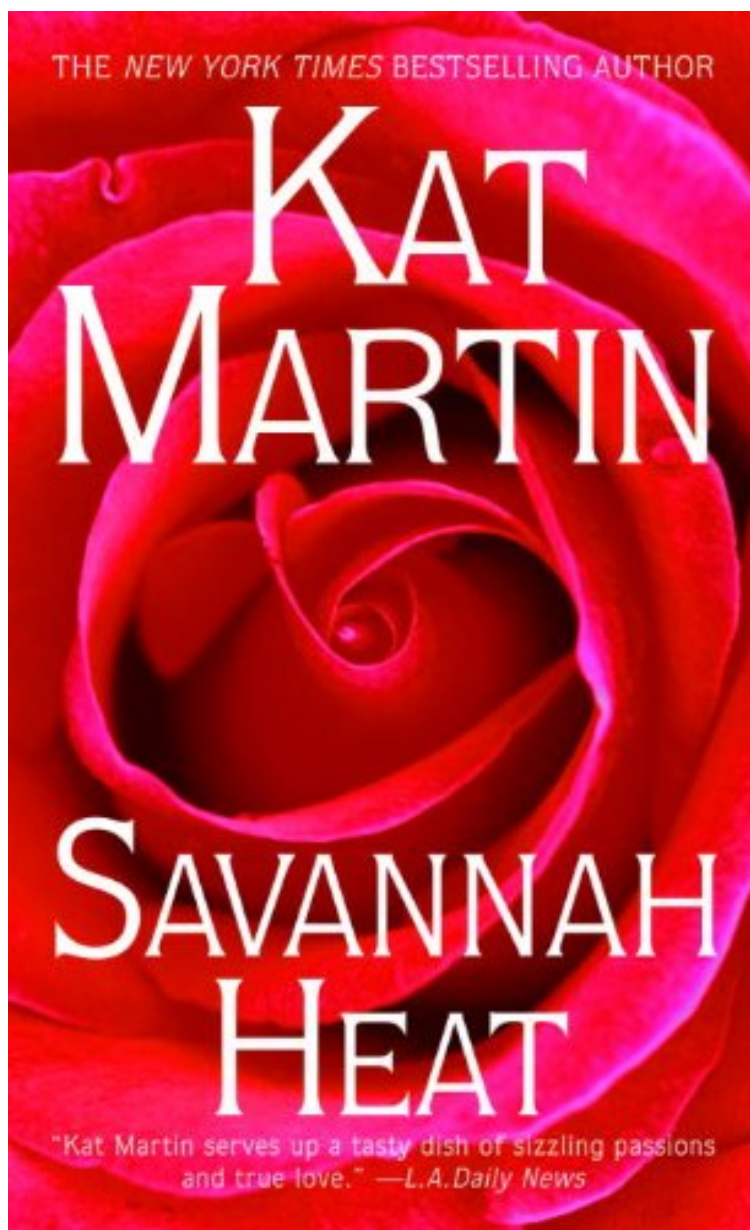


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Savannah Heat



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurDespite her disguise as Silver Jones, tavern maid, Lady Selena Hardwich-Jones was captured by bounty hunters combing the Georgia coast for the runaway with hair pale as spun silver and eyes like soft brown velvet. Forced onto a ship headed for her home in the West Indies, Silver vowed to make her break for freedom. But in the vessel's brash owner she found a will to match her own. Major Morgan Trask was determined to deliver his lovely human cargo safely to the aristocrat he had long admired. Was the ship's dashing captain Silver's stern captor or her gallant protector? Tormented by doubts, tantalized by

