

THE COLLECTOR:

*This Time
Forever*

LUCYND
STOREY

Loose Id



THE COLLECTOR 7: THIS TIME FOREVER

Lucynda Storey

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Dedication

To JR, who never stops believing in me, and to my kids, who now understand when Mom gets a wild idea from the most trivial things.

Prologue

“Sir.” Audra Phelan knocked on Andrew Bryden Martin’s door and entered. “I’ve just spoken with a book collector. She’s come across a first-edition Doyle in excellent condition.”

“I don’t need another edition of Holmes, Phelan.”

“It’s not a Holmes. The dinosaur tome, sir, *The Lost World*. I don’t believe you have that one in your library yet.”

He cleared his throat. Today, he seemed more alert, more energetic, more animated. “Use one of the smaller accounts and pay her what she asks plus ten percent.”

“Sir?” The overly generous offer seemed out of line with the man she’d known for the last several decades.

“It doesn’t hurt to have a book collector on our side. You never know what may turn up in their boxes of donated books, or what information may find its way into their store.”

“Yes, sir.” She tried to shake off the surprise. When had Andrew ever done anything on a schedule, according to a plan, by the book? Not since she’d saved him in the jungle years ago.

“Phelan, we’re close. Just a few more pieces.”

Ah, the reason for his excitement. A part of her was happy for his success. He'd been collecting pieces to assemble into a larger object for some time. Together, they'd researched items of magic that had brought lovers together. In all that time, though, with all the objects they'd collected, Andrew had never seen through her devotion to him, to see her heart filled with unrequited love for a man who worshipped a dead woman.

Not that she was jealous, exactly. One just couldn't compete with a memory, and he'd so fixated on his deceased wife that there was little Audra could do but offer her continued support in his quest.

The objects they'd collected so far seemed to buttress his theory. Chloe and Drake reunited over one such token, and even the crystal flacon of Lucrezia Borgia managed to bring happiness to Antonio and Abby.

Andrew, as determined and single-minded as he was about the so-called Love Totem, was sure to find his heart's desire.

"That's good news indeed, sir."

"In fact, I've a lead."

His statement piqued her interest. "On?"

Rolling his wheelchair away from the desk, he headed toward the door. "A sistrum. Purporting to be that of Hathor."

"The Egyptian goddess of music, home, motherhood, joy?"

"It would seem, although the object isn't whole. It may be a part of the totem, or it may be a three-thousand-year-old artifact. The holder hasn't revealed much about the object's history."

"Where did this lead come from?" Through the years they'd tracked many such objects. Only a handful held the power Andrew had become so adept at recognizing.

"The Internet. Fellow by the name of Cutler is seeking the missing piece. He contacted several of the museums with which we are affiliated, looking for a piece of green alabaster

about six inches long.” He paused at the doorway, and Audra pushed the switch which held the door open longer.

Andrew rolled past, and Audra, through years of habit, grabbed the handles of the chair and escorted Andrew into the sunroom for his morning coffee. “Do you find the lead credible?”

“Too early to tell, Phelan. But I would like you to draft an e-mail.”

Chapter One

Skylar Creighton perched on the edge of the upholstered chair in the waiting room, palms sweaty. One by one, the area emptied until she was left alone with the irritating, blaring television. Wiping her hands on her jeans, she glanced at the curved reception desk, where no one remained on duty.

The staff had all but disappeared once five o'clock arrived. Still, she waited. Dr. Redmond wouldn't have stayed late to see her for something unimportant. Sick to her stomach, she couldn't decide if the cause was nerves or something more sinister, the very reason the doctor had insisted she come back to the clinic today.

"In today's news, a three-alarm fire at a local warehouse has been brought under control."

Trying to bring her nerves under control, she tuned out the news. Most of what the anchors had to say was depressing anyway. Who wanted to know about another fatal roadside bombing or a double homicide? Life was too short to fill with sad gunk.

"Miss Creighton," a portly nurse called, "Dr. Redmond is ready for you."

Why didn't the nurse's smile reach her eyes? Skylar swallowed hard against her rising fear. This was not the time to panic. She didn't know what the doctor had found in the myriad of blood tests she'd taken earlier in the day.

Nurse Portly led her down a hallway, turned left, then right and then straight again. For a brief moment, a picture of Peter Pan explaining to Wendy how to get to Never Never Land flashed in her mind. Hadn't the boy who refused to grow up said something like, "Straight on 'til morning?"

He hadn't visited University Hospital with its long halls and disconcerting twists and turns. For God's sake, you'd need a GPS to get out of the place.

The nurse opened a door and ushered Skylar into a small room. Dr. Redmond stood and waved her to a seat. The fifty-something doctor sat when she did and interlocked his fingers.

"There's no easy way to tell you this, Skylar."

Oh, no. Bad news. Her pulse leapt while she held her breath. Tears welled in her eyes and she hadn't even heard what he had to say yet. "Straight out," she gulped, trying to steel herself.

"We ran the tests several times. You're a late stage four."

His sympathetic voice did nothing to ease the terror streaking through her or the tremors making their presence known. "Stage four?" She furrowed her brows in thought. "Cancer? That's bad, isn't it?"

Dr. Redmond nodded.

"But I haven't had any symptoms, any pain, any hint something was wrong!"

"Symptoms are generalities," he gently explained. "Cancer manifests itself in different ways in different people."

She took a deep breath and squeezed her eyes shut, fighting the urge to burst into tears. "How long?"

"Give or take a week or two, six to eight weeks."

Her eyes widened. “Weeks?”

“I’ve got an emergency appointment for you with the oncologist.” Tears welled in the doctor’s eyes. “I’m so sorry, Skylar.”

* * * * *

Tears rimmed Skylar’s eyes as she stared at the legal document in front of her. Just barely thirty and she was making out her last will and testament, leaving her beloved bookstore to the ARC to be run by a stranger who’d probably never set foot inside her shop. The sad fact made her just as sick, maybe even worse, as the news Dr. Redmond had given her. Her whole life had been nothing but one humongous waste.

She scrawled her signature on the appropriate line, folded and then sealed the document, sliding the pages into an envelope.

The oncologist said the only thing that might save her was an invasive surgery. The recovery would take weeks. Weeks she couldn’t squander. Time was too precious now to waste lying in a hospital bed recovering from a surgery that might or might not work.

She’d always thought she’d have time. Time to explore the world from more than the pages of a first-edition Doyle. Time to find a good man, marry, and raise a large family of difficult-to-place, adopted kids.

The luxury of believing there were unlimited years to fulfill her few goals had dissipated with Dr. Redmond’s diagnosis. The short future slipped through her fingers by hours rather than months. The end, if what she’d ferreted out from various medical journals and online sources was to be believed, would be horrendous. Already, she’d felt the stabbing agony slice through her innards. Real or imagined, she couldn’t tell.

Dr. Redmond counseled hospice, as did the oncologist. No, not yet. Skylar would decide how and where she died. Some damn cancer eating away at her would not take those final decisions from her. She balled her hands into fists. What else was there to do except prepare to die?

Well, damn it, she'd die her own way. She pulled the cord on the "open" sign and the light winked out. No point in staying late.

Fall would be in its full glory in a few days. The color change was amazing in October. She'd close up shop and head to Central City. Her most favorite place in the entire world was a cemetery just outside the former ghost town. Aspens grew in abandon, shading headstones worn smooth by wind and weather. Fifty years had passed since the last person had been buried there. Long enough to give the place a graceful serenity. She chortled at the irony.

She'd drive up Clear Creek Canyon, park her car in one of the casino lots, hike the mountain, and end her sojourn at the cemetery to make her final peace with the world. Yes, if one had to die, doing so quietly in an environment one loved was the way to go.

Skylar pulled open the file drawer of her office desk. And just in case the end came more quickly than the doctors predicted and she couldn't handle the pain...she rummaged through the drawer's contents and sighed when her fingers touched cool metal. The heavy gun would take away the suffering.

Next to the desk sat a worn backpack. She'd taken the bag on her travels to Europe a decade ago. Skylar lifted it lovingly and placed the pack on the desktop. Threads caught in the zipper, a tear from a pen, even a frequently reattached strap weren't enough to make her throw this part of her history away. Now the well-traveled knapsack would accompany her on the last, great journey of her life.

She shoved the gun into the bag, along with a bottle of *Patrón Reposado* tequila she'd intended for the tenth anniversary of the shop. Carefully, she packed her lined windbreaker around the bottle and then added aspirin, the oxycodone the oncologist had prescribed, and her favorite first-edition book, *Crossing Oceans, Crossing Swords: The True Adventures of Captain Rand Edward Jamison*. The swashbuckler, through his journal, had stolen her imagination as well as her heart long ago.

Damn! Everything was so frickin' final. The tears she'd held back crested her lids and spilled as fast and hard as a sudden summer thunderstorm. "Goddamnit!" she sobbed. "This isn't supposed to be how my life ends."

Her nose dripped. At least she wasn't bawling her eyes out among the stacks. She reached across the desk to grab a Kleenex when the sound of the bell on the shop door jingled merrily through the store. "I'm closing," she choked out.

"Miss Skylar, help!"

She pushed away from the desk, alarm spreading through her, and hurried to her office door. "William? What's wrong?"

The homeless veteran never asked for her help, although she'd given aid to him frequently.

"He cut me."

At his words, Skylar glanced to where his hands were clutched together over his stomach. A red stain spread from beneath his fingers, the blood seeping through his dirty blue shirt onto the floor, the trail reaching back toward the front door.

Rushing to him, she supported his sagging body. They staggered into her office, Skylar bearing the lion's share of his weight. With a free hand she spun the chair behind the desk and sat him in it. She picked up her cordless phone and punched 9-1-1. "My God, William, who did this to you?"

"The man with the sword. Hid in his umbrella." William gasped the words as blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

"Hang on, William."

"Nine-one-one operator."

"Operator, send an ambulance to Sky's Mile High Books, and hurry. My friend has been injured." She gulped, trying to get her breath. "He's been attacked and is bleeding a lot."

Once more the bells on the shop door rattled, the light and cheerful sound at odds with the rasp of William's breathing.

"I followed your bloody trail in here, you homeless bastard," a deep, menacing voice called. "You're nothing but street scum and trouble."

The owner of the ominous voice sounded as if he meant business. Skylar dropped the phone onto the desk. Maybe if she got William to the storage room, she could get him out the delivery door. Hiding was impossible, not with the way William's blood was dripping. "William?" she whispered, terror gripping her. "What set this guy off?"

"He wants my stone." With a bloody hand, William pulled an oddly shaped piece of polished pale green stone from the inside of his shirt. His breath came in shallow puffs. "But it ain't his."

The weak, barely audible sound of William's voice frightened Skylar more. Blood saturated his shirt and pooled in the stitching of her chair at his hips, soaking his threadbare jeans. There was so much blood. It spilled onto her black slacks and the long purple-and-black plaid flannel shirt she wore over them. *God, please let the ambulance get here in time.* "A piece of green rock?"

"Yes, I want *that* piece of green rock." William's attacker stood in her office doorway. She froze as if in quicksand, wallowing in fear.

Good Lord, he was tall. His head, covered with long blond hair, nearly reached the sill, and his eyes were cloaked by a pair of Ray-Bans. A black duster covered his body and accentuated broad shoulders. The open coat revealed a powerful torso encased in a body-hugging tee-shirt, and his wide, aggressive stance echoed the danger she'd heard in his voice. He tapped an umbrella point against the wooden floor.

"No," William weakly whispered.

In the last thirty seconds, William's color had paled significantly. Skylar placed a hand on his forehead, only to touch clammy skin. Without help he'd definitely die.

“Now, boy,” his assailant grumbled, removing his sunglasses to narrow the stare of his brown eyes on the green shard in William’s hands. “I can make this quick, or I can make your death linger for days.”

The sound of a sword being drawn from its sheath hissed through the room. Dear God! The blade had come from the man’s umbrella, just as William had warned. Well, the evil Mr. Steed was not going to hurt William anymore, not while she had breath left in her cancer-ridden body. She fumbled for the backpack and grasped the shoulder strap to pull it toward her.

The tall man took two strides and, across the desk, pointed the blade at Skylar. The tip touched the hollow between her breasts. “Don’t get any ideas.”

She gulped and froze, afraid to move a millimeter. Without the gun, how could she save William? Where was help? With a sword pointed at her chest, a man at her side like Captain Rand Jamison would be handy. But the heroes of literature didn’t exist in today’s reality, no matter how hard she might wish.

“Whatever you do, don’t let him have it,” William commanded with an unexpected burst of energy. He shoved the stone into her hand.

* * * * *

Captain Rand Edward Jamison peered over the stern of his ship, *Red Sky*. From what he could see, his schooner had escaped serious damage from the Spanish warship. Fortunately, the captain of the man-of-war had been as surprised at the appearance of an enemy vessel as Rand. Today, Rand decided, was not the day to exchange cannon volleys with one of the queen’s enemies. Unfurling the headsail caught the additional wind needed for escape.

In the distance, the warship continued to shrink, evidence of the *Red Sky’s* superior speed. If the wind held, they’d leave trouble on the far side of the horizon.

He straightened and rolled his tense shoulders, hearing the bones of his back pop like cinders in a fire. They would need to find a cove soon and have the carpenter properly assess damage from an earlier foray. He took a deep breath and returned to his men.

Seventy men crewed the *Red Sky*. They all shared an equal hatred for the Spanish. Ill-gotten gain didn't dissuade their piratical hearts, either. Gold motivated more men than politics.

"Mates, we've put the warship behind us, but only your vigilance will keep her that way. Pray keep an eager eye to the sea that we not be caught with our breeches around our ankles." *Again.*

He looked into the face of each of the men assembled. "You worked hard, mates, and we will enjoy our rewards in port soon."

"How soon, Captain?"

Rand stole a glance at the setting sun and mentally calculated the distance they'd traveled as well as their position. "Two days."

"Aye," the sailing master reaffirmed. "As long as the signs stay with us, we'll port in two days at New Providence, having our fill of women, song, and drink."

"Aye," responded an echoing chorus.

"Keep an eye! Don't let your desires lure you to a Siren's destruction." Rand needed his crew alert, not daydreaming about bedding women just yet. "See that you take equal turns in your rest so we may all be prepared in case the Spanish come to call again."

There was grumbling among the men. No one liked the surprise they'd run into during the mid-afternoon hours. "Cook, extra rations. These men worked hard this day and well deserve a reward."

As did he. A bottle of Jamaican rum called to him. The liquor would be welcome company while he chronicled today's mishap. "I'll be in my cabin."

Rand's black boots tapped against the wood as he headed to his study. Over his shoulder, he watched the men go to their assignments.

They'd been lucky. If it hadn't been for the fact they cruised today with their sails fully extended and a good easterly filling them, they might not have had the knots needed to escape. The Spanish warship had several large cannon but was too far away to make effective use of her guns. A direct hit and the *Red Sky* would have been crippled and all her sailors hauled to the nearest port for hanging, *if* they lived that long.

Dangling from a rope was not the way Rand planned to die. He had a promise to keep, a woman to find, and a life to live. Best to get the log completed and catch some sleep. Who knew when the next call to battle would arrive?

With a hand on the latch, Rand pushed open the door to his quarters, only to be met by an audible gasp. He quickly pulled his sword from his scabbard, the rasp slicing through the air.

Chapter Two

A swirling blackness surrounded Skylar. Every direction she looked was nothing but emptiness. Puffs left her mouth to form tiny clouds, and she shivered with a mixture of fear and chilling numbness. The void was cold. “Oh, God,” she moaned. “I’m dead.”

She pinched her upper arm, her fingers grasping pebbled gooseflesh. “Ow.” *Okay, my spirit and my body are still together and I’m not burning, so I’m not in hell. Am I in purgatory? Wasn’t I good enough on earth to deserve heaven?*

The whirling sensation increased. So did the need to hurl from her twisted, heaving stomach the ham croissant she’d eaten for lunch. Spinning around like a child’s top hadn’t been in her plans for the day. Hell, she had the car gassed up and ready to go to Central City for her last vacation, had packed her backpack...

Her backpack...she’d been holding the strap when the world went black. Pulling her arm toward her chest, Skylar saw the bag clutched in her hand. What was happening? Why on earth would her ratty piece of luggage be with her in this in-between place?

The turning changed directions like one of the amusement park rides at Elitches going into reverse. Rotating in an opposite direction paired with a rapid flipping. She squeezed her

eyes shut, trying to lessen the nausea. Faster and faster she fell, or floated, or whatever it was she was doing in purgatory.

Another flip. The whirling slowed. She peeked, then closed her eyes once more. A glimpse of light during one such turn was the first ray to pierce the darkness. Skylar's stomach settled, ceasing its need for violent protest. Cautiously, she reopened her eyes.

The blackness had faded to a muted gray; the air warmed and a semblance of light edged out the dark. A wider expanse of gray morphing into white filled her vision, forcing her to squint against the unexpected brightness

Suddenly, she dropped. She crashed against something substantial, and the backpack flew from her hand. Unexpected pain shot through her side and she cried out. Stars danced behind her once more closed eyelids, and Skylar struggled to breathe. Her elbow hurt and the throb ran up her arm into her shoulder. She inhaled deeply, trying to take calming, deep breaths. The attempt sent another pulse of pain through her body. Had she broken a rib, her elbow, or more?

An oddly familiar scent tickled her nose. Something like the lemon polish she dusted her furniture with.

With the wind knocked from her lungs and the pain in her arm, she found moving difficult but not impossible. Now she had to know where she'd landed.

Slowly, Skylar forced open her eyes, terrified she'd landed in hell. Instead she saw an expanse of brown wood. Wood? She turned her head to the right, looked beneath her palm, then glanced higher. Wide planks of lumber lined the floor. A deeper color of brown planks covered the walls. To the left there was more of the unending sea of wood. A desk against one wall gleamed brightly as it reflected light from a bank of paned windows; more light glinted off pieces of metal secured in the legs.

Curling into a sitting position, she stuffed a fist against her mouth to stifle a cry of pain. Skylar took in the scant pieces of furniture: a table, a desk with a chair, and a bed in a corner

alcove with a sagging mattress. From what she could see, the legs the table were attached to the floor.

Wincing, she pushed to her feet and sought her backpack. The room looked familiar, like a stage set for *Pirates of Penzance*.

Pirates?

She shivered. No way was she on a pirate ship. She was living some sort of dream and just hadn't woken yet.

Still...she stumbled toward the light. Heavy red curtains were tied back with rope at the far ends of the windows to allow sunshine into the otherwise austere and cheerless room. A sharp shaft of light struck the straps of her bag, illuminating its location on the far side of the bed. Relief flooded her, and a heavy, long sigh escaped her lips. If she had the bag, she had some means of survival, no matter where she was.

Those same window dressings allowed her to gaze onto a never-ending vista of undulating blue. Her head bobbed in time with the waves while her feet tilted as if she were on some crazy skateboard as she moved closer to the view. The waves curled into short whitecaps slapping against the boat in a soft hiss. Her stomach twisted in a third direction. "Oh, God."

Skylar grasped the oiled frame holding the windows in place and fought the heaving of her stomach. She had to sit down and find the "sea legs" she'd read about in those swashbuckling stories she loved.

No, wait! She had to figure out where she was and what the hell she was doing on a boat sailing over the sea. Like a drunken sailor she lurched toward a door. She swayed against the undulations until she caught the natural beat and adjusted. Finally, she reached the door. A keyhole faceplate secured the room.

Cautiously, Skylar reached toward the handle. A soft jangle of metal reached her ears. The sound grew louder.

A second swell of panic washed through her. Her heart pounded and sweat soaked the hair at the nape of her neck. She didn't know where she'd landed, but she was pretty sure she didn't belong in this room. The reaction of the compartment's resident would be suspicious at best, violent at worst.

The second possibility concerned her the most. Then the latch on the door moved.

Skylar gasped. Fear knotted her stomach and chills broke out on her arms. She had to hide, but where?

Glancing around the room, she spied one possibility. She sprinted to a curtained corner, praying the red drapes would conceal her. Pain stabbed her arm, her ribs, but she swallowed it back, terrified of making a sound that would give her position away. With a final glance toward the latch, she saw the straps of her backpack and not far from it the green stone William had thrust into her hand. Her heart lodged in her throat. These items lying about in plain sight assured she'd be discovered, but what could she do?

Rand shoved the door hard, harder than he intended. Anxious energy rode his veins like a schooner in full sail. He let the feeling run through him, ready to let the full extent of latent energy loose when the time came to fight. If an intruder thought to hide behind the heavy cedar, he would pay for his foolishness. A glance behind the door hinges revealed nothing.

With his sword leading the way, he advanced, his gaze darting around the room, seeking a place an intruder might conceal himself. At first glance, he saw nothing amiss.

Perhaps the interloper lay on his belly beneath the bed bolted to the floor. He marched to the bed and yanked off the quilt, tossing it in a heap on the floor. Streams of sunlight edged beneath the mattress and frame.

Bloody hell. The light didn't illumine the space completely, which meant he'd have to kneel. A perfect opportunity for an opponent to get the drop on him from behind. Well,

there was nothing to be done about the awkward position except protect his flank by squatting near the wall.

Backing up until he felt the solid wood behind him, Rand slowly dropped. His blood pumped furiously, waiting for the confrontation to come. He held his breath in an attempt to stay calm. With his sword in front of him, he looked beneath the bed.

No intruder hid in the deep shadows. He exhaled slowly with relief and...

Curious.

An oddly shaped bag sat on the floor on the far side of the bed. His breath hitched as he glanced around the room again. Someone had left the satchel. Someone had been in his rooms. Nay, someone was in his rooms. Instinct honed by hard fighting warned him of such. By all that was holy, he'd have the man's head on a pike after he'd hung him from the yardarm.

No one dared violate his cabin, the only decent respite he had from the din of the ship's workings. He advanced. Each controlled, quiet step brought him deeper into his quarters and closer to whoever hid within.

Maneuvering around the furniture without engaging any surprise assailant left only one other reasonable place for a man to hide. Rand studied the floor beginning on the port side of the room, following the line of bundled curtain.

Ah! The tips of a pair of unusual shoes peeked from beneath the starboard drapes. Slowly, he neared, sword forward. He didn't stop until the tip of the blade touched the material. "Give me one reason I shouldn't run you through this moment."

An unearthly quiet settled in the cabin. Rand's breath rasped from his throat, his patience rapidly nearing the end of his endurance. He pushed the point a bit harder against the curtain. "I'll not ask again," he announced in a low, threatening voice.

"I'm unarmed, sir."

The timbre of the enemy's voice jarred a memory, strong enough to rip open a wound to his heart he'd thought healed. Could there be two such individuals with the voice of an angel? Narrow fingers gripped the material, cautiously revealing a soft-looking, pale hand, then an arm. All too familiar.

Too slow.

Rand reached forward and yanked the material from beneath the slim fingers.

A whoosh escaped his lungs, half sigh, half gasp. Dropping his sword arm, he could do nothing but stare. "You're dead."

"Oh, please," the vision implored. "I'm not quite ready to die yet."

The husky voice was the same, but the trespasser before him looked different than his beloved. Small of stature and with short brown hair, piercing green eyes, and full, ripe lips, this person had the appearance of a young man. Yet, dressed differently, would this person look like Emma? The pale skin and vibrant eyes along with her voice drew forth the loneliness he'd buried deep when she passed. "Who are you?"

He sounded weak to his own ears. He forced himself to resume the stature and poise of a commander, to dam the well of memory that had gushed forth. "I'll thank you not to keep me waiting as long as you did before."

"Well, that couldn't be helped."

"Why is that?"

"I...I...was afraid."

"As well you should be, lad --"

"What? I am not a boy!"

Rand's forehead furrowed as he studied the person before him. "Step away from the curtain."

He studied the figure before him. If this was a woman, he could see no evidence to her claim. "You wear the clothing of a man."

Those green eyes narrowed and filled with anger. “Well, I don’t have a fucking dick!”

“No lady of my acquaintance would speak thus.”

“Bingo! Captain Queeg. I don’t know you from Adam, and I’m sure a real lady wouldn’t associate with you.” She sniffed the air. “You haven’t had a bath in ages.”

How dare this slip of a...whatever speak to him so! “I’ll have you prove your claim. But I warn you, should you be other than that which you state, I *will* run you through without a moment’s hesitation.”

For emphasis, he pressed the point of his sword against the lad’s throat, praying the memories evoked would subside. “Do not tarry. I lack patience.”

“So it seems,” came the saucy reply.

Small hands set about the task of unfastening the trousers. “Ah, shit. I have to take off my shoes.”

“You certainly speak as if you were acquainted with the hard-working poor.” He pointed at the plaid colors she wore. “Are ya Scot?”

A leg lifted, a string was pulled and the odd-looking white shoe pushed to the floor. The stranger repeated the action, then stepped out of the breeches. Rand narrowed his gaze. Never had he seen legs so devoid of hair.

“No. American.”

American? Rand had not heard of any colonial vessels in the region.

The shirt remained low over the intruder’s hips. “Continue to disrobe,” he commanded. No matter what sex he discovered, this person had gained entrance to his rooms under suspicious circumstances. Without the modesty clothing provided, he had a better chance of controlling the outcome of the encounter. Women had, in times past, been given the duty of assassination.

With trembling fingers, the buttons were loosed from their holes. With each release, the plaid cloth opened. A final flourish, and the shirt was dropped to the floor with a soft whoosh.

Rand's breath caught in his throat.

