



THE CURSED HEART



BONNIE WORMSLEY

The Cursed Heart

Bonnie Wormsley

Yellow Rose Books

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Dedication

For everyone who has ever sparked my imagination and inspired flights of fancy.

Chapter One

IT WAS IN the morning, only an hour or so before dawn. It was one of the darkest times of the night, when the moon was sinking in the sky. The clouds drifting through made it even darker, casting shadows across the ocean and obscuring the ship that sat silhouetted against the rocks. It was the perfect night.

Katherine Tanner, a woman of about thirty, stood at the helm of her ship, one hand resting on the wheel, the other stroking the head of a magnificent Siberian tiger who sat at her side.

The nighttime breeze coming off the sea ruffled the tiger's orange fur and made Katie's cheeks cold. She was dressed in boy's clothes—breeches, a shirt, and leather boots—as were many of the women on the ship. What made her different than the others was the captain's hat on her head—and the tiger of course.

"Keep an eye to the East, Saida," Katie murmured to the tiger.

The crew was waiting silently for the signal. Katie had sent three of the smallest and quickest of her crew out in a rowboat to stealthily board the ship that was visible on the horizon. Katie could see the ship but her ship, *The Widow*, was invisible to those aboard as it sat in shadow against the rocks.

The crew she sent out knew the routine well: board the ship one at a time, take out the scouts and anyone on deck, flash the signal, then sneak below and take out the cannons.

Katie took out her telescope and scanned the ship. She could see Beth taking out the man in the crow's nest. Marie and Evan swiftly and silently took out the other men on deck before Marie gave the signal, lighting a single candle she had carried aboard with her.

"Okay let's go. Haul in the anchor and move the ship in slowly," Katie ordered the rest of her crew.

The Widow moved up alongside a ship called *The Resilient* and Katie boarded the ship using a strong plank, while some of the crew swung across on the lines. Saida followed the captain across on the plank.

While her crew crawled through the ship, subduing its passengers and gathering treasure, Katie and Saida went straight to the captain's quarters of the ship.

The room was empty and Saida stood in the doorway ensuring it would stay that way while Katie pillaged the room. She took the bloke's money purse and anything else useful from the room before she took what she came for—books. He had shelves of them. Katie didn't stop to look at any of them, just swept them all into a sack.

Saida let out a soft growl, alerting her to someone approaching.

She quickly cinched the bag.

"We've got the crew subdued in the brig, Captain," her first mate Nathaniel called out to her.

"Thanks, Nate," she said and heaved the bag over her shoulder. She headed down the steps to the brig and Saida followed a few steps behind her.

Katie walked down to the belly of the ship where Marie had the ship's crew secured in the brig. She was twirling her pistol around, that manic look in her eye that she sometimes got.

"I've got it from here, Marie. Get what you can from the rest of the ship and make sure to get the galley," Katie said as she reached the group. She set the bag beside the steps before approaching the cell.

"Aye, Captain," Marie said and walked past her, careful to walk on the opposite side of the steps than Saida.

"A woman pirate? And a captain no less? What is this world coming to?" said one of the prisoners scornfully.

"Shut it, you scurvy dog," Katie snarled and Saida let out a terrifying roar at the cage that made the man who had spoken wet himself. Katie chuckled.

"Which one of you swine is captain of this here vessel?" Katie asked. A man, not the one who had pissed himself, stepped forward.

"C-Captain Henry Pollard," he said, his eyes cast to the floor in shame at being overtaken by a female pirate. She had seen it at least a hundred times before. English men with their sexist premonitions, insisted women were the weaker sex.

"Henry," she began and smirked as his face turned an ugly shade of purple. "Know that no unnecessary blood was spilled here tonight. Little harm was done to your crew compared to what could have been done. And your ship, she is quite a nice ship by the way, has not been damaged. I suggest that, after we leave, you make for the port of Sangine for supplies."

The man didn't respond but glared silently, hatred evident in his beady eyes.

"If you're smart you won't—" Katie fell silent as she heard a soft whimper from a door opposite the cell. Saida sniffed curiously and pawed at the door.

"What's in there?" Katie demanded. No one spoke.

Scoffing, she turned and unlatched the door. She pushed it open. An awful smell wafted out but it was too dark to see inside. Saida walked in as Katie grabbed a lantern from nearby. She entered the small room slowly.

The lantern cast a dim light on the room's sole occupant, a thin young woman, who lay on the floor. At first Katie thought she was dead, but when Saida sniffed her, the girl whimpered in fear.

“Come here, Saida,” Katie called and the tiger moved away. “Go and guard the prisoners.”

The tiger left the room with a flick of her tail, back to the brig outside.

“It’s okay,” Katie said softly as she approached the girl. “No one is going to hurt you. What’s your name?”

The girl scrambled away as Katie approached. She pressed herself against the wall, dirty blonde hair hanging limply around her face. The captain knelt down before her. Up close she could see just how thin the girl really was—skeletal, really.

She must be starving, Katie thought to herself.

“My name is Captain Katherine Tanner. How did you get here?” she asked softly.

The girl looked up at her with bright blue eyes, fearful, but she didn’t speak.

Katie got up and went to the doorway.

“Henry. How did this girl come to be locked in this room?” she demanded. His sneer was his only response. Katie blew out a sigh, and strode over to the door to the brig. She unlocked it and whistled to Saida. The tiger let out a snarl and charged into the cell. Men screamed and scrambled out of her way. Saida pounced on Henry and held him to the floor, her fangs inches away from his face.

“Help...get her...off,” he wheezed, the weight of the tiger compressing his lungs.

His crew all cowered in one corner of the cell, as far away from the angry tiger as they could get.

“Maybe you want to answer my question now, eh, Henry?” Katie asked sweetly.

“Yes.” He coughed. Saida backed off just a little so the man could catch his breath.

“The girl, Henry?” Katie pressed.

“I purchased her at the market in France. She was a slave on a pirate ship before the ship was captured. I got her to help clean.”

“So why is she locked in a closet?” she demanded.

“We had to. Any time you take your eyes off of her she tries to jump off the ship. I’ve fished her out of the ocean twice already. I keep her here until there is someone available to watch her while she cleans.”

“What’s her name?”

“I don’t know. She won’t talk.”

“Is she deaf?”

“No, ma’am.”

“That’s captain to you, Henry.”

“Yes, Captain. The girl understands words, she just won’t talk to us.”

"I wouldn't want to talk to you either," Katie scoffed.

"She isn't stupid. The first time we fished her out of the ocean we locked her in here. Within an hour she picked the lock and jumped overboard again."

Katie looked back in the room at the girl who still cowered in the corner.

"We're ready to shove off, Captain!" called Nate from the top of the stairs.

"Aye," she responded. "Saida, come."

The tiger turned her back on the man she'd been ready to kill and snarled once at the men in the corner before gracefully exiting the cell. Katie slid the door closed and locked it, then pocketed the key.

"What—you aren't gonna leave us locked in here!" Henry exclaimed, scrambling to the bars of the cell.

"I am. And I'm taking the girl with me," she retorted and spit at Henry through the bars. She went back into the room and over to the girl, who was trembling.

"Come on, darling. Let's get you out of here," she said gently, extending her hand. Hesitantly the girl took Katie's hand and got to her feet. The captain was surprised to find the girl stood several inches taller than herself. This was not a child, this was no doubt a woman of at least twenty.

Katie led her out of the room. The girl saw the men in the cell and her blue eyes lit up some. When she saw Saida waiting by the stairs, she flinched.

"Don't worry about Saida, she's my friend," Katie assured her, stopping to stroke the tiger's head and pick up the bag of books. The big cat purred, but the girl seemed nervous still. Katie waited until Saida went up the stairs before she and the girl followed.

Nate was waiting at the top of the stairs. He eyed the girl curiously.

"I didn't realize we were taking prisoners," he remarked and the girl hid behind the captain.

"We're not. She was a slave. I'm taking her with us," Katie said with an air of finality.

"What's your name?" he asked the girl, offering her a friendly smile.

"She doesn't talk, or at least she hasn't so far. Let's get her back to the ship and get some food in her. The poor thing looks starved to death."

"Aye, Captain."

The girl followed Katie across the plank and onto *The Widow*. There were boxes, barrels and bags of loot on deck to be gone through. Katie had her own bag slung over her shoulder.

"Hoist the anchor and set sail, Nate," she commanded.

"Aye, Captain."

"Jenna," she said, calling over one of her kinder female crew members.

"Yes, Captain?" Jenna asked, her hazel eyes warm.

"We rescued this girl from *The Resilient*. See to it that she eats a good meal. Clean her up some and find her some clean clothes, okay?" she said, eyeing the dirty dress that the girl was wearing. It had probably been white at some point.

"Yes, Captain," Jenna said, taking the girl by the hand. "Come on, let's find you something to eat."

The girl went with Jenna but looked over her shoulder at Katie as she went, her blue eyes wide and scared. Katie felt a twinge of regret. Maybe she should have stayed with the girl but she had work to do.

"Let me drop my bag in my quarters, Nate, then I'll come help you go through the spoils," Katie said to her first mate.

Katie went into her quarters, Saida following closely behind. She shut the door behind them and the big cat went to her spot at the end of the bed. She flopped down on a big silk cushion fit for a prince that they had stolen from a ship from India.

Katie took everything from her bag except for the books. She left those in the bag and pushed it under the bed to look through later.

The sun was coming up over the horizon when she stepped back out on deck. She took a moment to appreciate the sight as the sky was painted an array of orange, pink, purple, and red. Then she went to see what all they had acquired in their heist.

She had been sorting through stuff and watching the crew split up the gold for nearly an hour when the girl streaked past her out of nowhere, headed for the side of the ship. She was climbing up on the railing when Joshua grabbed her and pulled her down. The girl screamed and hit at him, but he held her still as the captain rushed over.

"What happened?" Katie demanded as Jenna came panting across the deck.

"I'm sorry, Captain, she just took off. I had my back turned for just a moment, looking for clothes for her, next thing I knew she was gone."

"She tried to jump. She hasn't said anything?" Katie asked.

"No, Captain. I made sure she ate good—some of the stew from last night and biscuits. She wolfed it down. I got her a basin of water and cloth to wash off with. I turned to look for clothes, and she ran off."

Katie looked at the girl who had stopped struggling against Joshua and was watching her with those wide blue eyes.

"If I tell Joshua to let you go, you can't jump overboard, you understand?" she asked the girl. "There is nowhere to go and I won't

be responsible for you drowning."

Blue eyes darted toward the rail, then back to the captain.

Finally, she nodded. Katie nodded to Joshua to release her.

"Why don't you come with me to my quarters," she said and the girl nodded. "Jenna, bring me that wash basin, please."

"Yes, Captain."

Katie led the blonde girl to her room. Saida was sleeping peacefully on her cushion, but the girl still looked wary.

"It's okay, really. You don't have to be frightened," Katie told her. "You aren't a prisoner on this ship, or a slave. If you decide you want to leave, I'll let you off at the next port, no problem. You just have to promise me you won't jump overboard in the meantime, okay?"

The girl hesitated, then nodded.

There was a knock on the door and Katie called "enter." Jenna came in carrying a pail of water and a rag. She placed it on the table.

"Thank you, Jenna. I'll help her get cleaned up and find her something to wear."

"Yes, Captain. Let me know if I can be of any help," Jenna replied. Katie nodded and Jenna left, closing the door behind her.

Katie found a bar of soap and set it on the table next to the water. "Can you wash yourself?" Katie asked the girl. She nodded and began to remove her soiled dress. Katie watched for a moment, but quickly turned away, realizing it wasn't proper for her to do so. She went over to her trunk and began to rummage through for something that might fit the girl.

"It'll have to be a dress, I suppose," she mused as she rummaged, feeling the need to fill the silence and hoping to put the girl at ease. "You're taller than I am so I don't think my pants would quite fit you right and they'd be hanging off anyway, you're so thin. We can find you some later, if you prefer breeches and a shirt. Most of the crew does, as it makes it easier to move around. I do, most of the time, but I have a few dresses. Here we are, this should do."

It was a simple brown dress that she knew to be comfortable.

She had chosen all of her clothes for comfort over aesthetics.

Katie stood and turned to see the girl was facing her, naked and wet. Katie's eyes lingered on her pale skin, noting how her ribs were so visible she could count them. Realizing she was staring, Katie blushed and looked down, holding out the dress to her.

The girl took the dress, then spoke, in a voice so quiet Katie wasn't sure she had heard it.

"I don't mind if you look at me."

Katie jerked her head up in surprise. The girl's blue eyes were wide, as if she was surprised, too.

"You can speak," Katie remarked.

Hesitantly the girl nodded, still clutching the dress to her chest. "What's your name?" Katie prompted, trying to keep her voice calm.

"Ha...Hannah," she replied softly, her voice clear and sweet.

"Hannah," Katie said wondrously. "Do you know where you came from? Your parents? How old are you?"

Hannah looked down and didn't speak for a very long time. "It's okay," Katie said softly. "You don't have to answer.

Come on, let's get you dressed before you catch a chill."

Katie helped Hannah put on the brown dress. It was a little short, but otherwise fit her perfectly.

"Here," Katie said, turning around one of the chairs at the table. "Sit down and lean back and I'll wash your hair for you."

Hannah nodded and sat while Katie grabbed her hairbrush, pulling out the strands of her own red hair and Saida's orange fur from between the bristles. She grabbed the jug of clean water from her nightstand and went back to the table. She slid the washbasin under Hannah's head and soaked her dirty strands. Within a few minutes the water had turned black from dirt. She used the bar of soap to wash her hair, then used the water from the jug to rinse the rest of the dirt and soap out. She dried Hannah's hair with a towel and tossed the dirty water out the window. After that she set to work disentangling the blonde locks with her hairbrush.

"Are you really a captain?" Hannah asked, finally speaking again.

"Well I don't wear this hat to keep my hair from blowing in the wind, though that is a bonus," she joked, hoping to get a laugh or even just a smile from the girl. She got neither.

"Is this a dream?" Hannah asked, a wondrous look in her eyes.

"No," she replied simply, brushing out a very stubborn knot.

Hannah didn't speak again and for the better part of an hour the captain worked the knots out of her hair. When she was finished, she was amazed. Hannah had the prettiest blonde hair she had ever seen. It fell in soft waves around her shoulders.

"You clean up good, kid," Katie said lightly, smiling at her.

"Thank you, Captain," Hannah replied quietly. She let out a soft yawn and rubbed her eyes.

"Would you like to sleep here?" she asked after thinking a moment. "It's less crowded than crew quarters and you seemed a little uneasy around them. Saida can look out for you here if I have to go out, not that anyone on this ship would mess with you. No one is even allowed in here but me. I'd throw 'em overboard or worse."

Hannah nodded and Katie set about finding something for her to sleep on. She found a bedroll that had been Saida's before they got the cushion.

"This used to be Saida's so it might smell a bit like tiger but it's

comfortable enough," Katie said as she unrolled it. She gave Hannah one of her own pillows and the thick blanket off her bed that she rarely used.

"Thank you, Captain," she said softly and lay down on the bedroll.

Katie sat on the edge of her bed a moment. She glanced at the girl and shrugged to herself before pulling out the bag of books from under her bed. There weren't many good ones, mostly religious texts, which she scoffed at, a few fiction stories she'd never heard of, and one Shakespeare.

"You took those from the other ship?" Hannah asked quietly.

Katie looked down to see she was being watched closely. "Yes. Don't tell anyone, okay?"

Hannah nodded solemnly.

"Can you read?" Katie asked her.

"Not very well." Hannah admitted softly. "I learned my letters, but that was a long time ago."

"My father taught me how to read, using newspapers. He said it was important for me to know what was going on in the world, but I always preferred fiction," she said with a chuckle. She reached under her bed and pulled out an old book. "Here."

"Gull...Gulliver's...Travels," Hannah read the title. "By Jonathan Swift."

"Yep. You can read it, if you like," she said, stowing her new books back under the bed. She pulled out *Moby Dick* from under her pillow. She had not finished it yet. She flipped to the ear-marked page and settled down to read.

The next time she looked up Hannah was asleep, clutching the book to her chest as she slept. Katie smiled to herself. She was a beautiful girl. Then she frowned. How had such a beautiful girl come to be a slave? She knew the girl had to have been kidnapped but from where? How long ago? Did she even remember?

Hannah frowned in her sleep and whimpered softly. Katie's heart broke, wishing she could comfort her somehow. Hannah's grip on the book tightened and she inhaled deeply. Her expression relaxed.

Katie watched her sleep for a bit longer until she knew she should check on things out on deck. She got up quietly, sliding the book back under her pillow. She pulled the blanket up over Hannah's body and the girl didn't even stir.

From her spot on the cushion Saida opened one eye. Katie put a finger to her lips and pointed to the girl. The tiger seemed to understand and closed her eyes again.

Katie went out on deck where Nate stood at the wheel. He immediately stepped aside to let her take her place.

"How's the girl?" he asked, curious.

"She's resting for now. Her name is Hannah," she answered, one hand on the wheel as she looked out over the water. The sun was

higher in the sky now and the reflection off the water was so bright it almost hurt her eyes.

"So she does talk."

"Apparently so."

"What are you going to do with her?"

"I told her she's welcome to leave as soon as we make port, if that's what she wants. But if she wants to stay, I'll let her. I'm sure we can find a place for her. I had to make her promise not to jump overboard."

"Was she really trying to kill herself, you think?" he asked, frowning.

"I don't know, Nate. We don't know what that poor girl has been through. Hell, from the looks of her."

"You're letting her stay in your quarters?" he asked, one eyebrow raised.

"You have a problem with that, First Mate?" she asked testily, one hand on her hip.

"No, Captain," he said quickly. "None at all."

"Good. That poor girl is scared to death as it is and she seems to trust me. I have to help her. I think I was meant to find her."

Chapter Two

A FEW HOURS later, Katie's stomach started to growl. She thought of Hannah, alone in her quarters, and decided to get them something to eat.

"Nate, I'm going to have lunch and check on Hannah. You have the helm. Let me know if you spot any ships in our vicinity."

"Aye, Captain," he said, taking the wheel from her.

Katie headed down to the galley. The air was humid and heavy with the smell of meat simmering. The ship's cook, Martha, was chopping vegetables. She was a robust woman with a fiery temper, but Katie was glad to have her aboard. She made sure the crew ate well enough that they rarely got sick.

"Afternoon, Captain," Martha greeted, not missing a beat as she continued to chop carrots quickly and efficiently.

"Martha. Did you meet our new passenger?" Katie asked as she looked around for some food.

"Aye, Jenna brought her here and I fed her up good. Wee lass looked like she hadn't eaten in months. You lookin' for somethin' for her?"

"Aye, and me, too."

"I got ye right here," Martha said and set aside her chopping. She filled a tray with the freshest bread, salted meat, and two oranges. Katie thanked her and headed back to her cabin.

When she pushed open the door she was surprised to see Hannah sitting on the edge of her bed, reading. She let out a surprised squeak when she saw the captain and quickly scrambled back to her bedroll.

"It's all right, Hannah, you don't have to be frightened. I don't mind if you sit on the bed when I'm not here."

"You aren't going to lash me?" she asked, her voice shaky with fear.

"Of course not! I brought some food. I thought you might be hungry."

"Yes, Captain," the girl said eagerly. Katie chuckled and set the food on the table.

Saida walked to the door and waited expectantly. Katie let her out, then sat at the table and motioned for Hannah to join her.

"Did you sleep well?" Katie asked, picking up an orange and peeling it.

"Yes, ma'am," she said, a little too quickly.

Katie paused peeling her orange and studied Hannah carefully. She could tell she was lying.

"You don't have to lie to me," the captain said quietly. Hannah's blue eyes grew wide and she looked frightened.

"I'm sorry, Captain," she stammered nervously. "I did sleep well, for a little while, but when I woke up alone I was...I couldn't fall back asleep."

"I see. You slept better when I was here?" she guessed.

"Yes, ma'am," she said, fidgeting with a slice of bread in her lap.

"I understand. I was thinking I could use a nap myself after lunch. Would you like to lay back down?" Hannah nodded wordlessly.

"Is the bedroll comfortable enough for you? I could find another to make it softer."

"It's okay, Captain. In fact it's...it's more than I'm used to," she said softly. "All of this is."

Katie reached across the table and covered the girl's hand with her own, wanting to offer her some comfort. She didn't miss the way Hannah flinched, however, so she quickly pulled her hand back.

They ate the rest of the meal in silence. When they finished, Katie kicked off her boots, hung up her hat and sword, and climbed into bed. She *was* tired since she preferred to do most of her raids at night, when they had an advantage.

"What about the tiger?" Hannah asked nervously as she lay down on the floor.

"She likes to prowl and keep people in line," Katie replied lightly. "Plus, she hasn't had her lunch yet either."

"Does she eat people?" she asked, a little frightened.

"Of course not. People haven't got enough meat on them," Katie replied with a laugh. "We keep animals for her below deck, chickens and goats and such. She also hunts sometimes. We find her a place to hunt when we can."

Hannah nodded and relaxed a little. Katie noticed she still clutched the book. Figuring it was a source of comfort for the girl, she didn't mention it.

UPON WAKING A while later, Katie saw Hannah was still sleeping soundly. She was snoring softly, a rather endearing sound that made the captain smile to herself. She watched the girl sleep for a while, her blonde hair falling across her pale face. She found herself hoping the girl would choose to stay.

When Hannah's eyes opened suddenly, they immediately found the captain's pale gray ones. Katie blushed at having been caught watching the girl sleep but determined to play it off.

"Good, you're awake. I was wondering if you would like for me to show you around the ship?"

Hannah sat up and nodded, rubbing her eyes sleepily.

"Okay," Katie said. She sat up on the edge of the bed and pulled her boots on. She put the hat back on her head and led her

young charge out onto the deck.

The first stop she made was one she always made with new crew members—the spot where her code was carved into a piece of wood and nailed near her cabin.

“You might be familiar with the pirate’s code but I have my own personal code that all my crew has to agree to before I’ll let them sail with me,” Katie explained.

Code of the crew sailing under Captain Katherine Tanner:

1. Anyone who wishes to sail under the Captain will submit to an inspection.

2. Those who pass the inspection will swear their loyalty to the Captain, by their own blood.

3. No one will enter the Captain’s cabin without permission.

4. Whoever spots the sails of a target ship will get the best weapon aboard that ship.

5. The Captain gets half the loot and first pick of the spoils. The First Mate will receive two shares and will have the charge of delegating the remainder of the loot equally amongst the crew.

6. Anyone that should have the misfortune to lose a limb in a time of Engagement shall have the sum of 600 pieces of Eight and shall remain on board as long as he thinks fit.

7. Anyone who consents to sail under the Captain will agree to wash every time the ship makes port.

8. In the absence of the Captain, the crew will report to the First Mate.

9. Every man has a vote in affairs of the moment, has equal title to the fresh provisions or strong liquors, at any time seized, and may use them at their leisure, unless a scarcity makes it necessary to vote a retrenchment.

10. Everyone aboard must keep their piece, pistols, and cutlass clean and fit for service.

11. Any quarrels amongst the crew are to be ended on shore, at sword and pistol.

12. If any person keep any Secret from the company, or conspire to commit Mutiny, he shall be marooned with one bottle of powder, one shot, one small arm, and a bottle of water.

13. If at any time you meet with a prudent woman, the man that offers to meddle with her, without her consent, shall suffer Death in the most gruesome way the Captain shall choose.

14. Punishment for any violation of the Code will be decided by the Captain.

Hannah read the Code silently to herself, struggling with a few of the words and having to ask Katie for help.

"What's that word, Captain?" she asked, pointing. "Retreat...no—"

"Retrenchment," Katie provided.

"What does it mean?"

"Basically, if we have a shortage of food and drink we have to ration it."

"Oh. Wouldn't it be more efficient to always ration it?"

"Gotta keep the crew happy, Hannah, and a happy pirate means plenty of drink."

She nodded and finished reading the rules. Beneath the Code were the names of the crew, signed in blood. In the middle was Saida's paw print, which was in Katie's blood, as she'd allow no harm to come to the tiger.

"They all sign in blood?" Hannah inquired and the captain nodded. "And the ones that are crossed out? Did they die?"

"Oh no. Well, not all of them. Sometimes when we make port, people leave. They make enough money and want to quit pirating or they want to stay at port longer to spend it. Or they find a different crew they want to join. Sometimes I have to kick them off, usually because they haven't bathed. People leave. It happens. Not often, but it happens. We can usually pick up new crew members easily enough, if I tell Nate to look around."

Hannah touched the wall near where the tiger's paw print was.

"Hey, I heard we had a new crew member," said a voice.

Katie turned to see Evan Collins approaching. He had a friendly smile on his pimply face, his straw-colored hair sticking up all over.

"She isn't an official member of the crew until she decides if she'll stay or not. I was just showing her around," Katie explained.

"Ah. It's not a bad place to be, really, and there's money to be

made for sure. My name is Evan," he said, holding out his hand to shake. Hannah shook his hand warily. She opened her mouth to speak but no sound came out. She looked away, red-faced.

"It's okay, Hannah," Katie assured, putting her hand on her arm.

"Yeah, don't worry about it. I used to be shy myself when I first came aboard," Evan said kindly. "You'll come around. We aren't bad people."

The next person she introduced her to was Nate, who stood at the wheel.

"This is Nate, you saw him earlier. He's the first mate. That means he's in charge when I'm not around, well him or Saida."