desire, Silver's emotions were in turmoil. For a secret shame kept her from telling Morgan Trask the real reason for her flight, all the while fearing and yearning to trust him. As they sailed into treacherous waters, their very lives in peril, Silver and Morgan could no longer deny their hunger for each other ... as they surrendered to a passion that burned hotter than the Savannah heat. *Chapter 1 Savannah, Georgia 1841 Escape!* It was all she could think of, all she could dream. The word possessed her, crowding her thoughts and blotting her senses until it formed a prison all its own. Silver Jones sank down on the low wooden cot in the corner of the rat-infested storeroom. Her blood still pumped from her latest unsuccessful effort: stacking heavy wooden crates and boxes one atop the other; then climbing the unstable pyramid to the small dirty window a dozen feet above her head. This morning she had finally succeeded in prying open a side door, and though she hadn't found an avenue of escape and only succeeded in tearing her nails and bloodying her fingers, she did find enough boxes in the adjoining room to build her shaky ladder. Damn it to hell! Silver slammed her slender fist against the cot, then cursed again for her self-inflicted pain. She'd been so sure that once she reached the window she'd be able to squeeze through the opening and make her escape.

Instead she'd discovered, even as slenderly built as she was, the opening was just too small. Hours of shouting for help had only made her hoarse. Silver released a weary sigh and glanced at her dismal surroundings. Along with the heavy boxes and her narrow wooden cot, a chipped pink porcelain water pitcher sat in a basin on an upturned crate next to a partly burned candle. The place smelled moldy and abandoned. Flies buzzed above a tray laden with a half-eaten crust of bread and an empty bowl of mutton stew. From the corner of her eye, Silver spotted the gray-brown fur of a rat as it skittered behind a hogs-head barrel in the corner, and clenched her teeth to stifle a scream. God, she hated the dirty little creatures. Bugs and spiders she could stand; there were lots of them where she came from. And lots of them here in the hot and humid climate of Savannah. But rats--even tiny little field mice--were another matter altogether. Silver shivered as the rat raced by just a few feet away and eventually disappeared. Ignoring thoughts of when it might return, she ran her fingers through her hair, tugging at a snarl here and there, and worked to comb out some of the tangles. The long, usually glistening silver strands that had inspired her nickname hung in grayish ropes around her face. Her low-cut white cotton peasant blouse and simple brown skirt, the uniform of the tavern maid at the White Horse Inn, where she had been working, were stained from the grime that covered the walls and floors and torn in several places. At least they hadn't mistreated her. Just spotted her in the tavern, then waited in the alley until she finished her duties and left for her small attic bedchamber above the carriage house in the rear. "It's her all right," the tallest man had whispered, just before his hand clamped over her mouth. Using the heavy weight of his body, he had forced her up against the building. "Hair as pale as spun silver, eyes like soft brown velvet, skin so fair and smooth makes a man itch to touch it." "Don't get any ideas," Ferdinand Pinkard warned. "You know the deal--the girl goes back in good condition. There'll be no reward if she's been harmed." "Bloody hell!" Silver cursed behind the man's foul-smelling fingers.

Struggling wildly, she lashed out with her slender hands and feet. One solid blow connected with a heavy calf, eliciting a yelp of pain and a string of oaths, and her free hand clawed the side of the tall man's face. With vicious determination, she sank her teeth into his palm. "You damned hellion!" He shook her so hard she feared her neck might break. "You'd better behave yourself, Miss Jones," Pinkard warned. The chill in his voice sent a tremor of fear down her spine. "It's a long way back--plenty of time for a few minor bruises to heal." Wiping at the blood on his cheek, the tall man tightened his hold. "You damnable she-devil." Lacing his hand through her hair, he jerked her head back until tears stung her eyes. "Careful, Julian." Pinkard's voice rang with a note of sarcasm. "We wouldn't want His Lordship to be displeased." There were four of them: two burly sailors, the tall, spidery man with the rancid breath who held her, and Ferdinand Pinkard. "How did you find me?" Silver asked through clenched teeth, fighting the pain in her arm that the man called Julian twisted up behind her back. "How--how did you know where to look?" One of the sailors, a big, red-haired, mustached man, chuckled softly. "Pinkard could find the last rat on a sinkin' ship. That pale hair o'yours--and a face just as perty--you weren't hardly no trouble a'tall." Silver felt a wave of despair. She had come so far, been so sure this time she would succeed. She wasn't really afraid; she knew exactly what these men wanted. Though she'd done her best to throw them off her trail, she should have known someone would find her. She should have known he would never let her go. Arms bound behind her, an oily rag stuffed into her mouth and tied so tight she could barely breathe, Silver had little choice but to let Pinkard and his henchmen drag her into the darkness of a waiting carriage. Stay calm, she told herself over and over. Keep your wits about you. You've come too far to fail now. Working to control her pounding heart, she leaned against the padded wall of the sleek black carriage, listening to the clatter of the wheels against the