Chapter Three

“You *are* female,” Rand said, unable to keep appreciation from his voice. The vision before him was sweetly curved, bounteously so, her breasts and hips concealed by small scraps of red cloth. Her short hair hid nothing from his view.

She placed her hands on her hips and glared at him. “I told you so. Now, will you put that thing down before you hurt someone, namely me?”

Rand lowered the blade slightly. Just because the woman hadn’t lied didn’t mean she lacked the capability of performing the dark deed of assassination. “Who are you?” He met her stare with one of his own and spoke sternly. “And do remember I am captain of the vessel you are on and the occupant of the stateroom you are now in. Your very life is in my hands.”

She hesitated for the briefest moment. “If I tell you who I am, do you think I might put my clothing back on?”

Rand glanced at the garments at her feet. So unusual.

The glimpse took too long. The woman spun away and darted toward the door. With his free hand he yanked her arm and twisted her about.

“Ow!”

"You're lucky I didn't run you through," he snarled, holding her close to him, their arms all that separated their bodies.

Had the circumstances been different, some might take their stance to be that of lovers. He inhaled and smelled a delicate scent of flowers. Bedding such a fresh, feisty woman had a certain appeal, but first she needed to understand he held the power of life or death. "Your actions condemn you, my lady."

She gasped. "Condemn me? I haven't done anything to be condemned for!"

"You tried to run rather than answer my simple question," Rand whispered into her ear, releasing her arm and sheathing his sword. In such close quarters all he would need for protection was the ivory-handled dagger concealed in his belt. "Your actions make you guilty of some act I've yet to discover."

"The only thing I'm guilty of is not knowing how the hell I got here. Look, I don't know who you are, or what sort of pirate game you're playing, but I don't want to be a part of it."

"I do not play at being a pirate, my lady. I *am* a pirate." He leered at her, delighted when he saw her shiver. "Now I must decide what to do with you, as a pirate ship is no place for a woman."

"Do with me?"

Her voice trembled. Good, she should be afraid.

"Fear not. I have no intentions of killing you just yet. There is much I need to discover regarding your purpose for being on my vessel. Then I shall rid myself of you as I see fit."

"As you see fit?" Her voice regained some of the fight she'd displayed earlier.

"Silence, woman! Have you no care for your own life? I and I alone, will determine your fate. It would be best for you to speak to me with respect."

A furious pounding resounded through the room. "Captain! Captain Jamison, sir, you're needed on deck right away."

“Aye, I’ll be there directly,” he shouted over her shoulder toward the door.

“Captain Jamison? Rand Jamison? Captain Rand Edward Jamison?”

He narrowed his eyes and stared at her. His lip curled and he snarled. “Aye. You know of me?”

“Aye,” she whispered, the color fleeing her face. Her body slackened and her eyes widened just before she collapsed.

He stepped forward and caught her as she fell boneless toward the floor. *Dear Mary, mother of God, now what?* He carried her to the bed and laid her upon the quilt. She knew him, yet he knew her not. Peering at her, he tried to find that which stirred his memories. Nothing came to mind.

Frederick Bonnie had interrupted his questioning of the woman. With additional questions and no answers, Rand knew he had to speak with her more. That meant making sure she didn’t leave his room. With a long length of rope he took from his sea chest, he tied the beauty to the corner of the bed. She would go nowhere.

’Twould be better anyway. The men were a superstitious lot, and finding a woman on board after their close call with the Spanish today would bode ill. He picked up her plaid shirt and covered her.

Satisfied, after a tug on her bonds, that she would go nowhere, Rand headed to the main deck.

* * * * *

Skylar woke. A draft of cool air blew across her body, raising gooseflesh on the exposed skin of her arms and legs. That had been a hell of a dream she’d had.

The Captain Rand Edward Jamison of her dream was even better looking than the rough drawings the publisher had inserted into the pirate’s journal. Most of his long black

hair had been tied back behind his neck, but a few strands had escaped their bonds and drifted across his forehead, bringing attention to his brilliant blue eyes.

God, her arms ached and she was cold. She tried to stretch and grab her comforter. The movement sent waves of pain through her injured arm.

Her eyes widened with shock. She'd injured her arm...falling...from some void. Oh, God. It was real. Twisting her head, she looked over her shoulder. Her stomach lurched and a chill of fear stole over her. She was injured, tied up and semi-naked on a pirate ship.

Not just any pirate ship, though. The notorious Captain Rand Edward Jamison had her as his trussed-up prisoner, and at the moment she was unable to do a damn thing about it.

Why had he left? Bits came back. Someone had called him upstairs. Then she'd discovered his identity and fainted. A ferocious pounding started behind her eyes, spread through her head, and intensified in the injured elbow, the rub of rope against her wrists chafing. How could this have possibly happened? Since when had her imagination been strong enough to conjure a pirate and his vessel into being?

Never, that's when.

The doctors hadn't said anything about being delusional or going crazy in any way. They'd just warned her that the pain would become unbearable. Counseled hospice. No, there were no warnings about being certifiable.

She looked around her as best as she could. The same wooden paneling walled the room. When she'd come through the void, her backpack had been with her. If she could find it, get to it, maybe she could retrieve the gun and get out. She shifted sideways, wiggled on the bed toward the edge until she could feel almost nothing beneath her. One more wiggle and she'd fall, fall to the floor feet first, in a better position to determine a means of escape.

Taking a deep breath, she squirmed one more time.

* * * * *

The sharp ringing of swords sang through the air and mingled with the yells and taunts of his men in an unholy concert of noise. The rowdy group of men ebbed and flowed as the swordplay danced across the deck with each parry and thrust. He bulled his way through the throng until he saw the combatants. "Grab Andrew, Frederick!" he yelled. "I've got Johnny." Rand grabbed a tall, surly fighter. "Halt!"

The pirate spun around. The tip of his sword struck Rand's upper arm, tearing his coat. Fury exploded through Rand, and he shoved the man to the deck. How dare any of his crew strike him!

"I've the other un, Cap'n." Frederick Bonnie, the quartermaster, had the man's arm pinned behind his back.

Rand eyed his crew with a narrow gaze. "What is this about?"

"A woman," someone responded.

"A woman?" His thoughts turned to the woman confined in his quarters. Could this be who they fought over?

"Aye," Johnny replied from the deck. Blood dribbled from his mouth as he pushed to his knees. "He called my Charlotte vile names."

"Did you now?" Rand quirked a brow at Andrew.

"I only said, sir, his doxie has had relations with half the crew."

Rand cupped his chin. "I can see where Johnny would take offense at your words, be they truth or not. Where is the dox -- woman in question?"

"Tortuga."

Andrew's response provided an answer to one of Rand's several questions. The matter at hand, though, needed to be dealt with. "The entertainment is over, mates. Stow their weapons and place these men in leg irons. Perhaps it will serve to remind them that no woman is worth such strife."

“Aye, women are good for one thing.” Samuel hitched his pants and jerked his hips back and forth. A general mumbling accompanied by laughter supported his lewd display.

“Aye,” Rand agreed. “And that very thing is why they are bad luck on board. They take your minds from your responsibilities.” He took in the deepening dusk. “Return to your duties, mates. It won’t be long ’til we reach port and you have your fill of womanly delights.”

Bad luck. The crew, notoriously superstitious, would be greatly alarmed to discover a woman on board, and he had one trussed to his bed like a Turkish slave.

He watched a moment as the men disbursed, and then took the stairs below deck. The incident reminded him he’d not lain with a woman in nearly three years, though opportunity assaulted him in every port. He’d been tempted, too. After all, he was but a mortal man. Each time he’d been about to accept a woman’s invitation to indulge in her body, the sweet, loving face of his Emma appeared like an apparition and stopped him before he sullied her memory.

He pulled the iron key from his pocket and opened the door. For a moment, he was speechless. The woman had maneuvered herself into a position wherein she stood with her arms raised above her head, as if she’d been trying to release herself from the bed by slipping her arms over the top of the headboard post. Thankfully, the post was taller than she and he’d returned when he had.

What if she’d managed to regain the bed and try the same trick standing on the mattress? She needed to be taught a lesson. He was the master, she the captive until he deemed otherwise.

He slammed the door shut and locked it. No one was disturbing him for anything less than full-scale battle. Not until he had answers from this wench. He turned from the door and stared.

She’d also turned when he entered the room, and a bright flush made her cheeks a becoming red. In fact, there were many physical assets the woman had that were quite

becoming. A shapely ass and a fine pair of tits chief among them. “Missy, you’d be thinking of escape again. Just where do you think you’d go in the middle of the Caribbean?”

“The Caribbean?”

“Aye. We pirates like the easy pickings and the warm clime of these waters.” He removed his coat and hung it over the back of the chair. “I’m thinking you need a whipping.”

“Touch me and I’ll scream bloody murder.”

“Scream and you will be bloody and murdered. These men haven’t been around a woman in several fortnights. After they’d had their fill of you, dead is exactly what you would be.”

Her face blanched. Good. Perhaps she would be more reasonable. “Now, woman, why are you here?”

“I don’t know.”

Rand frowned. “Really now?” He stepped nearer, close enough to inhale her flowery scent. “How would you explain being in my room, then? When did you sneak aboard?”

The long, pale column of her throat called to Rand to touch, taste, nibble. His hands, fisted at his sides, ached to caress her breasts. Those scraps of material, so tiny they barely concealed her treasures, needed to be gone.

He shoved the thought aside and tried to conjure up his memories of Emma. She wouldn’t come to mind. Frustration filled him, and he wanted to howl like a wild wolf.

“I didn’t sneak onto your tub. I was in my shop when an injured man arrived. He was being chased by an awfully big, frightening man who carried a sword in his umbrella. One moment the man was threatening me with the sword to my throat, and the next I was falling through space until I landed here.”

“This *ship* is not a *tub*. I command the --”

“*Red Sky*. I know. I’ve read all about your exploits with this vessel.”

More questions swirled through Rand's mind. How could she know his history, know his ship...unless she'd been sent to destroy him. Only one man wanted him dead badly enough to send a woman to do the deed -- Owain Cutler, the half-brother who'd tried to usurp Rand's inheritance.

He paced away from her. Part of him wanted to take his pleasure from her in a punishing coupling before he threw her overboard. Kill her before she killed him. He turned and saw her wide-eyed fear, the rapid rise and fall of her breasts. He narrowed his eyes and stared at her, knowing she could see his anger. "I should kill you for attempting to do Cutler's work. The coward sends a woman to do what he cannot accomplish."

"Who's Cutler?"

Her whispered words, filled with fear, struck a sympathetic chord. He forced himself to stay stern. This woman was his intended assassin. "How can you know of my exploits and not know of Cutler? Your lies continue to mount. You deserve the worst sort of death I can devise."

Standing behind her, he pulled her head back by her hair until her delectable neck was exposed. "I shall take my fill of you before I hand you over to the crew. You shall beg for death at my hands."

He nuzzled her neck, tasted the salt of her skin on the side of her throat. His loins stirred to life at her scent, at the feel of her skin beneath his mouth. His fingers trailed up the soft skin of her inner arm. He should throw her overboard. Already bad luck, in the form of a fight over a woman, had been brought aboard. If she were Cutler's woman, more ill was sure to arrive.

He'd send Cutler a lock of her hair, the flimsy undergarments she wore, and be satisfied he'd torn out the heart of his enemy. Indeed, the decision was simple. She'd come to take his life. He would take hers.

Chapter Four

He'd made his decision regarding her fate. Skylar felt it in the rasp of his tongue against her neck, in the erection that grazed her bottom. Rape, then death, condemned as his would-be assassin.

Before she'd landed in this alternate world, she'd been ready to die. Now every moment she had left was priceless. She'd fight Rand Jamison with the last particle of energy she had, if she had to. But her strength was limited, her arm injured from her tumble through the void.

Using her brains would give her time. Time to plan an escape. Time to find a way out of the nightmare she'd landed in. "I swear," she said. "I don't know who Cutler is. Your exploits never mentioned him by name." She gulped. "I can prove it."

"Can you?" he whispered against her neck.

Chills ran up her spine, and she swallowed hard, trying to keep her fear at bay. "My backpack. The bag. It has my favorite book in it. *Crossing Oceans, Crossing Swords: The True Adventures of Captain Rand Edward Jamison.*"

Behind her, she felt his body tense. He had to believe her. He had to check the bag. He just had to! She straightened as much as she could, tied to the bedpost. "Captain Jamison."

She turned her head to look him directly in the eyes. "I can't explain how I got here, but I believe I've traveled through time. In my time, you are a man of action, heroics, and legend. In my time, you've been dead nearly three hundred years."

He took a small step back and shook his head. "Not only does Cutler send a woman to do his dirty deeds, he sends a resident of Bedlam."

"Please," she begged. "Look in the bag. You'll see I'm telling the truth."

Jamison moved closer to the bag, and the air behind her cooled. Skylar shivered at the sudden chill. She should be glad he had left her alone, had stopped what he was doing with his tongue, had removed his hands from her over reactive body.

Instead, with brows furrowed, she tried to figure out why Jamison affected her. Sure, he held her life in his hands, but her life was ending anyway. In this life or time or wherever she was, the dashing pirate she'd read about stunk, had a serious attitude problem, and had some sort of paranoia about a man named Cutler.

There was a time she'd had capture fantasies with Rand Jamison as the star. Fantasies of being lured into sex with the seductive swashbuckler, playing the outraged virginal miss, and then succumbing to his charms led to some creative uses of her toys. But the man in this room? This wasn't the man she'd dreamt of.

Yet she'd seen something in him too when he first pulled her from behind the curtain. A glimpse of something as yet undefined. He'd been her hero through countless nights and pages. Maybe she just wanted to give the benefit of her faith in the heroic man she'd worshiped in literature to the man standing across the bed from her. If only the man before her could truly be the same one she'd come to love and admire and lust after, the one in her book.

She watched, wide-eyed, as he hefted the bag from the floor and tossed it onto the bed. For a brief moment, their gazes met. Skylar could only imagine Jamison saw her terror. If the contents of the bag didn't convince him she came from another time, what could she do?

Carefully, he examined the bag. "Where is the closure?"

"The zipper."

At his furrowed brows, she continued. "There is a metal tab. Pull it away from the end, and the bag will come open."

He did as she instructed. With a satisfied grunt, he finished spreading open the bag. He pulled out the tequila bottle, the book, and the gun. He picked up the pistol, caressed the sleek silver barrel. "What have you here?"

Skylar swallowed, her tongue thick in her mouth. Goosebumps broke out on her arms and legs. Could he understand her reasoning for having a gun in her possession? "My gun," she managed. Her heart beat wildly. What did he think? What would he do with it?

"Now what would you be doing with this odd-looking pistol?" He stared at her, shuffling the weapon from one hand to the other.

No, she decided, he wouldn't understand using a gun as a solution to end the incredible pain she'd been told to expect. A man like him endured torture, deprivation, the elements without quitting, without giving up, without being tempted to leave this world by his own hands.

Rand continued, oblivious to her silence. "Small and light, as well. A perfect weapon for assassination." Spinning, he pointed at the windows and pulled the trigger.

"Nooo!"

Nothing happened.

She exhaled a shaky breath, the tension fleeing her body. Thank God, the safety had been on. "What on earth were you thinking!"

He shrugged, stalked to the windows, then turned to face her. "Your pistol does not work. What good is such a weapon if you cannot shoot it?"

"It's a deterrent."

"A deterrent?"

“If I were to point it at you, you would think twice before coming after me, wouldn’t you?”

He appeared to consider her question, and then a wicked gleam lit his eyes. “Mayhaps, but now that I know the weapon will not fire, it would not deter me from anything.”

Skylar frowned. “You should be pleased the gun didn’t go off. I can imagine such noise would have brought your men running.”

He looked as if he had something to say.

Skylar didn’t let him, just plowed forward as if she hadn’t noticed he was about to offer some sort of retort. “The Captain Rand Edward Jamison I read about wasn’t so reckless. Unless you mean to do as you threatened.

“Well, you should know, *Captain*, that nothing you can do to me will compare to the death fate has waiting for me.” She was on a roll, and frustration and anger loosened her tongue regarding the weapon. She wagged a finger at him. “I packed that bag so I could head to the mountains, have a pleasant day or two doped up on pain pills, and then shoot myself when they no longer worked.”

He tossed the gun onto the mattress and then rounded the bed and came back to her. “Are you saying --”

“I’m dying. Cancer.” Bitterness spewed. At the confusion she saw in his eyes, she attempted to explain further. “A wasting disease, consumption...my body is being eaten alive by this disease...from the inside.”

Tears leaked from her eyes. Damn. She hated crying. For the most part she’d kept the tears at bay, but here, on Captain Rand Jamison’s ship, the inevitable slapped her in the face. Death sucked. She didn’t want to die.

What she wanted was a chance. A chance to live, a chance to love, a chance to see if Rand was the hero she’d fallen in love with eons ago in the pages of a dog-eared book.

Concern filled his eyes. Fuck that, too. She didn't want his commiseration. She just wanted life.

"Don't cry, missy." He reached over her shoulder and untied the rope.

Shoulders and elbow aching, Skylar's arms dropped like lead weights. She swiped at her tears with the back of her hand, then sniffed. "I don't want your pity."

"My wife..."

Wife? A vicious stab of jealousy unexpectedly ripped through her. She struggled to remember as she rolled her shoulders, trying to ease the ache from them. Had *Crossing Swords* mentioned a wife? His wife?

"For some reason, you remind me of her." Rand swallowed hard, his voice choked. "Her torment -- I would have given anything to have taken it in her stead, to stay her agony."

Without warning, he took her in his arms, circling her with unexpected warmth.

The haven of his arms combined with the pain in his voice proved too much for her battered soul. Skylar turned, laying her face against his chest, and allowed the dam holding back her emotions to burst. Quiet tears streamed down her cheeks and soaked his cotton shirt.

His hands stroked her hair in the comforting silence. This was the sort of man she imagined when she read about his swashbuckling adventures. Caring, comforting, compassionate.

They stood there, a small infinity. On a shuddering sigh, she pushed away from him, shocked to see his blue eyes bright with unshed tears. She stroked his cheek with her hand, finding solace in the little comfort she could return him. "For some reason fate brought me to you."

The truth surprised her. Of all the people, all the times, all the places on earth she could have been sent, she'd been sent to him.

He chuckled harshly, covering up the raw emotions she'd seen in his eyes seconds ago. "Aye, fate. A harsh mistress."

Rand grasped the hand on his cheek and lowered it to his side. "She gives and takes when and what she wants, not caring what innocent may be injured. Fate has brought many a man low with her adulterous ways."

The strength of his hand seeped into her fingers. At this moment, despite his posturing and threats, his presence made her feel safe. "Is that why you untied me? Because I've been wronged by fate and you felt sorry for me?"

The laughter he let loose this time was warm. "No."

"Why then?"

"Because I know Cutler did not send you."

Skylar looked up at him, into the blue of his eyes. Again she saw the nameless something in him, the thing announcing this man could be trusted. "And just how do you know that?"

A broad smile spread across his face. "Cutler would not have sent you to kill me with a pistol that did not work."

"Then," she responded, relieved he finally believed her, "You wouldn't mind if I put my clothes back on?"

He walked to the bank of windows, his back to her. "No, missy. Get dressed."

"For the record, my name is Skylar." Staggering from the tilting of the boat, she got to the end of the bed, rounded the corner, and made it to the small pile of clothes littering the floor. Her stomach heaved. She'd never been one for amusement park rides, and this continual shifting back and forth had her seasick.

Leaning over to pick up her shirt, Skylar froze, as if the touch of Midas had turned her into statuary.

There was blood on her hand.

Chapter Five

“God! I’m bleeding.”

Rand raced back to her and grabbed her hand, peering at her palm. “When were you injured?”

Skylar shook her head. She’d fallen hard on the floor, but nothing that warranted blood in such copious amounts. Had the shard of stone William had shoved into her hand sliced her palm? Twisting to look over her shoulder, she spotted the stone nestled in the joint of the floor and wall. It appeared to be stain free. If not the shard, then what had caused the injury?

“We best clear away the blood and see the damage.” He half dragged her toward his desk. Opening a drawer, he pulled out a pistol-shaped parcel wrapped in a dark-stained cloth that he probably used to clean the weapon, and removed a large, old-fashioned pistol. Dropping the weapon on his desk, he gripped the material and advanced.

“You’re not touching me with that filthy rag! It’s unsanitary.” She tried to pull free of his grasp.

Heedless of her words, he tightened his hold and swiped her palm. “I see nothing.” He wiped it again and again until no blood remained on her hand. “Nothing here either.” He turned her hand over and carefully examined its back. “Most curious.”

Indeed. Skylar followed the path of his hand in hers, past his wrist and up his arm. Her eyes widened. How had she missed this before? “It’s you. The blood is yours. Your arm.”

With a swift twist of his head, he looked at his upper arm. “Damn Andrew.”

She squinted. “I don’t understand.”

“I left you to settle an argument on deck. He sliced my jacket, but I didn’t feel the blade go deeper.”

“We need water, hot water.” She went into nurse mode, remembering basic first aid she’d learned long ago in college. Clean the wound, stop the bleeding, prevent infection, and seek professional treatment. The last almost made her laugh. She was probably about as professional as it got on Rand’s ship. “I’ve got to get this thing cleaned up and see how much damage that man’s sword did to you.”

“Nonsense, woman! I’ve suffered far more grievous injuries than this.”

Widening her stance, Skylar fisted her hands against her hips. The motion reminded her she was nearly naked in this man’s presence. As soon as she dealt with him, she’d put her clothes back on whether he liked it or not. “Look, you arrogant, pig-headed ass, I’m standing here practically in my birthday suit, and you are the only link I have with my former life. I don’t want to play nursemaid to you over some infection I could have prevented.” She fixed him with a narrow gaze. “I’m sure in all your adventures at sea you’ve seen wounded men who lost body parts to infection. I *know* how to keep that from happening, so you’re just going to have to swallow your damn pride and do what I say.”

“I can’t bloody hell go up top and demand hot water.”

“Why not?”

With a firm set to his jaw and his eyes narrowed, Rand Jamison looked as if he were going to argue with her further. Instead, he stunned her with his response. “I’ll have to tie you up again. You are a captive assassin, and I know not what mischief you will create.”

She met his cold stare with her own narrowed eyes and called his bluff. “Well, that won’t work now, will it? You yourself said I wasn’t an assassin.” If she had to, she’d out-logic him. “Were you so distrusting of your wife? The one you said I reminded you of?”

His head jerked as if she’d slapped him. His voice dropped lower. “That doesn’t mean I can trust you.” He took a menacing step toward her. “And I shall tie you if need be.”

Holding up her arms, Skylar studied the chafing of her wrists. When she’d twisted to maneuver herself to get off the bed, the ropes had skinned her wrists, leaving several painful red bands. “Fine,” she snapped, dropping her hands to her side. “You want to do this the hard way, well, then so be it.”

If Rand was taken aback by her outburst, he didn’t show it. His stoic stance brooked no resistance. Damn it, there was more than one way to win this argument. “Take off your shirt.”

Captain Rand Edward Jamison sneered. “I’ll not be taking orders from you, missy. I’ll not take orders from a woman!”

Skylar almost laughed. Would have if he hadn’t spoken with such intensity. This was the era for all that chauvinistic crap. An unequal division of men believing they had the superior intellects and women were little more than eye candy.

She puffed a stray lock of hair off her forehead. “Please, Captain Jamison, take off your shirt.”

Once more, she kept her smile to herself, swallowing it back as if it were a tasty morsel. Instead, she countered his resistance with an affront to his masculinity and a bit of reverse psychology. She stepped closer to Rand and spoke in a low, seductive voice. “Do you need help with that?”

He opened his mouth to speak, but she stopped him before he started. “Be careful. The dried blood has probably stuck the material to your skin and injury.” Playing him by pretending to be submissive might help reveal the serious injury she believed he had. She

carefully ran her palm over his bicep. “You wouldn’t want to injure your strong, muscular arm any more than necessary.”

Her statement was responded to with another growl. “I can remove my own clothing.”

With that he unlaced his shirt and whipped it over his head, heedless of her warning. A broad expanse of honed muscle became her vista. Power rippled through his torso, cascading from muscle to muscle until the movement disappeared beneath the narrow waistband of his trousers. A dusting of light hair angled downward to... She gulped.

Seeing Rand half-naked was better than what her imagination had supplied while reading his journal. He’d detailed some of his sexual exploits in the book. Based on what she saw, if a quarter of what she’d read was true, he had the attributes to carry out his bedroom adventures. Maybe, if she could get him to clean up --

He bunched the shirt in his hands.

The simple movement brought her attention back to him. Skylar’s gaze roamed from his broad, long-fingered hands and up his powerful arms until she spotted the injury. Just as she’d feared, the forceful removal of the shirt had reopened the gash. “You’re bleeding again, damn it,” she whispered, awestruck by the male specimen before her.

“Not for long.” He took the shirt and pushed it against the wound.

Skylar gasped and tremors shook her hands. Blood flowed freely down his arm. “Are you insane? Do you have a death wish?”

She grabbed the bottle of tequila off the bed. Trembling, she twisted the top and opened the bottle. The sharp scent of the alcohol drifted into the room. “Get that filthy rag off your wound.”

“Woman, you try my patience with your bossiness.”

“I try your patience?” She tossed the lid onto the bed. “Look, you can act all big and bad if you want, but I know what I know. And if you don’t get that cut cleaned out, Cutler will win. You’ll die from a rather nasty infection.”

