

THE MERCILESS

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THE MERCILESS
FELICITY HEATON

Chapter 1

She could hear the seagulls wheeling overhead, the ocean crashing against the bow of the ship and the voices of the men around her. They were laughing and making lewd comments. She felt the swell of each wave, and the rope biting into her wrists, holding them tight behind her back. The only trouble was she couldn't see anything. She could hardly breathe with the Hessian sack over her head.

Elizabeth kept still and quiet, her fear pushing her heart to the limit as it smashed against her ribs. She felt hot and flushed, her blonde hair sticking with sweat to her skin and her breathing coming erratically as she struggled against both the confines of her dress and the ropes that bound her. She wriggled slightly, trying to get herself free of her restraints.

There was a loud stomping of boots on wood and she froze as she heard silence descend across the ship. The only sound coming to her now was her own breathless panting and the pounding of her heart.

She'd heard stories, tales of pirates that sailed the oceans in search of money and pretty girls. On arriving in this sector of the world, she'd been told that she mustn't wander far from her home, that she must remain in the town, and that was exactly what she'd done for fear of running into these lawless men when she was alone. Only, this afternoon, they'd come to her house and taken her as she napped.

The sound of boots stopped. She could sense someone nearby, and he was casting a shadow on her.

Her arms ached as she was roughly hauled to her feet, and she felt numb as firm hands worked their way over her body as though they were searching for something. The satisfied chuckle their owner gave when she tried to move away made a desire to slap them rise up in her stomach.

As the sack was pulled off her head, she squinted hard, the brightness of the sun overhead causing her eyes to water as they tried to adjust.

A voice cut into her head. It was British and laced with anger.

"For Christ's sake, people! Simple instructions and none of you dimwits can follow them? Do I have to do everything myself?"

"What's wrong?" She heard a reply come from behind her but just continued to blink away the tears in her eyes as they began to focus.

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“Wrong girl, that’s what’s wrong, mate.” The voice replied venomously and she let her attention remain with him, her instincts telling her that he was the one in charge of this ship.

Rough hands grabbed her arm and she didn’t need to be able to see he was looking at her in order to feel his eyes roaming her body, burning her with their gaze.

Elizabeth opened her eyes up slowly, the adrenaline rush causing her body to tremble and her breathing to come in short sharp bursts.

“Look here, the little princess has nerve.”

She didn’t think she had nerve, unless he counted her looking up at his face as nerve. She felt her body flush under his eyes. They were as clear as the ocean and she felt as though she was drowning as he held her gaze. As he grinned wickedly, she pictured all the evil things he was probably going to do to her and she felt a spark of defiance flare up in her.

She spat in his face.

She dropped to her knees as he slapped her hard across the face, knocking her off balance. Staring at the wooden deck, she stifled her tears as her cheek buzzed painfully, stinging with the strength of his strike. She couldn’t let him see her weak. If he saw her weak then he’d use it against her. She started slightly as she was hauled to her feet again but this time it wasn’t by him. She found a dark haired boy staring at her. He couldn’t have been a day older than herself.

“Show a little more respect. This is his ship, his crew, and he won’t think twice about tossing you overboard for the sharks to eat.” He hissed a quiet warning to her and she knew better than to ignore it.

Elizabeth swallowed hard and willed her body to stop shaking as the man with the sun bleached hair stepped over to her. Her eyes roamed his face long enough for her to see that he was handsome, his features well sculptured and his skin tanned from being out in the strong Caribbean sun. Closing her eyes, she could still see the intense blue of his eyes and she felt as though the image of him was burnt on her memory.

Opening her eyes again, she found that he’d closed the gap between them and she stared down at her feet as he took a final step towards her.

“Let’s not play games. I make the rules here, sweetheart. You don’t like them...I can change them...” He leaned in close to her ear and breathed into it. “I can make them a lot worse for you.”

She bit her lip and watched him smile as he drew back, evidently satisfied by her reaction.

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“Tell me, who do I have to pleasure of *having* onboard my ship?” He curled his tongue up and saw her eyes dart to his mouth. They widened slightly at his insinuation and she struggled to ignore the laughter of his crew.

“My name, sir, is none of your business. You are obviously upset by my not being the correct girl. If you would just take me back...” she started, knowing there was no chance of it happening but holding onto hope anyway.

He grabbed a handful of her hair and grinned at her. “You’re here to stay. Tell me who you are, *now!*”

“Miss Elizabeth Miller...please...it hurts,” she pleaded him with her eyes and saw a smirk play on his lips. Her show of weakness seemed to do nothing more than drive him on.

“It’s going to hurt a lot more if you don’t start complying, little girl.” He pulled his knife out and ran it over her dress before twisting it in his hand, causing it to pierce the thick material of the corset and scrape against her skin.

She breathed in sharply and closed her eyes, her heart skipping a beat as she felt the prick of pain in her side.

“Please...” Elizabeth couldn’t believe she was begging such a heartless man. It felt as though it wasn’t having the tiniest effect on him, but she couldn’t stop herself from doing it, for hoping that he’d take pity on her.

“Now...” His voice was a deadly whisper by her ear. “Tell me who you are.”

Not knowing what he wanted to hear, she bit her lip. As she felt the knifepoint scrape her skin again, she hurriedly said the only things that came to mind.

“I’m nineteen, my name is Miss Miller. Your men grabbed me this afternoon. I don’t know why I’m here and I’m fairly certain I wasn’t who you were expecting.”

“Anything else?” He grinned, clearly relishing this little form of torture.

“I don’t want to die...my father...he’ll give you whatever you want.” She breathed the words out quickly as she felt the knife move against her stomach.

He arched a brow. He had been toying idly with the idea of dropping her off on the nearest island, but now she had managed to intrigue him and he found that he couldn’t go through with it.

“Daddy would pay dearly for your return?” He gave her a questioning look and she nodded dumbly.

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“He’s the governor...of the island...of Liberty...he’ll send the navy after you...he’ll know you have me...they’ll know.” She tried to hide the panic in her voice by threatening him but failed dismally.

He considered what she’d said. It seemed that instead of capturing the person he’d been looking for, his crew had caught one of the governor’s daughters instead. He gave a moments thought to who she was, and what he was going to do with her, and then found that something she’d said had made him even more curious about her.

“They?” He frowned again. The mention of the navy didn’t bother him. He could take on any naval ship he came across and win. However, her mention of more than one person coming to look for her had raised questions in his head.

“My father, and Charles...captain of the fleet posted in Liberty.”

He laughed at her the instant she said that man’s name and the whole crew followed his lead. Elizabeth felt as though she was missing something.

“Charles...Charles Hollingworth?” He chuckled. “Don’t make me laugh...that buffoon? He couldn’t save anyone. He hasn’t got the guts, believe me...not unless he...*ooh*...”

She watched his face crack into a wide grin as he tightened his grip on her hair.

“Unless he was after something he prized. That would be you, wouldn’t it?” He watched her nod slightly and wondered what strange kind of fate was at work today to bring him that something his heart had been waiting for all these years. “This just gets better. I think I’ll keep you, give him a run for his money, and see if his fat lazy navy boat can catch me. Then me and him, we’re going to have a little fun.”

He flung her away from him and turned to face the crew.

“Take us home, lads, and I mean fast.”

Grabbing hold of her arm, he pulled Elizabeth towards the stern of the ship. She looked around dumbly as she stumbled along behind him. The ship wasn’t the biggest one she’d been on, but she knew size wasn’t everything and a boat like this was built to be swift on the water, swift enough to outrun most of the ships that were currently docked at Liberty. Looking out to sea, she noted that land was already out of sight and as far as she knew they hadn’t been travelling that long. When they reached the cabin, she was pushed in through the double doors and watched as the man closed them behind him.

“Sit.” He pointed to a chair. Elizabeth eyed it closely before doing as he instructed. “And do try not to bleed on anything.”

She noted his change in temperament, the way he was suddenly a different person, and

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then looked down at the small trickle of blood running down her pale dress. Shifting her arms into a more comfortable position so the ropes that bound her wrists didn't cut in so painfully, she looked around the cabin, taking in the ornate carving of the wood and the navy crest on the back wall. Her brows wrinkled as she looked at it. As she brought her eyes down again, she saw the captain was leaning back in his chair, his hands behind his head and his eyes roaming her body.

"This ship doesn't belong to you. It belongs to the navy." She started, feeling more defiant now that they were one on one, and now that he seemed less threatening.

"Pirate, remember, we don't go out and buy ships. Let's just say..." He raised his eyes to the ceiling as though he was thinking and his tongue ran along his teeth. Elizabeth watched it closely as she waited for him to finish speaking. "...she's a right of salvage."

"Salvage?" Elizabeth didn't think she looked like salvage. From what she'd seen of her, the ship was in prime condition.

"Enough!" He growled at her as he sat up. "We have more pressing business to attend to."

"Charles and the fleet," she said flatly, wondering exactly what he intended to do.

"See, Charles was always a little slow, needed things spelled out for him..." He kicked the chair backwards as he stood up and began pacing the room. "I need to make sure he knows I've got you. I wouldn't want him going after the wrong ship now, would I?"

"He'll find you and when he does, you'll be dead." Elizabeth let her eyes follow his progress around the room. He seemed completely unaffected by her words. It was like she hadn't spoken at all.

"So, he needs a signal, or someone to get back to him with the information. Can't turn the ship around...got to get her home, get supplies and get word out."

"Where is home? If I'm to be a captive onboard this vessel I would like to know where we are going." She couldn't believe how calm she felt as she watched him pause and take in what she'd said.

He looked her over, his eyes narrowing as he tried to figure her out. He'd expected her to be more fearful of him. She was so small and so genteel that he thought she would have fainted or something equally as ridiculous by now. But there she was, sitting primly in her chair and looking at him with questioning eyes as she waited for him to answer her.

"Good question." He put his heavy boot on the edge of the seat she was sitting on and leant forwards, his elbow resting on his knee as he looked at her. "Charles, your fool of a captain, was always a little clueless, couldn't see the forest for the trees like. We're

going to send him a signal. We're going to anchor at Beggars Haven." He ran his finger down her cheek and Elizabeth closed her eyes as she tried to evade his touch. "And you, you're coming with me when we all leave the ship for some fun."

"Fun?" Elizabeth's voice trembled as the back of his hand brushed her cheek and her skin felt as though it was on fire.

"Yeah." He purred down at her, urged on by the way her voice shook and her eyes betrayed her fear. "Drinking...women...as captain I generally like to stay onboard the ship, but I think I'll make an exception for you...don't want my little girl left alone with all those big, bad, men..."

Elizabeth swallowed hard at the thought of being left alone with the rest of the crew as they caroused. She got the feeling that she was safer with the captain, even if it was only marginally so. She felt hot and flushed over his words, her being 'his little girl', as though she belonged to him now.

As he moved away from her, she let herself breathe again. Her ribs were still hurting where the knife had grazed her and her heart was still beating wildly from being so close to the pirate captain. She took a deep breath to steady herself and watched him staring out of the window with his hands clasped behind his back. Giving a thought to her own bound hands, she decided to try to talk to him, hoping she could convince him to untie her.

"You know my name, sir, so what, pray tell, shall I call you?"

"You can call me Captain." He turned his head to look at her, watching her with a smirk as she wriggled her arms, trying to free herself of the ropes.

"I'm afraid that won't do...unless..." She paused as she thought about something. "...you're not so fearless as you appear to be and the thought of a mere girl knowing your name is something you cannot face."

"Fearless." He chuckled. "I'm the most fearless man on this ocean. Don't you forget it."

"Then...what shall I call you?"

"Marlin."

"So, Mr. Marlin, you intend to hold me ransom but in actuality you don't want money, just the opportunity to outwit the navy?" She spoke as eloquently as she could while trying to wriggle free of her bonds.

"It's Marlin, just Marlin, and I don't want to outwit the navy, I've already done that. I just want to kill your puppy dog captain."

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Elizabeth tried to hide her shock as she froze. She had thought that he wanted to beat the navy but she realised now it was a personal vendetta against Charles. He'd shown no interest in her until she'd mentioned him.

"What has Charles done to inspire hatred in a man such as yourself? Surely you are above quarrels with the navy? You obviously keep a tight ship and from what I have heard of you, this doesn't fit your normal *modus operandi*."

"Heard of me, have you?" Marlin circled back around to her and grinned.

"A little..." She averted her eyes as he smiled at her, his face softening into a look that made her want to blush. "Charles and my father often exchanged stories of pirates and marauders. I was allowed to listen to some of them."

"And my name came up...so flatter me."

Elizabeth realised that he wanted her to tell him everything she knew about him.

"This ship is *The Merciless*. You stole it, killed the crew and threw the rightful captain overboard, leaving him for dead. Since then you've made quite a name for yourself."

"Do you know who the captain was? Who I left as shark bait out in the bay off Freeport?" Marlin leant against the table in the centre of the cabin and folded his arms as he watched her think.

"They never told me," she answered quietly as she felt his eyes boring into her.

"Your precious Charles. I took his ship rightfully, his crew willingly and I should have killed him. I realise that now. That's where you come in, isn't it? You're going to get me the opportunity to do what I should have done five years ago."