"Yeah, the tiger's the real first mate, she just can't steer for shit," Nate said with a wink, extending his hand. "Hannah, is it?"

Hannah nodded silently and shook his hand.

"Captain, may I be excused for a moment? I need to raise the tide."

"Go ahead, Nate," Katie said, taking the wheel. Nate hurried off and Hannah looked at the captain questioningly.

"Means he has to pee," she explained and Hannah nodded, her eyes lit up in amusement.

"Wh...what's your ship's name, Captain?" Hannah asked softly.

"*The Widow*," Katie answered.

Hannah looked curious but seemed hesitant to ask.

"I'll explain later," the captain promised. "Would you like to take the wheel for a moment?"

Hannah's eyes grew wide and she nodded eagerly. Katie stepped aside and let the girl take the wheel. She ran her hands over the wood wondrously. Katie smiled recalling the first time she'd captained the ship. Katie took the hat off of her head and placed it on Hannah's. The girl looked surprised for a moment, then smiled. A real smile that made Katie think she'd gladly give up the hat if it meant she could see that beautiful smile every day. And just as quickly the smile faded as she looked past Katie, hearing Nate's returning footsteps.

"Are we sailing under Captain Hannah now?" Nate teased as he approached.

"Just letting her try it out," Katie replied lightly, running a hand through her short crop of red hair. "I'm going to finish showing Hannah the ship now. You good for a while, Nate?"

"Aye, Captain," he replied, taking over. Katie took her hat back from Hannah, giving her a quick smile, before leading her away.

She spent the rest of the day showing Hannah around the ship and introducing her to everyone. They saw Saida in the galley, eating bones and other treats that Martha tossed her. Hannah looked both terrified and fascinated, seeing the tiger crush bones with her powerful jaws.

When they went back on deck it was getting dark. Katie scanned the horizon and spotted dark clouds brewing in the distance.

"Damn," she said aloud. "No raids tonight. There's a storm rolling in."

"A st-storm?" Hannah repeated, her face paling.

"Aye. I'll need to take the wheel until it's passed. You can go back to my cabin. Let Saida in, if you see her, and take my boots if you don't mind. No sense in getting them soaked," she said, pulling off her boots. "They take forever to dry."

"Yes, Captain," she said in a small voice, her eyes on the dark horizon. She took Katie's boots and socks and with a final look at the sky, headed back to the captain's quarters.

FOR MOST OF the night, Captain Katherine Tanner led her vessel and crew fearlessly through the storm. She knew no matter how the winds howled and the sea raged, her ship would not sink. She had been through enough hurricanes to know her ship would not fail her. When the worst was over, Katie dragged her exhausted body back to her cabin. She was soaked to the bone and sore from the wind and the waves battering her. She'd almost forgotten about Hannah until she saw the girl curled up on her bed, facing the wall.

Katie stripped off her wet clothes, shook the water from her hair, and changed into dry clothes. She stopped to stroke Saida's head when she noticed the girl on her bed was shaking.

"Hannah? Are you okay?"

Hannah sat up and Katie saw tears streaming down her face, her blue eyes fearful.

"Hey," Katie said, sitting beside her immediately, putting her arms around the girl. "It's okay. The storm's over."

"I'm s-sorry, I'm sorry," the girl sobbed, repeating it over and over again.

"Shh, it's okay," Katie murmured, holding her trembling body close to her tightly, wishing she could erase all of the fear the girl felt. "Lie down with me."

Hannah lay down, sniffing. Katie lay behind her, pulling the blanket up over both of them before wrapping her arms around the girl again.

"It was r-raining...the night the men took me, I..." Hannah started to shake violently again and Katie hugged her tighter.

"It's fine, you don't have to tell me. You're safe now."

Hannah nodded, exhaling shakily. Katie pressed her face into the girl's back. She could hear her heart beating like a hummingbird in her chest.

"It's okay," she murmured again. "Just sleep now. I'm with you."

I've got you."

Chapter Three

KATIE DIDN'T OPEN her eyes immediately when she woke the next morning. She was warm and comfortable and on the tail end of a fantastic dream she couldn't quite remember. And she so rarely had good dreams anymore.

She heard soft snoring, close to her ear, and her eyes flew open. She had her arms around Hannah who was sleeping soundly, nestled between the captain's breasts.

Oh no, Katie thought silently.

Slowly she disentangled herself from Hannah without waking her. Her heart ached painfully as she moved away from the bed to sit at the table.

I can't do this, she thought to herself. I can't fall for her, or let her fall for me. For so many reasons. She's young. She's female. I saved her, she trusts me, she's been through enough, and the curse –

Katie shook her head. She wouldn't think about that. Maybe if she ignored these feelings they would go away. She glanced back at the sleeping woman.

Right.

Katie grabbed her jacket and went out onto the deck, leaving Hannah sleeping in her cabin. The sky was clear blue, not a trace of the storm except for the weary-looking crew. Jenna sat on deck mending one of the sails that had come loose and ripped in the wind. Katie nodded to her before taking the wheel from Nate.

"You look tired, my friend. Go get some rest," she ordered him.

"Aye, Captain," he replied, clearly too tired to argue as he normally would.

The crew usually didn't get much rest during a storm. Even those who weren't needed on deck found the violent rocking of the ship impossible to sleep through. Katie made a quick decision to head for the nearest friendly port to allow her crew some rest and relaxation, and if that meant possibly losing her young friend, well, maybe that was for the best.

She checked her compass and made a slight course correction. She inhaled deeply as she scanned the sea around her. She loved the smell of the ocean in general, but especially after a storm. It smelled cleaner somehow.

Before long she heard steps behind her and knew she had been joined by Saida and Hannah. Instinctively her hand went to her side and gave the tiger's ears an affectionate scratch.

"Captain?" Hannah said, coming to stand on her other side. "I wish to do something. To be useful. I could clean, or something."

Anything.”

Katie considered this. She didn't want to send the young woman below decks to clean. As a slave that was no doubt how she had spent a lot of her time.

She looked around the deck thoughtfully. An idea struck her. “Are you scared of heights?”

“No, Captain.”

“Can you climb?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“How would you like to go up to the crow's nest? Evan looks like he's gonna fall out of it.”

“Yes, Captain,” she said, her blue eyes lighting up excitedly.

“Evan!” Katie shouted toward the crow's nest.

“Aye?” Evan called down.

“You're relieved. Go get some sleep, kid.”

“Aye, Captain,” he said, his voice sounding grateful.

Katie glanced back at Hannah who was almost smiling but not quite.

“You have to be able to give a shout as soon as you see sails or land or anything out of the ordinary. Can you do that?”

“Yes, Captain,” Hannah said determinedly.

“Go on then,” Katie said, unable to keep from smiling. She watched Hannah replace Evan in the crow's nest before turning her attention back to the sea.

A while later she looked back up to see how Hannah was doing. She was standing straight, scanning the horizons around them with the telescope Evan had left her. Her blonde hair was whipping about her face and although she didn't seem fazed, Katie knew from experience that long hair in the crow's nest could be a pain. It was one of the reasons she kept her red hair cut close to her ears.

Katie glanced around and spotted Joshua taking a break from the clean up.

“Hey, Joshua, would you mind taking the wheel, just for a few minutes? I need to check on something.”

“Sure, Captain, no problem,” he said, moving to take her place.

She stopped by where Jenna had just finished patching the sail.

“Do you have a scrap of cloth I can borrow, Jenna?” Katie asked, glancing up at the crow's nest again. Jenna followed her gaze and nodded. She dug around in her apron for a moment and produced a long, thin bit of cloth.

“Thanks,” the captain said with a nod.

Katie scaled the mast to the crow's nest easily.

“Captain,” Hannah said, surprised. “Is everything okay? Did I do something wrong?”

“No, you're doing fine,” Katie assured her. “I came to see if you'd

like help tying your hair back. I know it's got to be annoying you."

"Oh. Yes, please. Thank you."

Katie pulled the scrap of cloth from her pocket. She gathered all of Hannah's hair and tied it back with the cloth. Her fingers brushed the nape of her neck inadvertently. She quickly touched her cheek, making her flinch.

"You're freezing!" Katie exclaimed.

"No, Captain, I'm fine," she insisted.

"It's my fault, I sent you up here in a dress," she said, shaking her head. "I'll find you some trousers and things after Nate takes the wheel again. I think Beth may be close to your height. Here—"

Katie shrugged off her leather jacket and draped it over the taller woman's shoulders.

"No, I can't. What about you?"

"It's not as cold on deck, I'll be fine. Here, take this as well," she said, handing her a flask of water. "I'll get another."

"Why are you being so nice to me?" Hannah asked, accepting the water.

Katie looked at her, at a loss for words. She didn't have an answer, so she just shrugged and headed back down to the deck.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON Evan came back on deck, looking better for having rested.

"Did you get something to eat, Evan?" Katie asked him.

"Aye."

"Good. You can resume your post. We should be making port in Delfin this evening, so keep an eye to the South and let me know as soon as you spot it."

"Aye," he said, grinning. "How long are we staying?"

"I haven't decided yet," she replied.

Evan scaled up to the crow's nest and a short while later Hannah came down to her. She returned Katie's jacket silently.

"Would you like me to bring you something to eat, Captain? You've been down here most of the day without a break," Hannah said softly.

"That would be great, Hannah, thank you," Katie answered, surprised. How long had it been since someone cared to make sure she ate and drank?

Nate returned before Hannah did. Katie gladly turned the wheel over to him and stretched her neck and shoulders.

"We should reach Delfin by nightfall, so keep us pointed South," she ordered.

"Aye. Delfin, eh?" he asked, grinning as Evan had.

"I figure the crew could use some rest after the storm last night."

"What about Hannah?"

"If she decides to leave, that's her decision. I'm fine with that," she said, knowing it was a damn lie.

"Are you?" he asked her knowingly.

She leveled him with a glare that made most men cower and from her side Saida let out a low growl.

"Sorry, Captain," Nate said sheepishly, looking down at the deck.

At that moment Hannah returned with a tray of food. Katie quickly cleared her expression before turning to face her.

"Let's go eat in my quarters," she said and Hannah followed her with the tray. Katie noticed the wet clothes she had stripped off the night before and left on the floor were now hanging up to dry.

"Miss Bartlow said to tell you the ship is low on fresh water but there's plenty of ale and rum," Hannah said as she set the tray on the table.

It took Katie a minute to remember that Martha's last name was Bartlow. She smiled briefly, then frowned.

"I thought we got water from *The Resilient*?"

"She said, 'the damn English don't know how to store water.' It was sour," Hannah answered.

"Ah. Well. Maybe she can find more when we make port this evening."

"We're making port? Where?" Hannah asked, sitting down across from her at the table.

"Delfin. It's a pirate-friendly cove."

"I know it," she said with a brief nod.

"Right. Well...like I said before, if you want, you can leave the ship. If you don't want to be around any more pirates, which I would totally understand, I could take you farther up the coast to one of the Spanish naval ports. It wouldn't be a problem."

Hannah was silent a while, looking at the bread she held in her lap, not eating. Katie wasn't eating either, wanting to know the girl's answer.

"I won't be mad if you decide to go. I don't want you to feel like you have to stay here, you don't owe me anything. I took you so you could be free. Free to do whatever you want to."

"If I stay," Hannah interrupted quietly and Katie fell silent. "If I join the crew, can I stay in here with you?"

Katie's heart leapt. She wanted to stay!

"Yes," she said immediately, without thinking. "For as long as you want to."

Hannah looked relieved and smiled the smile that made the captain's heart skip a beat.

What on earth did I just get myself into? Katie thought to herself.

Chapter Four

A WHILE LATER Beth brought by some clothes for Hannah.

Not just breeches and a shirt but a pale pink dress as well.

"I never liked it all that much and it would look good on you," Beth said and Katie nodded gratefully.

"Thank you," Hannah said shyly. "I will pay you back for them when I can."

"Don't worry about it, kid. I was going to get new clothes anyway and now I will have room in my trunk," Beth replied with a wink.

She left the cabin and Hannah started to change.

"I'm going to check our progress," Katie said, quickly leaving the room.

Almost as soon as she stepped out on deck she heard Evan give a shout. She headed to the front of the ship where she could see the port on the horizon.

"Saida!" she called from the bow and the tiger made her way over from where she had been basking in the sun.

"All hands on deck, Saida," the captain whispered. The tiger flicked an ear and let out an ear-shattering roar that they probably heard all the way in Delfin. Throughout the ship, men and women stopped what they were doing and made their way to the front of the ship where the captain had summoned them. Katie saw Hannah come out, dressed in boy's clothes, looking anxious. Katie gave her a quick reassuring smile before addressing the crew.

"Listen up everyone. We are about to dock in Delfin for a few days. You all weathered the storm well last night and you deserve a break, but I want you to remember rule eleven of the code. And what is rule eleven, Evan?" she called, picking on him because he was staring eagerly toward land and not paying attention.

"Uh...beautiful women will only want to sleep with us if we've bathed?" he responded.

The crew laughed and Evan grinned sheepishly.

"More or less," Katie said with a chuckle. "Same goes for you ladies, although I know men are a lot less picky. If any of you come back to my ship smelling like you've spent the last month at sea, or in a whorehouse, you will get kicked off my ship. Understood?"

"Aye, Captain," they chorused.

"And if any of you do anything to embarrass me or this ship, I'll have you on Poop Patrol for the next month," she warned, knowing there were some who'd rather jump ship than clean up Saida's droppings. "I'll send Nate around to collect the crew in a few days. If you are not somewhere he can find you, you will get left behind. Dismissed."

The crew went back to work and Katie took her spot at the wheel. Hannah followed her, looking nervous.

"If you have...if you want to bring a man back to your bed, I can make myself scarce," Hannah said hesitantly.

Katie looked at her, surprised, and let out a bark of laughter. "You don't have to worry about that," she assured the girl. "I don't sleep around."

"Oh," Hannah answered, embarrassed.

"Go and fetch Saida's collar for me. It's hanging on a nail in my quarters, near my pistols."

Hannah returned quickly with the collar, a thick strap of leather, with Saida's name scratched on it.

"Why does she need a collar?" Hannah asked curiously.

"So if she gets off the ship to go hunt and someone sees her, they won't shoot her. They'll know she's mine."

When they reached the port, Katie steered the ship toward the dock carefully and ordered Joshua to tie it up.

"I can help, I know a lot of knots," Hannah offered and Katie nodded to her.

She didn't think much of it, focused on keeping the ship steady. Suddenly she heard a splash. A flash of orange shot across the deck and there was a second splash as Saida leapt over the side.

Katie and most of the crew rushed to the side of the ship, looking down at the rippling water. A few bubbles floated to the surface.

"The girl lost her footing!" Joshua called from the dock. At that moment Saida's head broke the surface of the water. Katie felt relieved to see Hannah's pale arms around the tiger's neck. Saida swam toward the shore and Katie hurried off the ship and up the dock to meet them.

Hannah was on her knees, coughing up water, and Saida was shaking the water from her fur when Katie reached them.

"Are you all right?" she demanded, kneeling beside them.

"S-slipped," Hannah said, shivering, and glanced back at Saida. "S-she saved my life."

"You can't swim?"

Hannah shook her head no.

"You want to be a pirate and you can't even swim" Katie said, shaking her head incredulously. She noticed a crowd had gathered. "Go back to the ship and get cleaned up, Hannah."

"Yes, Captain," she said and headed back up the dock. The crowd around them dispersed and headed toward the town.

"Thank you, Saida," Katie whispered, stroking the tiger's wet head. "I thought...for a minute..."

She didn't finish her sentence. Her heart was still pounding from the adrenaline. The tiger purred softly and blinked at her with warm

amber eyes.

"Go on and hunt, my friend," the captain said. "You've earned it."

She watched as the tiger headed toward the outskirts of the village. Katie knew enough of the other pirates that she was sure no one would dare mess with Saida. Even if they weren't scared of the four-hundred-pound cat, no one would dare to cross Katie.

Nate was still on the ship when Katie walked back up.

"I don't mind staying if you want to go ashore, Captain," he offered.

"Nonsense, Nate. Go on and have fun. That's an order," she told her first mate.

"Aye, Captain," he said with a smile. Katie watched him go before looking around her empty ship in the fading sunlight.

"I need a drink," she said aloud to no one in particular.

Katie made her way to her cabin. She found Hannah sitting on the bed, wearing the brown dress again. She looked annoyed.

"I can't believe I fell in. All the times that I tried to jump and someone snagged me, I had to go and fall in," she muttered.

Katie went over to the cabinet, pulled out a bottle of rum, and took a deep swallow. She felt the alcohol calm her nerves. Seeing that Hannah was still shivering, she sat beside her on the bed and offered her the bottle. Hannah accepted it and took a sip. She coughed a bit and cleared her throat before taking a bigger sip.

"When you tried to jump before, did you really want to die?" Katie asked quietly, taking the bottle for another drink.

Hannah glanced at her and held her gaze. "Yes," she said evenly.

"I'm sorry."

Katie took another drink and handed the bottle off again.

"Why? It's not your fault, what happened to me. And now, well, I don't want to jump anymore."

"I'm sorry because I know what it's like to want to die," Katie admitted quietly. Hannah looked surprised.

"But you're fearless! You're a pirate, and a captain at that.

You have your own ship, a loyal crew and a tiger!"

Katie let out a chuckle-like scoff. They passed the bottle back and forth a few times more before either of them spoke again.

"You wondered why my ship is called *The Widow*," Katie said. "I've been married four times. Each one of them died within a week of marrying me."

Hannah listened, her blue eyes wide, as they continued to drink.

"The first two were military men. John died in battle four days after we were married. A year later I married Theodore. He was kicked by a horse and struck his head on the pavement and died. Freak accident. The third, Jacob, was a blacksmith. He fell ill the day

after our wedding and was dead within a week."

Katie drank deeply and didn't speak again for so long that Hannah did.

"You said four, Captain?" she inquired.

"Aye. Captain Mutt," Katie replied with a half-smile. "You see, when everyone in England figured I was cursed, I decided to make the crossing to the New World. New World, new life. Our ship was taken by pirates a few weeks into our journey. I elected to join them. Within two years I was made First Mate. Three years after that, after rejecting him a dozen times and refusing to admit I loved him, I agreed to marry Captain Mutt. I don't even know if it counted as a real wedding. He did it himself, on his ship, right before a raid on a merchant ship. He was dead that night, shot through the neck. I don't know if it counted as a real marriage, but I told him I loved him for the first time that day and he was dead a few hours later."

"Wow," Hannah said softly.

"I wanted to die after that. I took on heavily armed ships we had no hope of defeating. I sailed dangerous waters. Crashed Mutt's ship into rocks, destroyed it. Got another ship. Chased hurricanes like a mad woman. I lost the lives of two whole crews, I was the only one who survived, me and Saida. It was sobering. I realized what I was doing was stupid. I might not be able to die but I was responsible for more than just myself. Figured the universe had a reason to keep me here, even if it is just to torment me."

"I'm sorry, Captain," Hannah said softly, handing her the bottle.

Katie shrugged and drained what was left.

"S'life I reckon," she murmured, tossing the empty bottle onto the floor. She lay back on the bed with a sigh. The alcohol made her brain fuzzy and she didn't protest when Hannah shifted and lay down beside her, putting her head on her shoulder.

"What about Saida?" Hannah asked curiously. "Where did you get her?"

Katie smiled hazily at the memory.

"I hadn't been with Mutt's crew long, a month, maybe more. We raided an Arab ship. While everyone scoured the ship for gold and valuables, I found the stalls of horses. There were pigs and other livestock. When I heard a mewling sound, I thought it was a kitten and went looking. In one of the empty horse stalls I found a small tiger cub in a tiny cage. I didn't ask for any treasure that raid, just asked that I be allowed to take care of the cub. Mutt agreed and we've been inseparable ever since. She knows me better than I know myself sometimes, I think," she said with a chuckle. "She's my best friend. My only friend, really."

"What about the crew? Mr. Smith, he's your first mate."

"Nate's all right and I call him my friend but I have to keep my

distance from the crew. Can't show weakness, can't let down my guard, not as captain. They'll mutiny. It's happened before. Not this crew, but I still have to be careful."

"What about me, Captain?" Hannah murmured, her breath warm on Katie's ear as she was drifting off. "Can I be your friend?"

"Yes," Katie whispered, and as darkness overcame her she thought she felt a soft kiss on her forehead, but she would never be sure if she had dreamed it or not.

Chapter Five

KATIE WAS ALONE and her head ached when she opened her eyes the next morning. For just a moment she thought she had dreamed it all—rescuing Hannah, bringing her aboard, agreeing to let her join the crew. Then she saw the bedroll on the floor where the girl was meant to sleep. She wasn't on it, but it was proof enough of her existence.

The captain got up and stretched. Her back cracked and she groaned. She pulled her boots on, grabbed her hat, and headed out onto the deck to find Hannah.

She didn't have to look far. She stepped out onto the deck, blinking in the bright sunlight. When her eyes adjusted she saw Saida laying in the sun. Hannah knelt next to her, brushing her fur and talking softly to her. Katie could hear the tiger purring from across the deck.

"Is that my hairbrush?" Katie asked, smiling as she approached.

"Aye. Is that okay?" Hannah asked, glancing up at her nervously.

"I've used it on her a few times myself. Come on, we have a small matter of business to attend to."

"Aye?" she asked questioningly, accepting the hand the captain offered. Katie pulled her to her feet.

"You intend to join my crew," Katie said, leading her over to the code. "Unless you've changed your mind?"

"I haven't, so long as you still want me to be part of your crew, Captain."

"Of course I do," she replied, handing her the small dagger that lay nearby.

"So I sign my name in blood? Anything else?"

"Swear your loyalty to me."

"Captain," Hannah said and made a quick slice of her palm without flinching. "I owe you my life. I swear to be loyal to you and to serve you on this ship. Anywhere you go, I will follow you, for so long as you will let me."

As Hannah signed her name in blood beneath Saida's paw print, Katie had to look away. It was the most touching blood oath she had ever heard.

"Is that all, Captain?"

"Aye. You're a true pirate now," she replied with a grin. "Welcome aboard. Now let's get that hand bandaged up, before it turns gangrenous. Most people just cut their finger, you know?"

Hannah smiled brightly and followed the captain back to her quarters. Katie poured a bit of rum over the cut as an antiseptic

before gently wrapping a bandage around it and tying it tight.

"Thank you, Captain," she said, her blue eyes bright.

"Would you like to go into town and have a hot meal? If the entire town isn't passed out drunk, that is. I know a place that's usually open."

Hannah grinned and nodded. Katie strapped on her belt with sword and pistols.

"What about the ship?" Hannah asked as they disembarked.

"Saida's on deck. You think any man is brave enough to take on a four-hundred-pound tiger? Or foolish enough?"

"Probably not."

Delfin by daylight looked like a ghost town, save for the men who lay passed out, or possibly dead, in the streets. Katie led Hannah through the town to a place she knew well. It was a bar/ brothel, called *The Fancy Lass*.

"It's a bit early for a drink," called a voice as Katie pushed the door open and they entered the dimly lit room.

"How about a hot meal for a friend?" Katie called back.

"So long as that friend has money," A woman with dark ringlets came out of a room in the back. She wore a lot of makeup and a poofy red dress that her breasts bulged out the top of.

"Bless my boots, it's Captain Katie!"

"Shannon, how are you?" Katie asked, wincing slightly as she endured a hug from the heavily perfumed woman.

"Same old, same old. Who's your gorgeous young friend?" Shannon asked, eyeing Hannah with a toothy smile. "Are you looking for work?"

"She's not," Katie said as Hannah shied away behind her. "Her name is Hannah, she's a part of my crew."

"Really? You don't look like a pirate. Much too pretty. You could make much better money here with me."

"Leave her be, Shannon. We came looking for something to eat. Got anything good?"

"I'll fix you up good, ladies, don't you worry. Have a seat at the bar, I'll be back in a minute," Shannon said, winking at Hannah before she left.

"Don't pay her any mind," Katie said, leading Hannah over to the bar. She sat a few seats down from a man passed out drunk and snoring. Katie was glad to see it wasn't one of her crew.

"She may be a bit odd but she's the best cook in Delfin," Katie continued. "And she takes very good care of the girls who work for her."

"Aye, Captain," Hannah said, looking a little tense as she sat down on the bar stool next to her.

Shannon returned a short while later with two plates piled high with hot chicken, potatoes, and carrots. She put the plates in

front of them and pulled out a bottle of wine along with three glasses from under the counter. She poured for them and one for herself to drink while they ate.

"Do you like the wine?" she asked them. "It's French."

"It's good," Katie commented. "Very light."

Hannah nodded her head in silent agreement.

"How is Beth doing? Is she well?" Shannon asked, leaning against the counter.

"She is. Beth worked for Shannon for years before she left and joined my crew," Katie explained to Hannah.

"Not because she didn't make good money," Shannon put in. "Redheads always make good money. Men like their fiery nature. Pretty blondes make good money, too."

"She left because she got fed up with the men," Katie said with a chuckle. "I gotta say, I'd get tired of sleeping with some of the flea-riddled, sorry sea dogs who come through Delfin."

"Every woman needs a break now and again," Shannon said with a shrug. "She could still come back someday."

"She seems really taken with life at sea," Katie said. "I think she enjoys her time on the ship."

When they finished eating, Katie paid Shannon several gold coins.

"Sure you won't come stay here with me, sweetie?" Shannon teased Hannah again before they left.