cobblestone streets, then to the whirl of wooden spokes as the road became a dusty lane. She should have kept running, should have gone inland. She thought of the misery she had left behind and could almost taste the blood in her mouth, feel the heavy blows of his fists. How many times had she suffered his abuse? How many times had she quietly submitted, believing she somehow deserved it, sure each time would be the last?

How many times had she rebelled and fought him and in the end endured far worse? Silver watched the passing blur of darkness outside the carriage window. God in heaven, would this nightmare never end? It hadn't taken long to reach their destination--an old abandoned warehouse somewhere distant from the docks. Pinkard had locked her in, leaving her bound and gagged all night just to make his authority clear. Her arms and mouth felt numb by morning, her tongue dry and swollen. She wished she could cry, but she didn't dare.

There wasn't room for weakness, wasn't room for tears. In the early hours of the morning, Pinkard returned with one of his men, bringing water and something to eat, and releasing her from her bonds. They had come each day since, always careful, never sending a man alone, never allowing her to get too near them. They'd been schooled well--the man who would pay for her return had told them in no uncertain terms exactly how desperate she was. Major Morgan Trask strode the long wooden dock toward the ship Savannah, just arrived from Charleston. As always, he admired her low, sleek lines, her graceful bowsprit arching out over the

water, the two tall masts of stout spruce that soared upward into the dark night sky. Above them, clouds covered the moon, and a heavy drizzle hinted at a mild spring storm. Morgan had owned the 145-foot topsail schooner for the past six months, but he rarely captained her. He'd given up that wandering existence last year since the profits he'd long saved and invested had made him a wealthy man. As he strode the dock, Morgan caught his reflection on the surface of the water, his tall, broad-shouldered image rippling with the incoming tide, his dark blond hair mussed by the wind. Over the years he'd grown used to the jagged scar that marked his cheek, but he found the military uniform he now wore, with its garish gold bars and shiny brass buttons, far too pretentious. He much preferred the dark brown breeches he usually wore at sea, often without even a shirt. But the Texians--as the newspapers sometimes called them and they often called themselves--had insisted on the formality of his rank. "It just wouldn't do," Stephen Pearson, President Lamar's representative, had said during his most persuasive visit, "for a civilian--a man not even a citizen of the

republic--to be involved in a weapons negotiation with the British." They'd decided on the temporary commission of major in the Texas Marines. A man with enough rank to command respect, but not so much that the British liaison might feel intimidated. The offer the Texians made had intrigued him from the start. It was a chance to sail the seas again, a chance for a little more adventure. But the real motivation for Morgan's acceptance of the Texians' proposal was his worry for his brother. Always brash and impetuous, Brendan Trask had been intrigued by the vast landscape and the limitless possibilities the young Republic of Texas had to offer. He had left Georgia two years ago and promptly enlisted in the Texas Marines. Now he was on assignment in Mexico, where his countrymen had gone to assist the Federalist rebels in an attempt to overthrow the Mexican government, a constant source of harassment for the fledgling Texas Republic.