"You really are heartless, just like they say you are." Elizabeth met his eyes with cold defiance reflected in her own as she realised she was being used as bait. For a second, she swore he'd looked taken aback by her words and it gave her the strength to continue. "They say you stole this ship because you liked her name, not because it was a good ship, but because it represented you. I see now that it is true...you're a cold, bitter man, with no feelings inside you. You're empty. I hope to God that when he finds you he kills you. You deserve to die for the things you've done."

Marlin pushed off from the table and grabbed Elizabeth around the throat, hauling her to her feet and choking her at the same time.

"You better learn to show me more respect, wench." He tightened his grip and watched her eyes watering as she looked up at him. He could see the fear swimming around in them and, for a brief moment, he thought that she'd cave, thought her defiance of him would waver and he'd win.

Then she spoke.

“I’ll never...respect...filth...like...you.” Elizabeth choked out and the feeling of anger boiling up inside her surprised her. She’d never felt this way before, never stood up to someone—especially a man.

“Then I’ll make you respect me.” Spurred on by her response, Marlin drew his knife out and cut the bonds around her wrists before dragging her out onto the main deck.

Chapter 2

Marching Elizabeth around and up the steps that led to the quarterdeck at the rear of the ship above his cabin, Marlin kept a tight hold of her wrist. There was only one way he could think of to get her to respect him. Only one tried and tested method. He hated to have to resort to using this tactic, but he couldn’t allow her to defy him in front of his crew. The quicker she learnt her place, the easier things would be between them.

Elizabeth whimpered as he tied a rope tightly around her waist. She could feel the whole crew watching her as Marlin tied the other end of the long rope to the balustrade.

“When you feel you can respect me, just call out my name.” With that, he pushed her over the back of the ship and watched her drop into the water below. When she broke the surface, he laughed down at her, showing her that he didn’t care, when in reality his heart was pounding fast against his chest. A voice at the back of his mind said that she would’ve learnt to respect him given time, but he squashed it and pushed away from it. As much as he despised having to do this, it was the only way.

Elizabeth gasped for air as she clawed her wet hair out of her eyes and held onto the rope tightly, trying to stop herself from going under as she was dragged along in the wake of the ship. Saltwater got in her eyes and mouth as she was repeatedly pulled under by the turbulence from the rudder and it took her a few moments to find a way of keeping her head above water for more than a second.

Holding onto the rope so it didn’t dig into her waist as painfully, she felt her spirits break. The water below her was black as midnight and her dress was starting to weigh her down, making it increasingly difficult to keep afloat. She could feel the cold seeping in and chilling her flesh as she struggled to keep from drowning. Hot tears ran down her cheeks as she tried to look up to where Marlin was towering above her, and she could hear the whole crew laughing at her as they came to see the show.

She felt as though she was going to die, and for no good reason. She didn’t know why she’d said all the things she had. It dawned on her that it wasn’t the pirate that she was mad at; she was angry at Charles and her father for lying to her about the story behind

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this ship and its captain. As she tried to keep a hold of the slippery rope, she began to wonder if everything else they had told her had been a lie, too, embellished half-truths that they thought would entertain her. Her father had often told her that she was too interested in learning, that she filled her head with books when she should have been outside or at least learning useful things such as housekeeping.

The seawater in her stomach caused it to bubble and the fear that had settled there was rapidly making her feel like throwing up as she shut her eyes tightly. Her arms ached from the effort of keeping herself from drowning. As the last of her warmth left her, she felt panic set in. What she had told him earlier was true. She didn't want to die but some part of her didn't want to call out to him, didn't want him to see that she needed him in even the tiniest way.

As the water enveloped her again, Elizabeth lost her strength completely. An eerie calmness filled her as the world faded to black and silence rang in her head.

Marlin watched her sink slowly and let the smile fade from his face.

"Think she's done." He plastered on a wide grin as he caught hold of the rope that was tied to Elizabeth and looked over his shoulder at his crew. "Back to work, lads."

As his crew went back to their posts, he let his smile disappear again and set about hauling Elizabeth back up onto the ship. He braced his foot against the solid wooden railings and pulled hard on the rope, raising her body little by little until she finally appeared in view.

He tied the rope off and looked at her as she dangled lifeless from the back of his ship; her body bent over backwards as it hung limp from the rope, and her arms splayed out at her sides like a fallen angel. Grabbing hold of the rope that was tied around her waist, he pulled her onto the quarterdeck. She lay still on the wooden floor as the seawater in her dress crept out onto the sun-drenched deck.

Crouching down beside her, he pressed his fingers against her neck and felt her pulse coming steady but weak. His heart began to slow with it, a sense of relief filling him as he realised that she would be all right. He placed a hand under her back and carefully raised her up into a sitting position, hoping she would come around. When it looked as though she wasn't going to, he took a deep breath and slapped her hard on the back.

Elizabeth felt the world come crashing back in on her and it was hard, noisy, and bright. She coughed up the water in her lungs and gasped at the air as it burnt her insides.

"There she is," Marlin chuckled. "Still feeling defiant?"

She shook her head weakly as she struggled to breathe and looked up at him with bleary eyes and a heavy heart.

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“Good girl.”

She felt his hand running under her legs and the next thing she knew he was lifting her up. Her body too tired to protest over his actions, she settled for holding onto his shoulders limply as he carried her down the stairs and onto the main deck.

Marlin paused for the briefest of moments to look at her. She had her eyes closed and her breathing was slow and laboured as she leant into him. Her head rested against his chest and it stirred something in him. He allowed himself to enjoy the feeling of her in his arms as he carried her into the cabin, and then settled her down on a couch.

“I’m not as heartless as you think.” He whispered in her ear and Elizabeth felt a shiver run up her spine. Keeping his tone steady, he tried to think of something to say that would ensure she remained in her place, and behaved more like a captive. “I’ve let men die that way. I could have let you die...you seemed to want to.”

She watched him back away from her and as he turned to walk out of the door, she blinked slowly, his words filling her head. Had he really let men die like that? She had welcomed death with open arms and why? Because she couldn’t bring herself to call out to a man, she didn’t want him to have power over her and in the end it worked against her. He had more power now than ever because he’d saved her when she’d been teetering on the brink of death. She closed her eyes and sighed. Although he had been the one who had put her in danger of dying, she couldn’t deny the fact that he’d saved her.

~

Several hours later, Elizabeth was still sitting in the same position. She was staring at her dirty white stockings where they poked out from under her dress. She rubbed her eyes to try to force her tears back down.

At some point when she was drowning, her shoes had been lost.

She wriggled her toes slightly and wondered if she was suffering from some kind of dementia to be so upset about losing her boots. Maybe the saltwater had addled her brain and now she was going to spend the rest of her life crying over the smallest thing. Her body ached with tiredness as she tried to move into a more comfortable position and her dress was still damp, clinging to her and encumbering her movements.

The cabin she sat in was rapidly growing dark as the sun disappeared behind the horizon and as it dawned on her that no one was going to disturb her anytime soon, she covered her face with her hands and let herself cry until she felt sick.

When she looked up again the room was pitch black and she could barely make out the furniture. The ocean swell had picked up. It rolled the boat as it continued its journey to the place Marlin had called home. She stood slowly, her cold muscles protesting over

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their sudden use as she stumbled towards the doors that led onto the main deck. Peering out, she frowned when she saw the deck was empty. Light coming from the little room at the opposite end of the ship told her that's where she would find the crew and possibly their captain.

Easing the doors open, she walked tentatively out onto the deck, her feet hurting with every step that she took. She grasped hold of the railings as she found them in the darkness and she felt her stomach roll in time with the ship as she leant against the balustrade. Looking over, she gulped down her fear. The water below her was dark and foreboding.

As she stared at the sea crashing against the side of the ship, she heard footsteps approaching her and she turned in time to be pushed brutally against the railings by a man she didn't recognise.

"Let me go." Elizabeth tried to pry the man's fingers off her but he just tightened his grip. She thrashed her limbs wildly as panic set in and the man hit her hard across the face.

"Shut it, you stupid wench." He hit her roughly across the cheek again. "Think the captain's partial to you...eh? Think he'll do anything for you...think again. You're nothing more than revenge to him, but you could be so much more to me."

Elizabeth could smell the alcohol on his breath as he leant into her, his mouth trying to reach hers as she desperately tried to back away.

"Please..." She pushed at him frantically as he pressed his body up against hers, his hands sliding their way under her skirt and up her thighs. She closed her eyes as they reached the top of her legs, her body still too weak from her earlier ordeal to break free from him. "Please don't..."

There was a click and the man paused. Elizabeth opened her eyes to see a gun pressed against the man's temple; on the other end of it stood Marlin, his other hand holding a lantern.

"What's going on here, mate?" His tone was venomous as he pushed the muzzle of the gun harder into the man's temple, angered by finding him with his hands on Elizabeth.

"She only got what she deserved."

Marlin let his eyes flicker to her face for a second before they settled back on his crewman. In the brief moment he looked at her, he could see the bruising across her cheek and it only made his anger worse.

"You know the rules, back away, son." He kept his voice emotionless as he pushed the crewman with his gun, forcing him to free Elizabeth.

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Elizabeth felt the man's hands slide off her; his body weight stopped pressing down on her and she could finally breathe again. The crewman took another step backwards and closed his eyes. She looked at him curiously and then started turning her head towards Marlin.

"What's going to happen to...?" she began.

There was a loud cracking noise that made her flinch and then she heard the crewman slump to the floor. Marlin looked at the smoking gun in his hand and frowned as he tried to gather himself.

"Why?" Elizabeth found her eyes drawn to the man on the floor. Blood was seeping onto the deck and swirling as it mixed with the seawater that coated the wood. She'd never seen something so horrific. She felt numb. A moment ago, he'd been full of life and now he was dead.

"We have rules," Marlin said flatly as he holstered his pistol, convincing himself that that's all this was about—upholding the rules. It had nothing to do with the girl.

"You have rules? You make them up as you go along..." Elizabeth took a step towards him and felt her anger boiling up inside. The crewman had deserved punishment for his actions but not death. She struck Marlin hard across the cheek, her eyes narrowing on his as her chest heaved with anger. "Bastard."

She went to move past him to return to the cabin, but he caught hold of her, spinning her around and pulling her up to him, holding her tight until she stopped struggling.

"Listen to me..." Marlin placed the lantern down and pinned her arms to her sides so she couldn't lash out at him again. His tone became gentle as he looked at her, letting his eyes wander over her face. He didn't expect her to understand what he was going to say, but she needed to learn a few things about the way a ship like *The Merciless* worked. "You think I like being down a crewman? We need all the hands we can get but there are rules we live by, codes of conduct that no man has a right to break. Not even me."

"But you made..."

"I did make them...and I live by them...but the basis of the code lays in history, pirates who rode these oceans long before I was born. It's these rules that saved you." Marlin let his eyes wander to her hair. He ran his fingers over it and watched them closely. "We all follow rules, in every walk of life."

Elizabeth closed her eyes as his fingers trailed down her cheek, tracing along the bone where she could feel it bruising. For a moment, she thought he was going to shift moods again but he remained quiet. Opening her eyes, she saw his were fixed on where his fingers were resting against her skin and he seemed fascinated with it.

“Marlin?” she whispered and he snapped out of his trance.

“Get back inside. It’s no place for a woman out here. Don’t want you ending up in the drink again.” He turned her around and then pushed her shoulders slightly to encourage her to go back to the cabin.

She looked back at him before walking along the deck.

“Miss Miller?” he called out and she turned to face him.

“Yes?” She felt her insides heat up over his addressing her so gentlemanly.

“There’s a blue dress, in the trunk...wear it...I’ll be expecting you to dine with me tonight.”

Chapter 3

Elizabeth sat opposite him in silence; her body and mind too tired to form words or even raise her eyes to look at him. The blue gown she wore could only be described as having seen better days and it was at least one size too big. This she was thankful for, as it had allowed her to let out her corset a little and she no longer felt so restricted. She’d managed to cover the small wound on her side that Marlin had caused with his knife, and was feeling a little more in spirits than she had been earlier in the evening.

She mustered up the energy to raise her eyes to settle on Marlin as he leant back in his chair, his heavy black boots swinging up to rest on the table. Taking a moment to look him over properly for the first time, she let her eyes start at his boots and work their way over his black breeches to the loose white shirt he was wearing, noting with some embarrassment that it was open enough for her to clearly see his chest.

Blushing to herself, she let her eyes continue their journey up his chest to his face. His lips were pursed as he cleaned the gun he was holding and she tried to set each feature of his sculptured face to memory, his defined cheekbones, the small thread of a scar that ran down over his right one, and his eyes. When she’d looked into them earlier, she’d felt lost. He held such power over her with them.

As if they knew she was thinking about them, his eyes moved to rest on her. His fingers paused at their work as his brows wrinkled.

“Not hungry?” Marlin stared at the untouched food in front of her. She was sitting with her hands in her lap and looked to be struggling to keep herself from slouching.

“I’m fine, thank you.” She straightened up and ignored the ache in her back.

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"If I left the room, would you eat?" His frown intensified.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Just thought you were being dainty." He watched her eyes grow defiant again but the flame of it seemed to pass quickly.

"I'm tired." She said resignedly, her body slumping a little to emphasise her point.

He just watched her, a predatory glint entering his eyes. Elizabeth noticed the way he was looking at her. She could feel his eyes tracing every curve of her body. She swallowed noisily and sat up straight again.

He chuckled.

She blinked.