"I'm loyal to my captain," Hannah retorted fiercely, emboldened by the wine. Shannon laughed loudly.

"Have a good day, ladies. Stay out of trouble," she said as they walked out.

"She was just messing with you," Katie said once she shut the door behind them. "But I appreciate the fealty."

"What do you want to do now, Captain?" Hannah inquired.

"I think I'm going to go back to the ship. I can let Saida go ashore to hunt more and I enjoy the silence when the ship is empty. Gives me time to read. You can stay in town, or you can come back with me."

"I'll come back with you, Captain. I'd like a chance to look around the ship without the rest of the crew there."

They were walking back to the docks when they passed a shop that made Katie stop walking. The building was old but she could tell it was a pair of scissors painted on the sign.

"A seamstress," she said to Hannah. "We can get you some more clothes while we're in town. Come on."

Hannah followed obediently as Katie pushed the door open and they stepped into a stuffy room. There were clothes strewn all around, on tables and chairs. A few dozen crates were scattered around the room. There didn't seem to be any organization to the

clutter.

"Hello?" Katie called loudly. "Is anyone here?"

She heard something crash in a back room. A man came stumbling out, looking as if he'd just woken up. His eyes were bloodshot, his clothes disheveled. As he came closer Katie caught the scent of stale alcohol.

"Who are you, what do you want?" he grunted, looking Katie over.

"I need to purchase some clothes for my crewman. Is there a seamstress around?"

"Used to be. She took off months ago. Now it's just me. What do you need?" he asked. His gaze drifted past her to where Hannah lingered by the door. She looked uneasily at Katie, who gave her a reassuring smile.

"Breeches and shirts. Do you have anything that will fit her?" she asked the man.

"I'll have to take some measurements," he said and began to rummage around a drawer. "What is she, a mute?"

"Does it matter?"

"Not so long as you have gold," he answered with a shrug.

Hannah stood perfectly still and didn't speak a word the entire time the tailor measured her. She was clearly uncomfortable but Katie kept a close eye on the man, making sure he didn't touch her more than was strictly necessary. In the end they left the shop with two pair of pants and a few shirts.

"I'm sorry I froze up," Hannah said quietly, her eyes down-cast as they continued on their way.

"Don't worry about it," she assured. "You don't have anything to be sorry for. And just so you know, as long as I'm around, you don't have anything to worry about. I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

KATIE SPENT THE rest of the afternoon in her cabin reading. A few hours before sunset, she decided to give in to a whim. She went down to the galley and prepared some food, wrapping it up and putting it into a sack. She added a blanket and flint, a couple of bottles of rum, then went in search of Hannah.

She found her back in the cabin, wearing the pink dress Beth had given her. She was studying her reflection in the mirror. She'd pulled her hair loose and brushed it out. She looked stunning.

When she saw the captain behind her in the mirror, she blushed and turned around.

"I thought I'd try it on, see what it looked like," Hannah said softly.

"It's lovely."

"I've never had anything so pretty as this," she said, looking at herself in the mirror again. Katie was silent a moment. She wanted to

tell the girl she was beautiful, but didn't. Suddenly she remembered why she was there.

"Hey, do you want to go somewhere with me?" she asked abruptly.

"Anywhere," Hannah said, turning back around. Katie beckoned for her to follow her out on deck. There was noise coming from the town as it came to life at night. Katie crossed the deck, Hannah one step behind her.

"Hop in," Katie said, tossing the rucksack into the long boat. When Hannah was in, Katie untied the rope and climbed in as well.

"Where are we going?" Hannah asked as Katie lowered them slowly to the water.

"It's more fun if you wait and see," she responded with a smile as she picked up the oars.

"Fun," Hannah repeated, as if it were a foreign concept. "Can I at least help you row?"

"No. Just sit back and enjoy the ride."

Katie rowed the boat around to the north side of the island. The sun was turning the sky deep orange as she rowed them ashore.

"Sit tight," she told Hannah as she got out into the shallows. She pulled the boat the rest of the way onto the sand before helping Hannah out.

"We have to walk a little ways," Katie said, reaching past her to grab the rucksack. She slung it over her shoulder and started walking.

"It will be dark soon," Hannah observed, sounding uneasy.

"Don't worry," Katie assured her with a smile. "I won't let anything happen to you."

They headed over rocky terrain and Katie put her arm out several times to keep Hannah from falling. The sky was deep purple when they heard the sound of flowing water. Katie smiled and led the way out of the trees, revealing a waterfall, flowing into a lagoon.

"Wow!" Hannah said, her eyes wide. "This is amazing."

"This isn't even the best part," she said. "Follow me."

Curious, Hannah followed the captain down to the edge of the water. Katie picked up a rock and tossed it in.

From the spot where the rock hit the water, ripples spread out and began to glow. The glow dispersed from that spot until the whole lake was glowing. Katie looked at Hannah with a smile. Her mouth was open, clearly at a loss for words. Her eyes were wide, reflecting the green glow.

"I don't...how..." Hannah whispered.

"It's a type of algae. It glows like this at night when it's disturbed. Saida and I found it years ago. Nobody else knows it's here. I've never brought anyone else here, but I thought you would like it."

"It's like a dream," Hannah said, still whispering.

Katie smiled and set about gathering wood to build a fire. There was still some piled up from the last time she had visited, though it had been nearly a year. She added a few more dry branches from the woods before she lit the pile with the flint. She kicked off her boots, took off her belt with sword and pistols, and waded out into the lagoon.

"Come on," she said to Hannah, who still stood at the edge of the water.

"I can't swim," she said, shaking her head. "I know. I'm going to teach you."

"I don't know..." she said nervously.

"I won't let you drown. Don't you trust me?"

Hannah met her gaze evenly, then nodded slightly. She pulled off her boots and set them by the fire. Then, she pulled off her dress.

"Uh, wh-what are you doing?" Katie asked, looking away.

"Well I don't want to mess up the dress Beth gave me," she replied, unabashed. "And it would just weigh me down, Captain."

Katie watched as Hannah folded the dress and as she turned to place it next to the fire, the captain saw crisscrossing scars on the young woman's back. They were thick and layered over one another. Some were older and white but there were newer ones that were still pink, no more than a few months old. Her heart ached at the sight.

"We're not on the ship, I think you can call me Katie," she told Hannah.

"Aye...Katie."

"Come on," she said, motioning her into the water. "Let's teach you how to swim."

For the next hour Katie tried to teach Hannah how to swim, but every time they got deep enough that she couldn't reach the bottom with her toes, she would panic. After a while Hannah was growing frustrated and tired. Katie was getting frustrated as well, but was trying to keep it from showing.

"Please, Captain, can't we take a break?" Hannah pleaded. "Katie, please."

"Yes, that sounds like a good idea," she replied, leading her out of the water. "I brought dinner."

She went to the rucksack and grabbed the blanket she had packed and spread it out on the sand. Hannah collapsed onto it, breathing hard, and Katie wondered if maybe she had pushed her too hard. Her wet clothes felt heavy and she stripped them off. She wrung them out and laid them next to the fire. When she spotted Hannah watching her intently, Katie blushed and fought the urge to cover up. If Hannah could be comfortable totally naked, so could she.

"It's considered rude to stare at someone when they don't have clothes on," Katie told her, folding her legs under her as she sat on

the blanket.

"Oh," she said, looking away. "Sorry."

"S'okay. Here, eat. It'll help give you some strength back."

Hannah pushed herself into a sitting position and Katie caught a quick glimpse of the bare breasts that had been distracting her for the whole lesson, before she looked away.

"Have you got anything to drink in there?" Hannah asked, nibbling on a biscuit. Smiling, Katie got out the bottles of rum and handed one to her.

"Thank you, Capt—Katie," she said, uncorking the bottle. She took a deep swig and sighed. Katie uncorked hers as well and took a swallow.

"Most people aren't so at ease being naked around other people," Katie commented after a while. She was still fighting the urge to cover herself but didn't want to put the wet clothes back on.

"I'm used to being naked," Hannah said with a shrug. "I wasn't allowed to wear clothes until the men in uniforms came and I went to the other boat, the one where you found me."

"You don't have to talk about that if you don't want to," Katie told her softly.

"I want to tell you. You told me about your past and I...I think you should know."

"I will listen."

They continued to drink for a little longer before Hannah finally began.

"I was nine years old. My parents, they owned a small fishing boat. We spent a lot of time at sea. I don't remember much else from that time. I remember it was storming one night and men came aboard our boat. Pirates. I don't know what they wanted. I remember a lot of yelling but not what was said. I don't know if it was just fun for them or...I don't know. They tied my parents up and shot them on deck in front of me."

"My God." Katie murmured.

"They took me onto their ship, *The Dark Horse*. I was beaten, flogged—I tried to do good and do everything they said but any time I messed up even a little—" She shook her head and took a drink. "I got older and I outgrew the clothes I had and they wouldn't let me wear anything else, they wouldn't let me wear breeches or shirts. When my body started to change they all noticed and they all...hurt me. Nobody stopped them."

Katie felt sick. She had suspected the truth and now it was confirmed. She was so furious she was shaking. She wanted to find those men and kill them.

Hannah smiled ruefully, as if she knew what the captain was thinking. She shook her head.

"They're dead. All of them. When the men in uniforms came, I thought I might be saved but they locked me in the brig with everyone else. I thought I was going to be killed. They took all the men to be hanged but left me in the cell. Eventually a man came and got me and took me somewhere else. Some kind of market. People bid on me. Captain Pollard took me aboard *The Resilient*. They kept me below and I worked all the time and when I was tired, they hit me. I was so miserable. I started trying to jump. So, they locked me up in that room.

"And then I found you," Katie said softly.

"And then you found me."

"I'm glad I did," Katie said, touching her soft pale cheek. Hannah flinched but did not pull away. "I only wish I could have found you sooner."

"You are nice to me," Hannah said, leaning her head against Katie's shoulder while she drank. "I don't remember anyone ever being nice to me like you are. And you don't hurt me."

"I won't let anyone hurt you again if I can help it," Katie promised.

After a while they waded back into the water together, both naked.

"What if I can't learn?" Hannah asked nervously. "What if I just can't swim?"

"Everybody can swim, even babies. Don't worry, I've a new plan. We'll stay in the shallows for this, where it isn't too deep, so you don't have to panic. I'll teach you to float before we worry about swimming."

"Okay. How do we start?"

"Lie back," Katie instructed, putting her hands out behind Hannah who laid back nervously, her arms and legs straight. Trying to ignore the sight of pale bare breasts in front of her face, Katie held her up from underneath, one hand under her back, the other under her thighs.

"You aren't relaxed. Don't be so stiff, just relax," Katie murmured. "Feel the water around you, let it hug your body."

Slowly she felt the muscles beneath her hands relax. She waited, then gently pulled her hands away and smiled.

"Feel the water lifting you up. You can open your eyes, Hannah."

Blue eyes opened, reflecting the glow of the water. Katie held her hands up and Hannah smiled.

"I'm floating?" she whispered, awestruck.

"Aye," the captain said and lay back to float beside her. She reached out without looking and took the girl's hand, so she wouldn't float away from her.

They floated together a while, hands clasped, looking up at the stars. Eventually they resumed the swimming lessons. Now that she had the hang of floating, and knowing the captain wouldn't let her

drown, Hannah caught on to swimming a lot easier. Soon she was swimming around the lake with ease.

As the night wore on, they started to get tired. Katie was the first one to get out. She shook the water from her short red hair and ran her fingers through it before getting dressed.

Hannah followed her out of the water. She looked exhausted, but pleased to have mastered swimming. Instead of getting dressed she flopped back down on the blanket next to the fire, naked.

"Don't you want to get dressed?" Katie asked, laying down beside her.

"Mmph," she responded from her facedown position on the blanket. In the light of the dying fire, Katie saw the scars on her back again. She reached out and gently traced a thick scar that ran from her shoulder blade to her lower back. Hannah shivered and turned her head to the side to look at the captain.

"Sorry," Katie whispered, pulling her hand away.

"It doesn't hurt," she replied softly. Hannah rolled onto her side to put her arm around the older woman. She tucked her head under the captain's chin and sighed.

"I shouldn't," Katie murmured, reluctant to touch her while she was naked.

"Please," Hannah said quietly and Katie let out a soft sigh, knowing she was lost to this girl. She put her arms around her, stroking her back lightly and feeling the intersecting scars. Hannah shivered again.

Katie let a peaceful, drowsy feeling seep through her. She was almost asleep when Hannah pulled her head back. Katie opened her eyes and saw Hannah looking up at her with a strange, almost sad look in her eyes.

"What's wrong?" Katie asked, gently stroking her back.

"Captain...will you kiss me?" she asked shyly.

Katie's heart stopped.

"I can't," she said painfully.

Hannah closed her eyes a moment and when she reopened them, the light of thousands of stars were reflected in the depths.

"I understand," she said softly.

Do you really? Do you know how bad I want to? Katie wondered, then did the only thing she could think to do, she kissed her forehead. Hannah smiled sadly before turning away from her. Katie let her go but Hannah moved back against her. She reached for Katie's hand and pulled her arm around her stomach.

"Goodnight, Captain."

Chapter Six

WHEN KATIE WOKE the next morning the sun had been up for a while. Hannah lay on her stomach with Katie's arm stretched across her back. Katie sat up and stretched, then looked back down at Hannah.

She winced when she saw the pale skin of her shoulders, back, and butt had been burned from the sun. Her entire back was bright red, except for a white stripe where the captain's arm had been.

"Hannah, wake up," she said, nudging her gently. Hannah stirred and slowly sat up.

"My back," she said, frowning slightly.

"Sunburn. I didn't think we would sleep so long, I am so sorry," Katie said sheepishly. "We should go back to the ship."

"Can't we stay?" she pleaded. "I want to swim again."

"What about your back?"

"It's not so bad," Hannah lied and Katie raised an eyebrow at her. "Well, maybe the water would help it feel better?"

"Go ahead," Katie told her. "I'll pack up the blanket. We'll head back in just a little bit."

"Aye, Captain," she replied and headed back into the water.

Katie watched her swim for a little while before realizing she was basically leering at the naked woman. She blushed and quickly busied herself with folding up the blanket. Her heart ached again as she thought of Hannah asking her to kiss her last night.

I can't, she thought to herself. I have to keep her safe. I don't want to lose her, too.

When Hannah came out of the water, she unfolded her dress to put it back on. She was slipping it over her head when Katie spotted something on her backside that hadn't been visible in the dim light the night before.

"What is that?" she asked, approaching the girl.

"What?" Hannah asked, pausing with the dress around her neck and turning to try and see.

"That," she replied, lightly touching the thin scars on her right butt cheek. "It says 'whore'."

"Oh," Hannah said and pulled her dress the rest of the way on. "The man who took me did that. My back used to say 'slave' but it's been covered by other scars."

Katie felt her anger bubbling up again.

"If that evil blackguard wasn't already hanged I'd hunt him to the ends of the earth, cut him up into little pieces while he was still alive and feed him to my tiger," Katie growled. She wanted to shoot something.

"Thank you," Hannah said and kissed Katie's cheek, startling her just enough to diffuse her anger.

"Let's go back to the ship," Katie said weakly, picking up her rucksack.

As she rowed them back to the south side of the island and the port, Katie could tell that Hannah was hurting. She offered to row, which the captain declined again. Every time a wave hit the boat, Hannah winced. When they reached the dock and climbed out, Katie noticed how she clenched her jaw.

"Come on," Katie said, leading her away from the ship and toward town. "Shannon will have something for your back."

"I'm fine," Hannah protested.

"Don't argue with your captain. Come on."

Katie led her back to *The Fancy Lass* where Shannon stood behind the bar, serving a man Katie instantly recognized as her first mate.

"Captain Katie, come back for another bite?" Shannon called as they entered.

"Captain," Nate said with a nod. "Hannah. Decided to stick with us, eh?"

"Aye," Hannah said quietly.

"I got some fresh pork," Shannon said. "Come on in and have a seat."

"Actually, Shannon, I was wondering if you had something for sunburn?" Katie inquired, approaching the bar.

"I don't see a sunburn," Nate remarked, looking them over. Katie leveled him with a glare and he quickly ducked his head and focused on eating his food.

"I've got just the thing. Follow me, ladies," Shannon said, coming around the bar.

She led them upstairs, which Katie knew was where the girls who worked for her stayed and plied their trade. She could hear moaning and squealing coming from one of the rooms they passed. She noticed Hannah blush.

Shannon led them to a locked room. She pulled a key from her bodice and unlocked the door.

"Come in," she said to the women. Katie and Hannah followed her into a small room. Shelves lined one of the walls, laden with various small pots, jars, and bottles.

"Which one of you is burned?" Shannon asked as she pursued the shelves.

"Not me!" Katie said, somewhat offended. Hannah glanced at her. "I'm captain of a ship, captains don't get sunburn. I just get tan and freckly."

Hannah smiled slightly.

"It's me that's burned, ma'am," she said softly to Shannon.

"Ah. Let's see it then," she said, turning around with a jar. Hannah glanced nervously at Katie.

"It's okay, she won't hurt you," the captain assured her, and looked at Shannon. "It won't hurt, will it?"

"No, this will make it feel much better."

Hannah turned her back to Shannon and started to take off her dress. Seeing that it was causing her pain to move, Katie stepped forward and helped her remove her dress.

"Ouch, that's a nasty looking burn," Shannon said sympathetically. "But this will help."

Shannon unscrewed the lid of the jar. She started to apply a balm but as soon as Shannon touched her, Hannah flinched and shied away.

"Hm... Why don't you do it, Captain Katie?" Shannon said, offering the jar to her. Katie nodded and took the balm. She began to spread it on as gently as she could with her rough hands, but Hannah didn't flinch away from her touch. Shannon smiled knowingly.

Katie spread the ointment across Hannah's shoulders and back, unable to help but feel guilty as she touched the blistered skin. It was her fault the girl was burned. Her butt was burned as well but she wasn't going to touch her there, not with the way Shannon was looking at her.

"Is all of that stuff medicine?" Hannah asked softly, looking at the shelves.

"Aye, lass. Some of it I make meself, some of it I buy from an old gypsy woman who comes through about once a month. But they all work, don't you worry," Shannon assured. "My girls get into the odd scrape here or there, it can happen in this line of work. The men too. Just last night I treated a man who had a crab clamp down on his willy!"

Hannah made a noise almost like a giggle.

"Please tell me it wasn't one of my men?" Katie asked, shaking her head slightly.

"Captain, you know discretion is part of my service. I know a few things about you that you wouldn't want them to know, eh? Never kiss and tell."

"Wh— I never— I have never used your...your services like that," Katie said stiffly. "I don't sleep with anyone."

"Heart breaker," Shannon said with a teasing smile. "Hannah, you'll want to let that dry before you put on your dress. It stains horribly if it isn't dry. When you get back to your ship I'd suggest letting it air as much as possible."

"Yes, ma'am," Hannah said softly. "Thank you."

"You're quite welcome, love. Captain, can I have a word?"

"Aye," Katie replied, following Shannon out curiously. The older woman closed the door behind them before speaking. "You know that girl has been abused?"

"Aye," the captain replied quietly. "I rescued her from life as a slave on an English ship. Before that she was kept by evil pirates for almost her whole life. She has told me a bit about it."

"The men who did that to her?"

"Already dead."

"Good. Burning in Hell, I hope."

Katie wasn't totally sure she believed in Hell but she nodded her head in agreement.

"Although I'd get far more satisfaction if I could chain them up in my brig and feed them to Saida bit by bit. Cut their dicks off and feed them to the rats, and give the rats to Saida."

"I have seen girls like her come through here," Shannon said. "Usually after the captains who keep them get tired of them, or they get old and they come work for me. They're usually cold inside, they don't talk about the past, they don't trust anyone. That girl in there is different. She trusts you."

"Aye."

"I don't usually meddle in other people's affairs, that's just bad business, but you be sure you take care of her. She is a sweet girl and I'd hate to see anything happen to her."

"I won't let anyone hurt her. I will keep her safe," Katie said with a nod. "Whatever it takes."

You have no idea, she added silently.

Chapter Seven

ARRIVING BACK AT the ship a while later, they headed to the captain's quarters. Hannah started to sit in a chair at the table, but immediately jumped up. She looked at Katie, the pain evident in her eyes.

"I'll put some more medicine on," Katie said. "Why don't you lay on the bed?"

Wordlessly, Hannah removed her dress and lay down on her stomach. Katie took the jar of ointment Shannon had given her and started to reapply it to Hannah's back. The skin on her butt looked even worse than before. Biting her lip slightly, Katie moved her hand lower, spreading the ointment over the soft globes of her ass. Hannah let out a sigh of relief as Katie's hands moved over her. When Hannah let out a soft moan, Katie felt a wave of heat roll through her abdomen at the sound. She quickly jerked her hand away, feeling guilty.

"Why don't you take a nap while the medicine works?" she suggested.

Hannah nodded silently and pulled Katie's pillow up under her head. Her hair fell across her back and stuck to the medicine. Frowning slightly, Katie gathered Hannah's hair and began to braid it so it would stay out of the way. By the time she was finished, Hannah's breathing had slowed and she was fast asleep.

While Hannah slept, Katie laid out several charts and navigational tools on her desk and began to plot out their next course.

A while later she heard a noise out on deck. She glanced at Hannah's still sleeping form on her bed and smiled briefly before going to see what was going on, hand on the hilt of her sword.

She relaxed when she saw Nate and Martha, carrying barrels aboard.

"What have you got there?" she asked, heading over to help them.

"Fresh water," Martha answered. "And a supposedly French wine."

"Supposedly?" she said with a smile, helping Martha carry the barrel down to the galley.

"Aye. It tastes nice but I got a good deal on it, which makes me suspicious."

"Where'd you get it?"

"From Miss Shannon," Martha replied as they went back up to get the next barrel. "She sent a bit of fresh pork for you and Miss Hannah."

"How is the newest member of our crew?" Nate asked, carrying a crate aboard.

"Resting," Katie answered.

“So she did decide to join?” Martha asked, glancing over at the Code.

“Aye.”

“Glad to hear it. She seems like a sweet girl.”

“When do you want me to gather the crew?” Nate asked.

“Let’s give them one more night,” Katie decided, wanting to give Hannah’s back more time to heal. “We’ll set sail tomorrow at noon.”

“Aye, Captain.”

THE NEXT DAY when they set sail from Delfin, Hannah asked if Katie wanted her up in the crow’s nest. Mindful of the girl’s sunburned back, hidden by her breeches and shirt, the captain shook her head.

“You can take over for Evan after sunset,” she said, her hand on the wheel keeping the ship steady as a wave rolled beneath it.

“But I wish to be useful,” Hannah insisted. “I didn’t join this crew without meaning to pull my own weight.”

“Why don’t you go help Martha in the kitchen?” Katie suggested after a moment. “I’m sure she can put you to work.”

“Aye, Captain,” she said, sounding pleased.

When Katie took a break later that evening, she went down to the galley to get something to eat. Hannah wasn’t there but Martha said she had been there most of the day until she ran out of tasks for the girl.

“She even scrubbed me floor,” the cook said, nodding to the floor, which was exceptionally clean.

Katie took some food and headed to her cabin, wondering if Hannah would be there resting before the night shift. When she pushed open the door, she found that her cabin had been cleaned. The trash had been picked up, clothes hung up, deck and windows scrubbed, even the bed was made.

Hannah stood at the desk, looking at one of the navigational charts Katie had left out. She was frowning slightly.

“You’ve been busy,” Katie commented, setting the food down on the table.

“Captain,” Hannah said, turning to face her. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“You cleaned.”

“Aye, after I finished helping in the kitchen.”

“You didn’t have to clean for me,” she said, shaking her head.

“I wanted to do it. I like to keep busy. I even brushed Saida’s teeth. You don’t mind do you?”

Katie glanced at the tiger who purred and showed her gleaming white fangs.

“Her breath smelled like death,” Hannah added.

"I know, it makes grown men piss themselves," Katie said, grinning. "I don't mind if you clean, as long as you know you don't have to do it. And as long as you will still be alert enough to act as a lookout for a shift tonight."

"Of course, Captain."

They sat at the table, which had also been wiped clean, and ate dinner together.

"Were you looking at the maps and charts when I came in?" Katie inquired.

"Aye. Just curious," Hannah said, eating some of the pork Martha had cooked.

"Do you know how to read them?"

"Aye."

"Were you looking for anywhere in particular?"

"No, Captain. Just curious," she said again.

They relaxed for a while after eating. Katie lay across the bed reading a book of poetry. Hannah sat at the table and read *Gulliver's Travels*.

When the sky grew dark beyond the window, Katie closed her book and stood. She stretched and motioned for Hannah to follow her out on deck. Saida followed as well.

Katie watched Hannah climb up to the crow's nest. When the girl was at her station, she and Saida went to the wheel to relieve Nate. The stars emerged and soon all was quiet on deck, save for the sound of the wind and the waves.

When she first heard a sound over the waves, she couldn't place it. She looked around and caught sight of the crow's nest. It was Hannah, singing. Katie couldn't quite make out the words but her clear alto voice in the night air lent an eerie tone to the melody.

The night wore on and sometimes Hannah sang and sometimes she didn't. Once, during one of her soft melodies, she stopped abruptly.

"Captain, I see a ship on the Eastern horizon!" she called excitedly.

Katie felt a surge of energy rush through her. They hadn't raided a ship since *The Resilient* and suddenly she was itching to stir up some trouble.