Brendan was bound to be in the thick of it. This trip would give Morgan a chance to check on him, assure himself that Brendan was safe. Morgan climbed over the port taffrail onto the deck of the Savannah, nearly empty of crew since most had gone ashore. He had bought the vessel on a whim--not that it wasn't a damned good investment. Owning the schooner had been a way of keeping in touch with the sea that had so long been his home. Now he was glad he had. Morgan strode the deck toward the wheelhouse, looking for Solomon Speight, the man who usually captained the ship on her trading voyages along the coast. Morgan spoke to Sol only briefly, while the lanky gray-haired man collected his gear and left to go ashore. "It'll be good to have a little time off," Sol said with a smile. He shook Morgan's hand and walked toward the rail with a rolling seaman's stride. "A man needs some time to himself once in a while." Morgan didn't believe a word of it. The sea was in Sol's blood; he was the kind of man whose bones would wind up in Davy Jones's locker. Morgan trusted him implicitly, but the Texians had insisted Morgan command the ship himself.

Besides, it would be good to leave the comforts of his Abercorn Street mansion, leave the demanding schedule of his cotton business behind and take the helm of a ship again. "Good evening, Major," came a voice from the ladder leading down to the main salon, an elegantly appointed room where the captain and first mate and any passengers who might be aboard took their meals. Paneled in oak with carved built-in hutches in each corner, the room centered on a heavy oak table and chairs. Behind it lay the plush captain's cabin and another small room that adjoined for the steward or cabin boy. "I'm Lieutenant Hamilton Riley. I'll be your attach for this leg of the journey." Riley climbed down the ladder, and Morgan shook his hand, noticing the slim but confident grip. "Nice to meet you, Lieutenant. Anything new I should know?" "Nothing