She'd seen him kill a man. He'd shown him no mercy and saved her again in the process. He earned the title of his ship well but she knew he wasn't showing her the whole picture. There were sides to him that she'd caught glimpses of throughout the day and it was those that had her intrigued. There was simply something about him that didn't fit with the images of pirates that she had in her head.

He was different from them somehow. For a start, he looked nothing like the men she'd seen hung from the gallows in Liberty. His skin was tanned to be sure but not leathery and dirty like the other pirates she had seen. The messiest thing about him was his dishevelled hair.

As she absorbed the sight of him, it struck Elizabeth that he was a regimented and disciplined man. He'd admitted that he lived by rules, and he ran a tighter ship than the naval one she'd sailed to Liberty in. Whatever he started out as in life, she knew it wasn't a pirate and it wasn't poor.

Marlin decided against checking her on her staring. In the low light of the room, he could see how heavy her eyelids were becoming. With each blink, she was closing her eyes a little longer. He sighed as he wondered what to do with her. Something told him that she wouldn't like the idea of being made to remain in the hold each night, and even though she'd proven to be a tempestuous sort of girl, he couldn't bring himself to put her there. She was too delicate looking, too pretty to be placed in such a grimy, cold place. But he couldn't let her sleep anywhere that he couldn't keep an eye on her. He needed to keep her in check, and needed to ensure that she remained onboard, and that meant she was going to have to sleep somewhere where he could watch her at all times.

The crew were liable to question him about the girl, and where she spent each night, especially after this evening's incident. It would take a lot to get them to believe that he

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wasn't taking liberties with Elizabeth if they did. Hopefully they would keep their questions to themselves and trust that he wasn't breaking the code. They'd known him long enough to know that he was a man of honour, that he wouldn't do such an atrocious thing to any woman, especially one so young and innocent as Elizabeth.

He looked at her where she was nearly dozing in her chair. She seemed so gentle looking when sleeping, so harmless, but there was such a fire in her eyes sometimes and it had him enthralled. He wanted to push her, wanted to stir the fire he'd seen inside her so he could bring it to the surface for him to see.

Filling a glass with wine, he pushed it towards her.

Elizabeth's eyes moved to fix on it.

"Do you drink wine?" He watched her eyes as she struggled to blink away her tiredness.

"Father doesn't let me," she said as way of a refusal.

"Father isn't here now, is he?" Marlin purred as he pushed the glass nearer her. "So... drink up...it'll make you feel better."

Elizabeth ran her fingers around the glass and stared at the dark red liquid. Trembling slightly under his gaze, she didn't have the energy to refuse him any more. Lifting the glass to her lips, she drank the contents down swiftly and placed it back on the table.

"Better?" He watched her closely as he stood up.

She felt the wine ease down to her stomach, warming her tired body from the inside out and she licked her lips as her eyes closed.

Marlin grinned. Moving swiftly, he pulled her up off the chair and threw her over his shoulder, chuckling as she gasped.

"Let me go!"

Ignoring her plea, he carried her to the bedroom, amusing himself with the way she was reacting as though he was going to take advantage of her. She flailed her legs in an attempt to free herself but he quickly caught hold of them to stop her from hurting him.

She found herself being thrown down onto a bed, its softness lulling her aching body as she lay stretched out and welcoming whatever fate had in store for her—too overcome with sleep to care about anything. She let her eyes close and she drifted off for a moment.

Marlin chuckled and watched as her eyes shot open.

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“Rules,” he said bluntly. “Prudent women can’t be messed with.”

She realised what he meant and hurriedly sat up, making it evident that she wasn’t interested in him.

“That’s better. Wouldn’t want me getting the idea that you wanted something from me, now would you?” He watched her as she busied herself with rearranging her dress.

“Would I be able to stop you if you did try?” she asked in a serious tone.

“I wouldn’t try. I’d have to put a pretty bullet in my head and we wouldn’t want that.” He grinned down at her where she sat perched on the edge of his bed.

The wisest thing he’d done on becoming the captain of *The Merciless* was ensuring he got a good rest by bolting down the best bed they could find in Beggars Haven in his cabin. He couldn’t think to command if he didn’t get rest, and he accredited many victories over the navy to having a bed to sleep in. Within the first year of his captaincy, he’d completely refurbished the crew quarters, making sure that everyone onboard was able to get good sleep.

“*You* wouldn’t want that.” Elizabeth raised her head and made it clear that she didn’t care about his head or his bullet.

“Please yourself.” He curled his tongue as he grinned and pulled his shirt off over his head. He heard her swallow noisily as she stared up at him. It was wrong of him to scare her by making her believe that he was going to force her to share his bed, but he couldn’t help himself. There was something pretty about her when she was doing her best to look shocked and disapproving, something that drove him on.

Her heart was pounding so hard that the sound of it filled her ears. She tried to avert her eyes from his chest but they seemed to defy her and work their way back to him no matter how hard she tried to keep them away.

As he undid his belt, a pleased look entered his eyes and she stood up sharply.

“Does this amuse you?” Her tone was laced with anger and disgust as she stared him in the eye.

He pulled the belt from the loops in his trousers and smirked at her. “Would you believe me if I said no?”

She shook her head in the negative, her whole body trembling under the intensity of his gaze.

“Do I scare you?” He watched her hands as they shook and her chest as it heaved with her short breaths. He leant in close to her and bit his lower lip as he waited for her reply.

"No...not at all," she replied shakily.

"I bet I could if I tried," he purred into her ear and as he went to grab her, she dashed out of his reach. He smiled as he found her eyes full of fire again.

"You said you wouldn't!" Her eyes widened, echoing her shock over his actions. "Are you not a man of honour? Is your word worth nothing?"

She pressed herself flat against the wall as she backed into it. He was approaching her, weaving in a painfully slow zigzag, and she didn't like the playful look that had entered his eyes. Her own eyes betrayed her again and dropped to his chest, and she quickly told herself it was purely to avoid his eyes as they flickered about her face. She'd never seen a man in such a state of undress and she couldn't help wondering if they all looked like him—defined and strong.

"Come on..." Marlin stopped in front of her and touched her cheek with his fingertips, marvelling over how she closed her eyes and lowered her head slightly when he did so. He imitated her movement and let his mouth rest by her ear as he whispered to her. "You know you want this."

It took a moment for Elizabeth to realise what he meant by those words, and when she did, her body responded in the opposite way to what she'd imagined it would. In place of anger and fear came tingles of anticipation and an ache in her thighs.

She pushed her palms against his chest, willing herself to push him away. He stumbled backwards and chuckled at her. She blushed crimson when she noticed her hands were still resting on his chest. She'd successfully pushed him backwards but not out of reach. Snatching her hands away from him, she let her shoulders sag as he laughed, her eyes downcast and her limbs heavy.

"Just don't hurt me," she whispered resignedly, unsure of whether he really was intending on having her or whether this was another game of his.

He blinked at the sight in front of him. In one moment, he seemed to have worn her down so much that she was openly submitting to him, surrendering herself on the basis that he didn't hurt her. He had been expecting defiance and a hard look from her. Seeing her so broken saddened him somehow and he almost longed for the stubborn girl to come back with her reproach and scorn.

"Get some sleep," he said quietly as he walked out of the room.

As he closed the door, she felt as though the world was empty and cold, that she was empty and cold. She slumped to the floor and curled up on her side, holding herself tightly. Her emotions felt muddled, confused, her body and mind both frequently betraying her with thoughts and feelings she shouldn't be having. He was a pirate, a no

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good thief, a murderer. So why was he the only one onboard she felt like she could trust? Why did she feel safe near him but scared at the same time? Closing her eyes, she let her tears spill onto the floor of his room and tried not to think about him, or home, or Charles, or anything. She had to sleep, had to be strong and stand up to him. He was beneath her. He was using her, he hated her, and if she didn't get that into her head soon his games were going to kill her.

~

Elizabeth awoke to the sound of seagulls and the smell of the ocean. Reaching out to one side, she expected to find the glass of water she always kept on her nightstand. She fluttered her eyes open when she found it wasn't there. Lying back on the bed, she stared at the ceiling as she remembered where she was. She was in his bedroom, on his ship, in the middle of nowhere.

"Seagulls don't travel far from land," she thought to herself as she heard one crying outside the window.

Raising herself up into a sitting position, she looked out the windows at the back of the ship and saw a few scraggly rocks jutting out of the sea, nothing more than an island in a vast empty ocean.

She sighed and then groaned as she looked around the room she was currently occupying. She stared at the far wall, remembering that she'd fallen asleep there last night after he'd left her and now she was waking up in his bed. A cold wave of panic washed over her as she stared down at her feet.

"Did I move myself...or did he move me?" she asked herself.

Slipping off the edge of the bed, she stood slowly as a way of testing her strength. Her stomach gurgled and she pressed her hand against it. Her ribs and back ached from sleeping in her corset.

She padded quietly across the room and peered around the door. The main room of the cabin was empty and she smiled as she looked at the table.

~

Marlin stared up at the position of the sun and then down at the deck below him. Walking down the steps, he revelled in the warm breeze coming off the water before opening the door and stepping into his cabin. Moving forwards a few feet, the next thing he felt was a sharp pain in his arm. He turned to see Elizabeth near him and grabbed her wrist as she tried to move away, the knife still held in her hand. Twisting her arm sharply, he forced her to drop the weapon she was holding.

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He growled with effort as he listened to her cry out in pain. When she crumpled to the floor, he let go of her wrist, satisfied that she knew not to try anything like it again. He inspected the long gash that now ran along his right forearm and pressed his hand against it as he smirked down at her.

“Morning, sunshine.”

“What did you do to me?” She met his eyes and scowled.

He noticed she looked about ready to fly at him and he smiled at the sight of it. There was something beautiful about her when she was angry—the fire burning in her eyes, her hair tousled and falling out of place as she knit her brows.

“I didn’t do anything to you,” he replied.

“Last night...” She started as she got to her feet, her anger at him still rising. “I awoke this morning on the bed.”

He rolled his eyes and walked over to the doors, shutting them and stopping the crew from being able to listen in on them. He strode back over to her and stared her down.

“Because I damn well put you there. You were curled up on the floor whimpering like a kicked dog. Nearly bloody drove me insane!” he growled through clenched teeth and her eyes widened.

“I’ll ask you to refrain from using such profanities around me. It’s one thing I have to be your captive; it’s another to expect me to stand for...”

“Shut up! For Christ’s sake, woman, this is my ship.” Marlin poked his finger repeatedly at his chest as he raised his voice loud enough to cause her to flinch with each word. “Mine...and I won’t stand here and be talked down to by some snotty little girl like you. Do you understand me you stupid wench? Am I making myself *clear*?”

Elizabeth was staring at his right arm as he prodded his chest with his left hand. She wrinkled her nose into a frown and watched the blood trickling down to his fingertips.

“Are you listening?” Marlin shouted at her, aggravated by her lack of attention to what he was saying. He folded his arms as he frowned at her.

“It will get infected if you don’t treat it,” she said dreamily as she watched a rivulet of crimson reach his elbow and a single drop fell to the floor.

“You’d like that...I’d probably die.” He spat the words over his shoulder at her as he stormed across the room.

As he sat down in his chair, he realised he was angrier with himself than he was with her. Since first laying eyes on her, he'd been different somehow, less in command than he was used to and he didn't like it. Something about Elizabeth had him captivated. Maybe it was her open defiance of him and the way she stuck her jaw out slightly when she wanted to make it clear to him that he wasn't going to win. He sighed and closed his eyes, letting his head roll backwards as he became aware of the pain in his arm for the first time.

Elizabeth shifted silently across the room to stand beside him. She could see the blood dripping from the wound and creating a small puddle on the floor. Reaching out tentatively, she went to touch his arm, but he jerked it away from her and she frowned.

"I...I just want to help," she said quietly.

"Help? You damn well did this to me...now you want to fix it?" He looked sceptical at best.

"I could say the same thing about you. Yesterday you threw me over the back of this ship and left me to drown before hauling me back up. It was a simple ploy to save my life and make me indebted to you, therefore gaining a modicum of respect from me...even though it was you yourself who attempted to kill me in the first place."

Marlin thought about what she'd said and kept his eyes closed so she couldn't read the emotions in them. He didn't want her to see that part of him felt badly about his actions.

"Bugger off," he said flatly, wanting her away from him.

"I will not."

"Why?" He looked up at her and narrowed his eyes as they locked on hers. "So you can save me and I'll be indebted to you?"

"Bastard." Elizabeth went to strike at him for his insinuation that she had done to him what he'd done to her, that she'd intentionally hurt him for the sole purpose of being able to help him afterwards.

He caught her arm and she felt the wet of his blood on her skin as his grip tightened, and she struggled to get free.

"Harsh words from such a good little girl. Still a little weak, aren't we? I bet you wish you ate something last night now. What say we see about giving you another swimming lesson?" He grinned up at her, covering up the pain he was causing himself by holding her so tight.

"No!" She yanked her arm away from his and backed into the corner like a frightened animal.

He smiled on seeing her so scared. Standing up, he revelled in the fact that he could practically see her trembling, the fact that she was finally starting to back down and learn her place on the ship. Something about the feeling of power it gave him went straight to his head.

“Was going to take it easy on you today, but since you decided to attack me, I’ve changed my mind.”

Chapter 4

Grabbing her arm tightly, Marlin dragged her out onto the main deck. Elizabeth struggled against him and desperately tried to stifle her emotions as her head filled with the memories of drowning.