She looked to the East but could see nothing, even through her telescope.

"Saida?" she asked the tiger quietly, knowing the cat's amber eyes could see farther in the dark. Saida was her asset that made nighttime raids possible. Saida growled low and lashed her tail. She saw the ship.

"What colors is she flying, Hannah, can you tell?"

"Uh, white and red?"

"What does it look like?"

"White with a red X."

"That's Spanish. Come on down," she ordered. She looked

down at Saida. Adrenaline was coursing through her, but she kept her voice low. "All hands on deck, Saida, but don't give away our position yet."

The tiger purred softly and padded silently below deck. Hannah joined the captain at the wheel as the tiger disappeared below deck.

"She's gone to wake the crew," Katie explained. "Which way were they moving?"

"Due North but they weren't moving very fast I don't think."

"Okay. Remind me to teach you the flags of the world later.

It's something you definitely need to know."

When the crew appeared on deck, the excitement was almost palpable. Katie immediately began giving orders.

"Bring us about, due northeast. Joshua, bring out the ballista. When we're in range, target their foresail with a flaming arrow. Marie, Beth, swing across when we're close enough and get below deck. Take out whoever is nearest the cannons. I don't fancy any holes in my ship. Nate can bring us alongside and Evan, Joshua, Erin, and Jenna can round up the Spaniards while they're trying to put the fire out. When the crew is contained, do what we do best—pilfer your weaselly guts out."

"Aye, Captain," they chorused and they all set to work.

"What can I do, Captain?" Hannah asked eagerly.

"You can go wait in my cabin," she replied, not looking down at her.

"What? I'm the one who spotted the damn ship! Is this because I didn't recognize the flag?"

"No. I don't want some trigger-happy Spaniard shooting you down. Now go—that's an order," Katie said in her best command tone.

Hannah glared at her, a surprisingly strong fire in the depths of her eyes.

"Aye, Captain," she said through gritted teeth. She stalked away, stomping her boots with every step. The noise sounded as loud as canon fire in the dead of night.

"Vexatious woman," Katie muttered to herself.

THE OPPOSING CREW was easily thwarted. When Nate laid the board across for her and Saida, Katie crossed and immediately scaled the foremast. She cut the rigging with a small dagger from her belt and watched as the burning sail was released and flew into the ocean.

With that task complete, she found Saida and they went to the captain's quarters to collect her usual bounty.

When she emerged later with the sack full of books slung over her shoulder, she went down to the cargo hold where Joshua and

Marie guarded the Spanish crew.

"*Mujer loca* bringing *el tigre* on ship!" shouted one of the men.

"Hm. Loca. That means crazy, doesn't it?" Katie asked, stroking Saida's head.

"Aye, Captain, it does," Marie said, twirling around a knife that was stained with blood.

"Well that's not very nice, is it Saida?" Katie asked and the tiger growled dangerously.

All of the men took a step back and she was sure at least two of them pissed themselves.

"Which one of you is captain? Is it you? What's your name?" she asked the man who had spoken.

"*Sí*. Jorge R-ramirez," he replied, eyeing Saida nervously.

"Now Jorge it isn't nice to call people crazy. After all, I intend to leave you and your men alive. No one was injured unnecessarily."

"She stabbed Felipe," said one of the men, looking at Marie.

Saida snarled at him for speaking and the man whimpered.

Katie glanced back at Marie.

"I'm sure she had a very good reason."

"Aye, he wasn't cooperating. I didn't even kill him, just stabbed him a little bit," Marie answered, rolling her eyes.

"See? We intend to let you live, as long as you don't do anything foolish. I even kept your ship from catching on fire. That was nice of me, wasn't it?"

"S-*sí*," the captain replied, fear evident in his brown eyes. She waited to see if anyone dared point out that she had been the reason the ship was on fire, but no one did. She sighed, thinking to herself that she sort of preferred the English ships. Captained by arrogant white men who hated her for being a woman. She liked rubbing their faces in it and torturing them. It was more fun.

"Say thank you and we will leave your vessel intact," she signed, becoming bored.

"*Gracias*, Captain," the man said quickly.

"Marie, keep an eye on them until we're ready to make way."

"Aye, Captain," Marie said with a feral grin.

"She's the real loca one," Katie informed the Spanish. As if to prove her point, Marie licked the blood off her knife. Katie fought back a cringe and returned out on deck.

Katie helped her crew carry loot aboard *The Widow*. When they finished, Marie was the last one back across before they set sail at full speed, lest the Spanish ship get any ideas for retaliation.

"Joshua can have my share of gold if he'll take the wheel whilst Nate divides the spoils."

"Aye, Captain," the burly man said, surprised, and he took her place at the helm.

Katie looked through the pile of weapons quickly and selected a cutlass that had a bluish blade.

"Hannah spotted the ship," she explained to Nate. He nodded and Katie headed to her cabin with the sword and the bag of books.

When she entered the room she saw Hannah laying on the bedroll, facing away from her, arms folded angrily across her chest. Silently, Katie lay the cutlass down beside the girl and went to sit on her bed with her new books.

"What's this?" Hannah asked, rolling over to look at the sword.

"You spotted the sails. You get the best weapon. It's in the Code."

"I didn't do anything," Hannah said pointedly.

"Your sharp eyes spotted the ship. I doubt we would have seen it otherwise. But, if you don't want it, I'm sure Nate can—"

"I want it," Hannah said quickly. She turned away from her, muttering under her breath. "...give me a sword...won't even let me use it..."

Katie smiled to herself. Even when she was mad at her, the captain found her adorable. She wouldn't let herself feel guilty for ordering Hannah to stay behind, the girl was safe and the raid had been successful.

Later, when she tried to sleep, she found Hannah's being mad at her was more frustrating than adorable. In just the last few nights she had grown accustomed to the girl's presence in her bed. Now she felt restless, tossing and turning, but she'd be damned if she would coax the poor girl back into her bed. She knew Hannah wasn't sleeping either because she couldn't hear her soft snores. So they both lay there silently, backs to each other, both too stubborn to give in.

Chapter Eight

A FEW HOURS of restlessness later, once the sun had come up, Katie gave up on sleep. She dragged herself out of bed, grabbed her hat and effects, and stalked out of her cabin without even looking back.

She made her way to the galley, her good mood of the previous night nowhere to be found. All the crew members she passed gave her a wide berth, lest she direct her evident displeasure at them.

"Tell me we have coffee," she growled to Martha when she entered the kitchen.

"Good morning to you, too," the cook snorted. "We've got some around here somewhere."

Katie sat at the small table in the kitchen to wait while Martha started water to boiling.

"Rough night, Captain?" she asked a few minutes later when she handed the captain a cup of black coffee. Katie took a drink of the bitter liquid and sighed.

"I just didn't sleep well," she muttered in response to the woman's question. "I'll be at the helm."

Katie went to the wheel to relieve Nate, cup of coffee in hand. "Rough night, Captain?" he asked with a grin.

"Can it," she growled. "Anything to report?"

"No, ma'am. A few minor disputes when it came to the loot but they were resolved easily enough."

"Good. You're dismissed."

Katie took the wheel and was joined a few minutes later by Saida, who sat down beside her. A sense of peace crept over the captain as she stood at the helm with her tiger. The sun was warm on her face and air was fresh and salty. She breathed deeply and sighed, allowing herself to feel better. This was all for the best, she told herself.

Later, when Katie heard the clank of metal hitting metal, her frown returned. She hated when her crew fought amongst themselves. It was a small crew to start with and disagreements made things difficult.

"Nate!" she called him to take the wheel. He'd been lingering since she dismissed him earlier that morning.

With Nate at the wheel, Katie went to find the source of the noise. Farther down the deck, she found a sight that surprised her – Hannah and Marie crossing swords. The ferocity with which Hannah fought back shocked her. She had underestimated the skinny woman!

"You've got a lot of pent up anger, kid, but it takes more than that to win a fight," Marie said. She moved quickly and divested

Hannah of her sword. With a lunge, Marie knocked her off her feet and pinned her to the deck. Seeing the wild look in Marie's dark eyes, the captain knew it was time to intervene.

"What's going on here?" Katie asked in her commanding tone. The crew members who had been watching quickly dispersed. Marie let Hannah up and helped her to her feet.

"Miss Bishop is teaching me to fight, Captain," Hannah said boldly.

"Call me that one more time and I'll knock you on your skinny ass again," Marie said, retrieving Hannah's cutlass and handing it to her. "My weapon isn't sharp, Captain. I won't hurt her. And she couldn't hurt me if she tried. She asked me to teach her."

"Good," the captain said approvingly.

"Really? You're not mad?" Hannah inquired.

"No. You should learn to defend yourself. Keep practicing," Katie said, going and sitting on a crate to watch.

The girls resumed sparring but Hannah seemed more nervous than before.

"You can't be distracted by the captain," Marie said, whacking Hannah with the flat side of her sword, causing her to drop her cutlass. "Your enemy will take advantage every chance he gets. Pick it up, let's go again."

Hannah grabbed her sword and swung it deftly. Marie met the stroke with her own blade.

"Good. Quick movement, good force, but you need to be lighter on your feet," Marie said, forcing her backwards. "You've got to learn to watch my feet and my weapon. Block out everyone else but still be aware enough of your surroundings that you don't knock into anyone and get yourself killed."

The captain watched them for a while before heading back to the helm. A few hours later she decided to take a break to eat. She had ceased hearing the sounds of the girls practicing but as she left the wheel she heard a distinct 'ow' in Hannah's voice.

Frowning again, Katie went to see what was going on. She found Marie with a sack full of potatoes, chucking them at Hannah while she tried to duck and dodge.

"Now what are you doing?" Katie asked incredulously.

"Teaching her to duck and move faster," Marie answered with a grin, hurling another potato at Hannah, who just barely dodged it. "She's tall, so she makes an easy target."

"So you came up with this idea?"

"Aye and it's working. She's faster than she was an hour ago," Marie answered.

"Does Martha know you have those potatoes?"

"Aye, she's gonna mash 'em up later."

“Carry on then,” Katie said, shaking her head and turned to walk away.

She heard Hannah giggle and sensed the attack. She ducked quickly and a potato flew over her head. She turned and glared at the girls. Marie looked away and Hannah smiled innocently. Katie turned away and smiled to herself where no one could see. It was good to see the girl being playful when just a week ago she had been too scared to speak.

Katie ate lunch in her quarters, looking over a map she’d taken from the Spanish captain’s quarters. It was a hand-drawn map of the coast and there were a few towns listed that weren’t on any map she had.

New settlements, she thought to herself.

She didn’t usually prey on towns. They weren’t a very large crew and she preferred to stalk ships at night and occasionally during the day. But new settlements had few defenses, and if they were lucky, fresh resources. Ships often brought gold and items to trade to new settlements from overseas.

“Easy prey,” she said aloud to Saida, who lifted her head from her cushion and purred.

Katie grabbed a pencil and marked the new settlements on her own map, then charted the course. They could reach the closest settlement in as little as two days, if the wind stayed good.

“Fair winds and following fortune,” she murmured to herself.

“Captain?”

Katie looked up to see Hannah had come in. She looked tired. Wisps of blonde hair had come loose from where she had tied it back and now framed her face.

“Did you say something?” Hannah asked, her movements a little stiff as she crossed the room.

“Depends. Are you still mad at me?” the captain asked, setting the pencil down on the map.

“I guess not. You were right to keep me from the raid. Fighting is harder than it looks,” she admitted, sitting down with a soft groan.

“Marie is the best swordsman on board, but I’m not sure I would have picked her to tutor you.”

“Why not?”

“Well, she’s a bit...crazy at times. She was in an asylum for a while before she escaped and came to work for me.”

“What? Why was she in an asylum?” she asked, a frown crossing her face.

“They locked her up for not wanting to get married. I think it made her a bit mad in the head, if she wasn’t already. But, Saida likes her, so I let her come aboard. Glad I did.”

“I don’t care if she’s crazy. If she is the best I want her to teach

me.”

Katie nodded and motioned her over.

“Come see what I’ve found,” she said to her.

Hannah stood next to her, frowning slightly as she looked over the map and listened to the captain’s plan.

“I want to anchor here,” Katie said, pointing to a spot south of the settlement. “And take a small boat to shore. We’ll walk to this town and stake it out. See if it is worth pillaging, what their defenses are. A good plan, don’t you think?”

She had noticed the girl’s frown and saw she wasn’t looking where she was pointing.

“Hm?” Hannah said, expression clearing. “Aye. It sounds like a good plan, Captain. Are you actually going to let me help this time?”

“I will allow you the next two days to practice with Marie and I will evaluate your progress. But I want you to go ashore with me when we reach the coast regardless.”

Hannah smiled at that, as the captain knew she would.

“Eat,” Katie told her, getting up. “I’m going to go over the plan with Nate.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Katie took her map to the helm and told Nate her plan. He agreed wholeheartedly and even suggested she take items to trade in the settlement to assess what sort of goods they had. They made the necessary course adjustments, then Katie left the wheel in his capable hands.

“I’m going to try to get some sleep. Wake me if you spot any ships,” she ordered.

“Aye, Captain.”

When she returned to her cabin she found Hannah standing in front of the mirror with her shirt off, examining a number of potato-sized bruises on her back, chest, and arms.

“Jesus,” Katie murmured, reaching out to touch her shoulder gently. Hannah flinched and turned around.

“They’re not as bad as they look,” she assured with a smile. “I’m getting faster.”

“Aye. I’m going to take a nap. I didn’t sleep well last night,” she said, her cheeks growing warm at her confession.

“I didn’t sleep at all,” Hannah admitted quietly, slipping her shirt back on. “Could I lay down with you?”

“I’d like that,” she agreed weakly.

Hannah nodded and got into bed while Katie laid her hat and belt on the table. She kicked off her boots and slid into bed. Hannah turned to face her.

“I’m sorry I was mad,” she said with a sigh.

"It's okay," Katie replied, touching her cheek gently. Hannah flinched again and Katie's brow furrowed.

"I'm sorry," Hannah whispered, closing her eyes.

"Why? You know I'm not going to hurt you."

"It's your hands. They're rough and sometimes they remind me... I can't always forget what...what Captain Ross and his crew did to me," she struggled to say. She opened her eyes. Katie saw the sadness and pain reflected in the depths.

"I'm sorry. I won't..."

"No," Hannah said quickly, grabbing Katie's hand and pressing it against her cheek. "Please."

She pulled the captain's hand to her mouth and kissed her rough palm tenderly. Katie couldn't speak but she pulled her hand away. She wrapped her arms tightly around the girl, holding her close.

Chapter Nine

THE NEXT TWO days passed fairly quickly. Hannah spent every waking moment practicing with her cutlass, with anyone who would practice with her. Katie noticed she wasn't the only one on board who had trouble saying no to Hannah.

It was late afternoon when Evan gave the shout of land ho from the crow's nest. Katie smiled as she steered the ship toward land. When they were close enough, she gave the order to drop anchor and stow the sails.

As the ship came to a stop, Hannah joined the captain at the bow as she scanned the coastline.

"We won't leave 'til sunrise," the captain told her. "I don't enjoy staying in strange woods at night."

"Aye, Captain."

"Nate, I want you to take Saida ashore and let her hunt," Katie ordered.

"Aye, Captain," he replied, glancing at the tiger who stretched and unsheathed her claws in anticipation.

They helped Nate and Saida into a boat. Katie stood at the railing and watched Nate row them to shore. When Saida disappeared into the woods, Katie went to her cabin to look over the map again. Hannah followed and stretched out on the bedroll to read her book.

A while later there was a knock on the door. Katie glanced at Hannah, who looked just as surprised as she did. Quickly making sure all of her books were hidden, Katie opened the door.

It was Martha with a tray full of food for them.

"Ye need to eat and keep up yer strength before ye go ashore," Martha explained, setting the tray down on the table. "No tellin' what kind of food they have in a new settlement."

"What's that?" Katie asked, nodding to a brown package that was on the tray with the food.

"Miss Shannon give me that in Delfin, said not to give it to ye 'til we were at sea. Truth be told I forgot about it until today."

"Thank you, Martha," Katie said, frowning slightly.

When the cook left, Hannah jumped up from her mat and rushed over to the table.

"What is it?" she asked curiously. Katie shrugged and unwrapped the parcel. The paper fell away to reveal a pale blue dress. Katie lifted it up and realized immediately it was not meant for her.

"I think it's for you," she said, handing it to Hannah.

"Me?" she asked, eyes wide. "Why would she give me a dress? It's gorgeous."

"Guess she liked you," Katie replied with a smile. "You can wear it

ashore tomorrow.”

Hannah nodded wordlessly, still shocked. She hung the dress up before returning to the table and sitting down to eat.

Later that night, after they had been asleep for several hours, Hannah stirred in Katie’s arms.

“S’wrong?” the captain asked blearily.

“I hear something odd,” she whispered, sounding uneasy.

Katie forced herself awake and sat up, listening intently. She heard what had disturbed Hannah and smiled.

“It’s fine, it’s just the crew,” she assured Hannah.

“What are they doing?” she asked curiously.

“Go see,” Katie encouraged.

Hannah glanced at her, then got up, her disheveled hair falling around her shoulders. She didn’t bother putting her boots on, just headed outside.

Katie waited a few minutes, trying to shake off the good dream she had been having. It had been too good—soft lips, pale breasts, and clear blue eyes. She sighed and ran her fingers through her hair before deciding to join the crew.

The deck was bathed in the light of a full moon and the men and women aboard *The Widow* were all gathered around. Joshua had his guitar and was playing along while he sang a drinking song. Nearly everyone had a bottle of rum in hand. Nate was dancing with Jenna, while Marie danced with a giggling Beth.

Katie spotted Hannah sitting near Joshua, a bottle of rum in hand, watching the dancers. She saw Evan ask Hannah to dance, but Hannah shyly shook her head no so he moved on, asking Erin to dance instead.

“Captain, dance with me?” Nate asked as Joshua started up the next song.

“I don’t dance,” she replied stiffly. “You know that.” Nate shrugged and resumed dancing.

“Have a drink then,” Martha said, pushing a bottle of rum into the captain’s hands. Katie nodded and sat on a crate to drink and watch the festivities.

As she watched and drank, she thought of the first time she’d danced in public. Her first wedding, to John. She’d worn a gorgeous, terribly uncomfortable puffy white dress. There had been a large band. She closed her eyes. She could almost hear the violins, could hear John whispering how beautiful she was. She had been so young, so in love, her heart beating so fast as the whole world watched her dance.

When Katie opened her eyes she saw Hannah again, bathed in pale moonlight as she enviously watched her crew mates dance. Katie glanced down at her half-empty bottle of rum, wishing someone would ask the girl to dance. Then she realized that wasn’t what she

wanted at all.

She drank deeply before hopping off the crate. She set the bottle down in her place. She strode over to Hannah and the girl looked up at her, wide-eyed.

"Dance with me?" Katie asked quietly, extending her hand. Hannah nodded, setting her bottle on the deck and putting her soft hand in Katie's. The captain pulled her to her feet and spun her around as Joshua started another song.

Just one dance, Katie thought to herself but almost immediately she lost herself in Hannah's sparkling eyes and her ecstatic smile.

They danced through several songs together. At one point she dipped Hannah low and she wanted so badly to kiss her. Instead she moved her mouth close to her ear.

"You're beautiful," she murmured, where only Hannah could hear.

Hannah came up breathless and blushing. She began to giggle as the captain spun her around the deck once more.

When that song ended, Joshua said his fingers needed a break. Evan took over the guitar, but it was like a spell had been broken. Katie went back to the crate to finish her bottle of rum. After that, she bade her crew goodnight and returned to her cabin.

She lay on her bed and closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them she blinked away tears that surprised her. She watched a spider building a web in the corner of the ceiling and thought of Hannah. She loved the girl. More than she had ever loved John, Theo, or Jacob. Even more than she had loved Mutt, and she had always loved him best. He had been her captain and she had loved him freely, without the societal pressures she'd had before. She hadn't wanted to marry him, but he'd been relentless. They already had it all together. She'd never understood why he wanted to be able to call her wife. When she had agreed, finally, he gave her a ring in front of the crew and told her he loved her.

He promised they'd take over the world together and kissed her. That night he was killed. When she found his body, she had thrown her ring into the ocean and vowed she would never fall in love again.

Katie felt the mattress shift as Hannah slipped into bed with her. She didn't look at her as the girl put her arms around her and lay her head on her shoulder.

"Thank you, Captain," Hannah whispered and kissed her cheek. Katie didn't respond, feeling more tears threaten and forcing them back.

There is no way this won't end badly, she thought silently, feeling as if her heart were breaking.

THE NEXT MORNING they ate breakfast together before getting ready. Katie helped Hannah put on her new dress and

braided her hair for her. The overall effect was breathtaking when Hannah smiled shyly and asked the captain what she thought. The blue of her dress matched her eyes and it was low cut, revealing the tops of the pale breasts that haunted the captain's dreams.

"You look stunning," Katie breathed. She paused and looked at her own reflection in the mirror. Red hair that almost reached her ears, tan face dusted by freckles, gray eyes that looked sad. She was dressed in her usual outfit of brown breeches and a white shirt. She shrugged at herself and went to her trunk to retrieve her bindings.

"I usually go ashore as a man," Katie explained as she removed her shirt and began to bind her breasts. "People are more likely to talk with me, trade with me."

"Oh," Hannah said, watching her curiously.

When Katie put her shirt back on, she pushed her hat on her head and tucked her hair under it. She grabbed her belt with sword and pistols and they headed onto the deck.

"Captain Tanner," Nate said with a nod, handing her a bag of items to be used for trade.

"If we aren't back by noon tomorrow, come find us," Katie said as they climbed into a boat. "Watch after everyone, Saida."

The tiger purred briefly and Katie scratched her furry head before sitting back in the boat as it was lowered to the water.

"I thought pirates had a 'fall behind, left behind' policy?" Hannah asked as Katie rowed them ashore.

"Aye, most do, but not me. No man is left behind if I can help it."

When they reached the shore, Katie hopped out and dragged the boat up and tied it off. She helped Hannah out of the boat, shouldered the sack of goods, and headed north along the shore.

"I could have dressed as a man as well," Hannah said as they walked along the beach, the emerald water lapping at the shoreline. "That way I could have brought my sword. What if we run into trouble?"

"If there's any trouble, I'll handle it. Anyway, your breasts are too big to bind," Katie said and quickly blushed. "Not to mention your hair and your voice. My voice is gravelly enough to sound like a man."

"I like your voice."

"Really?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes, I find it comforting," Hannah said, smiling at the captain as she helped her over a fallen tree.

"Well, thanks," she said uncertainly. She'd always hated the sound of her own voice, certainly no one had ever complimented her on it before. And 'comforting' wasn't a word she'd ever used to describe herself, but she was glad Hannah found her so.

They walked in silence for a while through wet sand and patches of tall grass. Eventually, Hannah spoke again.

"So, I'm to call you Tanner in town?" she asked.

"Aye."

"That's your last name isn't it?"

"Aye."

"Yours or...er...never mind," she faltered, her cheeks pink.

"It's okay. It was Mutt's last name," Katie said a little sadly. "His real name was Matthew Ulysses Tanner. Mutt was an acronym, sort of. He couldn't spell for shit."

Hannah laughed softly. A lone gull cried in the distance.

"Would...would he have liked me, you think?" Hannah asked softly after a few minutes had passed.

"Oh absolutely," Katie replied without hesitation.

"Really?"

"I'm certain of it. Mutt always had a soft spot for pretty girls. That's how I came aboard. I was twenty-one when they took our ship on the way to the New World. I was a lot prettier back then," she said with a short laugh.

"I think you're pretty now," Hannah said quietly, looking at the ground.

"A lot of men thought it was bad luck to have a woman on board a ship. He had a big crew, a big ship. He set them straight, or else traded them out for less superstitious men at the next port."

"Were you the only woman on board?"

"Aye."

"Weren't you scared?" she asked, eyes wide.

"A little, at first, but any man who had ever touched me had dropped dead," Katie said with a snort. "I let that get around and a lot of them gave me a wide berth. There were still a few who didn't believe me. Mutt executed three of his crewmen who tried to...meddle with me. He taught me to fight and I broke several noses before the crew stopped treating me like a woman. Eventually I got Saida and no one dared cross me after that."

"You were lucky," Hannah said softly. "What was he like, Captain Mutt?"

"He was fearless and...kinda stupid sometimes," she replied with a laugh. "Brave. And he could be very caring. I mean, he was a pirate and swindled nearly everyone he came across but he always left people enough to get by on. He never took all of a vessel's food or water. Their rum, maybe. He always made sure they had enough to make it back to a port to restock."

"We came across a vessel once in the Atlantic that had been pirated already. They were three days from a port and dying of thirst. The crew was too weak to even man the sails. Mutt gave them food and water and wine. Then we hunted down the pirate who had left them like that and Mutt shot him down."

“He had a habit of killing people who pissed him off. But if a member of his crew was killed, Mutt would send a sack of gold to the man’s family, enough that the man’s wife would never have to work a day in her life. He was a good man. And a good pirate.”

“Was he handsome?” Hannah asked with a small smile.

“To me he was. He was older than me. I was twenty-one when I joined the crew and he was nearing forty, or so he said. His hair was long and gray, to his shoulders, and he kept a beard. He looked kind of scruffy but he always smelled really good. And his eyes were warm brown, except when he was mad they turned almost black. I never planned on falling in love with him, but I guess that sort of thing just happens sometimes,” Katie sighed.