That seemed to snap him to reality. “What magic do you have that will prevent my succumbing to an infection?” He eyed her warily, pulling the shirt from the wound.

Time for a bit of diplomacy. “Please, Rand, sit on the bed and hold out your arm.”

Rand didn’t argue. The mattress sagged under his weight.

“This is going to sting.” Skylar lifted his arm and poured the costly tequila over it. Under her breath she muttered, “I hope you’re worth it.”

He jumped up, knocking her back a step. “Bloody hell, woman!”

“I warned you it would sting. Now sit back down and I’ll finish up.” She placed her hand against his firm chest and gave a tiny push. Rand’s hand covered hers, and for a moment Skylar couldn’t breathe. Her heart beat wildly and her knees were about to buckle. Rand’s injured arm wrapped around her waist, and he pulled her down on top of him, tumbling them over.

Beneath her, she felt Rand’s burgeoning erection push against her exposed skin. Her body responded with a quick rush of moisture between her thighs. Oh, no! She was not giving in to the irrational flood of hormones being in Rand’s arms created.

Pushing away from him, she scrambled to her feet, breathless. “We’ve got to bind that,” she gasped, her gaze darting around the room, looking for some bit of cloth. “We need something clean.”

“Why do you run from me, missy?”

His low, sexy voice stopped her search as surely as if he’d shot her with her own gun. Why did she run from her reaction to the man? Why was she so afraid to grab the passion of a few moments in his bed? *Because you want more than a few moments. You want whatever time you have left.*

The thought jarred her into action. No one knew how much time was left them, or anyone else. She wanted to win this man’s heart, as well as his body, if she had to be stuck on a pirate ship a couple centuries from her own time. With a sprint around the end of the bed,

she picked up her pants and ripped the seam of the leg apart, the sound of the tear grating to her ears in the quiet room. Returning to Rand, who had resumed a sitting position, she lifted his arm and wrapped the black material around his upper arm. "There."

He placed a hand over hers. Questions filled his eyes, along with an underpinning of sadness. "You cannot deny the attraction."

No, she couldn't. But she would. Despite the way her body reacted to his nearness, despite the love she'd born for a historical character for years, despite how much she wanted to make love to this man, she was in this for more than a single romp on the feather mattress he had lining his bed.

She pulled her hand away from his and turned. Until she could win his heart, it would be best he not see hers plastered all over her face.

His heart leapt like a sailfish when their hands touched. The disconcerting awareness only served to feed his curiosity about the vixen in his room. How she aroused him with her feisty manners flummoxed him. Her body enticed him, and her sultry voice stroked a chord of yearning he'd long ago suppressed. There was magic in her touch, a mysterious air that called to him.

Rand wasn't a particularly religious man; educated men gave up the pretenses of religion in favor of the enlightened philosophers. Religion was for those easily manipulated.

But faith. Now that was something else entirely.

Faith was the hope of things unseen, and he'd had faith in Emma's last words. He'd been sailing the seas the past five years, trying to find a way back to her. In his travels, he'd seen other things, magical things, spiritual things, things that defied the logic of science.

This woman in his room. She could be yet another of those strange occurrences he'd experienced on the high seas. Mayhaps she held a part of the puzzle that would return him to Emma.

She kept her back to him, as if her stance would stop him from discerning her secrets. He'd force her to reveal how she came to be on his ship. He stood, and she walked away, toward the windows, as if she knew he would question her further.

"Missy --"

"I have a name. I expect you to use it."

Wherever she was from, she certainly lacked civil manners. "I'm the commander of this ship, *missy*, and I have had men punished for less disrespect in their tone toward me," he threatened, hoping she wasn't aware of the true chain of command on a pirate ship.

"*That* --" She whirled. "-- doesn't surprise me in the least. To get respect, you have to earn it, and Captain Jamison, you have not wowed me with anything I'd want to respect."

He flexed his hands and took a deep breath, trying to control the retort ready to fly from his lips. Rand didn't understand her terminology, but her terse tone told him plenty. Although he was not ready to concede, perhaps the woman had a point. The bulk of their interactions had not been heartening. He'd accused her of being sent by Cutler to kill him, ordered her about like an unschooled page, acted less than a man when he yowled his pain at the pouring of the tequila on his wound.

Changing tactics in battle to assure the outcome was a tried and true alternative. To discover more about this woman and what she knew of him and his future, he needed to use honey. The honey that had brought countless young bees to him before Emma. The honey he'd replaced with vinegar after.

"We may have gotten off on the wrong foot." He put aside the rough frankness of the Jamison pirate and called upon the culture of the Jamison lord. He went to the window and stood next to her. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am indeed Captain Rand Edward Jamison, and captain the *Red Sky*." Tucking his injured arm against his waist, he bowed, then straightened. "I was quite disconcerted to find someone in my rooms, a woman no less. And one with a tale such as yours...well, my suspicious naturally got the best of me."

She turned to face him, chuckling softly. “Now *there’s* an understatement.”

Rand couldn’t breathe. His heart hammered through his veins, and his blood pounded against his temple like a racehorse anxious to run its course. He could barely make himself move toward the desk, but he forced himself to action. There were too many similarities to discount. Perhaps if he showed her that which he hadn’t looked upon without melancholy for some time, they could puzzle out her mystery together. “I...I think you will be interested in what I need to show you.”

The wooden drawer opened with a groan. Rarely did he breach its confines, the memories contained still raw despite the passage of time. Outwardly, he presented the image of a man recovered from loss. Inwardly, the death of Emma had left a hole nothing as yet had filled. Rather than drown his pain in a bottle of rum every time he saw her likeness, he’d put her portrait away, unwilling to destroy those memories completely. Someday, mayhaps, he could look upon her image and not succumb to the weighty sorrow that accompanied those memories.

With care, his fingers reached into the drawer and grasped the silver locket within. Fine filigree adorned the outside, but what Rand valued was inside. He gazed at the heart-shaped locket long moments before flicking the release and allowing the locket to open. And, as before, the action cracked open the emotions of love, joy, sorrow, and loss he experienced every time he ventured to look.

Even now, Emma still squeezed his heart, brought memories of sun-laden picnics on the green hills to mind as if he’d journeyed with her just yesterday; balls where her eyes glittered along with her jewels as they danced in their finery; carriage rides in the park. Emma.

A discreet cough forced him to look up and away from his remembrances. He swallowed the lump in his throat, hated the emotions he knew he couldn’t conceal in his voice. “My wife.”

The woman took the locket he extended. He watched her face as she studied the portrait. Surprise danced in her widening eyes. She glanced up at him, caught him staring, but he didn't break his gaze from her.

"She's beautiful."

"Aye." On legs as stiff as those of a peg-leg, he neared her. Had all the searching he'd done been to bring him to this moment, with this seeming stranger who claimed to be from another time? "You laugh like her."

"I do?"

Of course the woman would be surprised. How could she know what Emma had sounded like? "Aye," he whispered. "If you were appropriately dressed, had your hair arranged in a similar fashion, the resemblance would be uncanny."

She stumbled backward, her face pale, and plopped onto the bed. "From the time I was a little girl, I loved pirating stories. At college, I did a paper on pirates and discovered a copy of your journal. I jumped at the chance to buy a first-edition copy of *Crossing Swords* when the book crossed my path. I *hocked* my shop, spent years paying off the loan, to have that copy."

As if her confession were too much, she leapt to her feet.

"Look, missy, I --"

Her glare stopped him. "Miss Skylar," he continued. "When my Emma passed on, her final words to me were that we would find one another again. You could --"

"Be her." She shook her head. "This whole thing is weird, I admit. I feel like I know you and that despite your actions you are an honorable, trustworthy man. I don't have a shred of proof for any of this, just a feeling."

Rand understood her sentiments. He echoed her feelings, and that unsettled him. He tried to weigh the facts. She'd shown up in his cabin. She sounded like Emma. She bore similar physical characteristics. But this woman also had strangely colored apparel, odd

fastenings, unladylike speech, a remarkably lightweight weapon, and as bizarre a tale as any he'd heard in the taverns of the ports they'd anchored in.

"Look, Rand. It's been a pretty rough day. I want to take a look at your bandage, and then if you don't mind, I'd really love something to eat."

He glanced out the window. The day's light faded, merging the ocean with the sky. With a nod of his head, he stepped forward. Her fingers danced up his arm, a light touch that made him hunger for more than just sustenance.

He had to know; he had to taste her ripe red lips. Emma's kiss had never lied, always told him more than mere words ever could. Faster than a surprise squall, he pressed his mouth against hers.

Chapter Six

Skylar melted. The glide of his lips over hers took the little strength she had right out of her bones. Her legs could no more support her than a bowl of chocolate pudding could. The thought that she should fight this advance flitted through her mind and just as quickly disappeared. She'd wondered about his kisses for nearly forever. What did she have to lose? She'd already questioned her sanity and grudgingly acknowledged her cancer was destroying what was left of her life.

Rather than push away, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. Tiny tremors raced through her, quickening her body for lovemaking. Incredible. Her imagination hadn't come close to anything like this. She released his neck and cupped his cheeks with her palms, forcing the kiss to an end. "I don't know how you did that," she gasped, "but that was one hell of a kiss. Do you kiss all your partners like that?"

"Aye." He gripped her hands within his and lowered them to his heart. "I mean, nay, not all my partners elicit such a response from me. But, aye, that was a powerful kiss."

Wonder of wonders, his voice was as breathless as hers and he was off-kilter too. He was as affected by the kiss as she was. Maybe with this infant sexual connection she could

tell him everything. She risked a glance and inwardly rejoiced at the latest erection he sported, contained behind his tight breeches.

“Rand,” she began cautiously. “I have a lot to tell you.”

He nodded, his gaze never leaving her face. “Shall we sit?”

Skylar laughed. “Somehow I don’t think sitting is what’s on your mind.” This time she blatantly looked at the thickness in his groin, then glanced at his face, delighted to see a flush on his cheeks.

“Madam, you question my honest intentions?”

She took in the quirked eyebrow, the hint of mirth in his eyes, and the smallest upward curve of his lips. “You forget, Rand, I’ve read your biography.”

His eyes widened. “Indeed, I have. Where would this weighty tome be that would tell you of my adventures?”

“In my pack.” She turned, stretching toward the bag. Grasping a strap, she dragged the bag toward her and reached in, feeling for the book. Triumphant, she pulled out the volume. “Here it is. *Crossing Oceans, Crossing Swords: The True Adventures of Captain Rand Edward Jamison*.” She took a deep breath and for a moment wondered if she should tell him the truth. Opening her mouth to speak, a tiny voice in her conscious reminded her of a previous decision. She wasn’t supposed to wear her heart on her sleeve, and confessing she fell in love with him in the pages of this book...well, wouldn’t that be the same? “I learned a lot about you in these pages, Rand.”

“Such as?”

His softly spoken question held the curiosity Skylar believed she would have felt if their positions had been reversed. “Your first ship wasn’t *Red Sky* but rather the *H.M.S. Restoration*. You were asked to captain the ship by King William himself. According to the journal, you were set upon by another of His Majesty’s ships, which started you on your criminal journey. *Red Sky* will not be your last ship, either. You will --”

“Stop.”

The single word, uttered with quiet control, blocked the remainder of her recitation. She shook her head, trying to gauge where she’d made an error. “Am I wrong, Rand? Is the book wrong?”

“Nay. I did command one of the king’s own, and she was a beaut, a power to be reckoned with. The king had ordered us to track down a Spanish galleon that had, in its turn, pirated from another of His Majesty’s vessels. We handily defeated the crew and recovered the property and set about to return the wealth to the king. Five days from our success, we were set upon by none other than Captain Owain Cutler. At the time, he had no wish to destroy me completely. He only wanted to appear the heroic victor in the king’s eyes and be rewarded with Jamison lands. So he set me and my men adrift in a pair of longboats without provisions. His is the only English ship I’ve wanted to take. We’ve done naught but attack the enemies of the crown.”

Skylar’s stomach twisted. The book hadn’t given up this sort of detail. “What happened? How did you escape?”

“Never mind that now. The basics you have shared are accurate to a degree.”

“But,” she argued, “this is *your* journal. You don’t mention Cutler or these details. Why?”

“I’ve not kept a journal other than my captain’s log since Emma.”

Skylar opened *Crossing Swords*. The journal had been printed in 1728. “Rand, what year is this?”

“’Tis the year of our Lord, seventeen hundred and four.”

“You must have used your logs to create your memoir.” Excitement coursed through her veins. His simple statement confirmed her suspicions. She had indeed traveled back in time. But to what purpose?

God had a cruel sense of humor, releasing cancer upon her body and then sending her back in time to the one man she believed she loved. Had Rand's history been foretold in the pages she held in her hands? Was she responsible for saving his life in some way? Or had the Almighty condemned them to relive his history, unable to change a single outcome?

"Rand, this book --" She closed the cover and placed her hand on it reverently. "-- while perhaps lacking detail in certain areas, does reveal information that may be of use to you now. Perhaps you wrote it after you gave up the sea; perhaps you wrote hints, clues, as to what Cutler did -- er, will do -- that only you understand."

Sadness filled his eyes. "Do you think it wise, to know one's future?"

"I think it's foolishness to not use every weapon we have at our disposal when the time comes for deploying."

"You speak as if you know we head to battle."

"I know your future, Rand. It's in these pages. They prove I'm from the future."

"Aye."

His noncommittal voice irritated her. "Don't you care that I am in a place I don't belong?"

"Does it make a whit of difference? You are here, and here you will stay until the Almighty deigns to return you."

Skylar placed the book on the bed and popped to her feet. "It matters to me, damn it. Things like traveling back in time don't happen by accident."

"Aye. There is a purpose for your visit."

She crossed the room to confront him. With hands on hips she continued her argument. "I think that book --" She pointed toward the bed. "-- is the reason I'm here. I'm supposed to do something to help you."

He laughed, and the sound sent a shiver of apprehension through her.

“I’m not a particularly religious man, but I do know your visitation to my vessel is a portent. Of good or evil, I cannot yet say.” His gaze pierced her. “I see no reason to read about a future I’ve not yet experienced, one that has yet to be written. It’s enough for me to believe you are from another time.”

“You are the most thick-headed, frustrating man I’ve met! Why don’t you want to know what you yourself wrote?”

She fingered her hair, acutely aware of its short, masculine length. The question of why she’d been sent to him persisted, as did the question of why he didn’t want to know his own story.

“Mayhaps, Miss Skylar, it’s because the future is not to be known, has not been written. Is it not possible that the words in that book may change because our actions do? And that the whole history of the world may change because of some small event that did or did not come to pass? Not knowing what your book says will let the fabric of time weave its own story, not one falsely created.”

God, she had to get through to him. The book contained information about attacks, storms, significant events in his life. Forewarned was forearmed. How did she make him understand that her knowledge was power, the power to save his life and perhaps that of others, people who might be responsible for significant advances in politics, science, medicine, music? “Did it occur to you, Rand, that perhaps I was sent here, by the Almighty, to change the outcome of *your* history?”

He nodded and then took a half-dozen large steps toward the bank of windows, his back ramrod straight to her. Body language told her their conversation was over, at least for the moment. Fine. She wouldn’t say any more. She picked up her purple-and-black plaid shirt, shoved her arms through the sleeves, then buttoned the material.

Despite the numerous times she’d read his journal, caressed the leather cover, fingered the fine pages, she opened the book, intent on studying what he had to say about 1704. He

might not want to know, but she was going to memorize the smallest minutia he'd written in case some small fact proved critical in their time together.

Silence settled about the room like a buried Egyptian tomb. Stalemate.

Rand kept his back to Skylar. Captaining a vessel of notorious repute meant maintaining an air of authority, imprisoning any hint of weakness. And he was weak where this woman was concerned. He already knew it from the one single kiss he'd stolen. He pulled his shoulders further back and stared out the windows.

Black speckled with diamonds merged sky and sea. No sound drifted through the windows other than that of the ocean waves rising and falling, a soft slap against the sloop. Even topside the deck was quiet, as if the day's events had drained the crew of life. What would they do if they discovered a woman aboard? Nay, he knew that answer; the whole of the crew were naught but horny dogs. But how would they feel, react, if a departed loved one had returned to them in the flesh?

Stars above, he wanted to take her in his arms, feel her soft body beneath his hard one, press his flesh into her and give way to the passion Emma had always ignited in him. Pleasure her until all her thought had been obliterated and all she could do was feel him, then cry out his name with ecstasy as Emma had done whenever they joined.

Only this wasn't Emma. Not precisely.

Temptation taunted him to turn toward her, count the differences between the two women. But he couldn't discount the way she returned his kiss, the comfortable familiarity of a mouth that he had known all too well, the feel of her in his arms. The ache of longing for a woman, *this* woman, returned with the strength of a gale-force wind. Emma had been the only woman to stir him beyond primitive needs.

She had to be Emma.

But she wasn't. Her name was Skylar.

He could see in her eyes she accepted the theory that she might be his Emma returned, but he also saw in them her disbelief.

Rand had to admit, the idea was farfetched, no matter what Emma had whispered on her deathbed.

She was not Emma, but oh, how he wanted her to be.

Better she not see how he was affected. Better he remain austere, aloof, and alone. Better he get her off his ship as soon as possible and put her away from him. She was too like his Emma, and giving in to her womanly ways would jeopardize his return to Queen Anne with the riches Cutler had stolen.

He turned from the window, stalked to the stateroom door, and headed topside, but not before he locked the door once more.

Chapter Seven

Skylar fumed. How dare he lock her up again? Futilely, she pounded against the heavy door, knowing the effort wasted her energy. Nonetheless, it felt good to hit something. Damn the man, he'd left her locked in his cabin again, this time in the dark.

She eased her way toward the windows, allowing her eyes time to recognize the cabin's features with each step she took. Outdoors, starlight glinted off the ocean. The view somewhat calmed her ire. Rand could trust her; he didn't need to lock her away like some prisoner.

Prisoner. She wanted to laugh and sob simultaneously. She had to face the truth. She *was* a prisoner. In time. In this room. In her body.

The last disturbed her the most. She could get used to the 1700s if she had to. She'd eventually convince Rand to grant her freedom of movement about the ship. But her body? Cancer betrayed her body to time. Maybe traveling backwards had added the proverbial hour to her life. Maybe it hadn't. Only God knew, and she wasn't about to hand over the remaining control she had of her life to a heartless deity.

The wind picked up, billowing the curtains into the room like giant, hooped gowns. Skylar stepped closer and let the wind caress the hot anger from her face. Distant sounds

came to her, the voices of men, the snapping of sails in a breeze that grew stronger. Clouds chased the stars from the sky, the light winking out as if a child had extinguished birthday candles. *Make a wish, Skylar.*

I wish to live. Though the thought was futile, she wished for it anyway. Scooting closer to the sill, she hefted herself onto the wood and pulled her bare knees up to her chest, tucking them beneath her shirt. She stared at the ocean as Rand's ship raced through the night, propelled by the strong gusts.

The waves lifted the vessel higher, rocked it harder. The spray scented the air with a salty tang, made the humid air more so. The temperature dropped, and Skylar shivered. The bulk of Rand's exploits had been in the hot Caribbean, but the air was definitely cooler than she'd expected.

The reason struck her with uncommon force.

Hurricane season. Hadn't she read or heard somewhere that hurricane season started at the beginning of summer and lasted through November? If her memory was correct, they were in the middle of the tumultuous season at sea right now.

The wind continued blowing, but the intensity didn't change. Fat drops of rain fell as if in slow motion. Above her, the sounds of the men diminished. Was it because of the storm or because they'd gone to seek shelter?

The rain came harder, pelting the four windows open to the sea, striking anything in their wake. Grasping a sturdy frame, Skylar got to her knees and stretched to grab the window and pull it shut. No use letting the rain ruin the curtains or the few pieces of decent furniture in the room. Besides, cleaning the mildew out of the heavy material flapping like an injured bird would be a horrendous, smelly job. She wrinkled her nose at the thought.

I'm too damn short. She slid off the wooden frame and then climbed back onto the sill in an effort to better position herself to grasp the window. An odd sense of weightlessness assailed her, and she realized there wasn't much between her and the churning ocean below.

Holding tightly to the frame, she stretched toward the joint, grasping the edge of the window with her fingertips. Pain ripped through her arm, and she let go of the window as if she'd been burned. Jostled by the undulating sea, for a moment Skylar's balance was off kilter, and panic rose up her throat, tempting her to scream. The ship's tilt settled, but it wouldn't stay that way long. Her hand fumbled to the side, trying to find the safety her fingers had just vacated.

The ship rolled. Then rocked.

Her hand grasped the frame.

The panic eased but didn't disappear. *Don't look down.* Easier said than done, but she kept focused on the goal and beat the temptation into submission.

Taking tiny steps, she edged closer to the joint, never losing sight of the window, never forgetting her goal to save the few valuable items in this room. Rand's memories. Rand's belongings. Rand's wife.

Rain pounded at her, encumbering her efforts. Each drop struck her clothing and exposed skin as if the pellets were push-pins. Time crawled, but the wind rushed around the end of the ship with an intense roar. The tails of her shirt whipped about her thighs, a wet slap snapping through room. Slowly, she reached the window and pulled the frame toward her until she could close and latch the thin iron bar attached to the bottom of the sill and hook it into an eye protruding from the window frame. Thank God there were only two sets to worry about.

Then she looked down.

The ocean heaved in the tumult of the wind. Seasickness returned with a vengeance. Scrambling from her perch, she lurched toward the next open window. Her stomach contracted, wrenched, but nothing came up. Great -- dry heaves. With both hands, Skylar clung to the closed window. Her head hung through the opening, the wind and rain playing

tag with the short strands of her hair. She tried to force her gaze away from the black swirl she felt more than she saw.

For a crazy moment she thought of the sink drain in her kitchen, the swirl of the water sucking everything into a dark unknown.

Iron clinked, a sound muted by the strength of the storm. Thankfully, the winds hadn't intensified, but that didn't mean anything if they were in a tropical storm. Hurricane Andrew flattened Homestead, Florida; Katrina wiped out New Orleans and Biloxi. They started as tropical storms, then grew to gargantuan, destructive proportions.

She recalled George Clooney and Mark Wahlberg in *The Perfect Storm*. Weather systems collided with risk-taking fishermen whose ship eventually overturned. They *knew* they were going to die. She was too.

Skylar gripped the wood tighter, felt the muscles of her fingers tense and cut off some blood flow. She couldn't let go, wouldn't let go.

"Here, now, what do you think you're doin'?"

Rand's voice sliced through the darkness crowding the room, the fear crowding her heart. She tried to loosen her grip, but her hands wouldn't obey her mind. His warm breath caressed the back of her neck, made her all too aware of his nearness, his pure male heat, his haven of safety.

His large hand descended on hers, covering it like a pastor covered communion elements. Patiently, his fingers worked their way between hers and eased her hold on the window. Panic threatened to blossom once more; she was too close to nothing but air and sea, but his hand holding hers didn't allow for such a cowardly emotion.

She sucked in a breath, tried to control her breathing, but the calm she reached for wouldn't come, only left her gasping as if she'd run in a cross country meet. "I'm trying to close the windows," she said, afraid to turn and look at Rand, afraid to let him see her worries and fears.

He leaned over her, until he was like a protective shell above her, and then, with her hand in his, together they reached out and seized the edge of the window, her fingers slipping from his and grabbing the wood far short of where Rand's hand gripped the frame and pulled it toward them. He took her hand again and guided her through the motions of locking the window.

"There, no more rain to soak you."

His words lacked condemnation, only stated the obvious. On a shuddering breath she turned. The trousers he wore were plastered against his body, outlining every sinuous ridge of muscle.

"The rain did soak you."

He laughed, and the deep, rich sound chased the remaining gloom from her mind. "A pirate's bath, milady."

"You'll catch cold wearing wet clothes. You must remove your pants immediately."

A wicked, teasing gleam lit his eyes. "Our situations," he murmured, "are remarkably similar. I insist you do likewise."

It was true. Her shirt was soaked from her ill-fated attempt to close the cabin's windows. A fresh gust of wind snapped the curtain on the far side of the room, drawing her attention away from his wet hair, blue eyes, and full lips. "What about the other windows?"

In answer, he swiftly moved to the other set of windows and made short work of shutting them. The noise faded, the snapping sails no longer heard. He returned to stand in front of her, legs spread, arms crossed in a defiant gesture.

Was he taunting her or tempting her? His wet hair curled in dark strands against his brow. Skylar took a deep breath and realized she no longer smelled the odor of a man who'd worked in the hot, humid environment. Indeed, his "pirate's bath" had removed the scent she'd objected to earlier, left him smelling fresh.

She boldly stepped forward and with trembling hands reached for the buttons of his trousers. This *was* what she wanted, right? A chance to be with Rand the way men and women were meant to be together. A chance to know what making love to the sexy pirate was like. A chance to win his heart.

His pants fell to the floor, and he stepped out of them as if he were avoiding stepping on a coil of rope on the deck. Her hands flattened against his muscled torso and her heart pounded wildly. Tentatively, she let her fingers trace the contours of his chest, let them wander to his navel, then lower.

A groan filled the quiet of the dark room. Rand's hands gripped the facing of her shirt, his fingers slowly unbuttoning each closure. The separation of the material let cool air caress her damp skin. He shoved the sleeves off her arms until she once more stood before him in her skimpy undergarments.

"You are a delight to behold, Skylar."