“Please...” she said as he forcibly brought her out of the cabin. “I’m sorry.”

“Little too late for that.” He threw her in front of him and advanced on her.

She quickly realised that he wasn’t going to tie her up and throw her overboard and for a moment, she felt relieved but then her mind conjured up images of all things he might do instead. Eyes darting about her surroundings, she backed away from him as he stalked towards her, forcing her into a waiting circle of crewmen. When she bumped into the main mast, she felt her heartbeat speed up.

Trapped.

Marlin chuckled and let it grow into a laugh. Elizabeth’s cheeks turned crimson as the crew followed the lead of their captain—a hundred voices booming out laughter at her.

Closing her eyes in the hopes that it would make them go away, she felt something tight around her waist and when she opened her eyes, she saw ropes being wound around her midriff and the mast behind her. Looking up at Marlin, she saw the grin on his face fade as he looked back at her. She choked slightly when the ropes were drawn tighter around her.

He stepped towards her and tilted his head to one side, keeping his eyes cold and empty.

“There now...least you won’t get wet this time.” He shielded his eyes and stared up at the sun that was beating down on them, buying himself time to think of something to say. He’d thought when he’d thrown her overboard that she would’ve learnt her lesson and become more submissive, but the instant he’d let down his defences, she’d attacked him. If she didn’t learn this time, he didn’t know what he was going to do with

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her. He couldn't let his crew see him weak, and the more times she defied him, the worse he was going to have to treat her. "Although you might get a little hot...bad thing to get when you've not eaten anything. Exhaustion could probably kill a girl like you in no time."

The crew laughed as she widened her eyes in fear and struggled against the ropes that bound her to the mast. He kept his eyes fixed on her face as he ignored the way the sight of her panicking made him feel. This wasn't the way he liked to do things, but she'd really left him with no other choice.

"Tell you what. In lieu of water...you can have..." He looked thoughtful for a moment before grinning maliciously at her. "Blood."

He smeared his bloodied fingers across her face and watched her cringe as she tasted it in her mouth. Looking around at his crew, he found them all watching him and realised that they wanted to see more. He considered leaving her for a moment, and then looked down at his arm. Running his fingers up it, he scooped up all the blood he could and grasped hold of her cheeks with his right hand, forcing her mouth open.

"Open up, precious, this won't hurt a bit." He waited until her lips were parted and then stuck his fingers into her mouth, making her swallow the blood down, and ignoring the intense feeling of guilt in his stomach as she choked.

As he stepped away from her, she spat the remnants of his blood at him.

"Plenty more where that came from." He smirked as she raised her eyes to meet his and then turned to face his pilot and first mate. "How long 'til we reach Beggars Haven?"

"Say, seven hours, maybe more," the pilot replied.

"There's your sentence, sweetheart. Hope it was worth it." He turned on his heel and took the steps that led up to the quarterdeck two at a time, hollering orders to his crew as he did so, and putting his feelings back into place.

Elizabeth stifled her tears as the crew stared at her. She could feel their eyes roaming her body and she furrowed her brows. Looking up at Marlin, she caught him watching her. His eyes seemed to look over the crew and then come back to rest on her, and he frowned as she looked back at him with eyes full of fear. When she shifted her gaze to the crewmen again, she heard him speak.

"Back to work. Anyone even looks at her and I'll throw them in the hold." Marlin met her eyes for a split second before turning his back on her.

She swallowed hard as he turned away from her. In the moment he'd looked at her, she could have sworn he'd looked remorseful.

~

Marlin watched her from the quarterdeck as he stood beside the pilot. He could see that she was getting weak and it made his chest ache to see her that way. The moment she looked as though she was going to pass out, he would untie her and give her a chance to rest. He knew it wasn't possible for her to die on him; he'd taken precautions to make sure she'd have nothing worse than a mild case of sunstroke.

He glanced up the sails. He'd gone out of his way to keep her in partial shade. It was the only thing he could do for her. She had to learn to respect him. He had to maintain the level of captain onboard his own ship, and that meant doing whatever he had to in order to keep his crew's respect. Even if it hurt him to do it.

Looking around at his crew, he saw they were hard at work and then found his eyes coming to rest on Alexander. Signalling him, he considered what he was about to do and then decided that he would go through with it; his crew wouldn't know any better, and he'd watched her suffering long enough.

~

Elizabeth let her head loll forwards as her eyes slipped shut. She'd lost track of how long she'd been tied to the mast but it seemed like forever. At some point during their journey, the broad sails had begun to cast a shadow on the top half of her body. She'd been thankful for the way they kept her face out of the strong sun, but wished they had done more to relieve her of the heat. The layers of her dress seemed to trap the warmth, making her burn up until she felt as though she was baking alive. She recognised how exhausted she was, no longer able to keep herself awake, her body aching and hot as she slumped in the ropes that held her firm. On hearing heavy footsteps approaching her, she tried to raise her head but failed miserably. She felt something wet on her face and tried to move her head away from it.

"Keep still." A familiar voice reached her ears and she recognised it as belonging to the boy that had warned her to show Marlin a little respect. "If you don't keep still, he'll get mad at me."

She realised the boy was trying to wash her face with a cloth.

"I'm tired," she mumbled as she savoured the cooling sensation of the water on her face.

"He knows," the boy replied in a low voice, trying to give her some hope that she would be free from the mast soon. "Give him a while longer, miss, he'll come around."

"I don't think he will." She let her head fall forwards again and sighed.

"Keep your chin up. He's not used to defiance and I think that it's one of the reasons he's keeping you onboard and not leaving you at Beggars Haven. He seems to like your boldness, even if he won't admit it."

"Have you got a name?" She met his eyes and blinked slowly. Her head was aching like it was being split in two and it spun as she tried to look at him.

"Alexander." The boy smiled nervously.

"I can taste him, in my mouth." She tried to swallow but her mouth was too dry and her eyes fell to rest on the little pail of water that Alexander was holding.

"I can't...wish I could, miss," he said apologetically.

"Alexander!" Marlin's voice boomed out across the deck. "Little too much talk. I thought I made myself clear about the rules concerning my girl here."

Elizabeth raised her head enough to watch Marlin walking down the steps from the quarterdeck. She saw Alexander hold the handle of his pail in both hands and try to look submissive as his captain approached. Marlin cuffed him around the back of the head and made a growling noise.

"Back to work, whelp."

As his steely eyes turned on her, Elizabeth tried to lift her head up defiantly but found that she didn't have the energy.

"Comfortable?" Marlin bent over slightly and looked into her eyes.

She mumbled something unintelligible in response.

"Pardon?" He smiled.

"Very much so." Remembering what the boy had told her, she put all the energy she had left into defying him.

"Sure you don't want me to untie you?" Marlin smirked at her, watching the fire ignite in her eyes again.

"I'd rather die than have your filthy hands on me."

"Your funeral." He picked at his nails as he waited for her to try to muster up enough strength to reply.

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Elizabeth was enraged as she watched the bored expression creep onto his face. He was holding lives, or at least her life, in the balance and he seemed so nonchalant about it—like it meant nothing to him.

“Mar...” she breathed, hoping to get his attention.

“Hmm?” He lowered his head so he could read her eyes again.

“I hate you,” she ground out with the last ounce of her energy.

“I love you, too, sweetheart.” He grinned and watched her slump forwards.

As the world faded to black, all she could hear were his words echoing around her head and she felt as light as a feather as she drifted along with them. She could vaguely make out falling and being picked up again. She knew it was Marlin, she recognised his firm grip on her ribs and knees as he cradled her in his arms, carrying her somewhere. She leant her head against his chest and took a deep breath, savouring the comforting feeling he somehow managed to give her.

“No...” she mewled as he placed her down on the bed and went to leave.

Marlin stared down at her. In her half-conscious state, she was beyond a temptation to him. The way she clung to him had him enthralled. Even after he did such terrible things to her and made her teeter on the brink of death, her subconscious seemed to take comfort from him.

Sitting on the edge of the bed next to her, he watched her sleeping. He could feel the ship entering shallower waters as it neared the port and he knew she'd have precious little time to rest before they would leave for land that evening.

He listened to his heart pounding steadily as he watched her slumber on. She curled up slightly and moaned as the corset she wore dug into her. He wondered what wearing a corset for several days in a row did to a girl's constitution. For all their shapely benefits, they seemed to be nothing more than a torture device—not that he was complaining.

She smacked her lips together as she rolled onto her back and he took a deep breath and sighed it out. Standing up, he walked out of the room and onto the deck, catching the first crewman that came to hand.

“Fetch me some water. Clean stuff...good stuff.”

~

Elizabeth woke slowly, her brain aching so hard that it blinded her. As she struggled to focus her eyes, they came to rest on a large pitcher of water that was resting on a

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nearby table. She stumbled out of bed and hurried to it, raising it to her lips and trying to gulp down the water as though it was air.

As he leaned against the far wall, Marlin watched her drinking the water like it was going to disappear any second. When she choked on it, he walked towards her and gently pulled it away from her mouth.

“Slowly.” He smiled and saw her look startled at the sight of it. “Wouldn’t want you drowning yourself. There’s plenty more where it came from.”

She remembered what he’d said to her moments before she had passed out and for a second it pushed the memory of his brutality out of her head. Never had a man said ‘I love you’ to her and even though she knew he didn’t mean it, she couldn’t help thinking about it.

As she listened to the seagulls crying, her eyes lingered on his arm and she swallowed at the sight of the gauze wrapped around the wound she’d inflicted.

“I...I’m...” Elizabeth raised her eyes and looked deep into the twin pools of blue that were watching her. She wasn’t sure why she should say it after everything he’d done to her, but she needed to alleviate the sense of guilt she had.

“No apologies.” He smiled and she swore that she could see genuine warmth in it.

Her eyes darted from his as a seagull landed on the windowsill. She silently thanked it for pulling her attention away from Marlin’s eyes. When she looked in them, it was so easy to start forgetting everything he’d done to her.

“Are we...?” She stared at the bird in the window and waited for his answer.

He moved to the rear windows and pushed them open.

Elizabeth came to stand only inches from him and he let his eyes roam her exposed shoulders and neck as she looked out onto the distant town. When he’d watched her wake, he’d expected her to fly at him. Instead, she seemed dreamy, as though she wasn’t quite with the world. Holding his hand near her back, he let it hover over her exposed skin and wondered if she were tangible still. His fingers ached to check her and his mind plagued him with the idea that he’d driven her to this. He’d made her vacant and submissive and now he wanted the fire back. He just hoped it wasn’t too late.

“Been anchored for a few hours now. We’ll be heading out when the boys get back with the supplies.” Marlin’s voice was low as he watched her profile, her eyes scanning the port in front of her.

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She felt her skin humming as he placed his hand lightly on her shoulder and she stared at the town blankly to allow herself enough time to absorb the feelings he was stirring in her. Deep inside she knew it was wrong to let him inspire any emotions other than negative ones but she felt as though he was drawing him to her, as if she was caught in the tide and was powerless to resist him.

“You should get ready.” He let his fingers slip from her skin as he turned to leave.

“Marlin...I’m...” Her stomach growled. It wasn’t quite what she’d wanted to say but then he’d already told her not to apologise and she could understand that. No apology from her meant he didn’t have to face one of his own.

He chuckled quietly and tried to cover up the feeling inside him that was inspired by her saying his name. “We’ll get food on land. Just pretty yourself or do whatever you girls do.”

As he closed the door, Elizabeth’s eyes widened in shock. Hanging on the back of the door was a beautiful dress in emerald green and a pair of shoes dangled from the hanger. Biting her lip, she moved tentatively towards it and ran her fingers down the fine material. It gave her a feeling of warmth inside her and she sighed. He’d been so cruel and now he’d countered it with such a kindness that it confused her. Feeling her headache returning full force, she took the dress down and laid it on the bed.

She heaved another long sigh as she stared at the dress, unable to see what he expected to gain by buying her such a beautiful thing. Did he think by giving her this it would wipe the slate clean between them? It didn’t even come close. Although part of her felt swayed by it, she soon quashed it with her more defiant side. She wasn’t going to let him win her over with pretty dresses.

Elizabeth bit her lip as she thought about that. What would he have to do to win her over? A tiny voice told her that if she saw more of the real him, the man he’d shown her briefly on occasions, there was a high chance she was going to lose control of her emotions and they were going to run away with her.

While she dressed, she tried to stifle her feelings and pin her pirate captain’s character down. He was so changeable that she struggled to figure him out. One minute he’d be brutal and the next gentle as a puppy. He seemed to switch from hating her to liking her in the blink of an eye.

She stared at herself in the mirror and hoped that her appearance would placate him tonight. She was tired from her ordeals and just wanted to stay on his good side so her life would be easier.

Chewing her lips to redden them, she fixed her hair up before walking out onto deck.

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The sun was sinking slowing into the sea and the sky was burnished with orange and pink. She watched him pacing the deck, seemingly deep in thought as he strode from the starboard side to port side and back again. She noticed that he'd obviously been cleaning himself up in the time it had taken her to get ready.

He was wearing neat black breeches and a crisp white shirt. Tied around his waist was a long sword and his gun, and he'd tied long leather cuffs around his forearms. She noted with a smile that his boots were polished and that overall he cut a fine figure when dressed so well.