“Yeah,” Hannah agreed quietly.

“I tried to warn him about the curse. He said he laughed in the face of death. Idiot,” she said bitterly, kicking a clump of grass.

They continued their journey in silence for a while. Hannah was frowning, like she was trying to figure something out. Katie sniffed the air. She could smell the faint scent of fire ahead. She figured they must be getting close to the settlement.

“How many is nine and nine and one?” Hannah asked finally.

“Er...nineteen. Why?”

“That’s how old I am, I think. I don’t know when my birthday is exactly. I can remember my father giving me nine coins for my birthday. I know when I was on the ship with Captain Ross it got cold nine times. Nine winters. I don’t know how long I was on *The Resilient* but it felt like a long time. I didn’t used to be so thin.”

Hannah looked down at herself, touching her flat stomach. She looked better than she had when they rescued her, but she was still thin.

“Nineteen,” Katie mused, putting a hand out to steady her as they crossed a rocky area. “If you were a colonist, you’d be married by now. Men would be lining up for miles to ask your father for your hand.”

“Ugh,” Hannah said, making a face.

“What?” Katie asked, laughing.

“Marriage. It sounds awful. Men arrange marriages for their daughters, for profit. Then the husbands leave them for weeks at a time to go to war, or to sea. Hardly anybody marries for love.”

“I loved all of my husbands,” Katie argued. “Even though my first two marriages were arranged, the third was societal pressure, and the last wasn’t a real marriage.”

“When is your birthday?” Hannah asked abruptly, changing the subject.

“Huh?”

“Your birthday.”

“February fourteenth. Why?”

"How old are you?"

"Thirty something. Thirty-two I think. I stopped counting. I don't celebrate it."

"What, why not?" Katie just shrugged.

"I wish I knew when mine was," Hannah sighed.

"Just pick a date. Does it really matter?"

"What day did you take me off *The Resilient*?"

"May eighteenth," she replied after thinking a moment.

"May eighteenth. That shall be my birthday."

Katie looked at her and smiled. At that moment, they heard noise from ahead. They had reached the settlement.

Chapter Ten

THEY QUICKLY REALIZED there was no military presence in the small Spanish settlement. All the people were thin and dirty, their faces tired and sad. No one even paid attention to the white strangers walking along the dusty streets.

"Something isn't right here," Katie murmured, frowning.

"You've got that right, *señor*," said an old woman, sitting on the street selling wooden carvings.

"You speak English," Katie said, surprised.

"That's right. Live long enough, you learn things. Where are you two from and what brings you to this miserable place?"

"My name is Tanner and this is Hannah. We're nomads, of a sort."

The old woman studied them both with dark eyes.

"She your sister or your wife?" the woman grunted.

"Wife," Katie repeated hesitantly and she saw Hannah smile out of the corner of her eye.

"Don't you want to buy your wife one of my carvings, Mr. Tanner?"

"I will if you tell me what's going on here. This should be the time of year for crops but everyone in this town looks like they are starving."

"That's no secret," she scoffed, shaking her head sadly.

"What's your name?"

"Rosa."

"Will you tell me what's going on in this town, Rosa?" Katie asked. "Was it a bad harvest?"

"No, Mr. Tanner. The harvest is good. The problem is our so-called governor," Rosa whispered, though no one seemed to be listening. "Santana Cruz. His name means saint-like, but he is no saint. He sits up there in his big house and he takes all of our food and sells it back to us at incredibly high prices. Or, he makes us work for it, then barely gives us enough to get by. People are starving while he is fat and happy."

"Is there no military presence here?"

"A few soldiers who live with Señor Cruz in his house. They are like puppets to him and the rest of us slaves. I did not come to this New World to die in the street like a dog."

Katie pulled out her coin purse and gave the old woman several gold coins. The woman's wrinkly face broke out into a toothless grin.

"You have a kind heart, sir. And you have excellent taste, my dear," Rosa added as Hannah picked up a small wooden carving—a tiger, which hung from a string.

"It's a necklace," Hannah said, slipping it over her head.

"Yes. El tigre is for protection from dark forces," Rosa said

mysteriously.

"Sounds like you need him more than we do, Miss Rosa," Hannah said quietly. The old woman chuckled and pulled a similar pendant from under her dress.

"Don't worry about me, sweet girl," Rosa said with a small smile.

"Thank you," Katie said to her.

"Thank you, señor. With these coins I can eat for a week."

Katie and Hannah continued down the path. They could see the governor's big house sitting high on a hill, overlooking the town. Katie felt her blood boil as she thought of the man sitting idly by, letting people starve.

As the day wore on, they found an inn. Katie led Hannah inside and the tired-looking woman at the counter looked surprised.

"May we rent a room for the night, please, *señorita*?" Katie asked.

"Sí. You have coin?" she asked.

Katie shook her small purse and the woman's eyes widened. Katie handed her several coins and smiled kindly. The woman seemed shocked for a moment, then recovered.

"Room is upstairs," she said, showing them the way. "I cook soon, if you want?"

"Sí. I will pay you for that, too."

"Gracias, Señor –?"

"Tanner. This is Hannah."

"Gracias," she said again before leaving them alone in the small, dusty room.

"Hannah." Katie began seriously once she had shut the door.

"Yes, Captain?"

"We have to help these people."

Chapter Eleven

HANNAH SAT ON the edge of the bed, fiddling with her tiger pendant, while the captain paced the length of the small room.

"The problem is I don't know how many men are in that house," Katie muttered. "I've got my two pistols and two more in the bag Nate gave me for trade. I've got my cutlass and a dagger."

"We could burn the house down," Hannah suggested. "Shoot anyone who tries to leave."

Katie smiled fondly at her young friend.

"If it was just about killing them, that would work. But there's food in there that these people need, and probably medicine and other goods as well."

"Right. We could go back to the ship for help. I could get my cutlass. I'll cut down any man who stands in your way, Captain!" she vowed, then faltered. "Although, I've never actually killed anybody before."

"These are bad men, Hannah. I know settlements die sometimes, but these people don't have to," Katie said, shaking her head. "I don't fancy playing vigilante with the government and there wouldn't be anything in it for the crew. I won't ask them for their help, but I feel like I'm supposed to help these people. I won't ask you to do anything you aren't comfortable doing."

"I'm with you, Captain," Hannah declared boldly. "I'm not afraid."

"It will be dangerous and I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you."

"Don't ask me to leave you. 'For whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge.'"

"'Thy people shall be my people.' Did you just quote the Bible at me? I can't stand religion," Katie answered with a faint smile.

"My mom used to say that to my father, every time we went to sea. I didn't know it was from the Bible."

"The book of Ruth," Katie confirmed. "I will let you help me.

We will have to act tonight, or early morning, before dawn."

"Aye, Captain."

When they went downstairs that evening and had dinner with the woman, Deloris, and her husband, Tiago, who spoke even less English than his wife they learned that Tiago worked in the fields for Santana Cruz. In her broken English Deloris told much the same story Rosa had. She told how people were publicly flogged for stealing from the fields. Katie saw Hannah flinch and she took her hand beneath the table and squeezed it.

"Children die of hunger. My son, Galeno, he got sick..." Deloris's brown eyes filled with tears.

"The governor doesn't give you medicine?" Katie asked, trying to keep the anger from her voice.

"If there is medicine, he does not share."

"How many soldiers live with him? Why don't people fight back?"

"He has the only weapons. There was talk once, but Santana's men gathered up all of the ones who would fight and shot them in the street. They left the bodies there for their families to see."

"He must have a lot of men," Katie said, trying to glean the information she wanted.

"A dozen. Armed with pistols and swords. They are well fed and strong. When the ships come from Spain, those men go to the docks and take all the supplies back to the big house. There is another ship coming in two days, but we will not see any provisions."

Katie nodded thoughtfully. After dinner, she and Hannah went back upstairs to their room.

"We should save our strength," Katie said, sitting on the bed and leaning back against the headboard. "You can nap, if you want. I will wake you when it's time."

Hannah lay down and curled her body so she could lay her head in the captain's lap. Katie smiled and put an arm around the girl. Her fingers found the necklace and she stroked the wooden tiger.

"We should have brought Saida," Hannah said with a yawn, mirroring Katie's thoughts.

"I usually leave her with the ship when I go ashore, to keep the crew in line."

"You really think they might take the ship?"

"I don't know. Mutt's crew mutinied, after he was killed. They marooned me and took off on *The Frightful*, the ship that was rightfully mine. I got it back though before I crashed it into the rocks."

"You were marooned?" she asked, yawning again. "How did you survive?"

"Turns out I'm not that easy to kill. Get some rest, Hannah.

I'll wake you in a few hours."

Katie stroked Hannah's hair gently. Soon the girl was snoring in her lap. Katie smiled and as the hours passed she let her mind wander. It wasn't often she let her mind drift into 'what if' scenarios, she knew they served no practical purpose. But sometimes she couldn't help it. So she allowed herself to wonder what would have happened if Mutt hadn't died that night. What if he had been with her when she found Hannah? Would she still love the girl as much as she did?

Probably, she thought, looking down at the sleeping woman. He'd

probably love her too. Maybe we could have been happy together, all three of us.

She allowed herself to indulge in her fantasy for a while, then shook her head. It was useless. Mutt was dead and if she allowed herself to love Hannah, she would be dead too.

Katie sighed and touched Hannah's pale cheek gently. Fate was a cruel mistress.

When she felt enough time had passed and she could no longer stand to sit still, Katie gently shook Hannah.

"It's time," she whispered to her.

Instantly Hannah was on her feet, wide-awake. Her eyes sparkled with excitement and her cheeks were flushed.

"I'm ready, Captain," she said with determination.

"We need to move quietly and not wake anyone. Don't leave anything behind. We will have to leave immediately after."

Hannah nodded silently. She followed the captain down the staircase, stepping lightly so the wood did not creak. Katie took the bell off of the front door carefully so it did not make noise as they made their exit.

The town was dark and silent, but Katie's eyes adjusted quickly. She was used to working at night. She felt Hannah grip the back of her tunic.

Katie led them silently through the town. They moved like shadows. When they reached the governor's house, all of the windows were dark.

"Have you ever shot a gun before?" Katie breathed, her voice barely audible. Hannah shook her head 'no'.

"Just point and shoot, yeah?" Hannah asked.

"Pull the hammer back, then pull the trigger. There will be a short delay before it goes off so don't wait 'til the last minute to fire. Don't hesitate," she said, handing her one of the pistols. After a second thought, gave Hannah her cutlass as well. "Take this."

"What about you?" Hannah asked, accepting the captain's sword.

"I'll grab another, but don't lose my blade if you can help it. It was Mutt's."

Hannah looked at the blade she held with reverence.

"I want you to stay on the first floor. Dispatch anyone who tries to leave," Katie ordered. "And don't get shot. Got it?"

"Aye, Captain. You be careful, too."

They pushed open the front door of the house cautiously, Katie going in first with a pistol in one hand and her small dagger in the other. She spotted a man in uniform immediately. He was asleep in a chair, clearly supposed to be on guard. Katie slipped up behind him quietly and the man woke to a dagger pressing into his throat.

"Make a sound and I'll cut your throat, understand?" Katie hissed.

The man nodded, sweating nervously.

"Where is the worm-hearted slimy bilge rat who calls himself governor?" she demanded.

"U-upstairs. Last door on the left," he whimpered.

"Thanks," she said and slit his throat, knowing he would raise an alarm if she didn't. She took his pistol and slid it to Hannah, who stood by the front door. Hannah nodded to her and Katie nodded back before slipping upstairs as quietly as possible. At the end of the hall stood another guard, this one awake.

The man gave a shout in Spanish. She saw him reaching for his weapon, so she fired first. She swore as the man dropped, knowing the sound of her weapon would have been heard throughout the house.

Katie stepped over the guard's body and into the governor's room. He was a fat man with a round face, desperately holding a lantern in front of himself.

"There you are, you cargo-thieving bilge swiller," she growled, aiming her second pistol.

"W-who are you, señor? What do you want?" he asked, frightened.

"My name is Katie Tanner. I am no man. I am here to help this town. You've been a bad governor, Santana Cruz. Your people are starving in the streets while you stuff your face, like a fat walrus."

A shot rang out from downstairs and Katie sent a silent prayer to any god that would listen that it was Hannah's weapon.

"I can change," Santana simpered. "Give me a chance."

"Men like you don't change," Katie retorted coldly and fired.

Brains and blood splattered on the wall and Santana's body slumped onto the bed. At that moment two men burst into the room and Katie ducked to avoid being shot. She swore and drew her third pistol. She crouched there until the men came around the corner of the four-poster bed. She lunged at their ankles, slashing with her dagger. Both men fell and she leapt on one, quickly driving her dagger into his heart. The other man slashed at her with a sword and she jumped up but not quite quick enough to avoid him slicing her arm with the blade. Fire shot up her arm.

"Christ!" she shouted in pain and shot him dead. "That hurt, you little shit."

She kicked the corpse and flexed the fingers of her left hand. They still worked. Another shot rang out downstairs. Katie grabbed up the fallen soldier's sword and rushed out.

She grabbed the pistol from the fallen guard and turned to see three men coming down the hall. One had a rifle and she spotted his finger twitch on the trigger. She jumped back into the bedroom and the shot rang out. The lead buried itself in the wall.

She peeked around the corner and saw that man had fallen back to reload. One of the others had a sword, the other had a blunderbuss. She

shot the man with the blunderbuss and tossed her empty pistol aside as she stepped out with her sword.

She crossed blades with the other soldier, forcing him back. He nearly tripped over his dead comrade and she used his misstep as an opportunity to grab the blunderbuss. She didn't waste a moment and fired it at the other man who was almost done reloading. Even with her wounded arm, her shot was true and the man fell. She tossed the blunderbuss so she could meet the sword stroke of the man who had regained his footing.

Swords clashed and she countered his every strike, forcing him backwards. When they reached the stairs, swords locked, she gave him a swift kick. He lost his footing and toppled backwards. He was dead before he reached the bottom of the stairs, his neck broken.

Heart pounding, Katie hurried down the stairs to see about Hannah.

She found Hannah standing pretty much where she had left her but with the bodies of five more soldiers in the room, not including the first guard. Two had been shot and three had their bellies slashed open.

"Is that all of them?" Hannah asked, sounding calm. Katie did a quick count in her head.

"Aye. That's all of them."

"And the governor?"

"Dead in his bed. We should go," Katie said, taking her arm.

"What about the girls?"

"What girls?"

"In the kitchen," Hannah replied promptly. "They're like maids and stuff. They're scared and wanted to leave, but I didn't let them. I didn't think you would want me to shoot them so I told them to go into the kitchen. Was that wrong?"

"No, you did good. Let's go see."

Hannah led her into the kitchen where a group of girls were huddled in the corner. They looked terrified.

"We won't harm you," Katie said in a consolatory voice. "Do any of you speak English?"

A few of the girls nodded, still looking scared.

"Go into the town and tell everyone all of the bad men are dead. Governor Cruz is no more. Tell them to get as much food as they can carry. You are free people now."

Chapter Twelve

KATIE LED HANNAH out of the house and the two of them headed quickly and quietly out of the town. Katie looked at her, wondering how the girl would react to her first killings, but even in the darkness of the night she could see Hannah grinning.

"We did good, didn't we, Captain?"

"We did," Katie replied, smiling at her. "You did especially well. I am very impressed."

Hannah glowed with pride.

"Vigilante justice for the win!" she whooped.

"Shhh...til we are a little farther from town," Katie said, amused.

"I don't think anyone will come after us. Do you?" Hannah asked, lowering her voice. "We helped them."

"You never know."

The sky was just starting to lighten when Katie's adrenaline wore off and she began to feel weak. Her wounded arm was throbbing painfully. She looked down to see that her shirtsleeve was soaked with red, and she grimaced.

"Hannah, slow down," Katie said weakly and she slumped down with her back against a tree. "I need to rest a minute."

"What's wrong? Oh God, is that your blood?" Hannah asked, rushing to her side immediately.

"Aye."

"I thought it was from one of the men! Why didn't you say something sooner?" she demanded. "Oh God! You can't die!"

"It's not that serious," Katie said, smiling through the pain. "But I appreciate the concern."

"Let me see," she demanded, kneeling down beside her.

"It's fine," Katie insisted as Hannah began to unbutton the front of her shirt. She slid her injured arm from the sleeve with a soft grunt of pain.

"Don't touch it," she said quickly as Hannah examined the wound.

"I'm just looking, you monkey! You need to keep it up over your head," Hannah said and began to undo the captain's breast bindings.

"Hey!" Katie protested.

"I need something to bind the wound before you die of blood loss, silly. Now lift your arm."

Katie lifted her arm over her head as Hannah freed her breasts. She fought the urge to cover up, reminding herself that the girl had already seen her naked.

"I should make you walk the plank for insulting me," Katie grumbled.

"You wouldn't," Hannah retorted as she began to bind the wound.

"I might, then I'd jump in and save you," she snorted.

"You wouldn't have to. You taught me to swim, remember?"

"Vividly," Katie replied, her mouth going dry as she recalled the sight of Hannah's naked body in the glowing water. Her pale breasts in the moonlight. The same breasts that were now in her face as Hannah worked on her arm. She blushed and made herself look at the ground.

"There," Hannah said as she tied the bandage tightly. "Now you won't die of blood loss before we reach the ship."

"Don't be so dramatic. It's just a little cut."

"Right," she huffed.

Katie tried to put her shirt back on but found her wounded left arm was stiff and useless. Hannah said nothing but helped ease the arm back into its sleeve. She smiled as she began to do up the buttons for her. When her soft hands brushed her breasts, Katie's nipples hardened and her breath caught in her throat. Hannah's blue eyes met the captain's gray ones but neither said anything. When Hannah fastened the last button, Katie let out a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding.

"Can you walk?" Hannah asked, standing up.

"Aye. It's my arm, not my leg," Katie retorted, getting unsteadily to her feet. Hannah raised an eyebrow but said nothing as they continued back toward the ship. This time it was Hannah who kept a close eye on the captain as they crossed the uneven terrain.

When they reached the boat, Katie allowed Hannah to row them back to the ship. The whole crew was waiting on deck for them.

"What happened?" Nate asked, immediately spying the blood on the captain's shirt.

"Indians," Katie muttered. "A band of them attacked us this morning before dawn."

"What of the settlement?" Marie asked eagerly.

"Not worth our time," she answered, shaking her head. "They're starving as it is. *But* they are expecting a ship in the next two days. If we target that we could make a profit."

The crew looked satisfied and Katie exhaled, feeling somewhat sick. She felt hot all over.

"You should let me look at your arm, Captain. You may need stitches," Jenna said.

"No, no stitches. It's just a cut."

"At the very least it needs to be cleaned," she said. "I'm going to get my kit."

"Fine," Katie said sullenly and went to her quarters to wait.

Hannah followed her and sat on the bedroll on the floor.

"So you'll let Jenna look at your wound but not me?" Hannah asked, crossing her arms, her eyebrow quirked as she looked up at the captain.

"She's basically our ship's doctor. She knows more about treating wounds than anyone else on board. She used to be a nun," Katie said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Really?"

"Aye. 'Til she fell in love with a man. He'd been shipwrecked and washed ashore. Someone brought him to the convent for treatment. Jenna fell in love with him and when it turned out he was a pirate she followed him to sea and renounced her faith."

"What happened to the man?"

"He stayed with her for a while but eventually left her. That was before I knew her. When I found her, she was pining her life away in some hellhole of a bar in Nassau. I asked her if she was looking to join a crew and she agreed."

There was a knock on the door and Katie called for Jenna to enter. The mousy woman entered the room and shut the door behind her.

"Let's have a look," she said promptly.

With help from Jenna, Katie got her stiff arm from the shirt.

The blood was already seeping through the bindings.

"You bandaged it?" Jenna asked Hannah. From her spot on the floor Hannah nodded.

"That was good thinking to use the bindings."

Jenna unwrapped the wound carefully and Katie gritted her teeth in pain.

"You're going to need stitches, Captain," Jenna said, pulling a bottle of rum from her bag. Katie swore and grabbed the bottle. She pulled the cork out with her teeth and began to chug it.

"That's for cleaning wounds," Jenna said reprovably, taking the bottle back.

"That's not all it's good for, ya treacherous milkmaid. Give it back," Katie demanded.

Jenna poured the alcohol over the wound and Katie swore again, loudly. Jenna gave her the bottle back and searched through her bag, coming back with a needle and sewing gut, and a bit of leather.

"Bite on this and try to think of something happy," Jenna said. Katie held up a finger as she finished draining the bottle.

"Would you like me to leave, Captain?" Hannah asked softly.

"No, s'fine," Katie slurred. "Go 'head."

She bit down on the leather and closed her eyes. As the needle dug into her flesh, Katie searched for a happy memory. Immediately an image of Hannah floating on her back in the lagoon came to mind. Not sure when that had become her happy place, she started to push the image away, except when she did that the pain in her arm intensified. So she decided to roll with it.

Pale skin...water droplets running down pale breasts, tipped

with coral pink nipples...blonde hair spread out in the water...pink kissable lips...blue eyes that reflected thousands of stars...will you kiss me, Captain?

"Done."

Katie's eyes flew open to see Jenna tying the last knot in her arm. She glanced at Hannah who was watching her with wide eyes. She blushed and looked away, spitting out the bit of leather. "I'll get you some water and soap and clean your arm up,

then you need to get some rest," Jenna instructed.

"I can do that, if you like," Hannah offered. Katie nodded to Jenna.

As Hannah followed Jenna out to get the water, Katie lay back on the bed, keeping her arm across her chest so she didn't get blood on the blankets.

When Hannah returned, she pulled a chair over from the table and sat by the bed with a bowl of water. She squeezed out the rag and began to clean the blood from the captain's arm.

"What were you thinking about when she was stitching you up?" Hannah murmured.

"I can't tell you," Katie responded without opening her eyes.

She was getting tired now. "Was it Mutt?"

She hesitated a moment before answering. "No."

Katie forced her eyes open to look at Hannah for a moment.

Hannah smiled at her and Katie closed her eyes again.

"You should rest, Captain," Hannah said softly, pulling the blanket up over Katie's chest. "I will take care of you."

The last thing Katie felt as she drifted off to sleep was a feather-light kiss on her forehead.

Chapter Thirteen

KATIE SLEPT FOR a long time. Once, when she rolled over to her belly, she thought she saw Hannah sitting at the desk sketching something, but she couldn't keep her eyes open long enough to see.

When she finally woke up, sunlight was streaming through the window. She felt as if she'd been asleep for days. Her mouth was dry and her stomach growled. She sat up and stretched, wincing slightly at the stiff soreness in her arm.

She spied a cup of water on the table and got up. She drank it thirstily and looked around. Hannah was nowhere to be seen. Katie's sword lay on the table, along with her dagger. Both had been thoroughly cleaned. Two pistols were there as well, cleaned and reloaded. Her shirt was folded on the table. The sleeve had been mended and it looked as if Hannah had tried to clean the bloodstain but couldn't. Realizing she still wore only her breeches, she set about trying to find something to wear.

Her fingers were still stiff as could be so she decided to forego anything with buttons. She dug around in her trunk until she found a dress. It was deep red in color, with short sleeves, and stretchy enough that she thought she could manage to put it on.

She slipped the dress over her head and maneuvered her bandaged arm through the sleeve carefully. She knew the fresh bandage was Hannah's doing and she wanted to know where the girl was. She took the breeches off from beneath the dress and straightened the bodice.

Her sword lay on the table with her pistols and hat. She doubted she could fasten a belt with her arm wounded, so she merely picked up her hat and placed it on her head.

Out on deck she found Saida waiting for her right outside the door. The great cat purred loudly and rubbed at the hand of her good arm. She looked well fed and well groomed.

"There you are, my friend." Katie murmured, stroking the tiger's furry head with her good hand. "Has Hannah been taking care of you for me? Where is she?"

Saida purred and led her across the deck.

They rounded the corner to find Hannah sitting on a crate, holding a guitar. Joshua was showing her where to place her fingers on the strings to strum a chord. When she spotted Katie, her eyes lit up and she hopped off the crate.

"Captain! You're awake!"

"Aye. How long have I been asleep?" Katie asked.

"Almost two days."

"Two days!" she yelped.

"Aye. Miss Fleming said you needed to recover from the blood

loss.”

“No, I need to take control of my ship,” she said, brushing past Hannah and heading to the helm. She found Nate at the wheel.

“Captain. It’s good to see you up but shouldn’t you be resting?” Nate asked, stepping aside as she took the wheel.

“I don’t need rest, I need to be at the head of my ship. You’re dismissed, Nate.”

“Captain, I—”

“Dismissed.”

He nodded and left her there. Saida sat at her left side, next to her wounded arm. A short while later, Hannah joined them, holding some sort of cloth.

“Miss Fleming said if you insist on steering the ship—”

“It’s my ship, I’m the captain, it’s my job—”

“She insists you put your arm in a sling,” Hannah finished, ignoring her protest.

“Fine,” Katie agreed, aware that her arm had already begun to ache horribly. “You know you don’t have to call everybody mister and miss. You’re a member of the crew, same as them.”

Hannah shrugged and Katie allowed the girl to put her wounded arm in the sling, never releasing the grip on the wheel she had with her good arm.

“You have nothing to prove to anyone, you know?” Hannah murmured softly as she tied the sling around the captain’s neck.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she replied stiffly.