important. Trip appears to be pretty routine. We meet the Brits in Barbados, trade the cotton for sugar, the sugar for guns, then take the arms on down to the Yucatn. The Texas troops are holding their own, but these additional weapons will certainly be useful."Riley looked no more than twenty, though Morgan knew from his file that he was twenty-three. With his sandy hair and light blue eyes, Ham had the look of an innocent--which, even after his years at West Point, in many ways he was."We should be ready to leave in two more days," Morgan told him."That's fine. We've plenty of time before our scheduled rendezvous. In fact, we'll probably arrive well before the Brits do.""Any other Texians coming aboard?" Morgan asked."There'll be five of us in all, counting myself. I understand you'll be sailing with a crew of fifteen.""That's right. She'll carry as many as fifty, but I don't expect a difficult voyage, and the fewer people involved, the better."The young lieutenant grinned, exposing a dimple in his cheek that made him look even younger. "Quite right, sir." "If you need me for anything else, you can find me in my cabin." "Yes, sir," the lieutenant said with a smart salute."And you can cut all that military cock and bull right now. A simple 'yes, sir' from you and your men will do just fine." "Yes, sir," he repeated, snapping another salute. Then his ears turned red with embarrassment."That's all, Lieutenant." Morgan fought a smile of amusement as Hamilton Riley turned and hurried up the ladder.After crossing the salon to his quarters, Morgan sat down at his desk and began going over his orders and any last-minute details he might need to know before their departure. As soon as the rum in the hold had been off-loaded and replaced with cotton, they'd be on their way. Morgan almost smiled. After the hectic pace he'd been leading, he looked forward to a few restful weeks at sea. He could almost hear the sound of canvas snapping in the cool dawn breeze, see the clear blue waters of the Caribbean rushing beneath the hull. Morgan could hardly wait."Better wrap that blanket around ya," the red-haired sailor warned. "It's startin' to rain pretty hard."Though the scratchy wool itched something fierce, Silver did as she was told. Maybe they would leave her hands free to hold on to it, and she could find the opening she'd been seeking, catch them off guard, and make her escape."Not a chance, girlie," the one named Julian said, yanking her arms out in front of her and lashing her wrists together. He stuffed his dirty handkerchief into her mouth and tied another around her head, securing the first one in place.They tossed the blanket over her shoulders but left her head exposed to the wind and rain as they tugged her out the door. Dodging the rapidly growing puddles on the muddy, water-soaked street, they made their way to the carriage some distance away. By the time the men had Silver settled across from a dry Ferdinand Pinkard, her blanket had fallen in the mud and been left behind, and her clothes and hair were plastered wetly to her body. Though the other men's eyes homed in on the soft mounds of her breasts, the way her skirts clung to her hips and thighs, Pinkard just smiled."You're looking a bit bedraggled, my dear. Let's hope the good major can provide a change of clothing."Damn you to hell! Silver silently raged. If there were ever a man on this earth who deserved the wrath of the Lord, it was this one. Dark-complected beneath his pencil-thin mustache, the Spaniard was as heartless a pursuer as ever she could have encountered. Back home she'd heard his name often. He was a man who hired himself out for a price, and no job was too demeaning, no task too distasteful.The carriage pulled up at the docks, the door swung open, and the three men who rode outside lifted her onto the street. Pinkard pulled his narrow-brimmed hat down low, his long black cloak more firmly around him, and followed along behind."Watch your step," Julian warned, jerking her roughly over the rail of the ship and onto the deck."We've something to discuss with the major," Pinkard told a sandy-haired man in a dark blue uniform."He's in his cabin," the young man said. "Whom shall I say is calling?" "Ferdinand Pinkard. Tell him I've a treasure of some worth that belongs to a friend of his."The soldier eyed her curiously, taking in her wet clothes, bound hands, and the gag in her mouth. With a sympathetic glance, he went below, only to return a few minutes later. "He says you can go on down." "Thank you." Pinkard turned to the others--"You two wait here"--then to Julian, who gripped her arm in a deathlock. "Let's go."Down the ladder, across the salon, a quick knock on the low wooden door, and a deep voice told them to come in. Juilan thrust her through the opening, making her stumble; Pinkard stepped in behind her; then Julian walked back outside."What the hell's going on?"Silver's brown eyes swung to the tall dark blond man with the scar on his cheek who surged to his feet at their dramatic entrance."Salena," Pinkard said to her, using her given name, "this is Major Morgan Trask, recently of the Texas Marines." He arched a thin black brow in amusement and looked at her as if expecting her to give a formal greeting in return. "I'm afraid Salena can't answer," he said to the major, "but I'm sure she's pleased to meet a man who was once her father's friend."Silver cursed behind her gag and tried to kick the Spaniard in the shins. She got a ringing slap across the face for her effort. The tall major's brutal grip on Pinkard's arm and his hard warning glance stilled the blow that would have followed."I asked you what's going on," the major said. "Now either you tell me, or I