She gave him a wan smile. "I like the way you say my name." Her insides fluttered, and she suddenly realized she was nervous. A shiver ran through her body, and the tiny hairs on her arms stood on end. She could keep her heart locked behind the wall of her chest, but she couldn't deny the way her body reacted to this seduction.

"You're cold." He enfolded her in his strong arms.

The heat of his body warmed her, but it wasn't until his lips nibbled the tender skin beneath her earlobe that Skylar knew there was no turning back. Not because he was forcing himself on her, not because she was succumbing to hormones, not because she knew the days of her life had been numbered, but simply because she wanted to make love to him.

A soft moan escaped her lips. Her heart pounded in anticipation. *Nothing to lose, nothing to lose* matched each beat that pumped her blood. She tilted her head to give Rand better access to her neck and splayed her hands across his chest, toying with his nipples.

Without warning, Rand swept her up in his arms and headed toward the bed in the alcove. "Rand, put me down," she plead, but her voice lacked conviction. Being hauled off by a pirate, *this* pirate, had been a fantasy for far too long.

He did. He laid her on the bed like a prized jewel. He stood looking at her a long time, the heat in his eyes igniting her own flames of passion higher. Anticipation danced on her skin, and her nipples hardened. Just as she was about to remove her bra, Rand settled on the bed next to her, grasped her around the waist, and pulled her against him.

Everything about his body contrasted with hers. His height complemented her shorter stature. His hard muscles pressed against her softer ones. And when he picked up her hand and kissed the palm, she was acutely aware of how tiny her fingers were against his. But one thing they shared -- heat.

Rand's body seared hers. His hand slipped beneath the shoulder strap of her bra and slid the elastic down her arm, freeing her breast. Her nipple hardened more, both from the cool air in the room and the desire flooding her.

"Your breast is beautiful, as you are." Then he took her in his mouth.

"Ohh. God, that feels so good." She cupped his head with her hand, holding him tightly against her, and then rolled onto her back, spreading her legs in invitation.

A moment later, Rand released her nipple, then straddled her body. He kept his weight on his arms as if he were doing push-ups.

"Don't," she whispered. "Lie against me. I don't want you to reinjure your arm."

He eased down, his hair teasing her cheek, his lips against her shoulder. His soft laugh tickled her skin. "You worry too much, my sweet."

"Maybe so, but I'd be honored if you would humor me."

Rand shifted, placing the bulk of his weight on his good arm.

His injured arm he now used to explore her oversensitive body. Those large fingers swept over the swell of her breast, stopped to tease her nipple, traced the curvature of her

waist and hips. Everywhere those fingers went, her desire built. When his fingers reached her clit, circling the tiny bud and teasing it to aching hardness, Skylar thought she'd die from the heat and need he'd brought her.

That was before those large fingers entered her. First one, then another, and then a third. Nothing she'd experienced to date had made her feel so full. She tilted her hips to bring him in deeper. "More, please," she begged, not caring how wanton she sounded.

"Aye. You seem ready for more."

He moved those fingers deeper, faster. Her juices made a slurping, sucking sound in the room, and for a second she wondered if the sound would be the same when he finally took her with his cock.

Tremors started, tiny at first, building in intensity, like the waves had before the storm struck. She was sucked into the whirlwind of sensation Rand created, needing more, more, more, like a crack addict needed his smoke. Each stroke of his fingers within her body took her closer to the pinnacle of orgasm.

Suddenly, the sound of an explosion tore through the room.

Chapter Eight

Rand leapt from the bed, grabbed his breeches, and jammed his feet through the legs. Damn and double damn. A woman on board was a curse, to be sure. If the men were to find out, both their lives would be forfeit. "I've extra clothing in the chest. Do not leave the cabin unless you have need. You should be safe here."

In short order he donned a dark blue jacket and secured a black belt about his waist, where he stuffed his pistol and sword. "Do not," he sternly warned, "come on deck, Skylar."

He bounded out the door and through the gun deck. Noise reigned as the pirates loaded the cannon with balls and gunpowder. "Do not fire until I give the order," he yelled.

The men nearest him nodded. They would spread the word and eventually repeat the fire command once he gave it.

He gained the main deck. "Quartermaster, who fired upon us?"

"There, sir." In a stream of moonlight, the quartermaster pointed toward a spot on the ocean and handed him a spyglass. Although he couldn't see the ship well, he could see the pale sails.

"Prepare to be boarded. The ship you see could easily be one of our kind."

He hoped not. Pirates fighting pirates became a vicious battle of survival. His crew, tired from their earlier battle, would be at disadvantage. With a private ship or one of Her Majesty's ships, they seldom engaged in battle, relying instead on intimidation. Rarely had any of his crew needed to physically convince a prisoner to be cooperative. No, the trouble lay with uncooperative pirates. "What distance do you estimate?"

"Less than a half league, sir, and closing."

"We shall turn their attack to our advantage. Hoist Her Majesty's flag. Have cook give the crew his lard. Coat the deck near the capstan and rigging. When they attempt to board us, they will lose their footing."

The quartermaster headed toward the galley, giving orders as he went. A few moments later, the British flag was hoisted, flapping in the strong breeze. Rand gazed through the spyglass again. On the other ship, men had gathered, prepared for battle. Time. He needed just a few more minutes to ready his crew for the one they were about to meet.

Behind him, he heard bare feet slap against the deck. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw several of his men covering the deck as he'd requested. "Quietly, quickly. We don't want to give our surprise away."

They nodded and redoubled their efforts. Rand returned his attention to the vessel nearing them. A black flag with a skull and a dagger piercing the eye hole was run up the pole. Damn and double damn. The enemy ship appeared to be as well armed as his and was commanded by none other than Owain Cutler. To survive they would need to attack by surprise on both the men firing the cannon and on the ship itself.

Normally, they would salvage the ship and he'd assign her a new captain, press the crew into service on the *Red Sky*. But with the nearness of Cutler's vessel, aye, Cutler himself, such an attempt would be a luxury they couldn't afford. No, should they win the day, Rand would show Cutler the same courtesy the man had extended him.

“Bonnie,” he called. “Train the first and third volleys on her cannon. Each level, every other gun, thirty-second intervals. That should give the first group time enough to reload. Second and forth volleys work on the water line. We shall take out as many of her cannon as possible.”

The quartermaster returned. “The decks are accomplished, sir.”

“Good. Run up the white flag.”

“Surrender, sir?”

“Aye.”

“Sir?”

“When the first bastard steps foot on *Red Sky*, their entire crew will get a surprise the likes of which they shall never forget.” Rand smiled to himself. No one boarded the *Red Sky* without being invited first. No one. Especially Cutler.

The sea still spun in angry waves, each crest and fall bringing his ship closer to Cutler’s. Only one ship would sail away from the other this stormy night. Rand intended it be *Red Sky*. “Have the men assemble in the shadows, weapons drawn. We attack when the first pirate hits the deck.”

Silently, his men came from the remote corners of the ship. The soft swish of their swords leaving their scabbards whispered through the air. When he hazarded a glance over his shoulders, he smiled. They would, indeed, give their attackers a very unexpected surprise.

Time crawled by like a tortoise. Rand’s patience frayed, like a weathered piece of rope. Cutler shouldn’t have been in these waters. Rand wanted this confrontation over.

As if in answer to his unspoken request, a voice hailed the ship. “Prepare to be boarded, *Red Sky*.”

He saluted his acquiescence, then backed away from the gun wall, his hand on his pistol. When Cutler came aboard -- if he was man enough to do so -- Rand would end the cutthroat’s life and be rid of him.

The first wave of pirates sailed through the air, yelling and screaming. If they expected his crew to fall into chaos, they were about to be schooled in bravery.

“Fire!” Rand yelled.

The pirates landed on his deck, slipped, then fell, their ropes swinging back toward their ship. His men leapt from their concealed niches and cut down their enemy before the attacking pirates had a chance to swing a sword.

The loud *kaboom* of *Red Sky*’s cannon fire exploded through the air. Shrieks of pain sliced across the water. Another volley resounded over the ocean, followed by the sound of splintering wood.

A second wave of attackers leapt to the deck of *Red Sky*. “Bloody hell!” one man yelled as his feet went out beneath him.

Cannon fire bellowed back at *Red Sky*. The splitting wood was enough to distract some of his men from cutting down the boarding pirates. Swords clashed, the ringing and rasping of metal on metal multiplied tens of times. Black smoke blotted out the little light they had and filled the air with the scent of burning gunpowder.

Rand shot his pistol at an advancing pirate. A red stain spread from the center of his chest and his sword clattered to the deck as he fell. A second shot felled another pirate. Blood mingled on the deck with the lard, making a slippery, smelly surface on which to fight.

With his pistol empty, Rand quickly replaced his weapon with his sword. One of the attackers had gained the rigging and was attempting to climb to the sails. He could only have one purpose -- to destroy the sails in order to make *Red Sky* a listless target.

Rand leapt onto the rigging, climbing with one hand. As soon as he was close, he ran the man through, stopping his forward progression. The pirate’s sword fell to the deck while he himself remained lifeless and trapped in the ropes.

Rand surveyed the fight below him. His men were doing well, but the other ship seemed to have a slight advantage in the number of men in Cutler's crew. Peering at the scene beneath him, Rand also saw his men valiantly fighting, eliminating the boarding pirates as they swung from the ropes onto the greasy deck. The advantage of Cutler's numbers wouldn't last long.

He slid down the ropes to once more join the fray. Bodies, blood, bits of wood littered the deck. The swishing of swords and the resulting clang when they struck filled the night with a loud cacophony. The yelling of men fighting for their lives was broken by an occasional pistol shot. Cutler was nowhere to be seen, the coward.

Rand's crew fought hard and long, but they were tired. "Fight for your lives, mates. We'll not let this motley crew best the likes of us!"

A sword jabbed toward him. He met the thrust with a parry and forced the weapon from his attacker's hand. Fear filled the man's eyes, and Rand hesitated. Hesitated the merest second, long enough to consider sparing the life of the man, long enough for that same man to pull a blade from his belt.

Rand ran him through.

He pulled his sword from the man's chest and spun around to face the next attacker.

Hate-filled eyes raked Rand. He thrust, but Owain Cutler parried the strike. Around Rand, the din faded until all he heard was the ringing of his sword against Cutler's.

"I should have run you through rather than maroon you, *brother*." Cutler jabbed low.

Rand countered the thrust. "Aye, but you didn't. I owe you for that." He advanced on Cutler.

Cutler sneered. "You owe me for more than the sorry life you live. I liked not playing the part of the cuckold."

"To play the part you had to have married a woman of more than ill repute."

“I did.” Cutler thrust back, his sword cutting an arc in the air and catching the tip of Rand’s sword. “I bedded your *lady* wife long before you had her.”

Cutler’s sword slid down Rand’s blade toward the hilt. Fury filled Rand at Cutler’s words. Emma had described in odious detail how Cutler tried to rape her at her father’s estate, but was kept from fulfilling his vile act by her father’s soldiers. She’d not escaped unmarked, his dagger cutting her below the ribs and leaving a scar.

At the last moment, Rand spun away and put all his power into his swing. Cutler’s sword flew from his hand. Rand advanced, backing Cutler up against the gun wall. Placing the tip of his sword at Cutler’s throat, he gloated, “’Twould seem this day you have lost. Call your dogs off, and I’ll let you escape with your few remaining lives.”

Cutler laughed. “Such generosity. Would you maroon us as well?”

“I’d let you have your provisions, such as you have stored and can carry in your longboats, which is far better than that which you left me and my men.” Another cannon blasted, and then the sound of wood being torn asunder came from across the water. Rand glanced toward Cutler’s now listing ship. “Hell, I’d even let you have your tub.”

“Always trying to be honorable, Jamison.” Cutler wiped a hand across his mouth, then spat. “Honor will be your undoing.”

“’Tis better to live with honor than die in defeat and disrespect.” Rand lowered his sword slightly and gestured to the deck, littered with men, wounded, dying, dead. Some his, most Cutler’s. “Look around you. We have won the day; you are defeated.”

Cutler whistled, then yelled. “Lay down your swords, mateys.”

Around them swords clattered to the deck in a cascade of sound.

“Put them in the hold,” Rand ordered.

“You are wrong, Jamison. I shall never let the likes of you beat me.” He stepped sideways, until he was nearly flush with the gangplank recess. “Parted her legs right quick for me. Your Emma. She was a good fuck.”

Rand thrust forward, catching the epaulet of Cutler's jacket as Cutler jumped from the *Red Sky* into the sea.

* * * * *

Skylar donned a pair of badly worn breeches and laced shut an old shirt. Never before had she thought polyester especially soft, but against the rough wool of the trousers, the polyester won, hands down. The booms of the cannon lessened. Did that mean the battle was over, or just that each side had run out of ammunition?

Concern for Rand settled like a sinker in her stomach. He'd told her to wait, but for how long? What if he needed her help? What if he were injured? What if there was something she could do?

According to his journal, he'd been successful in all his naval engagements. So, okay, he didn't need her to win the battle. But the foremost question in her mind persisted -- what if he'd been injured? These men wouldn't know how to properly take care of him. Sure, they had rudimentary knowledge, but what did they actually know and practice in regards to hygiene? Rand's autobiography never mentioned his physical condition -- what if he lost a limb because she wasn't there to help prevent the first mate or the cook or some other ship's officer from performing an amputation?

She found her pistol tangled in the covers of the bed. Melancholy seized her. Rand had been making love to her in this bed. Now he could be on the deck somewhere, bleeding, becoming infected with God knew what, maybe even still fighting for his life.

Skylar flipped the safety off and tucked the pistol into the breeches, then headed toward the door.

In the room just outside Rand's cabin, men loaded black metal balls into their cannons. One at the rear lit a fuse. She smelled burning sulfur, then heard an explosion of sound.

Chapter Nine

Moans drifted through the air like an eerie ghost crying in the dark. Chills broke out across Skylar's skin, and the hair on her arms stood on end. Outside the great cabin, the noise was incredible, and she fought the urge to cover her ears. The scent of sweat and blood permeated the air and she nearly retched.

Wind rifled the short, stray strands of hair that had escaped her bandeau as she gained the topside deck. She froze when she heard a deep voice command, "Lay down your swords, mateys."

A shiver ran through her at the sound of that voice, intensifying when she heard his taunt about Emma. She caught a glimpse of a tall man with tendrils of blond hair escaping his tie just before he jumped from the deck. With a gasp, she realized who she saw and heard -- the same man that had attacked William and held a sword to her throat in the shop. She had to get to Rand, tell him about the man.

Men herded other men toward a part of the ship unknown to her, blocking access to Rand. The decked hummed with remedial activity. Pirates tended their fallen crewmates. Some scoured the deck of blood and whatever foul things the blood had mixed with. Others threw bodies overboard, commending the deceased to Davy Jones. Death and destruction

wrought a heavy toll. How many of the dead were Rand's men? How many were injured that she had the potential to save?

Tucking her chin toward her throat, she grabbed a crewman. "Boiling water," she commanded in a gruff, fairly masculine voice. "Hurry."

"And just who would you be?" the man snapped.

"Sk -- Scully." She knelt at the side of one of the fallen. "Do ya know this man?"

When the pirate nodded, Skylar added, "If ya don't hurry, this man will bleed to death." A gash on his side bled profusely. Grabbing his knife from his belt, she cut a swath of material from his breeches. She stuffed the rag in his hand and pushed against the wound. "Keep that tight to your side."

She crawled to the side of another pirate, cut his breeches, and tied a tourniquet around his thigh. Around her the cries and moans continued, an eerie sound in the night wind. There were so many wounded. Where was the damn man with the water?

Blood stuck to her palms, soaked the edges of her sleeves. An odious smell wafted from the deck, a combination of what she now recognized as grease, blood, and gunpowder.

God, there was so much blood. She looked into every face, closed more dead eyes than she'd ever seen in the movies, stopped as much bleeding as she could. The hacking injuries inflicted by one man upon another made her sick to her stomach, sicker than the reality of so much fucking blood. Mentally, she triaged the worst cases, catalogued the supplies she'd need. Ideally, the injured should be moved to the sick bay, but she knew from her reading that the sick bay was rife with bacteria and far too small to handle the number of injuries she saw around her.

So many bodies. So much blood.

Skylar pushed to her feet, her hands covered with blood, the knees of Rand's trousers soaked. She glanced around for a couple of able-bodied men. "You there," she said with her

low voice, “and you. Take the worst of the injured and place them near the galley. Mind you, be careful of their injuries.”

Surprisingly, they obeyed, almost as if in a trance. “You there,” she called to a third man of Rand’s crew. “The man with the belt around his thigh, bring him toward the galley.” She’d boil the damned water herself if she had to. “And then bring me some rum!”

On the deck, she found another seriously injured pirate. Repeating the cutting ceremony with the other man’s knife, she obtained a swath of cloth and tied it around the bleeding wound in his arm. The gash in his chest, however, was of more concern to her. Returning to her pirate vocalizing, she yelled, “Where’s the fucking water and rum?”

Miraculously, both appeared within seconds. “Sailcloth, thread, needle, a sponge. And don’t delay, else you’ll find yourself in this man’s stead.”

She soaked another bit of his breeches in the steaming water. While it sterilized, she inched his shirt away from the wound. She pulled her pistol from her belt and lifted the cloth from the water, then let the material cool. Dribbling the water around the wound, she finally saw the full length and breadth of the gash. Blood flowed, mingling with the water to turn a sickening pink on the man’s shirt. Throwing the cloth back in the bucket, she opened the rum bottle and poured the alcohol on the cut, then took a healthy drink herself.

For his part, the man winced and jerked from the pain, but did not cry out.

“Now here, drink.” She held the bottle to his lips and lifted his head. Rum dribbled down his neck, but his Adam’s apple bobbed. At least some of the alcohol would reach his stomach and help ease the pain. “I’m going to sew you up. Once you’re able, you must keep this injury clean to prevent it from festering. Do you understand?”

He nodded, and she held the bottle against his lips once more. Pirates returned with the items she’d requested.

She poured alcohol on the sponge, ran the thread over the sponge, and threaded the needle. “Hold him.”

Pirates were heartier than she'd realized. The man stayed as perfectly still as one could in such circumstances. She'd never been big on sewing, but she knew a couple of stitches. In a hospital, each stitch would have been individual. Time was against her on this swaying vessel. As small as she could manage, Skylar sewed the man closed with over twenty stitches. When she glanced into his face, she exhaled a sigh of relief. The man had passed out.

"Bring them all. The ones bleeding the worst." She glanced at her supplies. "You --" She pointed to a large, bare-chested man. "-- keep the water hot and fresh, the rum coming." She lowered her voice more, added a threat of menace. "Fail, and you walk the plank." She looked around. "You!"

A pirate jumped to at the sound of her voice. "Find some able-bodied men and take the men I've treated to their berths." She looked at him pointedly. "Under no circumstances take them to the sick bay."

In the distance, she heard a muffled order. Around her, those who could carry out some duty did so. The injured and dying lay on the deck. Guilt assuaged her. How could she possibly help them all? "Thread," she called out, her voice growing hoarse.

She sewed together the gash on a man's arm. Her next patient had a deep cut in his stomach; still another needed work on his leg. The men continued to be brought to her; pirates continued to carry them away.

Dawn arrived tinted with oranges and pinks. Her stomach growled. Thirst dried her mouth. Exhaustion threatened to put her to sleep as she knelt. Skylar picked up the bottle of rum and took another hearty swig. The alcohol burned her tongue, her throat, but it was something to drink. She'd worked all night.

Subtle tremors started in her legs. She had to get something to eat, or pass out from low blood sugar. She swallowed another gulp of rum. Didn't alcohol metabolize into sugar? On hands and knees she crawled around the men lying on the deck, giving an extra drink of rum

to those in pain, taking one here and there herself when the horror of the injuries she viewed became too much.

Lightheaded she crawled toward a wall and curled up in the provided shade.

* * * * *

Rand sought Skylar. She'd disappeared from his cabin, thankfully. A large section of the wall had been heavily damaged in the fight with Cutler's ship. Across the deck, he saw man after man sprawled. When he checked, he realized they'd been seriously injured and their hurts tended. He counted more than a score of men who'd be able to perform no service on *Red Sky* for some time. His ship was seriously undermanned, susceptible to another attack, one that was sure to be successful.

He found her curled like an infant against the gun wall. Kneeling, he shook her awake. "Show a leg, lad," he commanded, attempting to keep her identity secret. "There is work yet to be done."

Rand hauled her to her feet, dragging her toward the stern and the stairs that led below deck to his cabin.

"Hey," she managed. "I can w-w-walk by myself." She staggered from him.

"Bloody hell, are you drunk?" He leaned toward her face, sniffing. "By all that is holy, you have imbibed this day."

In answer, she hiccupped.

"You'll break your neck on the steps," he whispered and then grabbed her and tossed her across his shoulder to carry her down the stairs.

At the bottom, he set her on her feet. Uninjured men worked at repairing cannon damage to *Red Sky*. He escaped with Skylar into his cabin, no one having seen him enter with a young man.

Inside, he shook her. "What is wrong with you?"

She glanced into his eyes, and for a brief moment he saw the horror she'd been subjected to. "Is it always like that? The blood, the bodies?"

"More often than not. Catching a merchant by surprise is the least bloody, but fighting one of your own kind is usually without mercy." He moved to his chest and pulled out a bottle of rum. "You need this, I'm thinking."

Skylar shook her head. "I had too much already. I feel sick."

"You haven't had the meal you requested either," Rand responded. "I'll fetch some salmagundi for you. You will feel better once you have something in your stomach to go with the rum." He led her toward the bed. "The air will blow on you, I'm afraid, missy. The hole won't be fixed 'til we port. Rest a while."

Once she'd stretched out on his bed, Rand covered Skylar with a quilt. The breeches she wore were covered with blood, her hands stained as well. What had she seen? A pirate ship was no place for a lady. The savagery disrupted their delicate sensibilities.

Again he was seized with the need to get her to civilization as soon as possible. She belonged in Port Royal, but the town was far too dangerous for his crew. They were headed to New Providence, to careen the ship. There he could dress her properly and see that she was escorted to Port Royal, where she'd be safe and well cared for.

His pirate ship was no place for a woman, especially while Owain Cutler gunned for the *Red Sky*.

Chapter Ten

Rand returned with the salmagundi, to find Skylar fast asleep. He heard stories from several of his crew about a fierce-sounding pirate with surgical skills. That she'd ordered Jumpin' Johnnie around made him smile. Apparently, she'd ordered him to keep her supplied and threatened him with the plank if he failed. Ironically, Johnnie could not swim. She couldn't have selected a better threat.

In the galley, the stories continued about a pirate demanding boiling water and an ample supply of rum. Another pirate relayed a tale of keeping the man on deck supplied with thread and sailcloth. He'd have to talk to her about her reckless, yet brave, actions.

He sat on the side of the bed and watched her sleep. They'd port at dawn if the wind held. There he'd treat her as a lady should be treated. He'd spoil her with fancy dresses and a clean room at the most expensive inn. Then he'd see she was introduced to society at Port Royal, even if it cost him the last gold piece he had to get her there.

She stirred in her sleep. Rand brushed a stray lock from her forehead. The silky tendrils reminded him of her feminine charms, the way her soft body had yielded to his before the battle, the submission of her mouth to his, the way she welcomed him into her arms. She was Emma, yet she wasn't.

In the early days of their marriage, Rand had had to teach Emma the joys of joining their bodies. Not so Skylar. The knowledge she held of the way of a maid with a man surprised, yet delighted him. Worried him as well as filled him with jealousy. Who had taught his woman such things?

He left the bed and paced between the cabin door and the stern's windows three times, finally stopping to lean his head against the glass. Cutler's taunt returned with a vengeance. *Parted her legs right quick for me. Your Emma. She was a good fuck.*

Slamming his fist against the window sill, he turned and stared at Skylar. Was she Emma? Had Skylar parted her legs for Cutler? She'd certainly done so for Rand, and right quick, as Cutler claimed Emma had done. How would a future society change a woman's behavior?

He placed his fingers against his temple and rubbed. Skylar was a mystery, to be sure. Dare he believe she was Emma reincarnated? Did it truly matter?

Damn it, yes. Emma had promised she'd find a way back to him. Had she selected this woman's body, from another time, to accomplish the task? Maybe one of the Vodou women could determine if Emma's spirit resided in Skylar. But they weren't porting at Haiti, and he hadn't heard of any Vodou practitioners at New Providence. He couldn't think of a single way to prove Skylar was Emma. Damn and double damn.

Behind him, he heard her stir in the bed.

"Rand?"

Her soft voice sounded more like Emma at this moment than any other he could think of. He returned to sit at her side on the bed. "What is it?"

"I heard a man."

He nearly laughed. "The ship is full of them. What man did you hear?"

"A man said awful things about your wife, and then he jumped overboard."

“Aye.” What was she trying to tell him, other than the fact that she’d overheard Cutler’s disgusting comments?

She swallowed hard. It seemed she had difficulty in speaking further.

“What is it, Skylar?”

“I recognized his voice, and I caught a glimpse of him.” She seized his arm, her grip strong. “He was the man who came to my shop before I landed on your ship.”

Rand’s eyes widened just before he narrowed his gaze at her. His lips tightened. He could barely trust himself to speak, to keep his hands from her lovely throat. She’d seen Cutler before she was on *Red Sky*? Had this little vixen given him and his crew up to Cutler’s attack? “I think you should tell me more of this meeting,” he finally managed.