“Your crew admires you. Respects you. Wounds are not weakness, Captain.”

Katie did not respond, but kept her eyes on the sea ahead.

She saw Hannah smile at her out of the corner of her eye.

“You look nice by the way,” she told the captain quietly, before walking away. Katie watched her go, thinking maybe this girl knew her better than she thought.

It was later that evening when they first spotted the Spanish ship. Showing that her wound had not slowed her, Katie gave her orders, which the crew executed flawlessly. Trusting Hannah’s skill with pistol and blade, she sent her over with Marie and Joshua to disable the crew. Taking the Spanish ship was quick.

When Katie crossed over with Saida, Hannah joined them, cutlass in hand.

“This deck is clear, Captain, and the ship’s captain has been restrained in the brig. The rest of the crew is being rounded up,” she reported.

“Good. You should search for treasure with the others,” Katie said as she made her way to the captain’s quarters of the ship.

“I’ve no interest in gold, Captain. I’m with you.”

Hannah followed her and held a sack open for her as she tossed in any books that were in English. She glanced over the charts, saw nothing new, so she left them. She did find a wooden box and opened it curiously. Inside were wrapped bars of pressed chocolate. Katie smiled to herself and took them. She was sure her young friend had never drank chocolate before.

"Let me carry the bag for you, Captain," Hannah insisted when she started to leave.

"Nonsense," Katie said, slinging it over her shoulder. She was about to say more when they heard a commotion on deck.

"With me," she said to Hannah on her way out the door. "Saida, come."

They rushed on deck to see Nate crossing blades with a tall Spaniard. Hannah drew her cutlass, but Katie shook her head.

"Saida, go," she commanded.

The tiger leapt forward with a snarl and knocked the man to the deck. His weapon went flying and Saida kept him pinned to the deck.

"What's going on?" Katie demanded.

"This is the captain of this ship," Nate answered, wiping his hand across his forehead.

"I thought he was contained?"

"He was. He broke free when we were adding more of the crew we found in the cargo hold," Joshua said, coming up on deck, panting. "He got Beth's weapon and cut her down."

"Beth. Is she—

"Her leg. Jenna is fixing her up."

Katie turned her attention to the Spanish captain who was struggling to breathe beneath the weight of the tiger on his chest.

"What's your name?" she demanded.

"Caesar," he grunted.

"You made a big mistake, Caesar," she said in a deadly tone. "You hurt one of my crew. No one had to be hurt here tonight. No one had to die."

"I hate pirates. Especially a woman pirate!" he snarled, and spat at her. Before she could react, Hannah had her blade at the man's throat.

"Don't spit at my captain! I'll cut out your tongue and feed it to seagulls!" she growled.

"*Tortillera*. Lesbian pirate whore," he heaved from beneath Saida.

"Enough!" Katie thundered and everyone fell silent. "Give me a pistol."

Hannah stepped back and handed the captain her weapon.

When Katie aimed the gun, Saida stepped back. "Any last words?" she asked the man.

"See you in hell," Caesar growled.

"Don't wait up," she retorted and shot him.

Nobody moved or spoke for a minute. It was not often the crew saw their captain kill someone. She wasn't that type of pirate.

"What a deeply unpleasant man," Katie said ruefully. "Someone kick his body overboard. I'm going to check on Beth."

Katie handed the pistol back to Hannah, who got in one good kick to the corpse before following her captain below deck. Beth was up and limping toward the stairs when they came down.

"Are you all right?" Katie asked her.

"I'm fine, Captain. Just a scratch. Didn't even need stitches," Beth replied, looking down at her bandaged leg.

"You're lucky. Go back to the ship and rest, that's an order.

I'll see to it you get your fair share of spoils."

"Aye, Captain."

Jenna helped Beth out, leaving Katie, Hannah, and Saida with the incarcerated Spanish crew, who were eyeing the tiger nervously.

"Which one of you is First Mate?" Katie asked the men.

"Here, ma'am. Avi," one of the men replied.

"Congratulations, Avi. You've just been promoted to Captain. Don't do anything stupid, like try to chase us down. I'll send your ship to the depths and I won't be taking quarter. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am. Captain," he quickly corrected.

"You seem smarter than your recently-deceased predecessor.

Don't blow it," she said coolly and turned and walked away.

Back on deck, Nate announced they were ready to go. Nothing remained of the former Captain Caesar, except for a smeared bloodstain across the deck. They returned to *The Widow* and Katie headed to her quarters. Hannah followed, telling Nate she didn't really care what she got.

Katie and Hannah sat on the bed together, looking at the few books they had gotten.

"What's a tortillera?" Hannah asked, fiddling with her necklace absently.

"It's a derogatory name for a woman that sleeps with other women," Katie answered, shifting uncomfortably.

"Oh," she said. After a moment she added "I'm glad you shot him."

"Me, too. When he called you a whore I wanted to do a lot worse than that. Like maybe set him on fire."

"I couldn't believe he spat at you," she said, shaking her head. "I wanted to cut his head off."

"I don't think it would be easy to cut off someone's head," Katie said thoughtfully. "Lot of muscle and bone. It would take a lot of force."

"Maybe if we run into more bad guys, I'll get the chance to try," Hannah said with a grin.

"Maybe," Katie said, reaching into the bag to pull out another book. Her fingers brushed the wooden box she had forgotten about and she grinned suddenly, pulling it out.

"What is that?" Hannah asked curiously.

"A surprise. Wait here," Katie told her and left the cabin.

Down in the galley, Martha was going through the boxes and barrels of supplies she had liberated.

"Need anythin', Captain?" she asked, looking up from a crate.

"Just some hot water. I can do it," Katie assured her.

Katie boiled a pot of water and carried it back to her cabin.

Hannah sat on the bed with a book, looking curious. "Can I help, Captain? Your arm—"

"It's fine. Just wait," Katie told her.

She set the hot water on the table and got two cups. With her good arm, she cut a bit of the chocolate and put some in each cup. She added the water and stirred it. Once it was blended, she carried a cup to Hannah on the bed.

"Taste it," Katie urged her as she retrieved her own cup.

Curious, Hannah took a sip. Katie saw her eyes widen in surprise and she smiled.

"It's amazing. What is that?" Hannah asked, taking another sip.

"It's called chocolate. It's fairly rare and rather expensive. I imagine only kings and queens drink this stuff. Who knows how the dearly departed Caesar got his filthy hands on it."

"This is better than rum! Better than that French wine Miss Shannon had."

"I thought you would like it," Katie said, smiling as she took a sip from her own cup.

Chapter Fourteen

OVER THE NEXT two weeks *The Widow* patrolled the coast. They ravaged two more Spanish supply ships and one English ship. Katie didn't have to kill anyone else and she got a great number of books from the English ship. Apparently their captain was a big reader. She even found a book of fairy tales tucked away, which Hannah greatly enjoyed reading.

One evening they lay in bed together, reading, neither of them tired enough to sleep yet. Katie was reading a book of seventeenth century poetry and Hannah's nose was buried in the book of fairy tales.

"Do you really believe you are cursed, Captain?" Hannah asked out of the blue. Katie paused in her reading to look at the girl. She wore her pale pink dress, her hair cascading in waves around her shoulders.

"Four people have died within a week of me telling them I loved them. What do you think?" she answered.

"Well it's just, in these stories there's always a reason someone is cursed. Like a witch or a fairy."

"Life isn't a fairy tale, Hannah," she said shortly.

Seeing the hurt look on Hannah's face, she softened her voice.

"Besides, I haven't met any witches or fairies," she offered with a small smile.

"Are you sure? You haven't picked up a cursed necklace or eaten an enchanted fruit?" Hannah pressed on.

"No," Katie answered, bemused.

"Oh," she said with a sigh and returned to her book.

Katie returned to the poem she had been studying, written by a Spanish poet by the name of Pedro Calderón de la Barca. She liked his writing style, she decided. She was rereading a line that moved her when Hannah closed her book and set it aside. Katie didn't look up until she felt Hannah climb on top of her, straddling her waist. Immediately her mouth went dry.

"Wh—wha—?" she stammered dumbly.

"In stories, there's usually a way to break the curse."

"Oh?" Katie asked, not following.

"Yes. Usually a...kiss," Hannah said, the faintest of blushes tingeing her pale cheeks. "Please, Captain. Can I kiss you?"

Katie couldn't speak. She wanted to say no, but her mouth wasn't working. Shyly, Hannah leaned forward and pressed the sweetest of kisses to her lips. Katie gasped at the spark of electricity between them and Hannah darted her tongue quickly into her mouth. This sent a jolt of fire straight through her and suddenly she found

herself kissing Hannah back fiercely, her hands fisted in her soft hair.

She heard herself moan and she realized what was happening. She broke away abruptly, pushing Hannah away.

"I can't," Katie said, feeling tears well up in her eyes.

"You can't tell me you didn't feel that," Hannah whispered fiercely. "You can't tell me you don't love me!"

"I can't. Don't you understand that I can't?"

Hannah rolled off of her but not before Katie saw the tears forming in her blue eyes. Her heart felt like it was being ripped from her chest.

"I'm so sorry, Hannah, maybe you should go."

"No," Hannah said, laying down beside her but facing away. "You promised me I could stay here with you for as long as I liked. Even if you won't love me this is where I belong. I got what I wanted anyway. I just wanted to be kissed by someone I cared about at least once."

Tears slid silently down the captain's cheeks. She could tell that Hannah was crying too. She wanted to reach out and touch her, to take her in her arms and hold her but she didn't want to hurt the girl any more than she already had. She looked back down at the book and began softly reading the poem aloud.

*"If all that lives must love or lie all shapes on Earth, or sea, or sky
with one consent to Heaven cry
that the glory above all else in life, is love."*

Hannah didn't say anything but her shoulders shook slightly as she wept. Katie closed the book and lay down, facing away from the girl she so desperately wanted to comfort.

THE NEXT MORNING Katie woke up alone. She sat up and saw that at some point Hannah had gotten up and gone to sleep on the bedroll on the floor. Heart aching, but knowing it was better this way, safer for Hannah, Katie left her there and went to take her place at the helm.

Over the next few days they barely spoke. Hannah still stayed in the captain's quarters but she slept on the floor. Katie wanted desperately for things to go back to normal between them. She tried several times to apologize or explain, but each time Hannah just walked away.

After a week of this, Katie felt the overwhelming urge to get off the ship. She wanted ground beneath her feet for a while, to not see the same faces she saw every day, to not see *her* face every day.

She checked her coordinates and headed for the nearest port. It

didn't matter it wasn't one of the pirate towns. It was a trader's town and it would give the crew a chance to spend some of their loot.

As she steered the ship, Katie wondered if Hannah would choose to leave. She had seen her making friends among the crew. Joshua was still teaching her to play guitar, she practiced her swordsmanship with Marie, and she had seen her drinking with Beth the other night. Would her friendship with the crew be enough for her or would the sour turn in her relationship with the captain make her leave?

And will I be able to let her leave? Katie thought to herself. Katie usually insisted on being at the wheel whenever *The Widow* made port and would always give the crew a lecture before letting them disembark. This time she told her first mate to do it and she stayed in her cabin, brooding, until Nate told her everyone was off the ship.

"Everyone?" she asked.

"Aye. Hannah went off with Beth and Marie," he said knowingly.

"Did I ask? Would you mind watching the ship for a while? I want to go out into the woods with Saida."

"Sure, Captain," he said, surprised. "No problem."

"Thanks."

Katie packed her rucksack with a change of clothes, blanket, flint, and a bit of food in case she decided not to come back that night. For a fleeting moment, as she stepped off her ship with her furry companion, she thought about never coming back. Just heading off into the woods and never looking back. She and the tiger could find food easily enough. And if she never saw Hannah again, the girl could forget about her and move on.

Katie snorted aloud and dismissed the thought as she and Saida headed into the woods. First and foremost, the sea was her life. She had fallen in love with the sea, with being a pirate, as soon as she'd stepped foot on *The Frightful*. Before she had even fallen in love with Mutt, she'd fallen in love with his ship. She still cringed when she thought of how, in her grief, she had demolished the magnificent ship on the rock face of a skerry.

Secondly, she knew she would never forget about Hannah. That brief kiss they had shared had been unlike anything she had ever experienced before. Exceptional. Magical. Wonderful. Hannah was unforgettable. And, if the way she felt was truly reciprocated, Hannah would not be able to forget about her either. She would probably come looking for her, if she were gone more than a night.

As she traipsed aimlessly through the woods, Katie knew she was making too much noise for Saida to hunt. She also knew that her oldest of friends would be content to walk alongside her as the captain let the universe guide her feet.

"You are my best friend, Saida, and I trust you more than anyone," Katie said to the tiger. "What do you think of Hannah?"

The big cat perked up and purred loudly, glancing behind them as if she expected the girl to be following them.

"You're just saying that because she brushes your fur and picks meat out of your teeth," Katie said with a laugh, nudging Saida playfully. "Listen to me! I'm crazy."

Saida huffed, looking at her.

"No, not because I'm talking to you, sweetie," she assured Saida. "Because...because I have this girl who loves me, or who wants to love me, but I won't let her. She loves you, too, and she cleans up after me. She's fiercely loyal and she operates in the same moral gray area I do. She realizes that not all treasure is gold. And she's gorgeous. I can't keep my eyes off of her. She's amazing. And I won't let myself love her, that's crazy!"

Saida blinked her amber eyes at her slowly.

"But I can't," Katie sighed. "You know I can't. You know why. You saw what happened to Mutt. I can't lose Hannah, too."

The tiger didn't respond, looking straight ahead.

"But if she decides to leave, I'll be losing her anyway, but I'd rather have her off the ship than dead because of me."

Saida took off running all of a sudden. Katie gave a shout and rushed after her. She burst through the trees and nearly tripped over the tiger, who had stopped short beside a steaming river of water.

"A hot springs! Good find, Saida, you are absolutely brilliant," she raved.

Katie tossed her rucksack on the ground. She made herself stop long enough to spread out the blanket she had brought before she stripped off all her clothes and headed into the water.

She didn't worry about someone finding her. She and Saida had been walking for an hour and it was getting dark. She also knew Saida would alert her if anyone were nearby. Even as the big cat disappeared into the darkness to hunt, she knew she would not be far from her.

She slid into the hot water and moaned loudly. It was almost orgasmic. The water soaked into her very muscles it seemed and soothed away soreness in places she hadn't even realized were sore.

For a while she thought of nothing but how good it felt to soak. She floated in the water as the stars appeared in the sky and the moon rose. Eventually her thoughts turned, as they usually did, to Hannah.

She needed to fix things with the young woman. She missed their easy conversation, seeing her laugh and smile, answering her questions all the time and holding her at night while she snored her adorable snore. She smiled slightly but her heart ached in a way even the hot springs could not soothe. She didn't see how she could get that back. She couldn't give Hannah what she wanted, what Katie herself wanted as well. It wasn't worth risking the girl's life.

For a minute, she imagined what would happen if she did, falling into one of those 'what if' fantasies. What if she went to Hannah, brought her here to the hot springs. What if she kissed her, told her she was beautiful, pulled her into the water and made love to her. She wouldn't have to tell her she loved her. If she didn't say it, the 'L' word, maybe Hannah would be safe and they could be happy together.

She shook her head sadly. She knew better. She had tried that with Mutt. They'd had several good years before he had gotten so persistent about marrying her. It had been the first time she had told him she loved him.

"Love," she said aloud bitterly, like a curse.

She knew Hannah would want more. Hell, she deserved more. Her life had been so painful, she deserved to be happy. And here she was, denying her that happiness.

She thought of the kiss. Of the rush of energy she'd felt and the fire it had stirred up inside of her. Something she'd not felt in years. She recalled the soft brush of Hannah's hand on her breast that day she'd helped her button her shirt. She gasped softly as her own hand found her breast. She dragged her rough fingers over a nipple that instantly pebbled. She imagined what it would be like to touch Hannah that way. To kiss her magnificent breasts, to knead her soft flesh with her calloused hands. With her right hand she trailed a path down her body, imagining herself sliding her fingers along Hannah's pale flat stomach to the patch of blonde curls she had spotted every time she'd seen the girl naked.

She moaned aloud as her fingers found the sensitive bundle of nerves. Suddenly she was imagining Hannah's mouth between her legs, licking and sucking. She imagined burying her fists in that blonde hair she loved so much, pulling her closer.

She came quickly and cried the girl's name as an orgasm washed over her body. As soon as the waves subsided, she realized what she had done and immediately felt disgusted with herself. She dragged herself from the hot springs and collapsed, naked, on the blanket.

She thought herself no better than the men who had kept Hannah as a slave. No better than those who had used her for their own gratification. Was that not what she was doing?

"No," she whispered to herself, fighting the rising shame and tears. "I love her, I love her, I love her and it's torture!"

In the distance she heard a rumble. At first she thought it was Saida somewhere growling. Then lightning cracked across the sky and rain began pouring down. A storm had rolled in out of nowhere. She'd never seen it coming.

"Hannah," she said aloud, remembering the last time it had stormed and how frightened the girl had been. Katie scrambled to her

feet and grabbed her clothes, which were quickly getting soaked by the rain. She pulled them on as lightning cracked again.

"Hannah," she murmured. She slung her bag over her shoulder, shouting as she did. "Saida! We gotta go, Saida!"

The tiger sprang out of the darkness, snarling.

"Hannah needs us, Saida," Katie said, running back the way they'd come. Thunder rumbled and Saida let out a roar as they ran, as if she were challenging the sky.

They seemed to run for hours and Katie could just see the lights of the town through the trees when Saida abruptly changed course.

"Where are you going, we have to find Hannah!" she called, but followed the tiger, trusting her instincts.

The tiger ran the fastest Katie had ever seen her run. When she stopped abruptly it took the captain a minute to catch up with her. That's when she spotted Hannah beneath a tree, her arms thrown about the tiger's neck.

"Hannah," Katie breathed, panting. The girl lifted her head and her blue eyes were red from crying.

"C-Captain! I went to the ship and when you and Saida were both gone, I thought...I thought you'd left for good. I was trying to find you and I got l-lost," she said, getting up. Her pink dress was soaked through, her blonde hair plastered to her head.

"Oh, Hannah. I'd never leave you," Katie said, putting her arms around the girl. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. You were right, but I can't, I—"

"No, I'm sorry, Captain. I shouldn't have—"

Katie touched her cheek gently, silencing her. She pulled her face down for a kiss. Hannah froze a moment, then kissed back. They didn't stop until Hannah pulled away, gasping for breath.

"I don't understand," she said, breathing hard.

"I don't either," Katie replied softly. She started to say more but a boom of thunder interrupted. She saw at fear in Hannah's eyes and hugged her tightly.

"Let's get back to the ship," she murmured to her.

She kept an arm around the girl as Saida led them out of the woods. They went down the dock to the ship and quickly went into her cabin. Saida shook the water from her fur and flopped down on her cushion. As soon as the door was shut, Katie pulled Hannah close to her and kissed her again.

"I never planned to feel the way I do," the captain said softly. "About you. About anyone, ever again. I can't say it. You know I can't. But if you want...if you still want, I will give as much of myself to you as I can."

Hannah didn't speak and Katie pulled away, embarrassed. She'd said too much. What if the girl didn't really feel the same?

"I've made an ass of myself, I'm sorry," she said, turning away from her.

"No, you didn't," Hannah said, coming up behind and putting her arms around her. "Your clothes are totally soaked."

"So is your dress," she said with a weak smile.

"That's easily fixed," she said, stepping back and stripping off her dress. Katie's mouth went dry and Hannah smiled. A crack of lightning sounded with a crash of thunder following. Hannah's smile was chased away and replaced with a look of fear.

"It's okay," Katie murmured, touching her cheek. Hannah flinched, tears in her eyes, reliving some unseen horror.

"Hey, go lay down and I'll come hold you, okay?" Katie said softly. Hannah came back to herself some and lay down on the bed. Katie stripped off her wet clothes, shook the water from her hair, and crawled into bed next to her.

They were both shivering, Katie from being wet, and Hannah from fear. The captain pulled the blanket up over them and wrapped her arms around Hannah who pressed her face into the captain's chest and sighed.

"Get some sleep, darling," Katie murmured. "The storm will pass soon."

Chapter Fifteen

THE NEXT MORNING Katie found she was alone in the bed but she heard a faint scratching. She rolled over to see Hannah was sitting at the desk with charts and paper spread out in front of her.

"What are you doing?" Katie asked, sitting up and stretching.

"Something I've been working on. Is there any way the numbers on your chart could be wrong?"

"Huh? What numbers?" she asked, walking over.

"These," she said, pointing to the lines of longitude.

"The lines of longitude and latitude. Why?"

"This," she said, pulling out a hand drawn map.

"What is this?"

"There was a map on my father's ship. When I close my eyes I can see it. I know I'm not good with numbers, but I know the coordinates. But when I try to mark it based off of your chart, it puts the coordinates here, on the continent, but it isn't land-locked, I know it. It's supposed to be in the water. I'm certain. Somewhere out here," she said, pointing to the gulf.

"Hmm, hang on," Katie said, leaning past her to open a drawer. She dug through a number of old charts until she found the one she was looking for. She laid it out in front of the girl who took a pencil and quickly found the coordinates she wanted and marked it with an X in the middle of the gulf.

"This is it! This is the map my father had!" she cried out.

"Your parents must have been Jesuits. They measure the Prime Meridian at a different location, see? The Copernican Observatory on Monte Mario. So what is this?" Katie asked, pointing to the X Hannah had marked.

"It's a treasure," she said, grinning widely. "I wasn't entirely truthful. My parents did have a small fishing boat but that isn't all they used it for. My father was a treasure hunter."

"Where did he get this map?" Katie asked, Hannah's excitement becoming infectious.

"He drew it himself, from a bunch of old books. He said nobody else in the world knew where it was and we'd be rich as the King."

"What happened to the one he drew? There's no point going after this treasure if somebody else already got it."

"No, he burned it," Hannah said, shaking her head. "When he saw Captain Ross's ship on the horizon, he burned the map and hid the books. Ross never found the books and when...when he killed my parents and took me, he sank our boat. So the treasure, it's still there

probably."

"But the X is in the middle of the ocean. There's no islands or anything there, at least not on any of my charts."

"There is an island there," she replied confidently. "A cay, my father called it."

"You think we should go look for it?" Katie asked.

"If you want to, Captain," she said. "It's your ship." Katie leaned down and kissed her.

"I think it sounds like a wonderful adventure, darling," the captain said breathlessly. Hannah grinned and stood up. They kissed again. Hannah put her hands on the captain's hips and ran her hands up her body to her breasts. Katie gasped and broke the kiss.

"Mm. No," she murmured, taking Hannah's hands in hers and kissed her fingers.

"No?" Hannah cocked her head in an adorable pout.

"No," she said, kissing her pouted lips. "I want to take this slowly. Not rush things."

"But I can kiss you?"

"Whenever you want to," she answered without hesitation.

"What about the crew?"

"They aren't allowed to kiss me," Katie joked.

"I mean can I kiss you in front of them?" she asked, shoving her slightly.

Katie was silent a moment. This was her ship, dammit. If any of them had a problem with it, they could get off. She might not be able to tell Hannah how she felt, but she could show her.

"Yes. Even in front of the crew," she said and kissed her again.

"That's more than I ever hoped for," Hannah murmured and kissed her again. "I really like kissing you."

"I really like kissing you, too," she replied with a grin. "Let's get dressed and go get something to eat. We'll round up the crew later and tell them about the treasure."

"Aye, Captain," she said obediently.

Katie dressed in a clean pair of pants and shirt. She pulled on her boots and ran a brush through her hair while Hannah put on her blue dress.

"Come here," Katie beckoned her over and stepped behind her to brush her hair. She spent an unnecessary amount of time brushing the blonde locks, running her fingers through them.

"I love your hair," she murmured and held it aside to kiss the back of her neck. She kissed gently from her neck to her shoulder and Hannah's knees buckled. Katie grabbed her waist to keep her from hitting the deck.

"Sorry," she said sheepishly. "It's just I've been wanting to do that for weeks now."

"What, make my legs give in?" Hannah teased.

"No, kiss your neck. It's delicious," she said, nuzzling her neck. She made herself pull away. "Let's go, before I eat you up."

"Either is good with me," Hannah murmured. Katie chuckled, took her captain's hat off, and put it on Hannah's head. Hannah smiled brightly and followed Katie out onto the deck.

They found Nate sitting on deck, playing with a deck of cards. He looked up at them and grinned at the captain's hat on Hannah's head.

"Ahoy, Captain Hannah," he said teasingly. "Good to see you two are friends again."

Katie took Hannah's hand and smiled.

"You can go ashore, Nate. Saida is on board. Hannah and I are going to find something to eat."

"Aye, Captain. There's a place to eat right off the main street, next to the Market-house, that Evan said has good food. He met a lady at the restaurant there last night and brought her back here. I think he was trying to impress her."

Katie chuckled and thanked him.

Nate walked with them toward the town, smiling when he saw they continued holding hands. He bid them good day as they reached the small restaurant, called Belle's, and they parted ways from him as they went inside.

The interior of the building was well lit and clean, vastly different from the buildings in pirate towns. There were people here already, having lunch, and none of them were passed out or stank of liquor.

"Well, this is a nice change of pace," Katie said, causing Hannah to giggle.

"Come in, *chéries*, sit anywhere you like," said a tall woman with a French accent. She had dark blonde hair braided down her back and she smiled brightly. When Katie and Hannah sat, she brought them glasses of water.