The boy she knew as Alexander appeared and Elizabeth noticed his hands were blackened, evidence that he'd been the one responsible for making Marlin's boots a little more presentable. Alexander leant towards the captain and she decided that she must have been the subject of his discourse because Marlin's head swivelled to take in the sight of her.

She let her eyes roam his face as he watched her, his hair still tousled and wild, and his blue eyes twinkling with interest.

Marlin drew a sharp breath as he looked at her. He couldn't believe the vision in front of him, her beauty striking him as she stood meekly on the deck, seemingly awaiting his approval. Her long tresses of golden hair had been pinned up as neatly as possible and the dress fit her perfectly. The shape accentuated her curves at the same time as allowing her to let out her corset a little and the colour highlighted her eyes and hair. Her youthful round cheeks glowed at him as her soft lips played into a shy smile under his scrutiny.

Words failed him.

Taking a steadying breath, Elizabeth took a few tentative steps towards him and tried to think of a way to lighten the atmosphere that had descended around them. Giving him a nervous smile as she neared him, she settled on what she had thought about earlier—attempting to keep on his good side and being civil to him in the hopes that he'd be civil in return.

"You clean up well, Captain," she said with an air of fake nobility.

He smiled wide and extended his arm to her, playing along with her little charade.

"You'll be the most beautiful woman in town tonight, Miss Miller."

She smiled shyly and felt her knees weaken.

"However..." His tone was blunt as he peered over the edge of the ship and then at her dress. "Getting you down to the boat might be a bit of a bummer."

Chapter 5

As Alexander rowed them into the port, Elizabeth let her eyes roam over *The Merciless*. It was the first time that she'd managed to see the ship from far enough away to take her all in and she had to admit that she was a fine vessel, especially when compared to those they were passing by.

"Do you like her?" Marlin smiled as he watched her.

She felt as though he was asking for her approval. "She's a beautiful ship, but then you already knew that."

"It doesn't mean that I don't like hearing others say it. Besides, it's always nice to have a woman's opinion, especially yours," he whispered across to her and smiled as she averted her eyes to rest on one of the other ships.

She blushed in the darkness, her whole body heating through over his words. Since she'd woken up this evening, he'd been all politeness to her. He was clearly trying as hard as he could to be nice to her and it only served to confuse her further. Forcing herself to be suspicious, she remembered his words to her again and rubbed her temples as a dull throb entered her head.

"Why didn't you dock her in the port with the other vessels?" She watched them as they loomed above her, their hulls creaking with the swell of the tide.

"She's a fine ship; she's safer out there. She needs a little distance from the ships that are below her notice, a little space to be herself and show the world how beautiful she is."

She frowned as she turned to look at him. She'd realised halfway through his speech that he was watching her and not *The Merciless*. Did he think she needed space to bloom, that her friends and family were stopping her from becoming something more than they wanted her to be? She wondered if she'd talked in her sleep or whether he could read her mind. She'd always felt as though she was being held back due to her gender, never allowed to study or learn, always expected to be quiet and do what she was told. Be a gentle woman and eventually a good housewife. That's what they continually told her.

She blinked at him as he smiled at her again. In the dark, she could see the brilliance of it. It was as though he'd realised that he'd pinned her down completely.

Moving his eyes to rest on his ship, he leant a little closer to her and purred. "I want the world to see just how beautiful she is. For all her faults and haughtiness, she's the most spirited little darling I've ever come across. I'll be a sad man the day she leaves me."

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Elizabeth felt sick with nerves as his shoulder brushed against hers and his dulcet tones echoed around her head. She rose to the challenge he'd presented to her and found herself answering him.

"She might not leave you. *The Merciless* might be with you for many years unless the navy comes to claim her back. Would you fight to keep her?"

He hadn't expected her to reply. With one simple question, she had thrown all his feelings into disarray and forced him to think about what he'd said to her and whether somewhere, deep down inside of him, he'd meant it to be about her. He drew a long breath and stared at his ship, and then down at her hands where they were neatly resting in her lap.

"I believe I would die for her," he said simply.

They both fell into silence as they entered the shallower water of the port, neither of them willing to ask the other what their conversation had meant and both of them hoping it was nothing more than idle banter.

As they approached the town, Elizabeth turned her head to look at it, using the fact that she had to turn away from Marlin to her advantage. Staring at the scene laid out in front of her, she tried to convince herself that everything he'd said had been nothing more than empty words, devised by him to spite her, but she couldn't force them out of her head and they were joined by his earlier words of love.

When she came out of her reverie, she found they had docked and he was waiting to help her out of the small boat and onto the jetty. She let her hand slip into his and stepped out of the boat and onto the long wooden pier.

He pulled her up close to him and smiled when she went rigid. Letting his strong arms encircle her small waist, he watched the edge of fear entering her eyes.

"This place..." he murmured by her ear. His cheek brushed against hers and he could feel her trembling breath on his neck. "...Is full of thieves, murderers, mercenaries and pirates...all not having seen something as fine as you since they left their mothers. I suggest for your own safety you stay close to me."

As he moved away from her, she bit her lip and nodded. She could hear the shouts of men in the town up ahead and the shrieks of the women.

He watched her for a moment. When she looked steady enough to proceed, he moved to leave and waited for her to follow him. When she slipped her hand into his, he froze.

He looked down at them, his large hand encompassing her small one, and he couldn't stop his fingers from grasping it tightly. Staring at the sight of their joined hands, he

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swallowed hard. It had been too long since he'd felt something so strangely warm and reassuring. Her touch seemed to quell some of the fire in his heart, softening the edges of it until all he felt was calm.

Shifting his hand, he decided he wanted her closer and let his fingers interlock with hers. She gasped slightly when he tugged her towards him and as he looked in her eyes he could see the fear and self-doubt running through them as usual, but this time there was something more, something deeper that seemed to draw him in and make him want to reassure her.

"Don't let go. No matter what happens, stay close and don't let go." He cupped her cheek with his free hand and looked deep into her eyes, battling against the volcanic mix of feelings that had settled in his stomach. "Don't want to lose my girl."

She frowned as they started towards the town. She watched the lights of the buildings growing brighter and gradually she could make out the style and size of each of them. She struggled to bite back the words that she wanted to say so she didn't ruin the calm between them but it felt as though they were going to burst out of her. As they neared the end of the jetty, she snapped.

"I'm not your girl," she whispered and cursed herself the moment she said it.

Marlin felt as though the moment of peace he'd been enjoying with her had been rudely stolen away. His brows knitting tightly, he almost laughed out loud at himself for letting himself feel anything towards her other than hatred. Setting his jaw tight, he looked across at her and scowled.

"Afraid you are. Show me respect tonight, lie if you have to; I lose one ounce of standing here and I'll sell you." He practically hissed the words at her as she blinked in disbelief.

"You wouldn't?" She couldn't stop her eyes from widening in fear as she looked up at him. He smirked and she could see the warmth in his look had evaporated. "My God, you would."

She knew that his words had been a reaction to what she'd said to him but she wasn't going to risk his temper by denying his request. She was going to stick to what she'd decided earlier no matter what and try to be civil to him because she'd seen in his eyes how serious he was and there was no telling if he'd really sell her or not. Life onboard his ship with him for company was preferential to the life of a slave in this town. Here, no one would find her. On *The Merciless*, she still had hope of the navy rescuing her.

~

On reaching the town, she realised that staying close to him was going to be a lot harder than it had originally sounded. The crowds of men that filled the dirty streets jostled her as they leered, making lewd comments and gestures in her direction.

She clung to Marlin's hand fiercely as he weaved his way through the groups of revellers. The scent of oil lamps and alcohol filled the air as she stumbled along behind her captor. Some of the men reached out towards her and she felt her heart thumping against her chest as she tried to avoid their roaming hands.

Desperately trying to shift closer to Marlin, she looked up at his face. She could see the look of grim determination settled there as he led her along the street. His brows were knit so tightly that his eyes were nothing more than slits. His jaw set so hard that she could see the muscles of it clearly.

She was still pondering his face as she felt someone grab hold of her arm. As she was yanked backwards, she let out a squeal and she saw him turn on a pin point to face her assailant, his expression dark and his eyes as cold as steel.

"I suggest you let the lady go." His voice dripping with venom, he stared hard at the man and reached for his gun.

She turned to look at the man and he seemed to think hard for a few seconds before releasing her arm. She rubbed it as the man stared at her and then at Marlin.

"Well, well, well...if it isn't Marlin. Got yourself a girlfriend now...going a little soft are we?" The man grinned at Marlin and Elizabeth frowned at the sight of his blackened teeth.

This man was the spitting image of the men she'd seen hanging in Liberty—foul and black and unkempt.

"She's a real firecracker." Marlin leaned back slightly and sucked his cheeks into a wide grin. Elizabeth looked up at him and noticed the change in his behaviour, how brazen he was being, so overly confident and brash. She watched him curl his tongue up and kick the dirt with his boot as he chuckled, his head tilting slightly as he continued to grin at the man. "Picked her up in Liberty, governor's daughter apparently."

"So it's you who stole the belle of the ball, eh? Word travels fast on these waters. The navy set sail not yesterday, only a few hours after she'd been discovered as missing. They've been boarding every ship they come across, navy, merchant and pirate alike."

"That so?" Marlin grinned and let his hand come to rest on Elizabeth's side.

She could feel his grip tighten and realised that he was trying to tell her to move closer to him and distance herself from the other man. She edged as near to him as possible.

"See, precious Charles will be by to save you in no time...that is..." He smiled into her eyes as his fingers stroked her side. She held her breath and felt as though the world had dropped away the moment she'd met his eyes. "If you want to go home?"

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As the other pirate laughed heartily, she came back to reality. She saw Marlin's eyes turn hard and cold once more and she could read in them that he was genuinely upset by the man finding it something to laugh about.

"Something funny?" he growled as he looked at the man.

She let her eyes fix on Marlin's profile. She was lost in her thoughts and wondering if he really meant what he'd said a moment ago and on the rowing boat. Just now, his eyes had been all sincerity.

"The thought that something as fine, beautiful and young as this girl would want to be with you, Marlin. The seawater must have addled your brain, mate." He laughed raucously again and his friends followed suit.

She saw Marlin frown. In that instant, she swore she caught a glimpse of hurt in his eyes.

Taking a deep breath, she turned to the side so his hip was resting near her stomach, and moved closer to him, willing her nerves to settle as she reached up and stroked his cheek softly.

Silently, he turned to face her, an incredulous look on his face as she smiled up at him and let her fingers play in the hollow of his cheek. He let his arm come to rest around her shoulders and he closed his eyes briefly as she nestled close to him and leant her head against his chest. He knew she was only doing it to help him save face but it touched a nerve deep inside of him, somewhere in the chest region.

The whole crowd seemed to be stunned into silence for a split second by the sight of Marlin and the pretty girl cuddling up to him. In a matter of moments they had returned to whatever they had been doing before the spectacle had started, all of them doing their best to avoid meeting Marlin's eyes.

"I stand corrected. Did you take her for ransom or love?" The large pirate grinned at Marlin.

Elizabeth closed her eyes; Marlin's strong embrace lulling her and calming her nerves as it made her feel safe.

Marlin met the man's eyes and kept his face impassive.

"Bait," he said flatly as his fingers idly caressed her smooth shoulder. He'd expected her to tense up but she didn't, she seemed steady and calm in his arms. He could feel her heart pounding against his side and he wondered why she was so relaxed.

"Ah...drawing out an old wound, eh?"

“Could say that.” He sucked his cheeks into another wide grin.

As Elizabeth shifted slightly in his arms, he realised why she was so calm. He could feel her stomach rumbling and her breathing becoming shallow. She was falling asleep on him, on his chest, in his arms.

He moved almost imperceptibly and felt her jerk awake.

Elizabeth placed her hand against his chest and slowly blinked her eyes open. The smell of oil lamps and wet hay came back to her and she frowned. She slowly realised that she had her cheek pressed against Marlin’s chest and tried to ignore the fact that she had dozed off on him.

“See you around, mate. If you see him, tell him he knows where to find me.” Marlin started moving away with Elizabeth, his arm still firmly around her shoulders as he guided her through the streets.

She looked up at him as they walked. His look of grim determination had returned but she knew that it was all for show. In the dim light, she couldn’t read his eyes as he turned his head to look at her.

“Let’s get some food, sweetheart.”

She nodded and stuck close to him, feeling safe when he was surrounding her and holding her tight.

Chapter 6

As they turned a corner in the murky main street of Beggars Haven, Marlin nodded to a few men and steered Elizabeth into a building.

In the brief journey through the public house, she couldn’t help noticing how all the women present seemed to be intent on seducing the men. Their faces were heavy with rouge and their dresses revealed more than was decent. Clearly, these were the women of ill repute that she had heard tales of along with pirates.

She watched them smile and flutter their eyelashes at Marlin as he passed them, and noted that he didn’t look at any of them. He kept his eyes fixed straight ahead and didn’t slow down. His actions seemed to make them try harder to draw his attention. They were giggling and running their hands over his shoulder as he passed and Elizabeth thought it a little rude considering he was already in the company of a woman.

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She frowned at them as Marlin walked her straight through the main room of the pub and into the quieter back room.

Marlin sat her down in the corner on a long padded seat near the fireplace. When he sat down next to her, he noticed that she didn't start—she just looked at him.