She nodded, her face flushed. Excitement or fear, Rand couldn’t tell. “I was packing my bag when my shop bell rang. William came in, and he’d been stabbed. He told me a man cut him, a man who had a sword in his umbrella. I was calling 9-1-1 when the bell rang again.” She turned her head and their gazes collided. “A tall man entered my store, came to the office where I was helping William. He had blond hair and the coldest brown eyes I’ve ever seen. He had a sword at my throat, threatened to kill me when William shoved a piece of rock into my hands. Suddenly, I was gone. I wasn’t in my shop anymore. I tumbled through space and landed in your cabin.” She gripped his sleeve tighter. “I don’t know how he got here, but that same man was on your boat earlier. I’d swear to it.”

“And you know not who this man was?”

“No.” She shook her head. “The first time I saw him was at my bookstore. He scared the shit out of me. I thought he was going stab my neck with that sword.”

“Why?”

“The way he threatened William. He told him he could make his death painful or quick, depending on what William did.” Tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Here, here, why are you crying?” Tears were his weakness. He never could stand to see Emma cry.

“I don’t know what happened to William,” she choked out. “What if that man killed him?” She scrubbed a hand across her face. “How could he have gotten here?” She sniffed, then rubbed her nose against her tunic sleeve. “And why is he here?”

“You know not this man?”

“No.”

“Yet you saw him in your shop?”

Skylar nodded. “How could he have gotten here?”

Could this really be? Could two such people have journeyed through time? No, Cutler had been here all along. He’d not disappeared and suddenly returned. Some other explanation had to exist.

“The man you saw, Skylar, was Owain Cutler.”

Her lips formed a tiny *O*, her eyes widening at the information. “The same man that marooned you?”

He pried her fingers from his sleeve and returned to the windows. A heavy sigh left his mouth. “Aye.”

“Why didn’t you kill him?”

Behind him, he heard the patter of her bare feet, then felt her tug on his arm. He turned to see her eyes filled with anger.

“How could you let him say those things about her?” She moved a hand to her head and shoved the bandeau from her hair in one violent jerk. “Why didn’t you defend her, for God’s sake? She’s not here to do it herself.”

The venom of her words wounded him more than he liked. He’d not suffer a woman speaking to him such. “Is that what you think? That I didn’t care for Emma’s honor?”

If Skylar thought so, would other members of his crew think likewise? Did they believe he'd lost the ability to command them since he didn't defeat Cutler? "You would be wrong. I moved to cut the bastard's throat, but he'd already hurled himself overboard.

"I told you to stay put, but you disobeyed my command."

"Get used to it, buster. No one tells me what to do. I'm free to make my own choices and decisions."

He grabbed her upper arms. "Have a care, woman. These days are not your own. Women of your time may be sharp-tongued haranguers, but not here. You would do best to follow my instructions and act a lady."

"And if I'd followed your instructions, how many of those men upstairs would be dead? Or dying from a raging infection brought on by an unnecessary amputation?" She shook her arms.

Rand held on tighter. He wasn't letting this hellcat go. "I loved Emma."

Skylar narrowed her gaze at him. "Yeah, right."

Something within Rand snapped, sharper than a sail in a violent gust of wind. "What would you know of love? You spread your legs fast enough before the attack."

The color fled her face. For a moment, he thought she'd faint. Instead, she drew up to her full height and shrugged free of his grasp. For a moment, he thought she'd break into tears, fall at his feet, and ask to be forgiven for her impertinence, for her wanton ways. For a moment, he thought he'd rendered her speechless. A moment was all she gave him. Instead, she drew back her arm and slapped him hard across the face.

"How dare you! How dare you question anything about me at all? You don't know me, don't know what is important to me, don't know the hell my life has become. Don't you dare tell me I don't know anything about love or honor or any of that bullshit."

Skylar turned and headed toward the door.

“Where do you think you are going?”

Rand’s voice was authoritative, haughty. Well, she didn’t have to deal with his high-and-mighty crap. Already half a plan formed in her brain. If she killed the man he’d identified as Cutler, he couldn’t attack William later. She didn’t need Rand to stop the future when she could do it herself. *I don’t need you*, she thought. *How the hell did I ever think I loved you?*

“What?”

Oh, shit, she’d said the words aloud.

A moment later, Rand was spinning her around, pinning her with his blue-eyed gaze, demanding an explanation. “Tell me what you meant by those words, missy.”

She narrowed her gaze. “I don’t need you to defend Emma’s honor, or me.” She fingered the pistol in the tie of her breeches. “I can do it myself.”

“You mean to go after Cutler yourself? With a pistol that doesn’t fire? Have you lost your fuckin’ mind?”

“No, I haven’t. And my pistol works fine. Just because you didn’t know how to use it properly doesn’t mean it’s faulty.”

A muscle ticked near the corner of his eye. “I’ll tie you to the bed and not let you up until we reach New Providence.”

“New Providence?” Damn, her voice squeaked.

“Aye. There I will put you into the safekeeping of a family I know. They will escort you to Port Royal, where you shall be safe...and far from the likes of Cutler.”

“No.” Rand couldn’t go to New Providence. Not yet. She repeated her objection, stronger this time. “No.”

“Aye. I’m disembarkin’ you at New Providence. I need additional crew and supplies. I’ll not have you unman me by disobeying my orders yet again.”

She snarled. "What is it about you and your fucking precious pride? You can't go to New Providence."

He encroached on her space, backing her against the cabin door. "I'm thinkin' you need to be taught a lesson or two in acting the lady. Your mouth is unbecoming, as is your attitude."

"And you're the gentlemen to teach me? I think not." She glared. "Die if you want. I don't give a rat's ass. But I have a life to live three centuries from now, and I don't intend Cutler to kill me or my friend." She placed her palms against his chest and pushed. "Get away from me."

"That," he said with menace in his voice, "is the last order you shall give me."

Chapter Eleven

“Put me down, you oaf,” Skylar squealed as Rand settled her over his shoulder.

“Not until you learn to listen to me and do as I tell you.” He would not relent on this point. The stubborn woman had to be taught a lesson. He was tired of her rudeness, arguing, and disobedience.

With sure steps, he carried her across the wooden floor to his bed. When he stood her on her feet, he held tight to her waist. She’d not leave this room ’til she understood he was master and commander, in complete control of her fate on his ship. Settling on the bed, he pulled her over his knees.

“What?” she shrieked. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“What I should have done the first time you talked back to me.” With the palm of his hand he slapped her backside, a solid *thwarp* that resounded throughout the cabin and stung his hand.

“Ow, you bastard.”

She wriggled against his groin, trying to get free, but her attempt to escape another blow failed and only quickened his cock until it was as hard as a stanchion. He struck a second time. “You shall speak to me with respect.”

“Not on your life.”

“Such disrespect.” Rand spanked her bottom again, enjoying the feel of her clad cheeks against his palm. When she moved against him again, he groaned. Damn the wench! Her motions against him were far too arousing.

“Does striking a woman turn you on, Rand? Do you get off on making a woman helpless?”

He spanked her again. He didn’t know her expressions, but the meaning was clear. Every time she moved against him, his arousal became harder. “You know what you do, wench.” He grasped at something to say to her taunt. “You like the spanking I’m administering.”

“I’m sure you’d like to believe that,” she retorted.

He swatted her again. The heat of her buttocks seeped through the cotton of her breeches. “My statement can be proven.”

“Like hell.”

Grasping the waist of her breeches, he yanked them down. The scent of her arousal tickled his nostrils, inflaming his own desire to greater heights. Her cheeks were a lovely bright red, a thin piece of material barely covering her wares. He rubbed his forefinger along the seam of her ass, stopping when he touched the hot moisture between her legs. Rand leaned over and neared her ear. “I heard what you said, missy. About thinking you loved me.”

“You heard wrong,” she gasped.

“Then why are you wet with desire?” He stroked his finger against her damp folds. The heat of her flesh, her desire, her shortness of breath told him all he needed to know. Rubbing back and forth, he found a tight knot of skin and slicked her moisture around the hard nub. Her breathing came faster, her control slipping. She could argue all she liked, but the evidence was between her legs, beneath his fingertip.

“I...I...I’m not...I don’t --”

Rand lifted her from his lap, the filthy breeches falling to the floor. “Your body says otherwise.” He crushed her against him, his mouth claiming hers. Forcing her lips to part for him, his tongue dueled with hers. He freed a hand from holding her and released his belt. His sword and pistol fell with a solid, muted thud to the floor atop his clothing. The erection Skylar caused sprang free, hard as a mast.

In a move that surprised him, she stroked his rod and moaned against his mouth. The motion nearly pushed him past his limits of control. Vixen! She thought her touch would weaken him, but Rand knew it was he who’d won, if he could last a few moments more.

The battle was over. He gripped the tunic she wore and ripped it from her shoulders, revealing her luscious, creamy white breasts encased in flimsy red. He pushed the material aside and dipped his mouth to suckle first one, then the other nipple.

His suckling earned him a lusty moan, the sound nearly driving him past his limits. He needed to take her, make her his, but not until she begged him, not until she stopped fighting him.

“Rand,” she whispered, tracing a finger down the seam of his shirt. “I need to feel you, all of you.”

He didn’t need an invitation. It was the acquiescence he sought, her lust-filled voice illuminating the depth of her need. He whipped off his shirt while Skylar released the undergarment she wore. Gods, she was beautiful, so feisty and full of life. He laid her back against the mattress and reveled in the wonder of her offering herself to him.

“Rand,” she moaned again, a touch of impatience in her voice. “Now, please.”

With a sure stroke he slid into her welcoming sheath. Wet heat enveloped his cock. Damn, it felt good to be held inside a woman again. He pushed deeper until his sac rested against her, then slowly withdrew.

Repeating the movements, he danced intimately within her body, each stroke fired by her equally compelling response. She gripped when he would withdraw, pulled him deeper when he would thrust shallowly. Soft hands caressed his chest, shoulders, upper arms. Her fingers teased his nipples, lighting his body on fire with her light touch.

He swallowed her soft mewls with kisses, drawing her passion into his mouth. More, he wanted more of her. Neither rum nor grog filled him with such peace; even the tobaccos of the Indies didn't create such an intense need for more.

"Oh, God, Rand, I'm coming, I'm coming!" she screamed against his lips.

Suddenly, her womanhood seized him in a rhythmic grip. The throbbing matched that of the waves slapping against the ship. The steady beat of her body felt as if her blood pumped through his veins. The swelling within his heart matched that of his cock.

Powerful sensations arced through him like a multitude of lightning striking in succession on a turbulent sea. Her essence flowed around him, tempting him to release. He pumped faster until he was oblivious to everything but the impending explosion of his seed within her. When his climax came, the world tilted on its axis, a shift of brilliant light that sparkled but didn't flare out, as steady as the Southern Cross or the great North Star.

Home. He was home in this stranger, this woman from another time. By all that was holy, he wasn't letting her go.

* * * * *

Skylar had slept with men before. Not many, granted, but enough to know that having sex with them and making love to Rand were two totally different animals. Their coupling had been hurried, frenzied, and erotic. While she wouldn't admit it to Rand, she had found his spanking arousing, her orgasm more intense than any she'd had, self-induced or otherwise. Would they have an opportunity to explore one another at a more leisurely pace? She snuggled against his chest, acutely aware that the closeness she exhibited with him was not the norm of his society.

But then again, what was the norm for a man at sea?

Sunlight blazed through the breech in the cabin. Lucky to be undisturbed, they'd fallen asleep to a gentle rocking of the ship. If the things she'd read were true, most of the crew slept too, exhausted from their battle, nursing their injuries, perhaps acknowledging with drink the loss of friends. When they made port, she'd have Rand take her to the apothecary for medicines for the injured men so no more would be lost.

Port!

Dear God, they couldn't go to New Providence, and since Rand hadn't left the cabin to give the order to... "Rand, Rand, wake up."

He groaned. "What? What's wrong?"

"Rand, you've got to stop this ship from porting at New Providence."

With a push, he came to and rolled to his side, waking with a poorly concealed yawn. "We need men and supplies, I told you that before. You need to stop your nonsense about New Providence."

"If you continue your course, you'll be ambushed. Someone is waiting for *Red Sky* in one of the northern coves of New Providence."

A frown marred Rand's handsome face as he sat up straighter on the bed. "How come you to have this knowledge?"

"The journal. You detailed the attack in your journal. You'd just survived a pair of battles and hadn't yet made repairs when you were attacked. Undermanned, the vessel defeated you, the commander intent on bringing you back to Port Royal for trial." Hysteria built. He couldn't go, not when he knew what waited. "Please, Rand, please don't go."

"Say I believe you. What would you have me do? My men still need supplies; my ship still needs an able-bodied crew."

Skylar stumbled from the bed toward the large desk, determined to find a map and see where Rand could go. "I don't know." She found a parchment, unrolled it, and placed it on

the desk, looking for New Providence. Where could *Red Sky* go? She tapped her finger on the island drawn on the map. "Land south. Cross the island if you have to, but don't go on the northern side of the island with *Red Sky*. There are too many places a ship can hide for a night attack."

He followed her to the desk, lifted her chin, and then stroked the side of her face. "You worry too much, missy."

"Please, Rand, take me seriously." She chewed her bottom lip a moment. "I can only think of one person who'd lay in wait for you."

Rand frowned, then rubbed his hand across the stubble on his chin. "Aye. I'm inclined to agree with you on that account."

"He seems to have a vendetta against you. Why?"

Rand ran a hand through his dark hair and then headed to his chest. "I've not much that will fit you, missy, and I did ruin the tunic. Dirty as they are, you wore the only extra breeches I owned. Had we scuttled Cutler's ship, we might have had more selection."

Why was he changing the subject? She crossed the room and laid a hand on his arm. "Rand, if I'm going to stop Cutler from hurting my friend, my best opportunity is now, here in the eighteenth century. He either traveled from your time to mine, or from mine to yours. Either way, he has to be stopped. If knowing why he is so set on revenge against you will help me do that, then I beg you, tell me."

He handed her his tunic. The linen material smelled like Rand, a masculine scent that threatened to buckle her knees with the memory of their recent, slightly kinky lovemaking. If only they could while away her remaining days making memories of love and laughter.

"Cutler's quarrel is with me, not you."

Skylar slipped the shirt over her head. This material, softer than what Rand had ruined, draped her form, descending past her butt. She picked up the breeches from the floor and stepped into the legs. The knees were stiff with caked-on blood. When it was finally safe to

port, she'd be glad to be rid of the pants, take a bath, and wear clothes meant to fit her. "If your claim is true, then why was he so determined to get that shard from William? Why did he come into my shop at all?"

Rand shook his head. "He fancied himself in love with Emma. Perhaps the same thing I see in you, he does as well. Perhaps he is as attracted to you as a magnet is to iron."

She tucked the tunic into the breeches and then cinched a bright sash around her waist. "No, I don't believe that. I never set eyes on him until he followed William." She took in her surroundings. Other than the hole in the wood, Rand's cabin was simple. A large desk for reading navigation charts, the bed, his chest -- ah, there. The shard William had given her as he lay bleeding, maybe to death, in her office.

With a half dozen steps, she crossed the room and retrieved the shard. She held up the pale polished bit of rock. "This is what William refused to surrender, what Cutler wanted."

Rand fell to his knees, clasping his chest.

Chapter Twelve

Rand crossed himself three times before he stood. No, he wasn't superstitious, nor particularly religious, but one didn't take chances when an object from the past suddenly surfaced. The green bit of carved rock in Skylar's hand he knew all too well. It had belonged to Emma.

"Where did you get that?"

Her forehead wrinkled and she came closer. "William had it. I never saw it before he shoved it into my hand."

Frowning, Rand tried to make sense of the revelations. "A man is attacked, he comes to yer shop, Cutler shows up, and this other man gives you this broken piece of rock. Then you end up here."

"Yes," she said. "That's the nuts and bolts." She paused, and then Rand saw a light of realization dawn in her eyes. "Cutler is after this stone because it's magical."

"Aye." He tried to stay emotionless, but he'd been too shocked when he saw the piece. Skylar noticed too much for him to avoid the inevitable.

She pursed her lips, eyed him closely, then placed her hands on her hips still clutching the shard. "There's more. Out with it, Rand."

“The piece you hold is but part of a larger bit.” He moved to his sea chest, his heart heavy at the remembered loss of Emma, yet strangely comforted by the fact that the woman in his cabin, if not Emma, had somehow received a part of Emma’s essence. And Skylar had also come into possession of the missing piece of Emma’s statue, a fact not easily ignored.

Kneeling, Rand opened the chest and dug through the few articles of clothing he had until his hand rested upon the blue silken bag, cinched shut with a golden cord. Loosening the cord, he pulled forth the U-shaped object with the broken handle. Tiny cymbals lined the raised arms of the figure above the closed legs that formed what was left of the handle. “Emma was rather fond of this instrument. She called it a ‘sistrum.’ Said the image was of an Egyptian goddess named Hathor. A goddess of joy and music as well as family.”

He turned, holding the sistrum. In the past five years, he hadn’t looked at it at all, not since he’d put the antiquity away. Oddly, the longing he always felt for Emma while looking at her things did not assail him. Here in Skylar’s presence he experienced unexpected peace.

Skylar neared and stared. “My God, the handle.”

“Your piece matches this exactly, if I’m not mistaken.”

She held her piece closer to the handle. “Fuck me,” she whispered.

Skylar staggered backward toward the bed and plopped onto the mattress, her fingers white from the grip she had on the shard. She’d heard of some wild things, discounted most of them as Hollywood tricks and hype. But this? It rivaled anything she’d seen on *Crossing Over* or *Ghost Hunters*. How the hell had she ended up with a piece of green stone from an ancient artifact that belonged to another woman three hundred years earlier?

The impact of what she’d witnessed hit her with a force like that of the cannonball that had smashed the wall of Rand’s cabin. “Cutler can’t have this. If one piece could bring me to you, imagine what could happen if he found a way to unite the whole object.” She shook her

head, trying to get her thoughts together. “Why does he want it, Rand? I don’t mean because it’s magical -- that part is obvious. What does he want to do with the magic?”

Rand sat on the bed next to her. “Emma believed the sistrum’s magic would make her the perfect wife, mother, and lover -- all that she aspired to be in my life.” His head bowed and his voice softened. “She received it as a birthday gift from her father the day we meet, believed it brought us together.” He laughed bitterly, a sound so forlorn it nearly broke her heart.

“I didn’t believe in the power she ascribed to the sistrum until the day she died.”

“Why?” Curiosity seized her. “What changed your mind?”

“It was lying on her dresser. I heard a loud noise, but didn’t check to see what caused the sound. I was too occupied with Emma. I realized later the sistrum broke the moment she drew her last breath.” His voice broke, choked with grief. “I buried the shard with her body, but couldn’t bear to rid myself of the object she loved.”

Skylar gasped, then put an arm around Rand’s shoulder, trying to grasp the importance of what he’d shared and the depth of his loss, while masking her shock at what he’d just revealed regarding the shard. “I’m sorry,” she managed. “You must have loved her greatly.”

Abruptly standing, he knocked her arm away. “Belay that. Emma is not your concern.”

Something didn’t make sense. Cutler wanted the shard, but the sistrum broke when Emma died. Rand met Emma the day she’d been given the sistrum. William shoved a shard from a dead woman’s grave into Skylar’s hand, and she’d ended up with Rand. “Oh, Jesus. Rand, the sistrum’s magic is about love.”

Still, how did Cutler figure into this equation?

“Emma thought so.”

Skylar sprang to her feet. If her hypothesis was correct, no one on the *Red Sky* was safe as long as either piece of the sistrum was available. “Rand, Cutler and your wife --”

“Don’t speak that bastard’s name with hers.” He clenched one hand into a fist, the other around the broken sistrum handle. “He brought naught but pain to her.”

“Did he love her?” she persisted.

“He believed he did.” Rand stood and put the sistrum back in its bag, then returned it to his sea chest. He stood tall and forbidding, his voice strong and sure. “She did not return his affections.”

“Don’t you see, Rand? Cutler wants Emma back. He thinks he can win her back somehow with the shard. Does he know about the sistrum? Does he know what powers Emma believed it had?”

Rand paced to the cabin door, then to the windows, staring stoically at some point on the ocean. “Aye, he knew her belief.”

“So...” She rubbed her temple. “He believes it too. Maybe in my time he’s trying to put both the pieces together. We can’t let that happen.”

“What would you have me do?”

“We need to keep the pieces separate until we are sure Cutler poses no threat.” She rose and placed the piece in her backpack, then went to stand next to him at the windows. “We should hide the pieces in two different places. Obviously, he knows of the existence of the shard in my time, and he knows of the sistrum from Emma in yours, but does he know, right now, that the sistrum is broken?”

“Nay.” He continued to stare out the window. A soft breeze fluttered his hair around his forehead but did nothing to lessen the stance he maintained. “I should see to my crew.”

The crew. They had more people to consider than Cutler or their own situation with him. “I should check on the injured as well.” She glanced out the window. “I’m glad the sea is calm today.”

“You’re not a landlubber, are you?”

The light teasing of his voice soothed her somewhat, lessened the tension of the moment. She needed to figure out the whole thing still, but she could work on the puzzle while she tended the wounds of Rand's crew. "Colorado is landlocked."

"Col-er-ad-o. I've not heard of this place." He turned to her with the beginning of a smile on his face. "There is much I am sure to not know about the world you live in, the world of your future."

"There is a lot to know. In my time, ordinary people travel the ocean in ships that are practically floating cities, for nothing more than a holiday. But in Colorado, the largest body of water is created by a dam. The storm and the battle are about as far from my everyday life as you could imagine."

"You know so much of my life, yet I know so little of yours."

She laid her hand on his arm. They'd have time to know one another better, just not much. Maybe less if he insisted on going to New Providence. "Are we still making port at New Providence?"

"Aye. Nassau, to be exact. The government there isn't averse to our patronage."

Skylar closed her eyes before she let them roll. "You're not changing course?" She sighed in frustration. "You're not listening to my warning?"

"Aye, I listened to your warning, but 'tis as I told you before. The path of history must be writ as it should be, not as you would like it to read."

"But, Rand --"

He held up his hand, then placed a finger against her lips. "Hush, missy. It is enough to be prepared. Now, get you to your business."

When she didn't move, Rand took her by the arm, turned her around, and landed a solid spank on her backside. "I'll not tolerate any more argumentation."

* * * * *

On deck, Skylar tended the injured. She helped those who were able to move find shade beneath the billowing sails, brought beer and the foul-smelling salmagundi to those capable of drinking and eating, changed the bandages and checked the stitches of those she'd sewn back together. She even managed to get some salmagundi -- an evil, highly salted concoction of cabbage, onions, eggs, and mystery meat -- and a drink for herself. Her tasks filled the afternoon. She would have described the day's weather as perfect, had she been living in the twenty-first century.

She crossed the quarterdeck to lean across the railing and watch the reds of the setting sun. Rand had given orders for the decks to be swabbed, the cannons cleaned, and the riggings checked for damage. A cooling breeze caressed her face.

The afternoon allowed time for thought. In the past thirty-six hours, she'd found her sea legs, partially due to the calmer ocean, and she'd found the love of her life. Or Emma's.

The knowledge of being reincarnated unsettled her. She'd never considered a repeated life-after-death seriously, never imagined there would be so many parallels between the life once lived and the current life, never believed such a thing was even possible. Yet, here she was with the man she'd loved for nearly forever, discovering Emma's love had crossed the centuries to reside within Skylar's soul.

"You're deep in thought," Rand interjected.

Skylar jumped. "Don't --" She pointed a shaking finger at him. "-- sneak up on me."

He stood there, silent, staring west as she had, and the companionship that should have been comfortable wasn't. She'd made love to another woman's husband, a husband still deeply in love with his departed wife. Had that woman been reborn into a modern, technological society, with ideas and mores far from what Emma had lived? "I'm Emma, aren't I?"

The simple statement solidified Skylar's conclusion. Speaking it aloud made it real somehow.

“Aye.”

The simple, resigned answer confirmed her belief. She kept her gaze on the undulating water, trying to accept in her mind what her heart already knew. How could God possibly be so cruel? To take her away from Rand, bring her back, only to have her die again within months? She wrapped her fingers tightly around the weather-worn railing. “It’s not fair, Rand.”

“Come below, missy.”

The gentle comfort of his words compelled her to look at him. His strong jaw covered with dark stubble hinted at his stubbornness, his piercing blue eyes took in far more than he let on, and his sensuous mouth hid a tongue able to lash her nipples to hardened, sensitive peaks of pleasure. These were just a few of the traits she appreciated.

He was hers, yet he wasn’t. She was someone else, yet she wasn’t. She didn’t feel like another woman; she felt like Skylar, with her own memories and none of Emma’s.

To top it all off, he wouldn’t listen to her about the impending surprise attack in a New Providence harbor. She wanted to rage in frustration at his hard-headedness.

A long time ago, she’d read a book by Leo Frankowski about a cross-time engineer who got stuck in medieval Poland. The engineer had no compunctions about changing history and using everything at his disposal to defeat the Huns he knew were coming to destroy Polish civilization. Why couldn’t Rand have that attitude?

“Come with me.” He placed a hand at the small of her back, a gentling action that soothed a portion of her ire. “If I’m to die on the morrow, I’d have tonight with you.”

The muscles of Skylar’s throat constricted, clogged with emotion. She couldn’t stand by and do nothing, knowing what it would cost him and what remained of his crew. But what could she do to convince him to take prudent steps to prevent a sure disaster?