untie the girl and she tells me." "I wouldn't advise that if I were you. Salena has a terrible temper." "So it would seem." "The friend I'm speaking of is the earl of Kent." The major seemed annoyed by Pinkard's game. He was a tall man, well built, without an ounce of excess flesh. The scar on his cheek gave him a hard look but didn't detract from the strong line of his jaw or his straight patrician nose. "What's she got to do with William?" he asked. Pinkard chuckled softly, and his thin mustache tilted up in a crooked half-smile. "That dark-eyed, vile-tempered bundle you see before you is none other than his daughter." He untied the gag and pulled it from her mouth. Silver cursed him roundly and tried to kick him again. "Major Morgan Trask meet Lady Salena Hardwick-Jones." Morgan's practiced eye moved over her. She stood no taller than the average female, but the way she lifted her chin and squared her shoulders made her seem so. Her stringy gray-blond hair clung to a pair of smooth pale breasts that rose and fell above the low-cut bodice of her blouse. "My name is Silver Jones," she said. "I work at the White Horse Inn on Bay Street. This man is out of his mind." Morgan's mouth twitched in what, under different circumstances, might have had the makings of a smile. Even with her dirty face and soggy garments, he couldn't miss William's defiant stance with its healthy dose of arrogance or Mary's big brown eyes and thick-fringed lashes. The slim, straight nose and delicate cheekbones were all Silver Jones. "Silver, is it? Not Lady Salena?" The last time he'd seen William, Morgan had been a youth of fifteen. The earl of Kent had been a friend of his late father's, friend and mentor to him. Salena had been a toddler, smiling and climbing up on her father's knee. Then William had broken with family tradition and set off on his own. He bought a tiny island in the West Indies named Katonga that he had never seen and sailed away to run a plantation. Time and again Morgan had wondered about him but had never taken the time to visit. It was beginning to look as though he'd finally get the chance. "I told you my name is Silver. I work at the White Horse Inn. These gentlemen are mistaken." Morgan ignored her, turning his attention instead to Pinkard. "What exactly is it you want me to do with her?" "Take her home," the Spaniard said simply, "which, you may rest assured, will be no easy task." Morgan fastened his eyes on Salena. Wet clear through, the bodice of her blouse revealed a pair of pert pink nipples that had hardened against the cold and a waist so narrow he could span it with his hands. "Why did you run away?" He forced his eyes back up to her face and noticed the dirt that smudged her chin, covering a dainty cleft in the center. A tinge of pink crept into her cheeks, as if she knew where his eyes had been. "She's bent on marrying a man her father deems unfit," Pinkard answered for her. "Some ruffian who passed through on his way to the States. Her father forbade the marriage, so she's run after the scurvy fellow." "You're a liar, Pinkard," she spat. "And you're not Lady Salena," Morgan said mockingly. "You're just Silver Jones, a hardworking tavern wench who's here only by mistake." Silver didn't answer. If Morgan Trask was a friend of her father's, there was nothing left to say. "Why come to me?" the major asked Pinkard. "Believe it or not, beneath all that mud, Silver is a beautiful young woman. There are few men I'd trust to see her safely returned." "You mean there are few men you'd trust to get her there unharmed so you can get paid." "Precisely." Morgan had known Pinkard and his sell-his-soul-for-a-dollar business dealings for years. He wasn't surprised to find him returning a runaway girl to her grieving parents for money--but he was surprised to find the wayward young lady was Salena Hardwick-Jones. "My sources tell me you're headed for Barbados," Pinkard added. "Katonga isn't far out of the way. You can return the girl and pick up my money. And William will see you're taken care of as well--unless, of course, you want me to go along." "Not a chance, Pinkard. An hour with you is just about all I can stand." Pinkard let the words pass. "Then you'll take the girl home?" "I seem to have no other choice. I'm not about to leave her with you and your thugs. She may not whet your appetite"--he glanced once more in the girl's direction, at her nipped-in waist and the alluring curves of her breasts and thighs--"but I don't doubt the others would find her a tasty morsel. I'm surprised you've been able to keep them in line this long--assuming you have." "I assure you the lady's virtue remains intact. William was quite adamant about that." He arched a black brow. "Speaking of which, I hope I can count on your loyalty to William to overrule the sexual prowess women seem to find so attractive in you." Silver glanced at Morgan, who shot her a look that told her exactly the appeal she held for him. She was dirty and ragged and rain-soaked. And she hadn't bathed in a week. "Don't say it," she warned, watching his eyes move over her soggy clothes and matted hair. Handsome or not, he was just a man. What he thought of her meant nothing. Morgan just smiled. "Take care, Major," Pinkard cautioned as he turned to leave. "She'll do anything to keep from going back to Katonga. I'd watch my back if I were you." "I'll keep that in mind." The major's look said Pinkard's warning concerned him not in the least. Good, Silver thought. A man who underestimates his opponent is the easiest to defeat. "You know where to find me," Morgan finished. "I'll have your blood money ready and waiting when I get back." "You do that, Major. Both William and I are more than grateful for your