"Anything I can get you?" A buxom woman leant over the table in front of them.

Elizabeth expected Marlin's eyes to linger on her body in the same way they always lingered on her own but they remained fixed firmly on her face.

"Ale, wine, and food for the lady, something nice." He handed her a collection of coins and the woman smiled sweetly at him before walking away.

"You did well out there." He looked around at Elizabeth and read the tiredness in her face, her eyes large and soft.

"I'm just trying to give myself an easier life. If I'm nice to you then you'll hurt me less..." She trailed off as his eyes narrowed slightly on hers.

He wanted to say a million things in response to her statement, running from 'is that what you think?' through to 'you always hurt the ones you love'. He choked on the last one.

"I have to meet someone." He watched the edge of fear enter her eyes again and frowned. "Not leaving you, don't fret."

"I did not 'fret'," she said indignantly.

"Whatever you say, sweetheart. Just be polite when he arrives. The nicer you are to him the less likely I am to sell you." He grinned and watched her look turn incredulous once more.

~

Elizabeth toyed with the remains of her food and snuck a glance towards Marlin. He was tapping his fingers on the table and had an air of apprehension about him. As she went to speak to him, she found her attention drawn towards a large bald man that had just entered the area they were sitting in. She saw a wide smile creep across Marlin's face and he stood up as the man approached.

"Clancy...good to see you old man." Marlin grabbed him roughly and patted his back.

She wondered if this passed for affection in his eyes.

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She watched the man Marlin had called Clancy as he sat down opposite them and when he looked at her, she gave him her best polite smile, knowing that Marlin would be checking on her. She felt Marlin's eyes shift to rest on her and she moved hers to meet them. His seemed to be smiling at her and she decided that it probably had something to do with the quantity of ale he'd drunk while waiting for his friend.

"So...what brings you to these parts? Heard you were carrying interesting cargo." Clancy smiled wide at her and she frowned slightly. It was one thing to have Marlin's eyes lingering on her, quite another to have a complete stranger look at her that way. "Interesting she is, fair pretty I say..."

"Hey! Eyes off the lady, mate. Finders keepers." Marlin let an edge of annoyance enter his voice as he picked up the flagon of ale and filled his friend's tankard.

Elizabeth waited until he'd placed the flagon back down on the table before looking over at him. She couldn't quite believe the protective streak he'd gained since earlier in the day. One moment he was willing to let her die from exhaustion and the next he was protecting her as though she belonged to him. The voices of the two men near her fading away, she concentrated on trying to figure Marlin out but after much deliberation, she concluded that she couldn't imagine what had caused such a change in him.

As she felt his eyes on her, she came out of her reverie, giving him a look that clearly stated that she hadn't been listening.

"You'll do that then? I'll be grateful if you would. You know practically every man in this hell hole and the more that know about her the better it will be." Marlin grinned wickedly at Clancy and then looked around at Elizabeth. Reaching out, he pushed a strand of her hair back into place and could see her trying to figure out what he was up to.

"Word will spread like wild fire, no problem there. Problem is what you're going to do when they find you."

"That's the easy bit. I'm going to kill him." Marlin laughed and Elizabeth watched Clancy laugh along with him.

Stifling a yawn as she ignored them, she let her eyes wander about the room they were in. The walls were dark and grotty, dirty from smoke. The floor was equally as disgusting, covered in a thick layer of grime that had evidently been brought in from outside by the boots of the men who frequented the place. She could still hear the women in the next room as they laughed, flaunting their wares at the pirates and marauders that were drinking themselves into a stupor.

The large fireplace near her stood empty and she wondered why they actually made buildings with fireplaces in such a hot area of the world. It didn't seem to get any use. In fact, it was the cleanest thing in the establishment.

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She wrinkled her nose up as she stifled another yawn and let her attention return to the men she was sitting with. She silently watched Marlin as he refilled his friend's tankard again but not his own and pondered whether he was trying to get the other man drunk or whether he was just being friendly by supplying him with free ale.

She let her eyes linger on the leather cuffs around Marlin's wrists and part of her wanted to know if he'd properly taken care of the wound she'd inflicted. She wanted to reach out and touch his arm, knowing that if she did so she'd be able to read the answer to her question in his eyes, but she couldn't bring herself to go through with it.

Marlin frowned at her slightly as she stared at his arm. He noted the sad edge that had entered her expression and he struggled to keep his focus with Clancy. Her solemnity and quietness kept catching his attention. He wanted her to speak, to say something, anything. Her constant silence was causing a part of him to worry about her and he didn't like it.

As her brows knit together and her eyes narrowed on his arm, he realised what she was thinking, knew she was wondering if he was okay. He felt warm inside at the thought of her worrying about him. Letting his hand slip off the table, he tapped her hand gently and she raised her eyes to meet his. Marlin gave her his best smile and saw her worry disappear as she gave him a half smile in return.

Elizabeth let her eyes fall to rest on Marlin's hand where it now rested on the seat beside her leg. She listened to his voice as he continued to talk about ships and crews, enemies and allies and all the merchant ships that were now traversing the waters in this vicinity. Watching his fingers tapping impatiently as he talked, she noticed for the first time that he wasn't at all relaxed. He was as tense as she'd ever seen him and she wondered why. Maybe the man opposite him wasn't as much his friend as she believed him to be or maybe it was being out in town with her that had him on edge. Did he feel that bringing her with him was a bad decision? If something happened then she would hinder his escape. Would he simply leave her for dead?

When her expression turned pensive, Marlin turned his head to look at her. He tried to figure out what was going on in her head tonight. She seemed so withdrawn and distant, like her thoughts were weighing her down.

As he returned his attention to his friend, she raised her eyes up and studied his profile. In his expression, she could see that he didn't want to be here. She remembered him telling her that he rarely left the ship and subconsciously she knew he desired to be safely back onboard *The Merciless*.

Her hand moved of its own volition towards him and she let her it rest over his, curling her fingers around it so they brushed against his palm.

Marlin stared down at her hand as it touched his, her fingers holding him tightly and squeezing him as if she was trying to let him know that she could sense his unease and

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wanted to reassure him. He frowned at the sight of their hands together and the way it made him feel, and then raised his head to laugh at something Clancy had said.

Savouring the feeling of her hand in his, he tried to ignore the voice in the back of his mind that said something would happen to disturb the new found peace between him and his captive girl.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched a man enter the room and then raised a brow at Clancy. His friend's eyes moved to rest on the man as he stopped at the bar.

Marlin instinctively pulled Elizabeth onto his lap and held her tight around the waist, not wanting to relinquish her to the man.

Once she'd got past the initial shock of the position she found herself in, Elizabeth's first reaction was to strike him but she quickly decided against it. She wasn't stupid. She knew that now word was out he didn't need her any more. Charles would come for him whether he had her or not and if she disobeyed him in front of his friend he was likely to leave her here or worse, sell her like he'd threatened to.

"Still...sweetheart." Marlin purred into her ear and felt her relax slightly. "There's a man at the bar who would dearly love to kill me and you wouldn't want that now would you?"

He watched her eyes move to rest on her lap before coming up to meet his. He waited for her to tell him that she didn't care but she simply looked at him. He watched the tall, mousy haired man questioning the barmaid as Elizabeth continued to let her eyes roam his face, her nose wrinkling as her look turned pensive.

"Why would he kill you?" she whispered, her body buzzing with nerves as she sat on his lap with his fingers grasping her sides.

"Because he knows you...or Charles at least."

Her head shot around to face the man in question and she was free from Marlin in a matter of seconds. She stumbled towards the man at the bar, her heart leaping into her throat as she recognised him and came tantalisingly close to reaching him. A strong hand around her wrist yanked her backwards and she involuntarily cried out.

"Jeremy!"

The naval officer turned to face her and froze to the spot. There in front of him was the very girl he'd been looking for, her arm held tight by the man he was out to capture.

Anger erupting inside him over her actions, Marlin pulled Elizabeth hard into him and wrapped his arm tightly around her neck, using his injured forearm to choke her. He tightened his grip until she made a satisfying strangled noise and her fingers tried desperately to pry his arm off of her.

Elizabeth felt as though she couldn't breathe. He had her held so hard against him and his arm so tight around her throat that he was crushing her windpipe. She didn't know what had possessed her to her leap towards Jeremy but she knew what had made Marlin to treat her this way. A moment ago she had shown him affection, shown him that a part of her cared about him and in the very next second she was running away from him, and it was obvious that she'd hurt him by doing so. She closed her eyes as her hands gripped his arm and struggled to loosen his hold on her. As she recognised it was his injured one, she relinquished her grip so she didn't hurt him. Instead, she relaxed into him and hoped he'd notice that she wasn't planning on going anywhere.

"Miss Miller." Jeremy looked surprised to see her but not surprised to see the man standing behind her. His eyes coolly met Marlin's. "Should've known you'd be behind this."

"I'm flattered you think of me." Marlin slowly drew his pistol and pointed it first at Jeremy and then at Elizabeth's temple. As she tensed, he tried to quash the feeling of guilt inside him and told himself that if she hadn't tried to run away from him then it wouldn't have had to happen this way. "Another step, I kill her and then you."

He cursed himself as she became as still as a millpond in his arms. Knowing that he was scaring her, he pulled her a little closer to him and breathed in her scent.

Elizabeth felt her heart rocketing as her mind raced through every possible scenario. She knew that Jeremy had a tendency to act rashly and she prayed he didn't do anything foolish for both her sake and his. She frowned slightly as she felt Marlin's fingers stroking her shoulder where they grasped it. Focusing on the sensation, she noticed he was caressing her gently, almost lovingly as he eased the gun away from her head. She hoped that he was trying to give her a sign that she was safe.

"You wouldn't." Jeremy stared into Marlin's eyes.

"Wouldn't I? Everyone seems to be questioning my integrity these days." Marlin frowned hard at Jeremy and he saw his eyes move to rest on Elizabeth.

"Miss Miller, I can't let him leave this room. I'm sorry."

She quickly realised what he was saying. At the cost of risking both their lives, he was going to try to take Marlin on. He was willing to let Marlin kill her for the sake of being the man to capture him.

"Jeremy...I..." Elizabeth frowned at him in disbelief and watched his foot move towards her. As it touched the floor there was an ear splitting crack and her eyes rushed upwards as her blood ran cold, her voice strangled with emotion as she tried to speak. "No!"

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She broke free of Marlin and darted forwards, watching a trail of crimson seep from the small hole in Jeremy's forehead and feeling dizzy as he fell to the floor with a thud. Her hand trembled as it raced to cover her mouth and she let her tears flow freely as she stared down at Jeremy's body. Her own body grew numb with a thousand conflicting emotions as she broke down into sobs.

Marlin watched her for a moment and fought against his desire to comfort her. He turned to face Clancy as the other patrons of the building went back to their drinks and business.

"He was here fast. We've not been docked six hours."

"You think he's here with the *Endeavour*?" Clancy noticed how Marlin's eyes kept trying to work their way back to the girl as she cried near the officer's corpse.

"No, that ship is too slow. He had to have come on *The Merciless*' sister ship, *The Fearless*, they're the fastest in the fleet and now they're ours." Marlin grinned and tried to shut out the sound of Elizabeth's sobs. They were causing something inside him to ache. Turning slightly, he tried to reach a hand out to her but she evaded it and continued to cry, her breathing becoming erratic as she tried to calm herself. His eyes flickered with hurt and then went dark again.

"Well...my work here is done...spread the..." There was a thud and he turned to see Elizabeth lying unconscious on the dirty wooden floor, her cheeks flushed and wet with tears. He stared down at her blankly, his expression softening and his voice dropping to a murmur. "...Poor little thing, think I went too hard on her."

"Marlin?" Clancy looked incredulous as he witnessed the expression on the captain's face and the softness of his voice as he gazed down at the girl on the floor.

"Nothing..." Marlin growled as he turned back to Clancy and with a false air of happiness, slapped him on the shoulder. "*The Fearless* is yours, just spread the word."

Bending down beside her, Marlin scooped the prone form of Elizabeth up into his arms. He frowned with concern as he looked at her and her head rolled backwards. Jostling her in his arms, he waited for her head to come to rest against his chest before he started moving.

"You see Charles, you send him to me. You know where I'm heading."

Clancy nodded as he watched Marlin walk out of the door. He knew where he was heading all right. He was heading into deep water with the girl in his arms. He'd seen the concern in his friend's eyes as he'd watched the girl all evening. The emotions that were playing out between them were clear enough for everyone to see. He shook his head and sighed. Whether Marlin knew it or not, he was in for a rough ride to vengeance and the girl would undoubtedly be his downfall.

Chapter 7

Marlin carried Elizabeth through his cabin and straight into the bedroom. Several times on the journey back to the ship he'd tried to rouse her and failed. Now he was starting to wonder if she'd ever wake up.

Setting her down on the bed, he placed her head gently on the pillow and sat down next to her. He worked slowly to clear the hair from her face as she lay still and he could feel that it was still damp with her tears. Smoothing her golden locks as they fell messily about her, he tried to ignore how ashen she was, her lips and cheeks deathly pale. It dawned on him, now that she looked so near death, that he really wanted her alive. He'd put her through such trials since kidnapping her and she'd borne them all. Where other women would have faded away, she came back stronger. Now he feared that he'd pushed her that one step too far and she was lost to him.