Her stomach twisted and she wanted to fall to the deck on her knees, beg him to consider their future, recently rediscovered. She wanted to, but couldn’t.

Instead, she gripped her waist as pain ripped through her. Her legs locked and her muscles stiffened. Tears rimmed her lids. *Dear God, not now!*

Chapter Thirteen

Rand picked up Skylar and threw her over his shoulder. She was lighter than he'd thought, but so stiff that carrying her was awkward. The crew, bawdy sorts to begin with, laughed as they saw him head to his cabin carrying a smaller pirate. To them, it only meant one thing.

He couldn't exactly blame the sex-deprived men for thinking he would be sodomizing his subordinate. They'd been long without the comforts of a woman and her willing body.

This moment might even solidify his reputation as a man among the crew, although right now it mattered not a whit what they thought about his sexual prowess. Something was wrong with Skylar, and he intended to discover what ill laid claim to her.

The cannon hole in his cabin allowed in the remnants of the fading light. A cooler tropical air drifted through the room. Gently he placed her on the bed. "Skylar, what ails you?"

In response, she moaned and curled up into a tight ball. For pity's sake, it was happening again. He'd seen this reaction when the illness weakened Emma and reduced her to living in a pain-filled hell. Carefully, he schooled his features. It wouldn't do Skylar good to see his distress. "Is it the disease you spoke of?"

Skylar nodded. "My bag...there's an odd-looking container in it, a sort of brown color with a white top. The contents...will help with the pain."

He hurried to do her bidding, hating the agony that stole the color from her cheeks, robbed her of her vivaciousness, and pirated her breath until she could only moan like she'd been run through with a blade. Why did his women have to suffer so?

Ransacking the odd bag, he found the vial she requested. The container looked like brown glass, yet lacked the coolness and heavy weight of glass. A paper with her name and other information printed on it stuck to the small bottle. There was much in her world he wondered about.

Rand returned to her side and handed her the vial. With shaking hands she maneuvered the lid so it opened. Within he glimpsed small white tablets.

"Thank you," she gasped, her face contorted.

"What is this?" He kept his voice low, tried to be as comforting to her as he could.

She dropped a pair of the tablets into her palm and then placed them in her mouth and swallowed. A moment later, coughing seized her. "Medicine. Could you..." She panted. "...drink."

He rushed to his desk and pulled out his rum bottle. "'Tis what my men take to dull the pain."

She gave him a strange smile. "Beats...the water."

"This is the wasting disease you spoke of?" He lifted her head with one hand, the bottle with the other. "Here you go."

She opened her mouth like a newborn robin being fed a worm by its mother.

"Swallow." Pain made her docile and her pain made him angry. Why would the Almighty curse him this way? "I don't like seeing you like this, missy."

"Believe me, I don't like being this way."

They fell silent. He laid her back against the pillow and stroked her cheek. Beneath his fingers, her skin was soft, the hair around her forehead damp. Every glance into her face reminded him of Emma's agony. He'd been helpless when the disease ravaged her, just as he was helpless now.

To go through this again, with Skylar? He found himself thinking the sentiments she'd expressed earlier. Life was far from fair. He clenched his hand into a fist, the nails of his fingers digging into his flesh. There had to be a way to take some of her agony on his shoulders.

If he could provide her some degree of comfort... Yes, that was it.

They'd get to Nassau. Rather than sail in at dawn, they'd continue on. He'd navigated the waters between the Bahamian isles often enough to do so in the dark. He would do what he could. Sailing into harbor at night wasn't his best choice, but the only one to make for Skylar, for Emma reborn.

With reasonable caution, they could make harbor and he could get Skylar to the inn and allow her a proper place to rest by sunrise.

Drooping eyelids and the relaxation of her muscles beneath his fingers informed him the medicine she'd ingested had begun to ease her torment. "Sleep now, love. You shall find yourself in a better state tomorrow."

"Rand," she responded as though drunk. "Don't do anything stupid, anything you'll regret."

He leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "Nothing done for you shall ever be regretted."

* * * * *

Rand manned the helm through the dark bay. He'd sailed it often enough that he no longer required a local pilot to navigate the area. With the dead reckoning combined with his experiential knowledge, he was confident they could reach Nassau with little problem.

The warning Skylar had given him haunted him. There were coves aplenty in the region. A lighter-weight ship could easily take another if the crew were drunk, unaware, or just lax on watch. Even though Cutler's ship had been seriously damaged, the man was vengeful enough to throw prudence overboard and attempt another attack on *Red Sky*.

"Quartermaster!" he called.

Frederick Bonnie came running. "Sir?"

"Post a half-dozen men on each side of the ship. 'Cutler may yet be in these waters. I'd not have him sneak up on us unaware."

"Aye, sir."

Rand continued a steady course, until he heard the lookout call, "Land ho! Starboard."

"Keep a sharp eye, mates. Give report of your soundings at every turn of the glass."

Rand gripped the wheel, altering course as he heard the information relayed. With the help of the Almighty, they'd sail into the harbor of Nassau without mishap.

* * * * *

A warm puff of air woke Skylar. She opened her eyes to see Rand staring down at her, concern in his deep-blue eyes. His large hand stroked her hair, his touch comforting.

"How are you feeling, missy?"

A good question. She closed her eyes and concentrated. For the moment, she was pain free, although how much longer the effects of the oxycodone would last she couldn't guess. "Okay, I guess."

"Are you able to move about?"

She nodded and then sat up. "What's going on, Rand?"

“We’ve arrived.”

The smile on his face matched the tone of his voice, but the worry in his eyes didn’t abate.

“I’m so sorry.” She hated his seeing her incapacitated by the pain she’d experienced earlier.

“Here now, there is no need to apologize.” He wrapped an arm about her shoulder and helped her stand.

“Rand, please.” She forced her voice to sound strong. “There is no need to help me.” A gentle lapping of water slapped the ship. Noises from the dock mingled with the cry of gulls and drifted into the great cabin. “What happened?”

“We’ve reached harbor at Nassau without incident.” There was a smile in his voice, as if he was happy she’d been wrong.

“Without incident?” She furrowed her brows and made her way to the hole in his room. “How can that be? What did you do?”

“We took an aggressive course through the night. I saw the ship you warned about. They were unprepared for our passage so soon, and we sailed past without incident.”

She sighed heavily. Thank God. He hadn’t listened entirely, but he hadn’t dismissed her warning totally out of hand, either. Skylar turned to say something else to her pirate, but the words dissipated as if they had been nothing but imagined mist.

Rand wore a dark blue velvet dress coat edged with gold braid, and a tri-corner hat complete with a jaunty feather. His trousers were still filthy, but he’d put on silk stockings secured with garters, and dark leather shoes with silver buckles. He looked every bit the romantic pirate she’d envisioned when reading his journal. “Aren’t you a handsome sea dog.”

His brilliant smile warmed her heart. “I shall escort my love to the finest inn, see to it you are properly cleansed and dressed, and then escort you to the home of my friend, the acting governor of these parts.”

“What are we waiting for?”

His smile widened. “For the rest of the crew to depart *Red Sky*.”

* * * * *

True to his word, Rand escorted Skylar to the finest inn Nassau offered. The harbor town bustled with activity. Women in colorful long dresses and fancy matching millinery strolled the streets on the arms of male companions.

The building, a two-story construction, was run by a white proprietor and his wife, plus several black slaves. “Rand,” Skylar whispered after she saw the man backhand a young girl, “we can’t stay here. Slavery is illegal and morally reprehensible.”

“Skylar,” he responded earnestly, “there is no place in Nassau that would meet your approval.”

“But --”

“Society may be different in your time, but not here. To raise a ruckus would only draw attention to you that we can ill afford until Cutler is dealt with.”

He had a point, but she didn’t like it.

They approached the innkeeper at the bar. Rand didn’t appear to take her protest seriously. Skylar’s temper simmered.

“Innkeep,” Rand called in a friendly, authoritative voice. “Your finest room and a hot bath.”

The man looked Rand up and down, taking in the richness of his clothes and eyeing the pistol in his bandolier. “For the both of you?”

“Nay. This boy will be fetching my belongings while I retrieve my lady wife from her berth.”

Skylar contained her surprise at Rand’s mention of a wife and listened as the two men haggled back and forth over the cost of the room in shillings until both were satisfied.

Finally, the innkeeper handed Rand a long, thin key that reminded her of an old-fashioned jailor's key.

They left the inn, and Skylar squinted against the bright tropical sun shining in her eyes. "Wife?"

The impish light of teasing resided in Rand's eyes. "How else will you obtain a room with a hot bath?"

The thought of warm water washing the blood and dirt from her skin helped make his argument plausible. "Where next?"

"I've a lady friend here that should be able to help you with your trousseau."

In another roundabout way, Rand was talking about marriage. Were the legalities of a marriage a major concern to him? After all, she'd read of his conquests as a pirate. Bedding a woman didn't require a lifelong commitment. "Trousseau? Isn't that usually reserved for a *bride*?"

Rand shrugged, missing her emphasis. "You have need of female clothing."

He moved to take her by the elbow, then dropped his hand. The expediency of his decision made sense. Until she looked and dressed like a woman, it would appear odd for one male to take the arm of another in such a public venue.

They continued down the wooden walk, rounded a corner, and walked two more blocks before stopping at what appeared to be a two-story home. Rand knocked solidly on the door.

A large black woman answered. "Why, Cap'n Jamison, you be a sight." Her ready smile was infectious.

"Holy Baldridge, please meet..." He hesitated a moment.

Skylar stuck out her hand. "I'm Skylar Creighton, a friend of Rand's. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"A friend of Cap'n Jamison is a friend of mine, to be sure."

“Miss Creighton will be needing more appropriate attire, Holy.”

The woman laughed and held the door wide for them. “’Tis hard to be a lady and a pirate both. Come in, the both of ya.”

Skylar smiled. Holy’s happy attitude was contagious. “Today, I believe I’d much rather be a lady.” She looked down at her legs. “The stains and the stench are a powerful combination in arguing against piracy.”

Holy nodded. “I think I can find something for ya to wear until you have some proper clothing made.” She guided Skylar toward the back of the house. “Rand, hep yerself to some of John’s better drink. The man would have my hide if’n I offered you some of that Jamaican water.”

Rand’s hearty laugh followed them into a room with different pieces of material strewn about on various items of furniture. “You seem to keep busy, Mrs. Baldridge.”

“I’m keepin’ the mister honest. Now don’t ya be callin’ me missus. ‘Holy’ is jest fine.” She looked Skylar over. “You need to get out of what yer wearin’ if I’m to get a proper measurement.”

“Sure.” Skylar scrambled out of the ruined breeches and perspiration-stained tunic.

Holy studied Skylar a little longer, took measurements of her bust, waist, and hips, then went to a wardrobe standing against the far wall. After opening the doors, Holy pulled out a plain dove-gray skirt. “’Tain’t much, but will fit ya reasonable well until I get ya some proper clothes made.” She paused. “How long will you and the Cap’n be in Nassau?”

Holy’s question was a good one. “I don’t really know. He needs to resupply the ship and find additional hands to work her. He said something about visiting the governor too.”

At her statement, Holy tsked and held out a stay. “The fever took the governor and his missus not more than a fortnight ago.”

“The fever?” Skylar wracked her mind, trying to remember what she knew of illnesses and the tropics. Perhaps malaria or -- “Yellow fever?”

“Breathe in, child.” Holy nodded as she laced up the stays, tied pockets on around Skylar’s waist, and then held out a white petticoat. “Step in.”

Skylar did as asked, then stood still as Holy laced up yet another torture device around Skylar’s ribs. Finally, Holy held out the grey skirt. “Mosquitoes,” Skylar gasped. “Keep netting over your windows and beds. Don’t let them bite you.”

“Turn.”

Again, Skylar followed Holy’s order. Behind her, she felt Holy move the skirt and pin it over the lower layered cloth.

“It will do ya. Ya won’t look right fashionable ’til I make yer clothes, but you’ll pass.” She spun Skylar back around. “Thank you for the information.”

Together the women marched to the parlor, where they found Rand sitting, talking earnestly to a white man. “That would be my husband, John,” Holy said.

Rand jumped to his feet and hurried to Skylar’s side, taking her hand within his. “You are lovely.”

Just as suddenly, he got down on his knees. “In front of these witnesses, Skylar Creighton, I ask for your hand. Would you do me the honor of being mine in marriage?”

Chapter Fourteen

Skylar blinked down at the handsome man at her feet. Looking into his eyes, she saw all the love she could ever hope for from one man. But was the love he felt for her, or for his deceased wife? He squeezed her hand as if to give her encouragement to respond. “Rand,” she gasped. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes. My life will be completed with you in it, Skylar.”

All doubt fled. He hadn’t confused her with Emma. Even if they never managed to get the ceremony performed, she had comfort in the fact he wanted a permanent relationship. Even though such a union wouldn’t last long. Her decision was remarkably easy. Far easier than she’d imagined, although tinged with melancholy. “You know we won’t have long.”

“I’ll take all the days with you the Almighty will grant. Not one of us knows what He hath numbered for us.” His wicked grin melted her sadness. “Besides, I’d make an honest woman of you, Skylar Creighton.”

Holy Baldridge outright laughed, and her husband snorted. Skylar felt her face redden. “Rand!”

He stood, never letting go of her hand, then pulled her to him and spun her about. “You have made me a happy man, my love.”

Skylar giggled. “Stop, Rand. You’re imposing on the hospitality of these good people.”

Abruptly he stopped and, with his arm secure about her waist, brought her to his side. “My intended has made a point. Would you be so kind as to include a dress fit for a wedding among the garments you’re making, Mrs. Baldridge? And when they’re ready, would you see they are delivered to the Bloated Goat?”

“Yes, Cap’n Jamison. If ya don’t mind my askin’, when would ya be marryin’ Miss Skylar?”

Rand’s laugh echoed through the room, and Skylar felt his grip tighten. “As soon as you are done with the dress.”

* * * * *

They returned to the inn, and Rand followed Skylar up the stairs to their room. Once inside, he shut and locked the door and then whirled her around and forced her against the roughhewn wood.

“I’ve been wanting to kiss you since you said yes, missy.”

He peppered her cheeks and her neck with tiny kisses, the effect intoxicating. Skylar’s heart pounded in anticipation of making love to the dashing pirate who now held her body along with her heart. She wrapped her arms around his neck and sighed. “Rand, are you absolutely sure this is the course you want to take?”

“Marrying you?” He whispered the words against the column of her throat, then moved to nibbling her earlobe. “I’ve rarely been so confident of a decision.”

Skylar was about to respond when someone knocked solidly against the door.

“Bath,” a muffled female voice called from the other side.

They broke away from one another as if they were kids caught necking in the high school parking lot. Skylar stifled a giggle and moved toward the single window of the room.

A large bed was the room's centerpiece, a wardrobe sat against a wall, and in the corner was a screen which she assumed afforded one privacy for using a chamber pot.

Rand unlocked the door, and the girl they had seen the innkeeper slap earlier struggled with another girl to carry an awkward metal container reminiscent of a short watering trough. Skylar was about to ask Rand to help the girls when he kicked the door wide and lifted the trough from their arms. The girls sighed, and they bowed their heads.

God, they shouldn't be so subservient; they were people, not pack animals. "Let's put this in the center of the room, shall we?" Skylar said to break the tension she felt.

Rand favored the girls with a smile, and they made a soft twittering noise, as though he'd done something embarrassing. The pair quickly left the room. "They shall be back with your water shortly."

Skylar peered into the metal container and frowned. "This is going to take some time to fill."

"Aye. But nothing is too good for you, missy."

She glanced up at him, thrilled he would go through such efforts on her behalf, yet sad that it took slave labor to fulfill her desire. "Rand, would you slip them a few shillings when they're done? Perhaps they can save enough to purchase their freedom. I don't like to think of them going through such efforts just for me, or of them being abused by the proprietor."

Rand took her into his arms and held her tightly. "You have a kind and gentle heart, my Skylar. I'll see that the women are properly rewarded and taken care of."

Beneath her ear she heard the solid, steady beat of his heart. The sound encouraged her, strengthened her when she didn't realize she even had need of encouragement and strength.

A knock sounded against the partially open door and the girls entered, each carrying two buckets, steam rising from the tops. With deft movements they emptied their containers, and as they departed one said, "We'll be back right quick with more."

“You should undress now if you want to bathe in hot water,” Rand told Skylar.

Standing on tiptoe, she kissed Rand on the cheek and went behind the divider.

Skylar continued to delight Rand. Her concern for others so beneath her status was the very thing legends of saints were made of. And she was his. His foul-mouthed, beautiful, saintly woman, soon to be his wife a second time.

He slipped the girls five shillings each when they completed their tasks. “Take care to use this money wisely. If you have need of guidance, visit the seamstress, Mrs. Baldrige.”

Tomorrow he’d secure their freedom and see they apprenticed to John and Holy, who would not only teach them, but treat them well.

Closing the door, he locked it behind them. “You can come forth.”

He turned and watched Skylar come around the silk screen, gorgeous in her nakedness. He wanted her in his bed, now, but she’d spoken frequently of the need for a higher level of hygiene. For her sake, he fought the lustful beast within, knowing the delight of her body would be shared in a short while. “The water should be of comfort to you. The last two buckets were not as hot as the others.”

She sank to her knees at the side of the tub and swirled her hand in the water. “Why are you still dressed?”

Rand shook his head. “What?”

“I mean...” She ran her tongue over her bottom lip. “...that this tub is big enough for two.” She stood and stepped into the water. “You should join me.”

The beast within roared and slammed against the prison Rand had moments ago created. Lust hit him hard at the thought of sharing the private bath. No lady of his acquaintance would suggest such a thing. The mere thought...the mere thought was arousing as hell. This woman was to be his wife. That she would enjoy such intimacies was a blessing, to be sure.

He unfastened his bandolier, untied his sash, and shed the remainder of his clothing as fast as he could.

Skylar nodded at his burgeoning erection. "I take it you approve?"

In a few short steps, he gathered up the bathing cloth from the nearby stand and sank into the warm water. "The women of your time are most remarkable if they treat their men to such pleasantries."

"The women of my time enjoy having sex and don't see it as a duty to be suffered."

Skylar stretched, her ankles resting atop Rand's thighs. It would only take a slight movement for the soles of her feet to caress his length. Dear God in Heaven. As if reading his mind, she splashed water between his legs.

"Earth to Rand, earth to Rand. Are you there?"

The teasing sound of her words brought him back to his senses. "Turn around."

Drawing her legs up against her chest, she wriggled until her back was to his chest. He cupped his hands and dipped them into the warm water, letting their contents spill over her short hair. "Will you let it grow?"

"My hair? It hasn't been long since I was a kid." She looked at him over her shoulder, her gaze searching his face.

Rand leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "I'd like to see your hair long, if you're willing."

A smile turned her lips upward and lit her eyes with happiness. "For you, Rand, I'd be willing."

She leaned against his chest, and another wave of lust and love coursed through his body. For Skylar he fought the immediate need to be buried deep within her body. He gently pushed her forward and scooped more water onto her hair. Nudging his fingers beneath the strands, he caressed her scalp.

A soft moan left her lips. "That feels awesome."

“I’m not sure what you just said, but I liked the sound of it.”

She laughed, and for a moment he remembered Emma and their brief time together. Then Skylar shimmied further against him, brushing against his groin, and he was back in the present with a vixen who knew all too well how to fuel his lust.

Withdrawing his fingers from her hair, he poured more water over her head. As the water fell, he massaged her shoulders, his fingertips caressing the upper swell of her breasts. She gasped, a sound of longing that delighted his ears and soul.

“I think it’s my turn.”

The huskiness of her voice had him wondering what she planned. “For?”

She slipped forward and turned around. “To wash your hair.”

Rand acquiesced by bowing until his head neared the water. “Do not tarry, missy. The water is cooling, and there is more to wash.”

Skylar poured water over his hair, massaging his scalp as he had hers, running her fingers through its length. She repeated the procedure several times, but on the last pass, she let her hand trail over his chest and caress his manhood.

Enough was enough! He had to have her, be in her, make love to her.

Reaching out, he retrieved the soap from the stand and slid his hands under the water, scrubbing the soap between his palms. Foam bubbles escaped his fingers.

He lifted her calf and covered it with the soap and then rubbed with the cloth, caressing the firm muscle, remembering the feel of her around him when they’d made love.

A floral scent drifted to his nose, imprinting this moment on his mind, his heart, his spirit. He’d never let her die again if he could do anything to prevent it.

He lowered her leg and set to work on the other. Her little moans of pleasure told him more than any words could express. Leaning forward, he placed her calf back in the water, soaped up his hands again, and set to work on her waist, her ribs, her ample, responsive breasts.

With reverence he cleansed and rinsed the sensitive flesh, her taut nipples calling him to partake. Partake he did. The hardened tips swelled within his mouth, his tongue licking and tasting her bounty.

“For the love of God, Rand, that feels so damn good.” She sat up taller and leaned forward, as if to give him better access to her breast.

Her hands found his and took the soap. Lathered, she trailed her hand over his shoulders, beneath his arms, down to his hands. Never before had he been touched this way. She was his as he was hers. Neither death nor time would separate them again.

He took in a shuddering breath, releasing her breast with a final lick.

“Hurry, Rand.”

Her entreaty matched his desire. His lips found hers, and then the water was splashing about them both as he lifted her from the tub and carried her to the bed.

He pulled back the quilt, pleased the bed sheets were clean. She’d been so humorous with her insistence on cleanliness before. The bed gave way beneath their damp bodies, and he straddled her hips, intent on providing her with pleasure in their union.

“Rand, I’ve imagined you loving me for so long.” She paused, her eyes filled with uncertainty. “But not this way.” She bit her lower lip. “Make my fantasy a reality.”

Her words puzzled him. “You do not like this style of coupling?”

“Oh, yes, but I’ve had this vision of you making love to me, with you as my captor and I as a virginal miss...”

He frowned, trying to make sense of her words. “You wish me to rape you?”

“No! Not that at all.” She reached up a hand and stroked his chin. “It’s pretend. You act as though you’re forcing me to succumb to your seduction. I know that you would never force yourself on me. I know also I would never stop you from making love to me.”

A game. She wanted to play a game in their bed. In hushed whispers at the men's club in London he'd heard of such activities. Until now, he'd thought it nothing more than boastful lies, had thought no woman would want to be treated thus.

"You wish me to take you rough and forceful."

"Yes," she whispered, her voice full of seduction and longing. "Be *my* fantasy pirate."

'Twas an easy thing to do. To give in to passionate lust and play the brute. He glanced about for his sash, leapt from the bed to pick it up off the floor. "Might I tie you?"

"Yes, oh, yes, please." But then a frown turned her lips. "But you can't ask me. You have to take charge and be, um, very pirate-like."

"Aye. I think I understand."

He scowled and climbed back onto the bed. In a theatrical voice he intoned, "Ye think to get away from me, do ya?"

Skylar's eyes widened, but a hint of a grin tipped her lips. Her voice was deceptively high as she wiggled beneath him, keeping her legs tightly together. "What...what are you going to do to me?"

"I shall have ye, tied to the mast if that is the only way to take ye." He pressed fully against her supple body.

Outside, the sounds of the day faded as residents of the town took to their beds to escape the heat. Inside, he burned to be buried within her channel.

He wrapped her wrists with the sash and placed her hands over her head. "And have ye I shall." He forced her legs apart with his hands and plunged his length into the heat between her thighs.

Rather than screaming, she let loose a moan of pleasure that nearly had him spilling his seed. "Quiet, wench. I've not yet had my fill of ye."

Her eyes widened. "Please, sir," she begged. "Don't hurt me."

He thrust harder. "I told ye to stay quiet." He placed a hand against her mouth.

Quick as a snake, her tongue lashed out against his palm, stroking the space between his fingers. It was as if she'd lit a fuse. Rand knew he was about to explode, but he forced himself to slow, to regain control until he could torment her as she was him. He withdrew his cock. "Vixen."

She attempted to say something, her mouth moving against his hand. "I'll remove my hand from you, but don't scream or..."

When she nodded, he lifted his hand.

"God," she begged, "please, don't stop."

He smiled, then trailed his wet hand to her ready entrance. Her unladylike fantasy allowed him a ferocious freedom in bed he hadn't allowed himself, as a Jamison gentleman, to experience. Sexual power roared through him. Rand sank three fingers into her primed body, pumping in and out until he felt her tremble. "For a captive, I think ye enjoy my plundering of yer treasures."

She shook her head, opened her mouth to protest, but he took her lips and claimed her as his own. When her tremors ceased, he removed his fingers and brought them to his nose. Her scent was heady, and he took a finger into his mouth and tasted her slightly salty moisture.

Lust filled her eyes as he watched her staring at him. He put his fingers to her lips. "Suck," he commanded.

The way she took his fingers into her mouth...by all that was holy, he wanted her to take his cock the same way. Instead, he fondled her breast until the nipple was a large peak, and then sucked it into his mouth.

Without mercy, he nipped and lashed the tip, not stopping until she moaned, "Now."

The agonized moan told him the game was over. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. He thrust into her body, her feminine sheath gripping him as though he were being milked. "Oh, God. Yes, Rand, yes."

“Missy,” he groaned against her lips. He placed tiny kisses along her jaw and then gently suckled her earlobe. Every soft mew, lusty moan, stroke of her fingers against his skin urged him to bring them both to completion.