"How are you today, *chéries*? I like your hat," the woman said, smiling at Hannah.

Hannah's cheeks colored pink and she took off Katie's hat. "It's hers," she said shyly, handing it back to the captain.

"*Tres belle, ma chéri*. Both of you. What can I get you to eat? I have salad. I just picked the tomatoes from my garden this morning."

"That sounds lovely," Katie said and Hannah nodded in agreement.

When the woman walked away, Hannah nodded to a corner table.

"Isn't that Evan?" she said quietly. Katie followed her gaze and saw her pimply-faced young crewman making googly-eyes at a raven-haired beauty who smiled indulgently at him.

"Nate did say Evan was trying to impress a girl last night," Katie

said with a chuckle.

"Looks like it worked," Hannah replied with a grin as they saw the girl lean across the table to kiss Evan.

"He looks love struck," Katie commented. "I hope he doesn't jump ship to stay with her. He's an excellent man to have in the crow's nest."

"What about me?" Hannah asked in a feigned hurt tone.

"You are an excellent *woman* to have in the crow's nest, or anywhere for the matter," she murmured, causing Hannah to blush deep red.

The lady returned with their salads and they both dug in. They were almost done eating when Evan came over with his new friend, holding hands.

"Captain," Evan said, clearing his throat. "I would like to introduce you to Celeste."

"Captain Katherine Tanner, how do you do?" Katie said, shaking the woman's hand.

"Bonjour, Captain Tanner. I saw your ship last night. I just wanted to tell you *The Widow*, she is magnificent."

"Well, thank you," she said, pleased to receive a compliment on her ship.

"Celeste is interested in joining the crew, Captain," Evan blurted out.

"Aye?" Katie asked, raising an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"*Oui*, Captain. I fell in love with the sea on the journey to the New World. It would be an honor to serve aboard your vessel."

"Evan, why don't you and Celeste meet me back on the ship in about an hour or so? I'm trying to have lunch with Han...with my girlfriend," she said, testing the word out. It felt strange but she saw Hannah glow with pleasure. Evan's eyes grew so wide she thought they might pop out of his skull.

"Wh—really? I had no idea. I'm sorry, Captain, I didn't know."

"Is that going to be a problem?"

"No," he said quickly. "Not at all, Captain. We'll see you back on the ship. Come on, Celeste."

When Evan and Celeste left, Katie smiled and continued eating.

"Am I really your girlfriend?" Hannah asked shyly.

"Isn't that what we decided last night? Are you okay with that?"

"Yes," she replied softly, cheeks pink. She smiled serenely and Katie smiled back.

"I wonder if I should make a formal announcement to the crew?" Katie mused. "That way if any of them do have a problem with it, they can jump ship now so I don't have to deal with them later."

Katie paid for their food and they strolled through the village, hand in hand. In the middle of town was the marketplace where people stood around trading goods. Children of all ages darted

around playing. They looked around for a while until Katie noticed a woman standing at a table by herself. All the townspeople seemed to be avoiding even looking at the woman, who was dressed all in black.

Curious, Katie flagged down one of the kids running around and offered him a coin.

"Who is that woman?" Katie asked the young boy, who grinned a gap-toothed grin when she gave him the coin.

"Tha's Miss Yvonne. She's a witch she is," the boy said. "Tha's wha' all the grownups say. She gave me a neat rock and even gave me a piece o' candy one day but me mum made me spit it out, even tho it didn' taste poison or nothin'."

"Thank you," she said and the boy sped off as Katie glanced curiously toward the woman.

"A real live witch?" Hannah whispered in awe. "We should go talk to her!"

Katie smiled fondly at her companion.

"There's no such thing as witches, Hannah. She's probably just an odd old lady but we can go see what she is selling anyway."

They walked over, arms linked, and stood before the woman's table. Her table was laden with stones and jewelry made of stones, but they weren't stones like any Katie had ever seen.

They weren't plain rocks but she didn't think they were jewels either. They were all differing colors, some shiny, some sparkling, some smooth, some rough.

"Are they valuable?" Katie asked, looking up at the woman.

She wore a black dress and had long silver hair, but her face bore no wrinkles of age. Her brown eyes were bright and she smiled, showing teeth as white as pearls.

"Each has a different value to different individuals, Captain," she answered.

"She is a witch, she knows you're a captain," Hannah whispered, tugging on Katie's sleeve.

"She is not. I'm wearing a captain's hat," Katie replied, rolling her eyes. "There's no such thing as witches."

"Are you a witch?" Hannah asked Miss Yvonne bluntly, then hid behind Katie slightly. The woman laughed loudly and favored Hannah with a smile.

"I do not call myself that. I am more of a healer," Yvonne answered.

"Oh, so like a doctor?" Hannah asked, coming out from behind the captain.

"Not quite. What I have are not remedies for physical ailments but for emotional and spiritual help."

"With rocks," Katie said candidly.

"Aye, Captain. And flowers," she said. Seemingly out of

nowhere she held a yellow flower and she leaned across the table to place it in Hannah's hair.

"Thank you," Hannah said with a smile, then paused. "Do you curse people?"

"That's not really my style," Yvonne replied softly, and Hannah brightened again. "I am better at reading people and knowing what they need. Would you like me to tell you what I think will help protect you?"

"Protect me from what?"

"You know what, child," she said with a somewhat sad smile. "I can help you both, if you believe."

Hannah nodded eagerly and Katie sort of shrugged. This was starting to sound a little like religion, or else a ploy to get them to buy things. But if Hannah wanted something, she would definitely buy it for her.

Yvonne scanned her table carefully a moment before picking up a bracelet made of shimmering brownish gold stones.

"You need this," she said, placing it on Hannah's wrist. "Tiger's eye is a good protective stone."

"Tiger's eye," Hannah repeated, nudging Katie and holding up the bracelet to show her. The captain had to admit it did bear a resemblance to the way Saida's eyes flashed in the dark.

"What about my captain?" Hannah asked enthusiastically.

"Oh, I'm fine," Katie said, backing away. "I'm not much of a jewelry person."

"Please, Captain?" Hannah said, looking up at her with her bright eyes. Of course Katie relented.

"May I see your hand a moment, Captain?" Yvonne asked. Reluctantly Katie extended her hand. The silver-haired woman turned her hand palm up and studied it a moment. A shadow crossed her face, but just as quickly it disappeared.

"Just a moment," she said and pulled out a box from beneath her table. It had dozens of small drawers and Yvonne went through them, gathering beads.

"Tiger's eye, carnelian...sunstone is good...moonstone as well, since you travel on water...malachite...and more tiger's eye, it seems to like you," she murmured to herself, stringing the beads as spoke. When she was finished, she tied it onto the captain's wrist.

"It won't undo what's been done to you, but it will help," Yvonne said in a serious, quiet tone. A chill went through Katie. Did this woman really know?

"Don't be afraid, Captain," Yvonne said, her tone warm again. "I have a good feeling about the two of you."

"What do we owe you?" Katie asked, pulling out her coin pouch. Yvonne shook her head.

"I don't do this for money, Captain. I do it to help people.

That in itself is profit enough for me."

Katie wanted to insist but it wasn't in her nature as a pirate to turn down anything free. Still, she felt as if she owed the woman something.

"Thank you," Katie said. "If there's anything we can do for you, let us know. We will be in town at least one more night."

"Thank you, Captain. And good luck."

Chapter Sixteen

KATIE AND HANNAH headed back to the ship to meet with Evan and his girlfriend. When they arrived, they found Evan and Celeste already on deck, along with Saida. The big cat was stretched out in the sun, seeming disinterested in the couple, but the tip of her tail twitched. She was well aware of them.

"Captain," Celeste greeted. "Your tigress is as beautiful and magnificent as your ship."

Saida let out a short purr and Katie chuckled.

"Well, you've got 'flattery' down. What other skills do you have that might make you an asset to my crew?"

"Truthfully I do not know much about ships. But I am a fast learner. And I am a good cook, I cook for Miss Belle in town."

"You'll have to take that up with Martha, Evan, but she may appreciate the extra help. Can you fight, Celeste?"

"My brother taught me to handle a sword but I do not have a blade of my own."

"That is an easy fix. Do you really think you have what it takes to be a pirate? On the seas for weeks at a time, preying on innocent ships and settlements for your own selfish gain?"

"Oui, Captain," she said, green eyes glittering.

Katie led her to the Code and allowed her to read it.

"Can you abide by these laws and swear your loyalty to me on your own blood?"

"Aye."

"What do you think, Saida?" Katie asked the cat. She studied Celeste, then yawned. She did not see Celeste as a threat.

"Good enough. You're in, as soon as you sign," Katie said, handing her a dagger.

Celeste hesitated slightly before she sliced her finger with a grimace. As blood welled from the cut, she signed her name underneath Evan's.

"By my blood, I swear my loyalty," she said and Katie nodded.

"Normally my first mate or I give a tour of the ship, but I'm guessing Evan here would like that honor?"

"Yes, please, Captain," he said eagerly.

"Go ahead then. I'll be gathering the crew in the morning to announce our next venture."

"Aye, Captain."

"I thought you were assembling them tonight?" Hannah asked as the two of them went into the captain's quarters.

"I thought about it but I have somewhere I'd like to take you

tonight," Katie said, smiling.

"A surprise?"

"Aye. I'll pack us some food, I doubt we will come back tonight. I want to let Saida come with us and give her a chance to hunt. Do you think Evan can be trusted to watch the ship?"

"You're asking me?" Hannah asked, surprised. "I thought you worried about mutiny?"

"Honestly? As long as I have you and Saida with me, they can have the damn ship," she said and kissed her. "We can always get another."

"I don't think they would take it, really," Hannah said softly, smiling.

"I don't either, really. And leaving him in charge will help Evan impress Celeste."

They gathered a few supplies and prepared to leave. At the last minute Hannah grabbed the Jesuit map where she had marked the X and stowed it in her bag.

"Just in case," she said.

"Good idea," Katie said, kissing her forehead. "Let's go."

They went out onto the deck. Hannah tugged at Katie's sleeve and pointed up to the crow's nest where Evan was kissing Celeste against the rail.

"Don't fall!" Katie called, amused. They broke apart and even from the deck Katie could see Evan's blush.

"Sorry, Captain!" he called back sheepishly.

"Can you watch the ship for the evening, Evan? Don't let anyone on board but the crew."

"Me? I mean, sure. Yeah. Thank you, Captain!"

"Don't screw up," she shouted up to him, and smiled as she, Hannah, and Saida left the ship.

"You can go hunt, Saida," Katie said as soon as they were in the trees. "Just stay where you can hear us if there's trouble."

The tiger gave a short purr then seemed to melt into the forest.

"Do you really think Miss Yvonne wasn't a real witch, Captain?" Hannah asked as they walked, fiddling with her bracelet.

"Call me Katie when we're not on the ship, darling," Katie said, taking her smaller hand in hers. "And I don't know. It seems unlikely. I'm not sure I believe in witches."

"But you believe in the Curse. Who do you think cursed you if it wasn't a witch?"

"I don't know, maybe God, but I'm not sure I believe in him either."

"You don't believe in God?" Hannah asked, surprised.

"How can I? How can you?"

"My parents taught me to believe in God," she answered with a

shrug. "They said everything that happens is God's will."

"How can I believe in a God who would let the things that happened to you happen?" Katie murmured, squeezing her hand. "It is hard to believe in any sort of higher power that would let that sort of thing happen."

"Everything happens for a reason," Hannah said softly. "If I hadn't been aboard Captain Ross's ship, then taken by the other men and sold to the captain of *The Resilient*, I never would have met you."

Katie squeezed her hand again in return. They continued in silence for a while, Katie following the path she and Saida had crashed through the night before.

"If you don't think they'll help, why are you still wearing the bracelet?" Hannah asked with a smile.

"They are unusual stones, and it can't hurt," she answered, smiling faintly.

Eventually they came to the hot springs Katie and Saida had found the night before. Hannah's eyes lit up and she immediately stripped naked. Katie automatically averted her eyes, but remembered she didn't have to do that anymore. She watched as Hannah stepped into the water.

"It's warm!" she exclaimed, surprised. Katie chuckled and put down her bag.

"It's a hot springs," she said as she spread the blanket out, as she had the night before. Remembering what else she had done the night before, she blushed as she took off her clothes.

"Why are you blushing, Cap—Katie? I've seen you naked before," Hannah said as she sank further into the water. "I saw you naked last night. Although I've never let myself look properly before."

"See anything you like?" Katie asked, sliding into the water while Hannah ogled her.

"Lots of things," she replied, swimming over to her and kissing her. "Everything."

"I let myself look at you more than I should have," Katie admitted, putting her arms around Hannah. "I like looking at you."

"I know," Hannah said with a faint smile. "You think I'm beautiful. You told me."

"It's true," Katie promised, and sealed the promise with a kiss. "You're the most gorgeous woman I have ever laid eyes on."

Hannah blushed faintly. She gently ran her fingers along Katie's freckled shoulders to her chest.

"I always wanted to touch your freckles," she said shyly and dipped her head to kiss them. Katie gasped softly when Hannah's pink tongue darted out to taste her skin. She groaned as the girl trailed kisses to her neck, then up her jawline to her lips. Katie met

her with a searing kiss. Hannah pressed her body closer. When Katie felt her soft pale breasts against her own, she felt a rush of heat between her legs that had nothing to do with the hot springs.

She moved back just enough so she could put her hands on Hannah's breasts. She kneaded them, loving how soft they felt, and ran her thumbs over hardened nipples. Hannah gasped, breaking the kiss.

"What happened to taking things slowly?" she panted with a grin.

"I don't think I can," Katie groaned and Hannah slipped a knee between the captain's legs.

"You don't have to," Hannah whispered.

Katie kissed her hungrily and slid her hands to Hannah's hips. She steered her out of the water and onto the shore. Still kissing her, she laid her down on the blanket. She trailed kisses to her beautiful neck and began to kiss her there, tasting the salt of her skin. She trailed her hand down to the soft blonde curls, desperately wanting to feel her. When she slipped her hand between her legs, she heard Hannah whimper. It was not a whimper of pleasure, but of fear. Katie's head shot up in surprise and she saw the distress in her eyes.

Remembering how she had been hurt, Katie quickly pulled her hand away.

"No! Please, I'm sorry, Katie, please, continue."

"Shh," Katie murmured, silencing her with a kiss. "I'm not going to hurt you, darling. I'm going to make you forget anyone ever hurt you."

Katie took her time, her own needs tabled for the moment. She went slowly, kissing the delicious neck she loved so much for some time before moving her mouth to the full pale breasts. She kissed one while massaging the other with her hand. When she covered one of the pale pink nipples with her mouth, Hannah moaned loudly. Katie smiled as she flicked the hardened nipple with her tongue. There was nothing but pleasure in the sounds Hannah made now.

She took her time ravishing one breast before moving on to the other. Before long Hannah was moaning and whimpering with pleasure, her chest heaving. Katie trailed her kisses down her flat stomach slowly, cautiously. She dipped her tongue into her naval and Hannah's back arched.

"Please, Captain," Hannah begged desperately, her voice laden with desire. Hearing the desire in her voice as Hannah called her 'captain' broke Katie's resolve to go slow.

She moved her mouth quickly through damp blonde curls and slid her tongue through the folds. Hannah cried out and Katie fastened her mouth over the bundle of nerves at the cleft, knowing how close the girl was. She sucked it into her mouth and immediately felt Hannah's body tense and shudder.

"Oh— God— Captain!" Hannah cried out and Katie slipped

one finger into her, still sucking, as a powerful orgasm swept through the girl. Feeling Hannah's walls clench tightly around her finger, Katie groaned and pressed her own center against the girl's thigh. She was surprised when an orgasm rolled through her and she grabbed Hannah's hip with her free hand.

When her orgasm subsided and her head cleared, she looked up to see tears streaming down Hannah's face.

"Are you okay?" she asked, alarmed, and withdrew her hand. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No. God, no. I...I never felt that before, I never knew it could be like that," she sobbed.

Katie moved off of her so she could lay down beside her. She held the girl while she cried. She kissed the tears from her face tenderly until her tears ceased.

"What was that?" Hannah asked.

"An orgasm," Katie answered, amused but not wanting to hurt her feelings by laughing.

"Can I do it again?" she asked eagerly. This time Katie did laugh.

"Yes, though sometimes not right away."

"Wait. I can... Can I make you feel like that?" she asked shyly.

"You already did," she said. "Giving you pleasure was very pleasurable for me."

"I called you 'captain' when I had an orgasm. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I think that was what made me climax," she admitted, blushing. Hannah blushed as well and smiled.

"I want to do what you did. Can I?" Hannah asked shyly. "Can I kiss you and touch you, Captain?"

"Yes," Katie whispered and before she knew it Hannah was on top of her, kissing her clumsily.

Her inexperience was evident but Katie found it endearing as Hannah explored her body with her hands and mouth. When she slipped one long finger inside of her, Katie groaned.

"It's very wet," Hannah commented, moving her finger experimentally. Katie squirmed beneath her and Hannah watched her face, seeming fascinated.

"Please...more..." Katie pleaded of her innocent tormentor.

"Hm? Oh," she said and added a second finger. "Like this?"

Katie responded with a moan and Hannah began to move two fingers inside of her. With her other hand she ran her fingers through the auburn curls, making Katie shiver. She moved that hand lower and began to stroke Katie's swollen clitoris lightly.

"Harder," Katie begged and Hannah responded with an increase in pressure. Almost immediately she climaxed, crying Hannah's name as she did.

When the waves subsided, she opened her eyes to see Hannah

watching her intently. Katie blushed under her gaze and Hannah leaned forward to kiss her. She wiggled her fingers inside of Katie curiously before withdrawing them. She brought her hand to her lips and tasted her fingers. Her eyes lit up and she wiggled her way down Katie's body.

"What are you—ohh," Katie's question died into a moan as Hannah's tongue darted into her opening. She buried her hands in the girl's hair just as she had imagined doing the night before. Hannah lapped up Katie's juices before moving her mouth up to her clit. She circled it with her tongue, making the older woman cry out, before sucking on the sensitive, swollen bundle. It pushed Katie over the edge again and Hannah moved back to her opening to taste the fresh flood of juices, until Katie was begging her to stop.

"Please, I can't take anymore, I need a minute."

Hannah relented and returned to kiss her lips, letting Katie taste herself on her tongue.

"Come here and let me hold you while I get my strength back, you wonderful, beautiful girl," Katie said breathlessly. Hannah smiled and lay down so Katie could wrap her arms around her.

"Thank you, Katie," Hannah said after a quiet moment.

"I've never been thanked for sex before," Katie said, chuckling.

"I never felt like that before," Hannah replied, smiling. "It seemed like something I should thank you for."

"Well, you're welcome. And thank you."

"For what?"

"For being so stubborn. For loving me in spite of myself. For understanding."

"I do love you. And I do understand."

"You know how I feel," Katie murmured, kissing her, wishing she could tell her.

"You don't have to tell me, I know," Hannah said.

"I can't tell you, but I can show you," she replied. "If you let me, I will spend all night and the rest of my life showing you how I feel about you."

"Sounds good to me."

They did just that. They made love on the blanket, in the grass, and in the water. All night until they were exhausted, then they napped, holding each other.

Chapter Seventeen

KATIE WOKE FIRST as the sun was rising. She lay there a while, just holding Hannah, amazed. Amazed that she was doing this, could do this, and terrified that it was going to go horribly wrong. Terrified this girl was going to die because she loved her. She sent up a silent prayer to the God Hannah believed in.

She knew it was supposed to end with amen but she wasn't sure how to start. She looked up at the sky and pleaded silently.

Please, God, she has been through so much, please let me love her.

Let her be happy. She deserves to be happy. Amen.

She woke Hannah slowly by kissing her neck, trailing her fingers through the soft curls between her legs. They made love once more and before Katie knew it, they had to return to the ship.

"Do we have to?" Hannah groaned as they started to get dressed. "We could stay here forever."

"I thought you wanted to go hunt for your treasure?" Katie asked with a smile, pulling her shirt on over her head. Hannah brightened and put on her dress.

"I do want to," she said. "Me and you."

"Me and you," Katie repeated, taking her hand.

Saida reappeared when they started heading back toward the ship. They walked in comfortable silence as they made their way through the woods. Katie couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so happy. Even Saida was purring.

When they reached the port, they headed down the dock to the ship. They hadn't reached *The Widow* yet when a man stepped in front of them.

"Hey, beautiful," he said to Hannah with a grin. "Do you want to see my ship?"

Hannah and Katie exchanged a look and both laughed.

"No," Katie said, taking Hannah's hand. "She definitely doesn't."

The man flushed in anger as they started to move past him. "I was talking to you," he said, grabbing Hannah by the arm.

She flinched and Katie whirled around and punched the man in the nose. She felt a satisfying crunch as the bones shattered beneath her fist. He fell to the dock, blood spurting from his nose.

"Touch her again and I'll kill you," she growled. She took Hannah by the hand and led her away.

"Thank you," Hannah said softly.

When they reached the ship, they found everyone was gathered, waiting. Katie got up in front of the crew and got their attention.

"In the Code you all agreed to follow, but it says that each of you gets a vote in the affairs of the ship. I have it, on good authority, the location of a treasure that most likely hasn't been touched," Katie said to them.

"How much treasure?" Marie asked eagerly.

"Enough that we could all be rich," Katie answered.

"And you've a mind to go after it?" Nate asked.

"Aye. Now I know there's a chance we won't find it, or it may be gone, although that's a slim chance. And this isn't our usual game. So I thought I'd give you all a vote."

"I'm in, Captain," Nate said automatically.

"Definitely," Marie added.

"Aye," the rest of the crew called out.

"We're ready when you are, Captain. Should we prepare to make way?" Joshua asked.

"Aye. Wait...one more thing that you all should know about that might be an issue for some of you, maybe, morally," she said clumsily.

"Moral issue? Captain, we're pirates," Marie said with a snort.

"Right, well..." Katie cleared her throat before continuing. "Hannah and I have decided to, eh...start a relationship."

There was a moment of silence, then Beth asked "You mean you weren't already?" There were several chuckles.

"So nobody has a problem with that?"

Everybody shook their heads, most of them smiling.

"Nobody cares, Captain. Hell, I sleep with Beth and nobody cares," Marie said with a shrug.

"Marie!" Beth shouted, flushing, while everybody laughed.

"Well everybody knows," Marie said. "Hard to keep a secret like that on a ship."

"I didn't know," Katie said with a chuckle. "Well, all right.

Let's prepare to make way."

The crew dispersed and started to get the ship ready. Hannah tugged on the captain's sleeve.

"Saida's not here," she said.

"Where'd she go?" Katie asked, alarmed.

"She didn't come back on with us."

Katie rushed to the side of the ship and looked over. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw the tiger on the dock, but frowned when she saw the tiger was winding herself around a woman with silver hair.

Katie and Hannah got off the ship and met Miss Yvonne on the dock. There was a large trunk behind her. Saida was purring loudly as Yvonne scratched her ears.

"Miss Yvonne, what can we do for you?" Katie asked.

"Your tiger is magnificent. You take very good care of her, it's clear," the woman said, smiling. "She is healthy and well fed. That

can't be easy for you at sea. You must love her very much."

"I have never seen her warm up to anyone so quickly before," Katie remarked. "But most people are terrified of her."

"At least at first," Hannah added. "I was."

"I would never be scared of someone so gorgeous," Yvonne cooed at the big cat, then she looked up at them. "You're making way soon, Captain?"

"Aye."

"I think it is time for me to move on from this place. Could I ride with you on your ship?"

"Er, we're not really a passenger ship," Katie said awkwardly.

"I know what kind of ship this is, Captain," Yvonne said with a smile. "I am prepared to pull my own weight. Whatever you require."

"Please, Captain?" Hannah said. Katie thought a moment before giving a brief nod.

"I don't make a habit of turning people away," the captain said. "Especially if Saida likes them."

"You won't regret it, Captain," Yvonne said with a smile.

"Can I show her around the ship, please?" Hannah asked eagerly.

"Sure. I need to talk over our course with Nate anyway," Katie said with a shrug.

Hannah led Yvonne away onto the ship and Saida followed them. Katie called Nate into her cabin and spread out her chart, keeping Hannah's map with the exact coordinates hidden. Only she and Hannah knew the exact coordinates of the treasure, and she preferred to keep it that way.

"We'll have to stop in Key West for supplies before we head out into the gulf," Nate commented and Katie agreed.

"We'll need a lot of fresh water and livestock for Saida as well," she added. "Nowhere to hunt in the open ocean."

"She could learn to fish," he joked.

There was a soft knock on the door and Hannah entered, holding a cup.

"I thought you might like a cup of coffee, Captain," Hannah said softly, setting the cup down on the desk next to her. "I was showing Miss Yvonne the galley and thought you might be tired. We had a long night."

"You are right. Thank you, sweet girl," she replied, giving her a quick kiss, conscious of Nate's grin.

"I've got to finish showing Miss Yvonne around but I wanted to ask, does she need to sign the code?"

"Not unless she intends to actually join the crew. It's my understanding she just wants a ride."

"Okay. Thank you, Captain," Hannah said and left.

"So we have a passenger?" Nate inquired.

“Aye. A witch.”

“A wi—really?”

“I’ve no idea. But Saida likes her and Hannah likes her. She asked for a ride, said she felt it was time for her to move on. She’s odd, but she is nice. Even if she may be a witch.”