assistance--even if it has been given with some reluctance." With a last glance at Silver, Pinkard walked out the door, closing it firmly behind him. Morgan turned his attention to Salena Hardwick-Jones. Though she held her head high, there were smudges beneath her eyes that betrayed her fatigue, and her wrists were chapped and raw from the too-tight bindings. His brows drew together as he assessed the red mark across her cheek left by Pinkard's hand. The bastard hadn't the conscience God gave a snake. Pulling open the door, he leaned into the passageway and caught the attention of Hamilton Riley, who sat waiting in the salon. Morgan explained to him about their newest traveling companion, then asked him to have Cookie, the ship's cook, heat water for a bath. "She'll need something dry to wear," Morgan added. "Jordy's about her size. Get something from him." Jordan Little was his cabin boy, a youth of just thirteen. Once the tasks had been set in motion, Morgan stepped back inside and closed the door. "We need to talk, Salena." "My name is Silver." He watched her for a moment, noting the rise and fall of her high, round breasts, the color that tinted her cheeks. Even tired and bedraggled, and wet clear to her bones, she had an air about her. Morgan scoffed at the idea of aristocratic bloodlines that William held so dear, and yet . . . "If that's the name you prefer--" "It's the only name I'll answer to." Morgan ignored a pinprick of anger. If he just took it slowly, made her understand that her father had only her best interests in mind, the girl would soon settle down and accept the inevitable. "If you promise to behave, I'll cut your bindings." Silver nodded. Morgan slid a small stag-handled knife from the sheath at his waist and slit the leather thongs that bound her wrists. She glanced toward the door. "Don't even think about it," he warned. "I was just hoping the bath would hurry." It was a lie, and they both knew it. "Your father was a friend of mine," he told her, hoping to ease the moment. "We knew each other in London." But at his words, she grew only more tense. She glanced away for an instant; then her brown eyes fixed on a point on the wall above his head. "What are you planning to do with me?" "I'm going to take you home." "You're going to try, Silver thought. "I don't suppose there's anything I could say to change your mind." "I owe your father. It's a debt I've never repaid. Seeing his daughter returned to him safely is the least I can do." A shiver raced up Silver's spine. "You're cold." Morgan stepped toward her, but Silver instinctively stepped away. "I was just going to get you a blanket." "The bath will warm me enough." A soft knock sounded at the door. The major opened it, and two young seamen walked in, one with a heavy copper bathing tub, the other carrying dry clothes tucked beneath his arm and two steaming tin pails. The cabin boy, a youth with auburn hair, freckles, and wide hazel eyes, arrived with a pot of tea, cold chicken, and cheese. Silver had to admit the bath and food looked good. As soon as she was clean and dry and had eaten her fill, she would plan her next move. "I'll be just outside if you need anything," Morgan told her when the men had left. He stepped out into the passageway. "Thank you, Major." It was all she could do not to smile. The man underestimated her sorely. She'd be bathed, dressed, and away before he knew what had hit him. And hit him she would. One solid blow to the top of his dark blond head, and he would be out for the night. She would do her best not to hurt him, but he had left her no choice. She shivered inside her wet clothing and glanced at the steaming hot water. In the meantime, she looked forward with relish to the moments she would spend in the tub. Presentation de l'diteur Despite her disguise as Silver Jones, tavern maid, Lady Selena Hardwick-Jones was captured by bounty hunters combing the Georgia coast for the runaway with hair pale as spun silver and eyes like soft brown velvet. Forced onto a ship headed for her home in the West Indies, Silver vowed to make her break for freedom. But in the vessel's brash owner she found a will to match her own. Major Morgan Trask was determined to deliver his lovely human cargo safely to the aristocrat he had long admired. Was the ship's dashing captain Silver's stern captor or her gallant protector? Tormented by doubts, tantalized by desire, Silver's emotions were in turmoil. For a secret shame kept her from telling Morgan Trask the real reason for her flight, all the while fearing and yearning to trust him. As they sailed into treacherous waters, their very lives in peril, Silver and Morgan could no longer deny their hunger for each other ... as they surrendered to a passion that burned hotter than the Savannah heat.