How was it possible to want a woman this much, to need a woman this much? Being inside Skylar filled his soul, replacing the ache of loss he’d felt for Emma with a beauty that belonged only to the woman beneath him.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, and he thrust harder. She maneuvered her tied hands over his head and caressed his shoulders with her fingertips.

Throbs rippled deep within her body and caressed his rod, and then he, too, throbbed and swelled in her tight grip until his seed erupted in a hot gush.

Her game drained him. Had a woman ever brought him to such a point of exhaustion before? Rand lowered his head to her breast. Sweat dewed her skin. She lifted her arms from around his neck. Somehow he found the strength to release the sash from her wrists.

“That,” she said weakly, “was amazing.”

“Aye, you won’t have argument from me.”

Rand allowed himself to collapse onto the pillow beside her and rolled her into his arms. Despite the heat, they lay together awash in the power of their coupling.

Eyelids heavy, Rand had almost drifted to sleep when someone started pounding on the door.

Chapter Fifteen

Skylar pulled the quilt up to her chin as Rand strode toward the door in his birthday suit. His taut ass flexed and relaxed with each step, the strong muscles of his thighs beckoning her to take him to bed again.

She took a deep breath, thankful the effects of the medication still kept the pain of her cancer at bay, if indeed it was the cancer that had pushed her over her threshold. Today she appreciated the genes she'd inherited. Her sensitivity to medicine allowed the aftereffects of painkillers to linger. If the pain didn't return, she'd chalk up yesterday's experience to being overwrought, overstressed, and overworked.

Rand cracked open the door. "Bonnie! What are you doin' here?"

Skylar tried to peer around Rand's body, currently blocking the door. What would the quartermaster want with Rand now? In all the pirating adventures she'd ever read, making port was an opportunity to eat well and drink a lot as well as take the chance to find a woman to screw.

"Sir," Bonnie began, "while we were off-loading the injured, someone snuck aboard."

The muscles of Rand's back stiffened, and Skylar saw his fists clench. "And?"

The single word held barely contained anger.

“Well, sir, the great cabin...”

“Out with it, Bonnie!”

“The contents of yer chest were strewn about the room.”

Skylar gasped and clutched the quilt tighter. Had they been making love while Cutler searched for the sistrum?

Rand must have thought the same thing. He stalked back into the room and picked up his trousers, shirt, bandolier, sword, and pistol. He dressed in a flurry of arms and legs and material. “Stay here, missy. I’ll check for the sistrum.”

And then he was out the door.

* * * * *

Rand returned to Skylar just before the sun set. His news boded ill for them. He knocked against the door and entered.

Skylar slept on the bed, her relaxed state one he would not be able to emulate until the return of the sistrum. He could only imagine Owain’s ire when he discovered the piece was broken.

“Skylar,” he called softly, crossing the room to sit on the edge of the bed.

She opened her eyes, stretched, and yawned. “Rand.”

He loved hearing the smile in her voice, the warm welcome she had for him. “My love, I’m afraid I have bad news for you.”

Her eyes widened and she covered her mouth with both hands. “What,” she whispered through her fingers.

Rand took her hands from her face and held them tightly. “There is no easy way to tell you this, but Cutler has the sistrum.”

She rubbed her eyes with her free hand and then sat up with his assistance. “You’re sure?”

He nodded. "The silk bag was not in my room. We could not track him. I can only surmise he will try to use the power of the sistrum."

"He'll try to bring Emma back, but I'm already here." Skylar leapt from the bed and stepped into the first layer of her skirt. "At some point he will discover the sistrum is broken and will come looking for the other piece."

"I fear that as well. You are no longer safe in my company."

Rand watched her fasten the pockets about her waist and then tighten the laces of her stays. She kept her head bent, concentrating on dressing, but it did not stop her from speaking.

"I can't believe any woman would allow herself to wear so many heavy clothes in such heat, tied together like...like, I don't know what!" Skylar complained, tossing aside the stomacher Holy had given her.

"Rand, I am perfectly safe in your company," she went on as though her last eruption had not occurred. "However, the shard of the sistrum isn't."

To be sure, she had an excellent point, but if he could keep both Skylar and the broken bit safe at the same time, all the better. The hourglass was against them. He patted the edge of the bed in an invitation of intimacy that he wanted yet couldn't have, not if his nemesis was in the picture. All he could do was keep his tone light when the subject he would discuss was as weighty as an anchor. "Love, come and sit."

She sauntered toward him, sashaying her hips, her feet still bare. If Cutler hadn't stolen the sistrum, Rand would have allowed himself to enjoy her teasing gesture. The very one he'd provoked. He patted the mattress, and she sat near him.

"The stomach pains you had aboard *Red Sky*-- have they abated?"

Her eyes opened wide, the playfulness of a moment before gone. "I haven't taken any more meds, if that's what you're asking. I think I was overly stressed with the battle and the injuries and death, not to mention the whole boat thing in general."

“Tell me of your illness.”

The color, along with emotions, left her face, and Rand felt as if he looked at a white sheet in a snowstorm, blank, void, cold.

“Missy?” he said as gently as possible.

“Uh, why? Why do you want to know now, Rand?”

He stroked her hair. “Emma, she had pains. Her back, her stomach. Her stomach swelled as if she were with child.” He choked with remembrance of her pain. “Later...later she could barely stand to be touched, she ached so.”

“They told me they would have to cut me open to fully understand the involvement of the cancer.” Her fingers pulled at the coverlet. “If it was outside my uterus, the way the doctors suspected, it would require extensive surgery, surgery that could have kept me in bed ’til it was time for me to die. I didn’t want that, Rand. Not then, not now.”

He pulled her against him and held her to his side. Next to him she seemed small and petite and fragile. Much the way his Emma had been. But Skylar was more than what Emma had been. She’d embodied all the good of Emma and had become a woman of strength, forthrightness, and action, all uniquely Skylar.

Emma had kept her promise. She’d found her way back to Rand.

He would not lose her a second time.

“Listen, missy, and listen well. I love you, more than you can understand right now. My life was nothing but wandering the seas looking for you, empty yet hoping, and all the while trying to keep my neck from getting stretched on the yardarm. We are going to get you back to your time somehow, we are going to stop Owain Cutler, and we are going to be together as we were meant to be.”

“What you are suggesting isn’t possible Rand. If somehow I manage to get back to my time, how will you get there? What about the intervening, not years, but centuries?”

“You crossed time to come to me. There will be a way for me to come to your future. I am certain of it.”

She plucked at the threads of his jacket. “You have a faith that I don’t.”

A breeze ruffled the curtains at the window. So much to say and so little time. No, no time. He had to get Skylar back to her century, find a way to get to her before Cutler did. “When Emma died, she told me she would find me again. Now it is my turn. All I ask is that you trust me, that you trust what you have seen and experienced here.”

He lifted her head and looked into her eyes, bright and sparkling with the beginning of tears. “Now, missy, if I am to find you, I shall need to know as much as you can tell me.”

He gently gripped her chin, his lips brushing against her soft ones. “Trust our love.”

Skylar knew Rand was right, but she didn’t like it. She shared with him all the highlights of her life, detailing times and places and names and events. In essence, all that he’d not wanted to know about himself she revealed about herself. In the end, though, all the talking came down to one thing.

She was going back to the twenty-first century.

To die.

Alone.

By going back to the future to hide the piece of the sistrum, she would keep Cutler at bay for three hundred years. *Three hundred years?* “Rand. Why doesn’t Cutler die? He showed up in my shop not looking a day over forty, and he should have been nothing more than a pile of dust in a coffin somewhere.”

“Now that he has the bulk of the sistrum, my guess is he will have discerned its use and that it somehow prolonged his life.”

She disengaged herself from his arms and went to the window. Sitting on the ledge, she let the ocean breeze cool her face. She had much to be thankful for, yet regret filled her.

They should have had more time together. But from the moment she was told of her cancer, time had become nothing more than sand passing through the hourglass at a pace she couldn't check. She couldn't steal extra minutes, nor could she slow the steady step of Father Time, and now the moments she had with Rand were coming to an end, her memories of an unreal reality something no one of her acquaintance would begin to believe, much less understand.

The relentless perseverance with which Cutler would continue to seek the other part of the sistrum left her no choice. Against the wishes of her heart, she had to return to Denver.

"What would you have me do?" she asked, still staring out the window.

"Missy." The single word, whispered lovingly next to her ear, should have caught her by surprise, but this was Rand, her Rand, the man she'd crossed time for.

Leaping from her seat, she turned and found comfort in his arms. "You know I don't want to leave you, don't you?"

"Aye." One of his large hands stroked down her back in a repetitive, reassuring touch. "And you know I shall find you again, don't you?"

Did she? Rand had faith in Emma's words. Skylar, what did she have? Not faith in God, that was sure. "If you say you will, then you will."

He rested his chin atop her head. "You asked what I would have you do." His jaw bumped against her scalp when she nodded. "If I were to have my way, I'd have you stay with me always as my wife. We'd go back to England and be happy."

Skylar swallowed the lump in her throat. Just by his including the word "if," she knew a "but" was coming. "Buts" never boded well. She stiffened, preparing for the emotional blow.

"There is a place I've heard of here on New Providence. It is said to hold powers beyond human understanding. We shall go there and attempt to send you back to Denver."

His arms tightened around her, and for a moment she allowed herself to soak up the illusion of safety he presented. She held him tightly and willed her love for him to flow through her arms around his waist and her cheek pressed against his shoulder, in an effort to give him back some of what he gave her.

Abruptly he let go and turned his back to her. "Please," he begged, his voice thick, "do not make this more difficult than it already is."

* * * * *

"Holy's?" Skylar was confused. She'd assumed they would immediately head toward the region of the island he claimed held unnatural power. Instead his boots made a solid thunk against the boardwalk as he led Skylar along the same path they'd traveled once before. "Why are we coming here, Rand?"

He knocked on the door. "Holy was brought here from Africa. She knows things outside what is acknowledged in Christendom."

The front door creaked open. "Why, Capt'n Jamison and his intended, come in, come in."

"Thank you, Holy," Skylar said, still wondering what knowledge the former slave could have that Rand hadn't already acquired.

Holy led them through the house, to the parlor, and motioned for them to take a seat on a striped green-and-gold settee. "How can I be of service to you, Capt'n?"

"Are you acquainted with the ways of the Vodou?"

Holy gasped. "Capt'n Jamison, sir!" Her voice dropped to a terrified whisper. "Ya could get hung as a witch for speaking of it."

He grabbed Holy's hands and fixed her with a serious gaze. "Skylar is ill. I know there is a place said to have great mystical powers. The healing she needs is far beyond what a

simple parish priest can accomplish. She needs a true practitioner of Vodou to help her in a place of great power.”

The panic remained in Holy’s eyes. Skylar couldn’t blame the woman for being petrified. Acceptance of blacks and whatever form of religion they practiced was still a long way off.

Holy’s glance darted from one to the other several times. Rand’s request seemed to have stolen the words from her mouth.

A deep voice resounded through the parlor. “Do not ask her again if’n ya value the air you breathe.”

Chapter Sixteen

Rand jumped to his feet, and Skylar looked around the room, trying to find the source of the amazing voice.

“John Baldrige,” Holy scolded, now also on her feet. “Don’t you be threatenin’ my company.”

“I heard enough to know you aren’t going on a fool’s mission and getting’ yerself kilt.” He stepped from the shadows of a doorway at the far end of the parlor and turned toward Rand. “I’ll take you. Holy’s aunt, she lives in the forest, deep. I brought her out of Africa with Holy, but she never wanted the city ways. She can hep ya.”

Rand crossed the room and pumped John’s hand. “I’m afraid time is against us. Cutler stole a powerful talisman my Emma possessed. He’ll be wanting to find a Vodou as well.”

“In that case, the women need travel with us. Holy, change into yer pirating garb. It will make ridin’ easier.” John nodded at Rand. “I make the same suggestion for yer woman, Capt’n Jamison.”

“He makes a point.” Rand returned to her side. “We will be traveling in the dark on horseback. The journey would be easier without the skirts.”

Skylar couldn't agree more with John's suggestion. She nodded toward Rand and followed Holy out of the room.

"He must love you something fierce to ask this of John," Holy commented.

"I believe he does. More than that, he fears what Cutler may do with a powerful talisman. Will your aunt be able to help us?"

Each woman tossed her skirts and stays over a chair. "She is the only one in New Providence with knowledge of the old ways. She did not wish to settle in Jamaica, where more believers could be found, but wished to stay with what remained of her family clan." Holy pulled out breeches from a dresser in the room. "I took the liberty to wash them. Put them away right before sunset."

Skylar held up the fresh breeches. "I never thought I'd be happy to see these again so fast." She slipped them on over the shift, careful to cover the tied on pockets as well. The broken piece of the sistrum resided in one of them. She was about to ask for a belt of some sort when Holy handed her a piece of corded leather. Once finished, the two women headed back to the parlor.

"Do you ride, missy?"

"I've been on a horse before, but I've never controlled one."

The men glanced at one another. "You shall ride with me, then," Rand told Skylar.

John nodded toward Holy. "You, too."

If Holy had been about to say something, she wisely held her tongue. Both men had an intensity about them, as they checked their pistols and pulled the curtains, that discouraged argument.

"Cutler could be anywhere. I think it best if we draw little attention to our party."

Silence seemed the best option. Skylar followed Rand and stepped out into the night. Insects buzzed, but rather than a sweet symphony of sound, the noise provided an eerie backdrop for the assignation Rand wanted to occur.

He held out his hand and helped her onto a dark horse. The sistrum piece settled near her inner thigh. She grabbed the saddle, more afraid than she'd been so far on this trip back in time. What did she know of horseback riding and trekking through tropical forests? Nothing, absolutely nothing.

Then Rand was in the saddle behind her, his arms around her holding the reins and her fear abated. With him in control, she had nothing to worry about, at least not from the animal she rode.

They followed John and Holy until the buildings of Nassau were no longer visible behind them. The hoof beats of the horses, once a loud clatter, faded into a dull, modulated thump. Nothing stirred. The long leaves of the tropical plants kept most light from reaching the forest floor. A shiver of apprehension raced over Skylar's arms. Rand pulled her closer, so close she felt his heart pounding steadily through his chest.

A short time later, they stopped. "Shh," Rand whispered into her ear, as if she'd just spoken. His body tensed.

No way she was saying a goddamned word, the way his senses went on full alert. Instead, Skylar peered into the darkness, trying to ascertain what had Rand spooked.

A bird chirped, a pleasant lyrical sound in the gloomy night. Ahead, John and Holy moved forward, not much more than a dark blur blending into obscurity. To the right, a light flashed. "What was that?" she whispered, trying to control her alarm.

Rand leaned forward in the saddle and stroked the shell of her ear with his tongue. "Signal," he responded, right before he nipped her lobe.

Heat engulfed her. Her pulse leapt, but she wasn't sure if worry or lust had her heart pounding. If Rand was trying to confuse her, lessen her nervousness, he had found a surefire method to obscure the cause of her reaction.

Despite the signal, they continued on. She slapped at a mosquito and wiped her palm on the thigh of her pants, then swiped at her brow. Despite October, despite sunset, despite

the fewer layers of clothing she wore, her palm came away damp from perspiration. *You're going to love the Rockies, Rand, if you ever make it to Colorado.*

Another flash of light. John veered his mount toward the brief signal. Rand followed. A short time later, they entered a clearing, barely lit with cloud-diffused moonlight. On the far side, an indistinct mound nestled against the edge of the trees.

Nearing, Skylar saw more details emerge. Curved branches with large leaves crisscrossed one another to form a sort of thatched hut. But the branches weren't a dried brown. They still bore the color of living plants.

Rather than crossing the opening, John skirted the tiny glade, his head swiveling back and forth as though he expected someone to leap from the woods and attack at any moment. Even when they neared the shack, he stayed seated on his horse, nudging the mount behind the small shelter beneath the fronds of a giant palm tree.

Vines hung like knotted ropes around the shelter. Where was the door? Where was the person sending the light signal?

Skylar shifted in the saddle, and Rand held her tightly. "We must wait," he whispered.

The air around the edge of the clearing seemed cooler, but the long minutes of waiting silently made the atmosphere feel twice as heavy as what they'd traveled through. Tiny white flowers bloomed in the night as if the moon called to the blossoms to reveal their inner depths.

Someday, Skylar had planned on planting a moon garden. Moonflowers, white marigolds, maybe some oleander if it would grow, and other pale blossoms would have created a romantic vista for an enjoyable evening on the deck after sunset. Would have. Should have. Never would be.

Unbidden, Don Henley's husky voice crooned inside her skull...*and I know what's been on your mind, you're afraid it's all been wasted time.*

A light flashed and Skylar realized with a start that she hadn't seen anything mystical at all, nothing but a firefly sparking in the dark. She exhaled and relaxed against Rand's chest. Maybe she had wasted a lot of time in her life, not taken the opportunities to do and see the things she'd dreamed of, but she was here with Rand, and these past few days had not been wasted. She'd known love.

Suddenly, the horse shied.

"You!" a voice screeched.

Rand reined the horse into a spin until the animal halted and then faced the voice.

The sound came from a hunched-over black woman with hair disheveled and streaks of grey running through it. She lifted her hand and pointed at Skylar. "You," she squawked again. "Enter." She swept her ancient arm at them. "Others, do not."

Rand switched the reins to one hand and dismounted. Lifting his arms, he placed his hands around her waist and helped Skylar down. He drew her against his chest for a long moment and then kissed her forehead. "I shall be right here, waiting for you."

The old woman turned and gently pushed apart a pair of tangled vines. The vegetation barely moved, thus keeping the precise location of the entry concealed. "Sit."

Skylar did as she was told and sat on a large root. The floor of the shelter was spongy and the room smelled of herbs and damp earth. In the center of the room, a small fire smoldered, filling the area with a cloying smoke. Skylar swallowed back the need to cough, not wishing to offend the woman Rand hoped would help them.

"You," the wizened old lady continued as if they'd long been in conversation, "are filled with death."

Skylar felt her eyes widen. Her pulse fluttered at her temple. How could this woman know?

Holy's aunt sat in front of the fire. "Evil follows you."

Was she speaking of Owain Cutler?

“He holds da green dancing woman.”

The woman threw something onto the fire and smoke billowed. “You have her legs.”

Definitely creepy. Not even Holy knew about the broken piece of the sistrum Skylar kept concealed in the tie-on pockets beneath her breeches.

“You must return home.” She pitched another handful of stuff onto the flames. “Home but not.” The flames grew higher. “He comes for you among da words.”

The smoke filling the room coalesced, first into a column, then into a more distinct form...that of a man.

Skylar’s heart leapt to her throat, pounded as if it could outrun a racehorse, kept the air from filling her lungs. The smoke-man was tall, as tall as a doorway. A band of dark covered the area where his eyes would be. A long cloak drifted past his knees. A large hand lifted toward his face and pushed aside the dark band across his eyes.

Skylar screamed, and then her world turned as dark as the night outside.

Rand rushed the vines where he’d seen Skylar and the old one enter. His sword tangled in the boughs, and he viciously yanked it free, snapping several of the tendrils. The shanty had filled with smoke and Skylar lay prostrate on the floor, the old one sitting across from her, mumbling as she stared into the fire.

“What has happened?” he demanded, his voice loud and angry. He knelt at Skylar’s side, lifting her into his arms, stroking her face.

The old woman didn’t respond, just pointed a gnarled finger toward a tower of smoke in the corner.

Immediately, Rand saw what had brought about Skylar’s scream and subsequent faint. A lethal-looking version of Owain Cutler was fading into the smoke drifting from the shack.

“He comes.” The elderly lady swayed as she sat, a slow, hypnotic movement.

“Aye.” He didn’t need a Vodou to warn him of Cutler. “How can I get her back to her people?”

In his arms, Skylar had regained consciousness. “Rand.” She shuddered as she tried to sit up.

“Hush, missy.” He supported her against his shoulder, his arm wrapped around her as he helped her stand. “The Vodou is to tell us what we need to do to stop Cutler.”

“The evil one...holds power.” She shook her head and picked up a stick to stir the fire. “You need stronger. I make.”

She scrambled to her feet with the aid of a cane-like branch and pulled a hidden bag from the multitude of folds in her faded skirt. Along the back wall were various pieces of pottery. She reached into several, muttering or chanting; Rand wasn’t quite sure which. The bag swelled as she filled it with powders, herbs, even the sloughed-off skin of a snake.

The old woman turned and stared at them a long time. Her silent perusal made Rand nervous, but he kept silent and still, willing a good bit of his self-control into Skylar. “Chester. Seek the chester of the field.” She held the bag over the fire and chanted in a tongue Rand did not recognize. The flames of the fire licked higher, nearly touching the cloth bag.

Suddenly, she stopped. “Da green legs have power.” She opened her bag. The flames lowered.

Skylar turned to Rand, and he could see the question in her eyes. The old one knew about the sistrum, about its supernatural abilities. Rand nodded. “Give it to her.”

With a shaking hand, Skylar withdrew the shard from the pocket hidden beneath her pants and reached across the dying embers. The open bag released a foul-smelling odor. Rand nodded again, and Skylar dropped the broken bit of the sistrum into the mix.

“I rebuke da devourer for you. You will tread down da wicked; he will be ashes under da soles of your feet.” She cinched the bag shut. “Come.”

More agile than she let on, the old woman crossed the room and disappeared through the door.

Rand pulled Skylar behind him. Outdoors, Holy and John were getting off his horse. “No animals,” Holy whispered.

They rapidly traversed the edge of the clearing. Somewhere between where the shack lay hidden in the shadows and where they had earlier exited the woods, they veered onto a narrow path headed east. The scant light afforded by the moon all but disappeared. Palm fronds slapped at his face, but Rand didn’t mind as long as he kept them from striking Skylar.

In his gut, he knew his time with her was over. The burden of finding her in the future rest on his shoulders. Abruptly, they stopped moving.

“He is here,” the old one said in her creaky voice.

Chapter Seventeen

Rand pulled out his sword. He heard the sound of John's blade being pulled from his leather scabbard. It was good to know he had a worthwhile ally at his back.

Silently, the Vodou approached Rand and Skylar. She nodded when she saw his weapon drawn. "Keep the charm wit you," she said, shoving the bag with the shard into Skylar's hands. "Never let it go." She turned to Holy. "You --" And she returned her gaze to Skylar. "-- and you must say these words: 'Vindicate da weak, do justice to da afflicted, and keep evil from her. Return her to her people, to da time before affliction became her companion.' No matter what you see, do not let go; do not stop da chant." She pointed a bony finger at each of the women. "Do you understand?"

Skylar nodded, clutching the bag. "Rand."

He felt her tremble and for a moment allowed himself to feel her fear. The time had arrived when he would lose her to the centuries, but -- "You must promise, missy, that you will do all in your power to stay alive while I search for you. Everything."

"Oh, Rand," she said, and the two little words held more heartache, grief, and sorrow than he'd ever heard. "I will."

Nothing more remained to be said. He leaned over her and let his lips glide against the soft skin of her forehead, temple, cheek, and finally lips. Passion flared, intense, full of promise and a future Rand was determined to bring to fruition. "I love you."

Large tears rolled down her cheeks, yet she didn't sob or fall apart. "I love you," she managed before she turned away, following the other two women, chanting the words she'd been given to recite. "Vindicate the weak, do justice to the afflicted, and keep evil from her. Return her to her people, to the time before affliction became her companion. Vindicate the weak..."

The hairs on Rand's arms stood on end. The old one was right. Cutler lurked here, somewhere, waiting in the night. With sure steps he continued after the women, alert for any sign of trouble.

Ahead, he heard their whispered chant, and when they entered a tiny glen he knew they'd arrived at the mystical place he'd heard spoken of in reverent whispers while drinking draughts of ale late at night when the conversation turned serious. The area, no larger than a lady's flower garden, was surrounded by giant palms, but where there should have been blooms of vibrant color, there was only a flickering of pale moonlight on tiny mounds that reminded Rand of burial plots. His senses went on full alert.

The women held hands, chanting, chanting, chanting. "Vindicate, affliction, companion" drifted on the air. Where was Cutler?

He motioned to John, and the man began to search the edges of the circle as Rand started in the opposite direction. Suddenly, a gust of wind rattled the fronds, and Cutler was revealed leveling his pistol at the group of women.

Rand sliced through the dark with the flat of his sword, knocking the weapon from Owain's hand, sending it flying toward one of the mounds. "Cease," he commanded, but already Owain was drawing his sword.

"Never. You took Emma from me. You shan't have her talisman too."

"It wasn't yours." The swords sang a song of death in the clearing. "Twas a gift from her father."

"No! I gave her the sistrum of Hathor." Owain blocked an overhand swing. "She only believed the gift from her father."

"You lie!"

Back and forth the two men dueled, all while the chanting of the women grew louder, more insistent, more frantic as they danced in a tight circle. On the far side of the glade, John fought the single henchmen Cutler had brought with him.

"Where is the rest of it, Rand? Why did you break it? I need it whole to bring Emma back to me."

Their dance with death brought them closer to the women, who were spinning faster and faster. The three women appeared to be in a trancelike state. Rand gazed into Skylar's pale face, dripping with sweat. Eyes wide open, she continued to chant.

"Emma?" For a moment, Owain dropped his guard. "How did you get her back, you bastard!"

His thrusts grew frenzied in his anger. Rand parried every blow until he finally disarmed his adversary and knocked him to the ground. Cutler's sword flew toward the circle of women. The lack of a weapon didn't stop Cutler's attack. He spun on his back like a tortoise on its shell and clipped Rand's ankles, toppling him to the ground. The impact knocked Rand's sword from his hand, and it skidded into the high vegetation at the edge of the clearing.