He brushed the backs of his fingers against her cheek and frowned as they sapped the warmth from his hand—she was freezing cold under his touch. Frowning as he grabbed a blanket from the bottom of the bed, he unfolded it and placed it gently over her, slipping her shoes off before tucking it in under her feet. He took his own boots off and moved to sit behind her on the bed. Pulling the covers up over her prone form, he lay down and curled up against her.

Something in his gut told him that if she woke in the night she'd believe he was taking liberties but it was the only solution that he had. He needed to warm her up and the two thin blankets draped over her weren't going to manage it. Closing his eyes, he moved closer to her until she was safely ensconced in his embrace. Her body moulded against his and her head shifted to be closer to him, and he felt warm inside over her first signs of movement.

He smiled as he began to drift off to sleep, enjoying the sensation of not being alone in his bed. It had been so long since he'd had this that he'd forgotten what it felt like, but he knew it was different somehow. She seemed to touch him on a deeper level and swayed his feelings. The only trouble about sleeping next to her was that if she got the wrong idea she'd kill him as he slept.

~

Elizabeth woke halfway through the night to a dark room illuminated by crisp moonlight. She could see the moon through the windows and her eyes worked to focus on it. She smiled at the sight of it before her face fell, the memories of what had transpired in the port coming back to haunt her. She could see it all clearly in her head, Jeremy risking her life for the sake of bringing her captor in.

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The Merciless

When something moved beside her in the dark, she went stiff. Looking down at her waist, she could see his arm draped over her, his fingers grasping her tightly through the blankets. Panic set in as she tried to see if all her clothing was intact without disturbing him and as she looked around the room for a means of escape or a weapon, her eyes came to rest on a note beside her.

She frowned as she tilted it towards the moonlight and read it.

Scream, shout, swear, just don't kill me. You needed heat and that is all I wanted to give to you. I did not try to do anything to you. I swear it. Wake me and I'll leave.

As she thought about it, she realised that where he had been holding her hostage, she had been holding his bed hostage, and she was certain that most captives didn't get to sleep in the captain's bedroom. In fact, she was sure they slept in the hold. She wondered where he had slept last night. The only viable answer was the little couch in the main room, as he wouldn't have left the cabin for fear of losing some of the crews' respect.

Closing her eyes, she sighed as she repeatedly told herself that she was wicked for enjoying the feeling of him next to her, that she was the Devil's child for wanting to stay in his arms. As he pulled her closer to him and nuzzled her hair, she told herself that she needed his warmth and that was all this was. It was nothing to do with him. It was about the warmth that he gave her.

Elizabeth drifted off to sleep again, her mind emptying of her fears and the visions of what had happened to her that day and being replaced with thoughts of his strong arms and comforting embrace. She knew it was wrong to feel anything for him. After everything he'd done to her, she should have hated him but she couldn't help herself, she could be mad as hell at him for something but the second he wrapped his arms around her or looked deeply into her eyes she was lost in him.

~

Awakening to sunlight streaming in through the cabin window, Elizabeth watched it play on the empty bed next to her and placed her hand into it, letting the sun warm it through. Her head ached with the recollection of what had happened last night and she sighed as she watched the dappled light dance on her fingers before she moved her eyes to rest on the note that was still beside her.

Sitting up and getting out of bed, she padded quietly across the room to the door. Peering around it, she saw Marlin sitting at the table studying a map and he didn't look happy. Taking quiet tentative steps, she moved to the chair opposite him and sat down as she pinned her hair into place.

Marlin didn't bother looking up. He simply pushed a plate of food towards her and continued to look at the map.

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She stared down at the unappetising mixture of potatoes and meat and curled her lip up in disgust. As her stomach growled at her, she closed her eyes, giving in to her hunger and eating the food in front of her. The silence in the room was deafening and she could feel the tension between her and Marlin growing again. As she ate, she started to wish that she had spoken on first entering the room because she could no longer find words to say to him and the longer she endured the silence raging between them the more the memories of last night angered her.

Elizabeth looked up at Marlin as he studied the papers in front of him. He'd taken the life of a man she knew, a good man, and she hadn't seen him show even one ounce of remorse for his actions. A niggling voice in the back of her head said that she wasn't just mad at Marlin, she was mad at Jeremy too in a way. He'd been willing to risk her life for the sake of capturing Marlin. She knew that the navy's orders would have been the opposite—to save her at all costs and kill the pirate in the process if needs be. The thought of that happening made her blood run cold and she shuddered.

Marlin noticed her movement and looked up from his work, his brows knitting into a frown as he let his eyes roam over her. She looked better now but still seemed so out of sorts. Her spirits were clearly dampened and he knew he was the cause of it.

She sighed heavily.

Growing angry at both her and himself, he sat down and stared hard at her, trying to convince himself to hate her, to see her for what she really was—a one way ticket to revenge. But she had stirred something in him and last night had made it blindingly apparent to him. Somehow, she had cracked his defences wide open. Marlin chuckled to himself as he closed his eyes, remembering the way she had touched his hand in the port and the way he'd felt as he'd slept with her in his arms. Screwing his face up, he let his self-loathing take over and stood up sharply, banging his fist down on the table hard enough to cause all the cutlery to jump, and Elizabeth jumped too.

“Stop it...I will not apologise for what happened last night. I don't have to. He didn't care about you so stop trying to convince yourself that what he did was for your benefit. He was willing to let you die, Elizabeth. Why can't you see that clearly? He wasn't your friend. He didn't care about you. The only damn person that cares about you is...” Marlin cut himself off and started pacing the room, his heavy boots pounding out an ever quickening rhythm as his fists clenched and unclenched.

Elizabeth watched him as he paced back and forth with knitted brows and downcast eyes.

“Who, Marlin?” She sat still as her heart thudded quickly against her ribs, her eyes still following him. He didn't look like answering. He looked deep in thought and she could see that his anger was directed at himself for some reason.

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"Who...Marlin?" Her voice was firmer and he stopped and stared at her, his expression hard and cold.

"Charles," he said bluntly before walking briskly out through the doors and onto the deck.

Elizabeth stared at the spot he'd occupied and let her heartbeat even out. She'd seen it in his eyes. Something in them spoke to her and she felt certain that Charles wasn't the only man who cared for her. Taking a deep breath, she realised that she didn't really feel angry with him for killing Jeremy. She was only acting angry because she felt that in this situation it was her duty to feel angry. She didn't even feel angry anymore about being kidnapped. Since yesterday evening and last night, her feelings had altered dramatically. She missed home but not as badly as she thought she should have. She didn't miss her father and she certainly didn't miss Charles.

She turned her head to look out of the cabin doors at Marlin where he was stood on deck talking to Alexander. The sunlight played on him gently and seemed to soften his features, the angry lines of his face melting away as he chuckled over something. She watched him walk away from her towards the bow of the ship and smiled wide as an idea entered her head.

~

Elizabeth adjusted her corset and stared into the cracked and dirty mirror. If Marlin wanted to run hot and cold on her then she was damn well going to give as good as she got. Pushing her breasts up until her nipples were practically on show in the blood red dress that he'd given her along with the green one, she smiled at her image. She hoped to see him react to her like the men had reacted last night to the harlots. Looking down at herself, she had to admit quietly that he had taste in dresses. What she was wearing was more expensive than any dress she owned back home.

Letting loose her honeyed tresses from their pins, she ran her fingers through her hair and frowned. At the very least, she wanted to get him to agree to letting her have a bath, but what she wanted most was to have him chasing after her. She wanted to play on the emotions she believed he was harbouring and she wanted power over him, like he had power over her.

She ran her lips against her teeth repeatedly until they were reddened and pinched her cheeks to make them glow. When she was satisfied with her appearance, she smoothed her dress out one last time and with a deep breath walked through the double doors of his cabin and onto the deck.

Shading her eyes from the sun, she spotted him near the bow of the ship talking to his first mate and she was thankful that he had his back to her.

"Deep breath. You can do this." She told herself as she watched him.

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The Merciless

Elizabeth felt her heart flutter madly in her chest as she took a step out onto the main deck. Whether directly or indirectly she could feel all eyes on her—all except his. Willing her stomach to settle, she strode confidently along the deck, heading directly for him.

At first, she thought the crew staring at her was going to unnerve her so much that she was going to give in and run back to the relative safety of his cabin, but as she walked on, she noticed the look in their eyes. It was the same look that she'd seen on half their faces last night in the port. She was reeling them all in. They had all stopped working the instant they laid eyes on her.

Feeling a little more confident, she held her head high and ignored them all. She was half way across the deck now. He had to notice her soon.

Marlin watched his first mate staring over his shoulder and it became suddenly clear that the ship was dead silent. Turning slowly on his heel, he was about to shout a command when his ability to speak left him. There, striding confidently towards him was Elizabeth. She looked stunning in the red Chinese silk dress he'd bought her and with the sunlight bouncing off her hair. He swallowed hard and struggled for control. She was after something, that much he could tell, and some part of him silently prayed it was his heart.

Elizabeth raised her chin defiantly as he came down the steps to meet her. She could see his fascination with her clearly written in his eyes as they scanned her body and she tried not to blush as they lingered on her.

"A word, please," she said with no hesitation and his eyes shot up to meet hers.

He couldn't read her look. Her eyes were all defiance of him once more and he had to wonder where the girl who was so submissive yesterday had gone. He tilted his head to one side and narrowed his eyes on her, sucking his cheeks into a slight smile as he worked to figure out what she was up to.

"Go ahead."

Elizabeth felt her heart beat erratically over the look he was giving her. Last night he'd shown no interest in the girls at the port, now he was giving her his full attention and she hadn't expected it to be so overpowering.

"I..." She swallowed her nerves and stepped closer to him, watching his eyes shift so they remained locked with hers. "...was just wondering something."

"Really?" Marlin felt his heart beat hard against his chest and tried to stifle his feelings.

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Becoming steady and quietly confident that she could get what she wanted from him if she just let go of her reserve, she leant her head back and looked up at him, pouting as she smiled sweetly.

“This delightful ship of yours...” She watched his eyes smile at her even when his face was impassive. “I don’t suppose, you happen to have such a thing...” She giggled and he blinked. “...as a *bath*?”

As she breathed the last word up at him, Marlin swallowed hard. The thought of her in a bath, in his cabin, her sweet pale skin awash with bubbles and pretty scents, was enough to send him in need of clarity but he couldn’t move. He was a captive of her eyes as she leant in closer to him.

“Miss Miller...” Marlin whispered back at her as he lowered his voice. He saw a moment of doubt flicker in her beautiful green eyes and realised there was something wrong with this picture.

Elizabeth smiled wide at him, satisfied that she could sway him and she could rule him if she wanted to.

Taking a deep breath, Marlin stared at her.

“She would look better if she were a little cleaner,” he thought as he perused her.

He watched her take a deep breath, her breasts heaving against the restrictive material of her corset and wondered what she looked like under all those layers of material. She’d be a slim little thing. Firm, pert and young. Something was definitely wrong with this picture. Governor’s daughters weren’t interested in pirates. They only wanted naval men, like her Charles.

Marlin growled at how stupid he’d been and saw the edge of fear she usually wore around him return for a split second before she was defiant again.

Grabbing her hair, he yanked her head backwards and grinned down at her as her body involuntarily pressed against his as she leant over backwards in an attempt to ease the pain in her scalp.

“Don’t...try...and...play...me.” He leant forwards and whispered into her ear and she let out a quiet whimper.

Struggling against an overwhelming desire to cry out in pain, Elizabeth tried to shut out the sounds of the crew laughing at her. She’d thought that she’d won. She’d seen it in his eyes just seconds before he grabbed hold of her.

Leaning further forwards, Marlin felt the warmth of her skin as he kept his lips by her ear. He could feel her trembling against him.

Catching hold of her arm, he let go of her hair and began striding down the length of the ship. He didn't stop the crew from laughing at her. He could feel her body shaking under his tight grip, could picture her eyes brimming with tears without even having to look at her and for one infinitesimal moment, he wanted to stop, wanted to apologise, wanted to soothe her and look after her. Instead, he flung her through the doors and into the cabin.

Slamming them shut behind him, he looked at the crumpled heap of silk covered girl at his feet. She was sobbing as her fingertips tried to dig their way into the wooden floor, her hair covering her face as she turned it away from him. Marlin closed his eyes for a second and reeled his emotions in. Bending over, he caught her arm roughly and hauled her to her feet.

"None of that," he growled at her and she sobbed harder, and again he found himself considering comforting her.

Marlin cleared the hair from her face and watched her lips trembling. He could feel her whole body quivering under his touch and it was almost too much to handle. The thought that this tiny girl had shown him more defiance than any member of his crew, that she had stood up to him no matter how hard he tried to beat her down, had him fascinated with her. The fact that she'd shown him fleeting moments of tenderness and something nearing affection had him enthralled. He wanted to see how hard he could push her, wanted to figure out what conflict was reigning inside her, wanted to know if he could be more than just a pirate to her, wanted her.

He pulled her close to him, close enough that he could feel her ragged breaths against his neck as she lowered her head to avoid his eyes and placed a single finger under her chin. He was amazed when she raised her head up without him forcing her to.

Elizabeth could feel the tension in his body, could see the indecision in his eyes and read in his look that he was planning something. She watched his long lashes as his eyes closed, hiding his deep blue eyes from her and for a moment, she felt like all the light had left the world, and then stars exploded in front of her eyes.