Chapter Eighteen

WITH CUP OF coffee in hand, Katie took the helm as they left the port. She told Nate to rest up and he could take the night shift. As Nate headed below deck, Saida joined the captain at the helm.

The wind was fair and the ship was making good time. A few hours passed and Hannah came to her, with Yvonne following behind.

"Settling in okay?" Katie asked her with a nod. "Yes, Captain. Thank you again."

"Captain, Miss Yvonne has offered to tutor me," Hannah said excitedly.

"In what? Witchcraft?" she asked with a slight frown. "No offense."

"No, she's said she can teach me to read and write better, and to do math."

"You read just fine, I help you with words you don't know."

"But I want to learn. I don't want to have to ask you constantly. Please, Captain."

"All right," she agreed, taking Hannah's hand and squeezing it. "You can use our quarters."

"Thank you, Captain," she said, her eyes sparkling. She kissed Katie's hand quickly before hurrying off.

That evening when the sun set, Nate came and took over the wheel. She checked her cabin, but Hannah wasn't there. There were a number of books and papers spread out on the table and she looked over them curiously. The girl had been practicing her penmanship.

She was thinking of going down to the galley for dinner when Hannah came in, carrying a tray.

"It's like you read my mind," Katie remarked as Hannah put the tray down and cleared her things off the table.

"I told Evan I would take his place in the crow's nest for a few hours after dinner so he can spend some time with Celeste," Hannah said as they ate.

"Oh," Katie said, trying not to sound too disappointed. She had been looking forward to spending time alone with Hannah all day. "Aren't you tired?"

"A bit but don't worry. I'm still alert enough to work."

Hannah left as soon as she was done eating. Katie spent some time reading before trying to sleep. As exhausted as she was, she couldn't fall asleep. After tossing and turning for a while, she gave up and headed out on deck.

She scaled the mast up to the crow's nest easily and greeted

Hannah.

"Captain. What're you doing?" she asked.

"I couldn't sleep," Katie sighed. "So I thought I might come up here and help you keep watch."

"Oh yeah?" Hannah asked with a grin as Katie pulled her close and kissed her.

"Mm-hmm," she replied and kissed her again, pinning her to the rail. Hannah kissed back passionately, sending liquid fire through Katie's veins. Katie wedged her leg between Hannah's thighs and the girl moaned.

"This isn't...exactly...helping me watch," Hannah said between kisses.

"I'm a terrible captain, aren't I?" Katie said with a smirk.

"Just awful," she teased with another kiss. "Nate can see us."

Katie looked down and saw her first mate grinning. He quickly looked away.

"I don't care," Katie said, but stepped away after kissing her once more. Hannah sighed at the loss of contact but pulled out her telescope to scan the horizon. When Evan came to relieve Hannah, they returned to their quarters and crawled into bed, both too tired to do anything more than sleep.

OVER THE NEXT few weeks, Hannah continued her lessons with Yvonne. Katie began teaching her the basics of navigation as well, such as how to use the sun or moon to determine the longitude, and how to measure the angular height of stars above the horizon to determine latitude. She was a fast learner and soon was as good a navigator as the captain or Nate. Katie even allowed the girl to take the wheel for a few hours at a time.

When they finally made port in Key West, Katie gave everyone a day off to rest before they started stocking up. As everyone else left the ship, Yvonne came up to Katie and Hannah. She had her trunk with her.

Some of the crew had been wary of the silver-haired woman at first, but within a week of being on board she had won them over. Most of the crew members wore bracelets or necklaces with some of Yvonne's stones on them. They came to her with problems and she counseled them. Katie had almost forgotten she wasn't a part of the crew.

"You're leaving?" Hannah asked, disappointed.

"Yes, child. I think this is where I am meant to be. I plan to find a small boat and make my home on one of the smaller, uninhabited islands. It will do me good to spend some time communing with nature again."

"You are welcome to come with us, Miss Yvonne, you've certainly proven yourself worthy," Katie remarked. It was true. Yvonne had easily

picked up on the way the sails and rigging worked, making her invaluable as a crew member.

"No, thank you, Captain. I've no real interest in treasure," she replied.

"I understand," Katie said with a nod. She pulled out a pouch of gold coins and offered it to Yvonne.

"That's not necessary."

"Please. Consider it payment for your services. It will help you buy the boat you need."

Finally, Yvonne accepted the gold and smiled.

"May I speak with you alone a moment, Captain?" the woman asked. Katie glanced at Hannah who didn't seem to mind. She nodded and led Yvonne into her cabin, shutting the door.

"I know you and I have not talked much, and you haven't asked, but there is a way to reverse what has been done to you."

"How?" she asked, curious what the woman had to say.

"An act of true love."

"What does that mean, exactly?"

"You have to figure that part out for yourself, dear. Love isn't the same for everyone," she said with a small smile.

"Right," Katie said skeptically.

They walked back out on deck where Hannah was waiting.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Captain," Yvonne said, picking up her trunk.

"Thank you for teaching me, Miss Yvonne," Hannah said sadly.

"You are welcome, dear child. Do not be discouraged, I have a feeling we will see each other again."

They watched Yvonne leave, then Katie took Hannah by the hand and led her off the ship.

"What about Saida?" Hannah inquired.

"It's a rather small island. Not much room for her to hunt," the captain replied. "I thought you and I could go for a walk, stretch our legs off the ship. We've been at sea for weeks."

"Sounds good to me," Hannah said, smiling as the captain kissed her hand.

They walked along the beach for a while before Katie stopped and took her boots off.

"I want to feel the sand between my toes," she explained. Hannah followed suit and they left their boots and continued walking slowly, hand in hand.

They walked where the waves were coming in, letting the warm gulf waters lap at their feet. Hannah was looking out to sea when she gave a startled cry.

"Look, Katie!"

Katie looked toward the setting sun and saw a pod of dolphins

playing in the water. They leapt about, splashing and chattering happily, getting closer to the shore. Hannah stripped off her dress and tossed it on the shore, clear of the tide.

"What are you doing?" Katie asked with a chuckle as Hannah moved farther out into the water.

"Going to swim with them," she called back.

Katie took off her breeches and shirt and swam after her, not wanting to leave her alone with the dolphins, in case they turned aggressive.

Fortunately, these dolphins seemed more curious than aggressive. When Katie and Hannah were deep enough a few of the dolphins approached. They circled curiously, examining the women. When one dolphin rolled on its belly in front of Hannah, she stroked its belly reverently.

"I've never touched a dolphin before," she said breathlessly.

"I think she wants to play with you," Katie said. The dolphin was nudging Hannah's leg then swimming a little ways away before coming back to nudge her again.

"What do I do?" Hannah asked.

"Follow her. Like playing tag, I think."

"Tag?" she inquired, cocking her head. Katie remembered that Hannah hadn't had much of a childhood. The thought made her sad.

"Just swim after her, touch her, and swim away."

Hannah swam after the dolphin, who seemed elated to have the girl follow her. Katie knew the creature could easily swim faster than any human, but she seemed to slow down enough for Hannah to be able to catch her after a minute or two. Hannah swam away, giggling as the dolphin swam after her. Around them dolphins played similar games with each other.

Eventually they lost interest in the humans and moved on.

Hannah called goodbye to her new friends as she swam back to Katie's side. The sky was dark now, the only light coming from the moon and stars. It was warm enough to not need a fire, but Katie saw Hannah's nipples were hard as she came toward her in the water. She came up beside her and they shared a long kiss, which quickly turned into more.

Katie pushed her back toward the shore and when they reached the spot where the waves just barely reached the sand, she laid her down and began kissing her all over. She felt the waves washing gently around them as her fingers entered Hannah, knowing her well enough by now to know she was more than ready. Hannah moaned, bucking her hips to meet Katie's thrusts. She pressed herself down on Hannah's wet thigh, sliding back and forth in the same rhythm her fingers moved inside the girl.

They climaxed at the same time and when they had enough

strength, crawled farther up on the sand and lay down together. The white sand clung to their wet bodies but neither cared at the moment. They lay on their backs, Hannah nestled in the crook of Katie's arm, and looked up at the stars together.

"What if we don't find the treasure, Katie?" Hannah asked after some time had passed.

"It will still have been fun," the captain responded. "The crew might be disappointed, but if you hadn't noticed, gold isn't really my thing. As long as I have enough to stock my ship, enough to keep you and Saida happy, and books to read, I am happy."

"I would be a little disappointed if we didn't find it," Hannah admitted. "I know I remember the numbers right, I can see them so clearly in my mind but my father could have been wrong. The journals he had, maybe he read them wrong. Or maybe there isn't as much treasure as he thought."

"What would you want to do if we do find the treasure? You'd be rich enough to do whatever you wanted, if he was right."

"I'm happy as long as I'm with you, Captain," Hannah said with a smile and a kiss on her cheek. "But I think I would buy a lot of chocolate and rum."

Katie laughed at her answer, elated.

"That sounds good to me, darling," she said and kissed her again.

They dozed lightly in the sand, but Katie stirred when she heard something. Hannah sat up next to her.

"What was that?" she asked, a note of fear in her voice.

"Something moving in the sand," Katie said, getting to her feet. "Something big."

They brushed the dry sand from their bodies and quickly got dressed. Katie grabbed her sword and together they headed toward the sound. Suddenly, Hannah grabbed her arm.

"Katie look!" she whispered in excitement.

By the light of the moon Katie saw what had been making the noise. It was a giant turtle.

"A sea turtle," she said in awe. "I've never seen one this close before."

"She's injured," Hannah said anxiously. "Look at her arm – er, flipper."

"You're right," the captain said. The turtle had a deep gash on her left flipper, almost like a bite mark. It was caked with blood and there were sand flies buzzing around the wound.

"It looks infected," Hannah said, examining the wound closely.

"She must have been ashore laying her eggs and something attacked her," Katie said.

"How awful! We've got to help her."

"How? I'd love to, darling, but I don't know much about sea turtles, especially injured ones."

"I bet Miss Yvonne does. If we run back to town maybe we can find her. She can come help us."

"Okay," Katie agreed.

"One of us should stay here with her and make sure nothing else attacks her," Hannah said, kneeling in the sand beside the turtle. Katie hesitated a moment before handing Hannah her sword.

"You stay here and I'll go get Yvonne," she said to her.

"Be careful, Katie," Hannah said as she turned to go. "And hurry."

Katie jogged barefoot up the beach toward town. She passed the spot where they'd left their boots but didn't stop. She wasn't sure where to look for Yvonne so when she reached town, she headed for the tavern.

There was a crowd of people still up drinking. She scanned the noisy room for any of her crew and spotted Marie and Beth at a corner table. She stepped over a broken bottle and made her way to them.

"Captain," Beth greeted. "Want a drink?"

"No, thank you. Have either of you seen Yvonne? It's important," Katie said urgently.

"Is Hannah okay?" Marie asked, a hint of concern in her voice. She cleared her throat awkwardly.

"She's fine," Katie assured. "We just have a question for her."

"She was down at the docks earlier but you might try the inn," Beth suggested. "She said yesterday that she was looking forward to sleeping in a real bed."

"Good idea. Thanks," she said and hurried out of the bar. Katie found the inn and walked up to the man at the desk. "I'm looking for a woman," she began.

"Ain't we all?" he chuckled gruffly. Katie gave him a withering look.

"A woman with silver hair. She's tall, dressed in black."

"Aye, there might be a woman here like that."

"Where is she?"

"How much is that information worth to you?" he sneered.

Katie scoffed, wishing she had not left her sword with Hannah. Instead she dug a gold coin from her pocket.

"Everything has a price," the man said gleefully. "Up the stairs, third door on the left."

Katie hurried up the stairs and knocked on the door. Yvonne opened the door immediately and looked up and down the hall.

"Captain. Where is Hannah, is she all right?"

"Hannah's fine. She's found an injured critter, a sea turtle. She thinks you'll be able to help."

"Injured how?"

"A bite of some sort on its flipper. Looks infected."

"A dog bite probably," Yvonne said, going over to her trunk and digging around. "The two of you are more than capable of treating her. Clean the wound with water. Get some honey from Martha and slather it on the wound liberally, then cover it with one of these bandages."

"That's all?" Katie asked, accepting the strips of white cloth.

"That's all that can be done."

"Thank you, Yvonne."

"Good luck, Captain."

Katie went down to the docks and rushed aboard *The Widow*. Saida was on deck and greeted the captain with a questioning purr.

"Hannah's okay. I just need something from the kitchen," she told the tiger.

Katie wasn't surprised to find Martha wasn't aboard. She searched the kitchen until she found a jar with a honeycomb in it.

When she got back to Hannah and the turtle, she saw the girl had already washed the wound.

"I couldn't bear all the flies buzzing around it so I cleaned it as best as I could. Where's Yvonne?"

"She said to put honey on it and bandage it up," Katie said, kneeling next to her in the sand.

They worked together to treat the turtle, who Hannah named Shelly. When they finished they went to wash their hands in the ocean.

"What do sea turtles eat?" Hannah asked curiously.

"Seaweed I think. Some of them maybe eat fish," Katie said. "I'll bet Shelly's hungry. Who knows how long she's been up

here. Maybe I can swim out and get her some seaweed," Hannah said, looking toward the water.

"Let me," Katie insisted. "I'm a much stronger swimmer."

Katie waded out into the water and dove down. She grabbed a fistful of sea grass, then surfaced for a breath. She looked at her hand. It wasn't much grass for the large turtle. So she dove back down.

Katie dove and surfaced a dozen times, the waves buffeting her as she gathered grasses. The sea was rough and several times she was pushed under. She could feel her body getting weaker but she was determined not to disappoint Hannah.

She fought her way to the surface one last time, both hands full of seaweed. A large wave forced her under before she could take a full breath. She was pushed down toward the ocean floor, unable to fight her way up, both hands still clenched tight around her bounty.

I'm going to die for a turtle, she thought, as she was forced deeper. I'm going to die for Hannah and that's okay.

Suddenly there was something beneath her, pushing her to the surface. She broke the surface, gasping for breath. It was one of

Hannah's dolphin friends. Katie put her arms around the creature and it swam her toward shore.

When the dolphin could go no farther, Katie slid from his back in the shallows and crawled the rest of the way to shore.

"Are you okay?" Hannah cried, helping her to her feet and throwing her arms around her.

"Yeah," she panted. "Yeah, I'm okay. Here, darling, feed your turtle."

"Thank you," Hannah said, kissing her quickly, then looked to the dolphin. "And thank you!"

Katie watched as Hannah ran back to Shelly with the seaweed.

I almost died, she thought to herself. I almost died and I would have been glad to. I would do anything to make you happy, beautiful girl. I love you.

Chapter Nineteen

THEY RETURNED TO the ship the next day to meet with the crew about getting supplies. When they arrived, everyone was there except Nate.

"Has anyone seen Nate?" Katie asked the crew, frowning.

Everyone shook their heads.

"Maybe we should go look for him?" Hannah suggested and Katie nodded in agreement.

"It isn't like him to just disappear like this," she said as they headed off the ship.

They were walking up the dock when Nate came running up, looking exhausted.

"Sorry I'm late, Captain," he said, panting.

"Is everything okay, Nate? You look like hell," Katie remarked.

"No, I'm fine, I...I was with a woman," he answered with one of his lop-sided grins.

"Ah. Well come on. Everyone's waiting."

With Nate and Martha's help, Katie made a list of supplies they would need. She delegated who would get what and gave everyone plenty of gold to get what was needed.

They left port early the next morning, heading west into the gulf. There was an air of excitement among the crew.

"All everyone's talking about is what they're going to do with their share of the treasure," Hannah remarked as she and Katie sat down to eat dinner that evening. "I think Marie said she wants to buy a castle, or maybe build one."

"I can't really picture her settling down in a castle," Katie said with a laugh.

"Did you notice Nate?"

"Aye, he keeps looking behind us. He must have really fancied the lass he met in Key West. Hopefully he won't turn the ship around while we're all sleeping," she joked.

After they finished eating, they lay in bed together for a while reading. Hannah kept yawning and finally closed her book. "I can't keep my eyes open any longer, Katie," she yawned, nestling in beside her. "Will you read to me until I fall asleep?"

"Of course, darling," she replied and flipped back to a poem she had earmarked. *To a Kiss* by Robert Burns.

"Humid seal of soft affections, Tend'rest pledge of future bliss,
Dearest tie of young connections,
Love's first snow-drop, virgin kiss. Speaking silence, dumb

confession, Passion's birth and infants' play,

Dove-like fondness, chaste concession, Glowing dawn of brighter day.

Sorrowing joy, adieu's last action, Ling'ring lips—no more to join!

What words can ever speak affectionate Thrilling and sincere as thine!"

When Katie finished reading, she looked down to see Hannah sleeping peacefully, a small smile on her pale lips. Katie put her book away and lay down, putting her arms around the girl. She kissed her lips softly before allowing herself to relax into sleep.

A BLAST OF cannon fire bursting through the ship awakened them the next morning. Katie was on her feet in an instant. At the foot of the bed, Saida sprang to her feet with a snarl.

"What was that?" Hannah asked, getting up. The ship jarred violently again and Katie grabbed her sword and pistol.

"Cannons. Saida, wait until I know what's happening," Katie ordered. She shoved her hat down over her red hair and rushed out on deck.

What she saw made her freeze. Her crew was nowhere to be seen. Her ship was crawling with strange men. She heard Hannah whimper behind her. She spotted Nate walking among the strange men.

"What the hell's going on here?" she demanded, but Nate and two of the other men aimed pistols at her. She was vastly outnumbered and unprepared. Nate grinned widely.

"Hello, Captain," he said mockingly. "It seems somebody else was very interested in the location of the treasure you're hunting."

"Nate, you traitor! Where's my crew?" she snarled.

"Contained," he answered coolly. "And likely to be executed when the new captain comes aboard."

"Why are you doing this, Nate? You've been my first mate for years!"

"That's right, Katie. I was by your side for years. I loved you, but I believed your little lie about being 'cursed'," he said haughtily. "Then you bring that little blonde wench aboard, start letting her take my place at your side, training her to take over as first mate."

"You're mad!" she snorted. "You and I were only friends! I never knew you felt different. And I haven't been training anyone to take your place as first mate!"

"When we made port in Key West, I heard an old man ranting about a lost treasure. I struck a deal with him, and he's very interested in meeting you."

As the crowd of men stepped aside, Katie heard Hannah

whimpering in fear.

"No, no, no," she whispered, grabbing the back of Katie's shirt.

A tall man came across the deck. He had a scraggly black beard and was grinning, showing broken yellowed teeth.

"Hello, girlie. Miss me?" he asked, looking past Katie.

"Who are you?" Katie demanded, trying to block Hannah from his view.

"C-c—" Hannah stammered.

"Captain Ross," the man replied smugly. "Rightful owner of the treasure you're hunting and of that girl there."

"Impossible!" Katie said, shocked. "You were—"

"Hanged?" Ross provided. "It wasn't the first time someone's tried to kill me and it won't be the last."

He laughed a booming laugh while Katie glared at him. She could feel Hannah trembling behind her. Katie seethed with hatred. This was the man who had hurt Hannah! Who had raped her, killed her family in front of her!

"Now Captain Katie, if you'll just give me my map and the girl, I'll let you and what's left of your ship go."

"That's not what we agreed!" Nate shouted. "I was to be captain of—"

Without looking, Ross pulled out a pistol and shot him. Nate collapsed, a bullet hole in the middle of his forehead.

"Annoying bugger. Now, Captain, my map?"

"What makes you think there is a map?" Katie asked, stalling, trying to come up with a plan.

"That girl," he said, pointing to Hannah. "The only person in the world who knew where my grandfather's treasure was hidden was my brother, that girl's father."

"You mean you're her uncle?" Katie asked in disgust, hating him even more.

"Aye. When her parent's boat tragically sank," he said with a feral grin. "I took her in. I understand she was sold into slavery and money is a language we all understand. I will pay you—"

"You'll never touch her again, you slimy bilge rat!" Katie snarled.

Ross's grin faltered, then returned. He nodded to his men and a dozen or so stepped forward, dragging the two women apart.

Two men held Katie's arms and she struggled against them futilely as Hannah was thrown down onto the deck in front of Ross.

"Well, well, she cleaned you up right pretty, didn't she, girl? Gave you fancy new clothes. Made you think you were actually worth something to somebody."

Ross pulled out another pistol and aimed it at Hannah's head.

"Don't hurt her!" Katie screamed, trying to jerk away from the men that held her.

Ross's grin widened.

"Why is that, Captain Katie? Is she your little bosom buddy? Your sex slave? She's not even that good of a lay. Could it be you actually care for this little whore?"

"I love her," Katie said, closing her eyes. She knew they were both about to die and she wanted Hannah to know the truth, to hear it just once.

"And you, wench, do you love your new captain?" Ross jeered.

"Yes," Hannah whispered, looking to Katie with tears in her blue eyes.

"Then you'll tell me where the treasure is. Or I'll shoot you and your precious captain will watch you die."

Hannah didn't speak, didn't look as though she could. Ross kicked her, sending her across the deck closer to Katie. He leveled his pistol at her again.

"Tell me now, or you're dead. Five...four...three..."

A sudden snarl startled the men holding Katie. She leapt between Hannah and Ross. She heard the gun go off, felt a searing fire in her belly, heard Saida roar, then everything went black.

WHEN KATIE CAME to, she felt drunk. Her head buzzed and her tongue felt thick and furry. She forced her eyes open to see a thatched roof above her. She tried to sit up and groaned as her head swam and pain shot through her belly.

"Easy, Katie," a voice said and Hannah came into view. She wore a white dress and her blonde hair seemed to glow. Katie wondered, for a moment, if this was heaven. But if I were dead, I wouldn't hurt so much, she thought with a grimace.

She tried to speak but her voice was hoarse. Hannah grabbed a cup and Katie held her head up slightly as she pressed the cup to her lips. She drank deeply for several long moments, water that tasted sweet like coconut.

"Where are we?" she asked when she could speak. "What happened?"

"You were shot. We're on a small island south of Key West.

This is Miss Yvonne's little shanty. She saved your life."

"Ross?" Katie remembered and sat up, fighting the dizziness and pain.

"Dead. For certain this time. Saida killed him."

"Saida? Is she—?"

"She's okay. She was shot, too, but she recovered much more quickly than you did."

"How long have I been out?"

"Ten days."

"Ten days! But wait, the curse. I said I loved you."

"Miss Yvonne says the curse is broken. Something about an act of selflessness or true love."

"You're really okay?" Katie asked, touching her face in disbelief. Hannah nodded and kissed her gently.

"You saved my life, Captain. Again."

"Because I love you," Katie said and smiled. "I love you." She could say it now. She never wanted to stop saying it.

"I love you, too," Hannah replied, matching her smile. "Would you like to get up?"

Katie nodded and Hannah helped her up, letting the captain rest some of her weight on her until Katie got her footing. Hannah led her outside, into the sunlight.

Saida lay in the warm white sand, a bandage around one of her back legs. She purred when she saw the captain, but didn't get up. Katie looked to the sea and saw *The Widow* anchored offshore.

"My ship! The crew?"

"They're fine. Everyone is fine. When Saida killed Ross, his crew scattered back to their ship and took off. Marie picked the lock on the brig and the crew found us. I thought you were dead," she said, her voice trembling slightly.

"I'm okay. We're both okay," Katie said, pulling her into an embrace. "And Ross, he's gone for good this time."

Hannah nodded.

"We pushed his body overboard. There's no way he could have survived. Marie shot him for good measure, too," she said, shaking her head slightly.

Katie looked back out at her ship, feeling overwhelmed with emotion.

"They're all still with you, Katie," Hannah said, following her gaze. "Wherever you want to go. They're ready when you are."

Katie took a deep breath of the fresh salt air and looked at the blue-eyed beauty beside her and smiled. Hannah gazed at her in adoration.

"Well, Captain? What do you want to do?"

Katie took her hand and looked to the sea again. "Let's go find your treasure, darling."

Epilogue

SAIDA LAY STRETCHED out on deck, basking in the sunlight. Captain Katherine Tanner stood at the helm of the newly rechristened ship *Genesis*. She had one hand on the wheel, the other around the waist of her First Mate, Hannah Tanner.

"Well," Katie said to her. "Marie and Beth have their castle. Martha opened a restaurant in Port Royal. Joshua bought land to raise horses. Evan and Celeste left to start a family. We've got a whole new crew to break in. Where do you think we should go, my love?"

Hannah thought for a moment. A smile spread across her face.

"I heard of a town to the north that is burning folks accused of witchcraft," she said slowly. "Sounds like they could use some vigilante justice, don't you think?"

Katie looked surprised for a moment, then laughed.

"I couldn't agree more," the captain replied. "Let's do it."

She gave Hannah a kiss and steered the ship toward the northern horizon, toward their next adventure.

About the Author

Bonnie K. Wormsley was raised on a farm about ten miles outside of the small town of Louisville, GA. She started writing at a very young age and her mother still has some short stories she wrote in crayon and marker at just 6 years old. Encouraged by her family and inspired by an over-active imagination, Bonnie never gave up on her writing. In high school she interned at the local newspaper where she quickly discovered a penchant for reporting and developed a new passion in the form of photography.

After some time on her own Bonnie returned to her family's farm in Georgia and lives there now with her mother and two Siamese cats, Chuckee and Mei Mei. She has one son, who she calls her Wormlet. When not writing for professional purposes, she entertains herself and fans by writing fanfiction.

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