The two men twisted and writhed on the rough ground. "I won't let you take her from me again!" Cutler screamed, rolling toward a small mound and picking up his pistol, then scrambling to his feet, the gun pointed at Rand. "She belongs to me, and when I have the idol in one piece, I *will* have her back again, far from you and your traitorous black heart."

“Fool, it was *your* lecherous impatience that drove Emma to me that day! She never belonged to you. Your being my half-brother was all that saved you from certain death.”

The chanting grew louder. Soon, soon he hoped the power would come forth from the broken bit of the sistrum, the piece that had brought Skylar to him. He had to hold Owain off long enough to give her the chance she needed to get back to her world.

Cutler took aim, and in that moment Rand knew what all the pirates and soldiers and mercenaries had said was true. Every high point, every low point of his life winked by as if painted in miniature and put on short museum display. The women he'd had, the men he'd killed, the day he met Emma, the wedding, the death of his father, the loss of their son, her illness, and her final promise.

He'd expected Owain to shoot him, but instead Owain twisted and ran toward the circle, taking aim at the women. Jumping to his feet, Rand ran after him. In the circle, a blue light glowed around the women, who continued to chant, “Return her to her people, to the time before affliction became her companion -- ”

Rand heard the hammer come back on the pistol and, before he thought further, leapt at Cutler's back just as the night exploded.

Despite the dizziness the spinning created, Skylar saw Rand fighting Owain Cutler. With each turn of the circle, it seemed a wall lifted around them, blocking out the rolls and punches, sparing her the worst of the sight. She grasped the amulet bag as if her life depended on it, her knuckles turning white.

Then she saw Owain Cutler raise the pistol and aim it at Rand. Unexpectedly, the man then turned and sprinted straight at her group, the gun pointed their direction.

The next thing she knew, blue light exploded around her and a weight gripped her wrists. She looked down and saw Cutler attached to her arm like a leech. She screamed and kicked wildly at him as he tried to wrest the amulet from her hand.

The spinning and flipping she'd experienced when she first landed in Rand's cabin days ago seemed to catch her assailant off guard. Another vicious kick, coupled with a bite, and Cutler finally let go, screaming as he went tumbling through the void.

Now all that remained was for Skylar to continue the chant and hang on to the bag with all her might. But something felt wrong. She looked at her hands and realized she held nothing but air. In the void, she heard Cutler's parting curse, and then she saw the bag with her shard floating away, in a direction different from either of them. She didn't hold the shard, but neither did Cutler.

The tumbling stopped, and she landed with a thump into a soft pile of...trash?

It was Monday, judging by the fullness of the container. She dug through the trash and searched for a recent newspaper. Yes! It was Monday the first. Cutler wouldn't find her until Wednesday at the earliest.

She scrambled to her knees and hauled ass out of the dumpster.

* * * * *

"Ms. Phelan, are you familiar with an object called a sistrum?" Skylar drummed her fingers on the top of her desk. If anyone would know about a weird object associated with otherworldly powers, it would be Audra Phelan. Over the years, Ms. Phelan had purchased several first editions from Skylar's shop. They had met shortly after Sky's Mile High Books opened, and they'd struck up a cordial friendship via the phone.

"Just what I've learned in books and museums. Why?"

Why indeed. How did you explain to someone that you'd just traveled through time to meet the man of your dreams, come home again, and prepare to fight the one individual that could end any hope you had?

Skylar cleared her throat. "I've just, uh, had a rather unusual experience involving a part of a sistrum."

“Really?”

There seemed to be a bit more interest. Encouraged, Skylar went on. “You’re going to think that this is absolutely absurd, but I traveled back in time via a sistrum.”

“You did?”

Yep, Audra Phelan thought she’d lost her mind. It was there in those two tiny words.

“Look, I *know* it sounds crazy, but I landed on the ship of Rand Edward Jamison, two days ago.”

“Miss Creighton -- ”

“Without going into the insane details, if I should get my hands on this piece of alabaster again, would you know of a curator who might be interested?”

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone. “Miss Creighton, this is extremely odd. My office was recently contacted about a sistrum, a broken sistrum. A collector of Egyptian artifacts was hoping to verify the age of the piece he’d come into.”

Audra paused again, and Skylar’s heart was in her throat. Audra had to mean Cutler. Who else would try to authenticate an artifact like a sistrum? Egyptologists would know what they had when they uncovered the relic. Logic told her that her nemesis was only trying to see if a museum had the missing handle piece. Cutler was probably systematically going through every museum in the world.

“Miss Creighton, a Mr. Owain Cutler is there right now, working with the Denver Museum of Nature and Science.”

* * * * *

The sunset was a welcome relief to Rand. Concealed in the shadows, he had a much better chance of surprising Cutler before he hurt Skylar or killed her friend. It had taken longer than he’d anticipated to find Skylar in her home town, but once the bookstore opened, he recognized the name and located her.

And waited.

To interrupt the flow of her life as it was in the twenty-first century went against all he knew and believed. She had to experience the ups and downs on her own in order to become the woman he'd fallen in love with. Not that he hadn't kept an eye on her once he found her.

Nights were the hardest. He'd wanted to come to her so many times and hold her as she slept, make love to her until she couldn't walk, simply talk with her. So many of those nights, he'd spent waiting.

Now, after nearly ten years of watching her and her business, the time was here. The time to reinsert himself into her life, fulfill the promise he'd made her three hundred years ago.

He'd left her a simple note, on the windshield of her car early this morning: *Leave the back door unlocked.*

Did she remember him? Remember their few days together before Cutler interrupted their future? He hoped so. Had the Voudou spell done exactly as chanted, taken her back to a time before her affliction?

If the door opened from the alley, then she'd known he'd written the note. If not, he'd have to go in the front and lose all element of surprise.

He leapt from the top of the building adjacent to the bookstore and landed easily on his feet. The broadsword he carried was concealed in the long length of the dark duster he wore. The coat billowed, then settled around him not, unlike the cloaks he'd used in previous centuries.

Over the years, he'd watched Cutler, tempted to kill him on more than one occasion. But Rand didn't know where Cutler kept the sistrum, and he couldn't bring himself to kill the man he'd loathed for eons.

Perhaps he was a fool. Frederick Bonnie, quartermaster of the *Red Sky*, the only man who knew Rand's secret, certainly thought so. Bonnie had been the only one Rand trusted with his life. Their relationship was more that of brothers than the tie Rand had with his own flesh-and-blood brother.

The very man who would in a few minutes accost Skylar.

Rand turned the handle, pleased when he didn't meet the resistance of a lock. With slow, deliberate steps, he entered, scoping out the room, taking up a position just behind her office door.

Not long now. Not long at all.

Chapter Eighteen

“He cut me!”

As if on cue, Rand watched Skylar aid the injured man, helping him through her office and into a back room, where she could tend his injuries. He’d heard her talking to herself, making her plans, thinking ahead. She’d already called 9-1-1 before William entered the shop. The paramedics would be on the way to the back entrance.

Already the tide turned in Rand’s favor. This was history freshly written, and the end was unknown to any.

“I followed your bloody trail in here, you homeless bastard,” Cutler’s menacing voice called. “You’re nothing but street scum and trouble.”

Through the partially open blinds covering Skylar’s small office window, Rand watched Cutler advance toward the door. In the rear, small noises, like those a person hiding would make, drifted through the air.

“Now, boy,” Cutler said, entering the room, headed toward the sounds, “I can make this quick, or I can make your death linger for days.”

Rand stepped from behind the door, sword in hand. “As can I, Owain.”

Cutler spun around. “Jamison,” he snarled. “What are you doing here?”

“I might ask the same of you, except I already know the answer. You won’t get the remainder of Emma’s sistrum.”

Cutler’s dark eyes narrowed. “I’ve tracked it three hundred years. Don’t think you’re going to stop me now.”

“Oh, but I intend to.” Rand thrust with his sword, but Cutler danced away and pulled his sword out of an umbrella casing.

“I should have killed you on New Providence.” Cutler jabbed, his blade singing down the side of Rand’s.

“Aye, but you didn’t.” Rand lunged, forcing his opponent to withdraw several steps. “You are as greedy a bastard now as you were then. You hoped to take Emma from the circle. But the circle took her first.”

Owain answered with a series of powerful blows. “Aye, but the circle took me as well.”

Rand met the succession of strikes and altered the line of attack by passing his blade beneath Owain’s and forcing the sword up. A moment later, he’d grasped the hilt of Owain’s sword and forced the blade from his hand. The steel bounced on the carpet and came to a rest near the side of Skylar’s desk. “Admit defeat.”

“Never! As long as I have the sistrum, you shall never beat me.”

“Then you leave me no option.” Rand lifted the hilt of his own sword and smashed it against Owain’s skull. His half-brother crumpled to the floor.

Rand knelt and searched Owain’s pockets, withdrawing the blue silk bag that once housed Emma’s sistrum. It only remained to be verified that the ancient artifact still resided in the bag.

Hands shaking, Rand opened the bag. Relief surged through him. The sistrum was his once again. Skylar would be safe.

“Rand!” his woman screamed, and then an explosion of sound tore through the air.

He spun to see Skylar grasping the pistol he'd thought didn't work and Owain clutching his chest, blood spreading from his wound as he fell to the carpet. He knelt by his half-brother's side, shaking his head. "Why?"

"She's mine," Owain gurgled through the blood oozing from his mouth. "Always will be."

"No," Rand said simply. "She had a heart of gold; she gave of herself, of her wealth, of her soul. She could never love anyone as full of hate as you. Not when you tried to take that which she would freely give."

"Your fault." Owain's breath came shorter, his words more difficult to understand. "Mother should never...have married...Jamison."

Beside him, Rand sensed Skylar's approach. She knelt beside him and held Rand's hand. "Is he...?"

"No, but he is dying." Sadness crept into Rand's voice. Owain never understood the responsibility of being the eldest, never understood why he wasn't entitled to the Jamison lands or why his father had gambled away the only home Owain knew. He'd always resented being a second-born son, continually conniving to take what wasn't his. Even Emma.

"Look!" Skylar gasped.

The blood had stopped bubbling from Owain's mouth and had already turned a rusty red. His skin took on an ashen hue and then weathered, as if he'd spend the past three hundred years at sea. Eventually, his skin lost shape, caved in on itself, and collapsed into dust.

A dull sizzle filled the room, and then even his half-brother's clothing evaporated. Nothing was left behind, not a drop of blood, not a single thread. In the distance, sirens wailed.

Rand turned to Skylar, kissed her gently, and stood. "I have to go."

* * * * *

Several hours later, after dealing with the boys in blue, Skylar headed home, exhausted. The evening hadn't turned out quite like she'd expected, with the exception that William had worn the extra jacket she'd given him the day before and the padding had kept Cutler's sword from entering as deeply as it had in her previous experience.

Rand had disappeared, nearly as completely as Cutler's body. If it hadn't been for the fact that she had both pieces of the sistrum, she would have thought the whole thing one huge, tremendous nightmare. As it was, the proof lay in the small safe where she kept her till and the operational cash for the day.

The EMTs had carted William off to the hospital, labeling him as nothing more than a drunken street bum who'd gotten into one too many altercations. The questions the police and then the detectives asked seemed to go on forever, but eventually they'd thanked her for being a good citizen and went away to file their reports, assuring her they'd be in contact should more questions arise.

Which brought her to closing up the shop, shoving her hands into the pockets of her jacket to stay warm, and walking to her car for the long ride home. Two days had passed for her and three centuries for Rand. She'd been delighted to find the note on her car, thrilled he'd been able to locate her after so much time had passed in his life. He'd found her, but now he was gone. What did that mean?

"Thinking such deep thoughts won't keep you safe, missy."

She spun, a hand on the pepper spray she kept in her coat pocket. "Rand," she gasped. "You scared me."

He neared, and she saw the tiny lines around the edges of his eyes, eyes that were both sad and concerned. Lifting a short strand of hair, he inhaled. "God, I've missed you."

She'd missed him as well, but somehow saying so paled when she considered her two days to his three hundred years. Instead, she stepped closer, into the welcoming circle of his arms. "Why'd you leave?" she finally asked.

“Did the police believe the ravings of your friend?”

“No.”

He pulled her to his side, and they continued to walk in the light of the streetlamps, his arm wrapped securely around her shoulder. She felt at once both safe and worried. Rand hadn’t answered her question, and her stomach twisted with fear that this time when he left, it would be forever.

They crossed the street and entered the parking garage where her bright yellow VW Bug sat alone. Somehow Rand managed to fold his legs into the tiny space on the passenger side of the car.

She put the car into gear and pulled out onto Broadway. “What’s wrong?”

“Three hundred years is a long time. I can’t get my fill of you.”

They approached the I-25 interchange, and Skylar headed south. “It’s only been two days for me, Rand, and I can’t get my fill of you.” Pavement disappeared beneath the Bug’s wheels. “Will you stay?”

“With you?”

Was that a note of hope in his voice? “Of course. Where else would you stay?”

Too late she realized he’d been surviving on his own for years without her help. He had a place to stay, probably had several.

“Turn west on Hampden. We’ll go to my place.”

“West? Do you live on one of those big Cherry Hills estates or something?”

“Something like that.” He grabbed her hand, his fingers lacing with hers. “I’ve accumulated a degree of wealth over the years.”

Rand fell silent, and the worry sat in Skylar’s stomach like the anchor she remembered on *Red Sky*. Whatever it was, he wanted to be on his home turf.

He directed her down a few more streets, and then they were at the gated, paved drive lit with footlights, and Skylar was entering a world as different to her as her days aboard Rand's ship.

She pulled to a stop in front of a staired entry, framed with columns. Before she could blink, Rand was at her door, opening it, shepherding her toward the mansion.

Then she was in his arms and he was carrying her over the threshold like a new bride. The worry in her stomach disappeared for a moment, only to return as heavy as the weight of a bowling ball. Something didn't feel right, and her senses went on alert. "Rand, please, you're scaring me."

He set her gently on her feet, then cupped her face in his large hands. "God, Skylar, I've waited so long for this." He peppered her face with kisses and finally found her mouth and kissed her deeply.

Call her stupid, but she wanted to hear from his lips that he desired her, that he wanted her with him, that he loved her. "For what?"

Instead of answering, he shook his head, grabbed her hand, and led her on a tour of the house. Every room dazzled her in some way, but it wasn't until they got to the master room that Skylar realized something was wrong. Horribly wrong.

Everything was black, and as far as she could tell, there wasn't a window in the room. "Why is it so dark in here?"

He took a deep breath as he led her to a divan set against one dark wall. Once she sat, he knelt at her feet. "I'm not the man you think I am."

"Of course you are." And then she stopped as if she realized she hadn't carefully thought things through. "Rand, what did you do..." She swallowed hard and gripped his hand. "...all these years?"

"I thought of nothing but finding you and doing what I needed to survive. It wasn't pleasant."

Her pulse pounding in fluttery futility against the delicate skin at her neck, along with an imperceptible -- to the human eye -- sheen of sweat breaking out on her brow, nearly distracted Rand. She was so damn beautiful, and it had been too long since he'd seen her, spoken with her, loved her. So many times, it had been tempting to give up, take the comfort he could find, and relegate the dream of reuniting with Skylar to the land of nightmares.

"What, Rand? What did you do?"

He released her hand and paced the edges of the room. Could she, would she, accept what he was about to tell her? His pulse beat in a syncopation only a musician would appreciate. If he breathed like a normal man, he would have sounded breathless, as though he'd just run a marathon. Instead, he simply, unemotionally replied, "I became one of the living dead, Skylar."

She crossed the room and placed her hand on his shoulder. "You became a vampire?"

He nodded, and her hand dropped from his body as if a live current of electricity ran through him. "My God."

She ran toward the door, and he slapped it shut just as she pulled it open. "Skylar, don't." His voice was husky, huskier than it had been in the empty, celibate years since she'd returned to her century. He turned her toward him, humbled by the tears running down her face.

"I made you a killer." She wept. "God, I wanted to be with you so badly, I didn't stop to think what you would have to do to get here."

"Missy, no, it wasn't that way." He had to help her see he hadn't killed indiscriminately. He'd lived off the condemned, people whose evil deeds would not be missed. "I took the absolute minimum, and when I was forced to...end a life, it was only of a person who preyed upon the weak, a person who abused his power over others and made the

lives of those beneath him a living hell.” He cupped her chin and tilted her head so she had to look at him, see the truth in his eyes. “I never hurt an innocent. Never.”

“Oh, Rand.” She wiped away her tears with her fingers. “I didn’t think. I didn’t think.”

When the master had turned him in Budapest, Rand hadn’t thought he’d need to use all the skills he’d been taught. He’d promised himself he wouldn’t resort to hypnosis or other mind-control techniques when he finally revealed the truth to Skylar. He’d promised, but her hysteria shook him.

Tempted to calm her, he opted for one last tactic. “Stay with me tonight. Sleep with me. You’ve had an emotionally draining day. Tomorrow, things will be clearer. Tomorrow, you can decide what our future will be.”

Like a lamb, she nodded, and Rand led her to the king-sized bed. God, he wanted to make love to her, show her everything would be fine, that there was nothing now that could ever separate them, but he knew he couldn’t, knew that there was one final thing that could keep them apart.

Her decision.

Rand threw back the quilt, and together they slid into the bed. He settled her against his chest and pulled the covers over them, not saying a word, afraid that if he spoke, the calm of the moment would break like a sudden squall at sea.

He inhaled her scent, relished the feel of her in his arms, and listened for her breathing to settle into the shallow pattern of sleep. Staring at the ceiling, he waited, knowing this could be the last night he held the woman he’d loved for centuries.

Hours passed. Dawn would be upon them soon. He’d stay with her until she decided what their fate together would be. Without his usual preparations he might be weaker, but staying with Skylar while she pondered their future was more important than his safety as a vampire.

“Rand,” she whispered hesitantly.

“Yes, missy.” If he could sweat, his palms would have been damp.

“Did you kill many?”

“No. Only when I had to, and only those who brought pain and sorrow to others.”

“How did you -- ”

“In the beginning it was difficult to manage, but Frederick Bonnie was of great help. He understood what I needed and became a donor. He’s been with me all these years as my faithful servant.”

She pushed to her elbows and looked him in the eyes. “Is he a...too?”

“Not exactly. He’s in an in-between state, not quite dead, but not quite alive.” Shock registered in her eyes. “The choice was entirely his, Skylar.”

“And now...now how do you survive?” There was still a note of concern in her voice, but the horror of the initial revelation seemed to have receded.

“Over the years, I’ve invested. Mainly in technologies. I made use of refrigeration and willing blood donors. No one is forced to give their blood to me by brute strength these days.” He stroked her hair in an effort to keep her calm.

“I’m still dying, Rand.”

He kissed her temple. “I know.”

Checking on Skylar’s condition once he’d located her had been easy enough to accomplish. He’d poured millions into cancer research, trying to find anything that would help her survive the stage four without the invasive surgery. None of the labs had progressed further in treatment options.

Skylar was still going to die in a few short weeks.

Unless she chose to join him.

“It’s not fair,” she whispered against his chest. “For you, I mean. You spent three hundred years searching for me, doing all sorts of things that I’m sure I don’t want to know the gory details of, and now I’m going to die on you. Again.”

“Skylar, I intend this to be the last time either of us hunt for one another. I can’t expect another talisman to fall into my lap, nor can I expect a woman to fall into my room, claiming to be from another century. I want this time to be forever with you.”

She laughed, and the sound was without mirth. “How do you intend to do that? Make me a vampire?”

That was precisely what he intended to do if she accepted. “Missy, in three hundred years, I’ve learned a lot. I’m far more educated, more wealthy, more traveled than I was when you showed up in my cabin. I’ve been around the world, lived more history, in more far-flung locations than any man has a right to, all alone. I don’t want to be alone anymore. I’ve loved you all those years, and I will continue to love you for the indefinite future.” He kissed her cheek, then her mouth, savoring the sweet taste of her lips. This conversation was one he’d hoped to have later, not tonight. Frustration built, and he pulled away from her mouth abruptly. “Join me, Skylar. We’ll be together forever, the way we were meant to be.”

In her eyes, he saw a faint glimmer of hope, of love, of determination. “I want more than a few weeks with you, Rand, but...”

Her pulled the covers higher around her shoulders, held her in his arms, and sighed. He’d experienced her struggle; found his decision remarkably easy when it came to Skylar. Tonight her simple proclamation had to be enough.

Epilogue

“Will I still be able to feel you kiss me?”

Rand let his gaze fall on Skylar standing near the window. She was dressed in deep purple, her short dark hair pinned up with sparkling baubles. Her right hand clasped the black curtain, holding it back while she stared out at the vanishing day, her last sunset to truly enjoy.

“Orange and blue,” she whispered before he answered. “You know there is a bumper sticker that says ‘God is a Broncos fan’?”

“Truly?”

“Sure.” She sighed. “It’s why sunsets are orange and blue -- matches their uniforms.” Eventually, she let the curtain fall. “I miss your accent.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, missy.”

There was a lot for his intended to learn, but they had all the time in the world now that she’d decided to stay with him, this time forever.

All the money he’d poured into research hadn’t halted the cancer, only delayed its inevitable advance.

“You shall still feel heat, cold, the rain upon your skin.” He answered her even though she’d changed the subject to something far less threatening. Still, she needed to know the truth. Only with knowledge would she be able to comprehend the decision she’d made. Only with knowledge would she be able to face the fear that he saw flicker in her eyes. “The blood you take will pump through your veins as surely as it once did. You will have died and lost the ability to create your own, and so you will need to feed at least every sixty days. Feeding more often will prevent blood lust from clouding your mind and hurting an innocent.”

Her bottom lip quivered. “Will it hurt?”

The alarm in her words called out to him. When he’d sought out the master, he hadn’t been afraid; he’d only been doing what he could to survive so he could come for Skylar. All of Rand’s questions had been born out of necessity, not an emotional dread of the unknown. He went to the curtain and took her into his arms.

“No, missy,” he whispered against her hair. “I will see to it you only feel pleasure, and when you wake, you and I shall be together for eternity, as we were meant to be.”

“What happened to Owain’s part of the sistrum?”

“I returned it to Emma’s silk bag.”

“I’m sorry I killed your brother, Rand.”

He stroked her back, willing the motion to bring her comfort. “You did what I should have long ago. I couldn’t bear to take the life of my mother’s son.”

“I’ve spoken with someone interested in the sistrum, Rand. What would you think of donating it to an honest-to-goodness archeologist, one who studies Egyptian artifacts?”

Turning her in his arms, Rand guided her toward the dresser. With one hand he moved aside the mirror that hid a wall safe. A few flicks of his wrist and the safe opened. Within, the sistrum resided in the royal blue bag. He pulled the case forth and stretched open the strings. The sistrum had caused many problems over the centuries. Would it be safer in the hands of a curator or Egyptologist? Probably.

He slipped the sistrum from the silk and held the stone instrument by the handle decorated with the carving of Hathor's torso.

"I have my piece, too."

From a velvet clutch, Skylar removed the shard, the piece responsible for bringing them back together.

Suddenly, a blinding light flared from the sistrum Rand held in his palm. Skylar screeched, the shard flying from her hand. The light intensified, filled the room, and then winked out.

Heat seared Rand's palm and then immediately dissipated. In his hand the two pieces of the sistrum had fused together. "Aye, missy, I think perhaps you're right. Let us take this to your acquaintance."

* * * * *

"Sir, the Egyptian piece has arrived."

Andrew's head snapped up from behind his computer monitor. Phelan hated disturbing him when he was on the trail. There seemed to be just a few pieces left of the Love Totem. If it worked as he believed, he'd get his heart's fondest wish. "Excellent. Where is it?"

"With the others, sir."

"I'll be done shortly to take a look at it." He returned to staring at the computer screen. Like a Jack-in-the-box, his head popped up. "Piece?"

"Yes. It seems the couple involved saw the piece reunite. With the photo Cutler sent us of the partial sistrum he claimed to have, we should be able to determine if their story is true. The transmorphing of the object would support your theory regarding the reunification of the Love Totem."

Andrew's head disappeared behind his computer station once more, and a moment later Audra saw him rolling the chair from behind his desk.

“What are you waiting for, woman? Let’s go see the sistrum immediately!”

She nodded, then walked behind the chair to grasp the handles. “Skylar Creighton and Rand Jamison had quite the tale to relate.” Audra smiled as she pushed Andrew toward the elevator. She was confident the piece belonged with the others Andrew had collected, just as she was positive that Rand and Skylar would be together, this time forever.

 THE END 

Lucynda Storey

For the first ten years of Lucynda's life, she went where her Air Force father was assigned. Born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Lucynda also lived in Amarillo, Texas; Izmir, Turkey; and Limestone, Maine before "The Sergeant" retired in Denver, Colorado. Graduating from a south Denver high school, Lucynda went on to attend a small, four-year college in Nebraska, before taking a teaching job in Michigan. She spent the next eighteen years in Michigan learning about humidity and lake effect snow before convincing her husband to move with their three children to sunny, colorful Colorado.

Always interested in storytelling, she began writing in earnest in 1999. She writes contemporary, fantasy, and paranormal.

You can find out more about Lucynda and her other projects by joining her newsletter, http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Lucynda_Storey or visiting her website at: www.lucyndastorey.realmsoflove.com.