She felt his mouth press hard against hers, his full lips capturing and claiming them for his own. Her stomach swirled and her skin buzzed as his tongue darted out and licked along her lips, parting them slowly and begging entrance from her. She didn't know what else to do so she complied, allowing his tongue to slide into her mouth and tangle with hers. She pushed her hands against his shoulders and tried to push him away only to end up wrapping her arms around his neck as she surrendered to him. Her wide eyes closed slowly as he kissed her deeply and she felt as though she was being kissed into oblivion. Losing herself in her feelings, she didn't care if it was wrong, or if she was wicked. She wanted to remain in his arms with his lips against hers. Her heart was beating loudly in her ears, her body swimming with warmth and sweeps of tingles that ran along her nerves like shudders of pleasure.

Marlin felt her go limp in his arms and relax into him, her fingers playing in his hair. He took a step back and broke the kiss, watching her soft dream-like expression turn to horror as she realised what she'd done.

Elizabeth gasped and pressed her fingers to her lips, feeling them swollen with his kiss and tasting him in her mouth still.

He grinned wickedly at her as he turned and walked towards the door, stepping out onto the deck without looking back at her.

Grabbing the nearest member of his crew, he frowned down at him, trying to ignore the feeling of her that lingered on his mouth and skin.

"Got a new assignment for you." He smiled.

Chapter 8

Elizabeth slumped down onto the couch and stared at the floor blankly as the feeling of his kiss still resonated through her body. She pressed her fingers to her mouth and blinked slowly. She'd never been kissed before. She'd imagined her first time would be soft and tender, not passionate and desirous as it had been. It flared up feelings in her that she knew she shouldn't be having towards such a man.

As she continued to stare at the wooden floor, the doors swung open and a pair of boots appeared in her field of vision. They weren't Marlin's.

She looked up to see Alexander smiling down at her and wondered how he could be so happy all the time when he seemed to get hell from everyone onboard, even more than she got.

"I have orders to fix you a bath, miss."

Her mouth dropped open in shock. She'd actually got what she'd wanted from Marlin and all for the price of a kiss. She considered it for a moment. Did she pay with a kiss or would he have granted her wish anyway? Did he simply want to kiss her?

Cheeks turning crimson and hot, she noticed Alexander's look turn awkward.

"Could you...in the bedroom. I don't want the crew staring in at me through the window." Elizabeth looked towards the bedroom and then up at Alexander. He smiled again and leant towards her.

"Between you and me, miss, I don't think the captain would let them. In fact, I think he'd kill a man for simply looking at you without his leave to."

"Whatever do you mean?" She tried to look coy, drawing him into telling her his thoughts about Marlin.

"I mean, forgive me for being so forward and all, but he's taken quite a liking to you. Two years aboard this ship and I've never seen him so...so..."

"Happy?" Elizabeth offered, her expression remaining innocent.

"Yeah...it's like he's different, more lenient. He's acting the part too much, like he's trying to cover something up."

She noted that he seemed to be talking to himself rather than her, as though he was trying to fit everything together in his head.

"He kissed me," she said quietly, and let her cheeks burn up again. She didn't know why she'd said it. It had just pushed its way out and in doing so made her feel better for sharing it.

"Worse than I thought. You think he...it's not my place to discuss matters behind his back...some would see it as mutiny to talk about the captain in such a way."

"Then let me say what you cannot. I don't know if he has feelings for me...yesterday he was so cruel to me, but I think his heart ached to do it. In his eyes, I could see pity. When we went into Beggars Haven he was so protective of me and I know it wasn't because I was his hostage." She stared at the floor again as she thought about what had passed between her and Marlin last night. The boat journey, the time in port and the fact that she'd let him sleep next to her.

"On the boat..." Alexander let his voice drop to a whisper, his heart racing over discussing such matters with the captain's hostage. "...when I rowed you into port, he was talking about you wasn't he? He wasn't talking about the ship."

She blinked slowly and raised her eyes up to look at him. "I think so...I don't know...he seemed to be. Does it mean anything if he was? Does it alter us in any way?"

"The question you have to ask yourself, miss, is were you talking about him, too?"

Alexander watched her nose wrinkle up as she thought about the question he'd thrown into the air. He could see her turmoil written clearly across her face and in the way she sat with her hands clasped tightly in her lap and her body stiff.

"Yes," she sighed in resignation. "I must be insane. This can't be happening, can it? It's not normal for a girl to have feelings other than hatred towards pirates."

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“Define normal,” Alexander chuckled and smiled down at her. “Try not to think about it too much. Give him time and I have a feeling he’ll make things clear. I really don’t think he can hurt you anymore. In fact...I think he’d rather die than see you hurt.”

With that, he walked out of the door and left Elizabeth alone with thoughts of Marlin and her feelings filling her head. She absently watched Alexander through the windows in the doors as he talked to a couple of burly crewmen and they nodded.

“Shouldn’t be long.” Alexander smiled as he walked back in to the cabin. “Might be a little cold though. We don’t carry hot water onboard and it takes a while to heat it, time I doubt the captain will spare. He wants to break anchor as soon as possible.”

She smiled as she thought about having a bath, be it hot or cold.

“A cold bath is better than no bath.” She let her expression turn curious as her hands moved to rest beside her, her body relaxing into the couch. “You’ve really been here two years?”

“Yes. *The Merciless* sank my previous ship. The captain there was a real bastard... sorry miss. He treated us like slaves even though she was a naval ship. This ship is better. She’s a good ship, a fine ship, with a good crew. She’s more...”

“Naval?” she offered and watched him smile warmly.

“Now that you say it.”

Elizabeth watched two men carry a large round wooden tub into the bedroom, her mind occupied with thinking about just how naval most the men around her were, especially the captain.

“Better get back on deck. They’ll bring the water in soon and then no one will disturb you, captain’s orders.”

As Alexander left her and the two men followed him out of the door, she allowed herself to heave a long sigh. She needed to figure this ship out. The longer she spent onboard the less it seemed like the pirate ships she’d heard tales of. It wasn’t as rough as she’d expected and aside from the one incident when she’d first arrived and just now, there was no sign of the men paying her any heed. She had feared they would harass her at every passing moment but they seemed more interested in doing their duties. Maybe it was just their fear of angering the captain or maybe they were dedicated to the running of the ship and she was really of no interest to them.

The men came with the water and she turned her head to stare out of the window as they filled the bath. She let her eyes un-focus as she concentrated on the gentle sway of the ship on the tide and the noise of crew as they went about their work. Her thoughts

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returned to Marlin and the way he acted. He was becoming clearer to her now. She could read things in his eyes that she knew he tried to hide and they allowed her to see part of the real him, the man behind the façade.

She watched the men leave and stood up. Smoothing her dress down, she let her eyes focus on Marlin as he crossed the deck in front of her, his attention wholly with inspecting his crews work and dishing out orders as he saw fit. Smiling to herself, she knew that when Alexander had said 'no one' would disturb her that he meant 'no one but the captain'. She walked dreamily into the bedroom where her bath awaited her and looked around the back of the door. She smiled when she saw the key in the lock.

Elizabeth lit the lanterns in the room and locked the door, removing the key and placing it to one side as she moved across the room to the bed. Taking her dress off and undoing her corset, she carefully laid them out on the bed. Her heart raced as she pulled her under dress off over her head and her stomach tightened with excitement at the thought of being naked in a man's bedroom, a pirate captain's bedroom no less. She smiled nervously as she checked all the curtains were drawn tightly, even the ones at the rear of the ship.

Stepping into the large, round wooden tub, she lowered herself gently into the soapy water, sighing as it enveloped her and smiling over the fact it wasn't cold, it was tepid. She surmised that Marlin must have ordered some water to be heated. Humming a tune, she started to clean herself from her feet upwards.

~

Marlin paused on entering the cabin. He'd come to retrieve his maps but as he heard her singing sweetly in the bedroom, he couldn't help himself. He listened to the soft splashes of water as she washed herself and his feet moved of their own volition, carrying him towards the door. He raised his hand to knock but instead placed his palm against it, trying to connect with her on the other side.

Smiling to himself, he walked back to the cabin doors and locked them before drawing the curtains closed. Heading back to the bedroom door, he took a deep breath and listened to her singing to herself. He looked down at the handle and then noticed the lock below it. A wicked grin creeping across his face, he forced his feeling of guilt back down to his feet as he crouched down and peered through the keyhole.

He almost gasped when he saw her. She had her back to him and her hair was tousled and messily pinned up, but parts of it had fallen out of place and were trailing down her back. Her shoulders and back glowed warmly in the light from the lanterns and he could see beads of water on her skin. He swallowed noisily as she lifted her left arm from the water and proceeded to wash it with the sponge. As she raised her arm up above her head, he bit back his desire to moan. He could see the gentle curve of her breast clearly as she brought the sponge down her arm and over her side.

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He stood up sharply and paced the room to try to clear his head but found that he couldn't take his eyes off the door. It was wrong of him to spy on her when she was so vulnerable but part of him knew that what she had done was intentional. She would have left the key in the door had she not wanted anyone to see.

Walking back to the door, he crouched down again and watched her as she ran her hands over her glistening shoulders and down over her front.

Elizabeth couldn't resist smiling to herself. She felt wicked for doing such a thing and she was sure that she would be punished for it by some higher power but it felt good somehow, knowing he was watching her, knowing that she had some small kind of hold over him.

She had heard him enter the cabin and stop at the door, and she knew his curiosity would get the better of him and cause him to look through the keyhole. Knowing he was watching her bathe drove her to tease him. Since coming onboard she'd caught the lustful look in his eyes on several occasions and something made her want to show him what he was missing out on. She wanted to use her femininity and beauty to sway him, to ensure that he wouldn't want to hurt her any more. She wanted to get him back for earlier.

Slowly standing up, she heard a clatter and a thud in the other room and giggled quietly.

~

Marlin watched her intently, her small hands running over her exposed skin in such a way that he knew she was aware of him. He silently thanked God that Charles had insisted on carrying a bath onboard the ship. As he pondered the delicious curve of her shoulders and back, she stood up and his heart sped away with him. He stared blankly as the water cascaded down her body and then his eyes raced to follow it as it rushed over the small of her back and her firm round backside. He felt like moaning at the sight of it and it caused him to harden painfully in his breeches. Stumbling on standing, he bumped into the table and frowned as a giggle came from the other room. Sitting down slowly in his chair by the table, he winced as he went.

~

Elizabeth dressed hurriedly and walked out demurely into the main room of the cabin. She looked over at Marling as he stared pensively at the map in front of him.

"I thought I heard someone in here. For a moment, I wondered if it were one of the crew come to watch me bathe, but it's just you and you would not do such a despicable thing now, would you, Captain?"

"Absolutely not." Marlin shifted uncomfortably. "I needed to check these maps, plot our course, that kind of bloody thing."

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

Elizabeth raised her brows at his irritated tone, her heart speeding as she tried to not let his obvious desire affect her and make her blush.

“With the doors locked?” She let her eyes move to rest on the cabin doors and then back on him where he continued to stare at the maps.

“I did not wish to be disturbed.”

“In the dark?” She raised her brows again and watched him closely for a sign of guilt.

“I can see perfectly well, thank you.” He said indignantly.

“So which map are you looking at?” She watched him squint as he tried to read the words on the map.

“None of your business.” He huffed.

She kept her face blank as she sat down opposite him. He continued to read his map in the dark, avoiding her eyes at all costs so she couldn't attempt to read his emotions. His eyes crept to her hands where they were clasped on the table in front of her and he let them wander their own path up to her chest. He could see the moisture of her bath lingering there, drawing him in as she breathed softly. He shifted uncomfortably again. It was obvious that she was doing this intentionally. It was some kind of revenge for his earlier actions.

“Something wrong? You seem a little...unsettled.” She smiled innocently as his eyes moved to rest on her face. She could see the conflicting feelings in his expression and she waited patiently for his answer.

“I'm fine. Just need a moments peace...free from your yammering.” He ground the words out and then added to himself, “Free from you.”

Standing up, she curtsied. “Then I'll leave you to your thoughts, captain.”

Smiling to herself, she sashayed into the bedroom and shut the door, only to open it two seconds later and poke her head back around it.

“If you would be so kind as to tell your men I'm done with my bath now, *you* can take it away.”

She regretted it the instant she said it. She knew that she'd overstepped the mark by treating him as though he was just a crewman, and a bubble of panic rose up in her as she remembered what he'd done the last time she'd disrespected him.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

Marlin turned his head slowly to face her, his expression darkening as he met her eyes. Standing slowly, he walked towards her and put his foot in the door as she hurriedly tried to close it. He frowned as he pushed the door open and advanced on her. She backed towards the bed and held her hands up in the hope he would see it as a surrender and wouldn't hurt her.

As the backs of her legs hit the bed, she felt his hand push her shoulder and she fell backwards onto the mattress. She gasped as he straddled her thighs and held her wrists tightly, chuckling as she struggled against him.

He let her continue her fight until she had worn herself out. As soon as he felt her relax slightly, he pinned her arms to the bed and leant over her, watching her breasts heaving from her exertion.

"Now..." he purred softly down at her. "I've been wondering what's gotten into you today. You've not been your usual hateful self, kissing me and all."

"You kissed me!" she said defiantly and watched him smirk.

He gripped her wrists tighter. "You kissed me back. You let me in...let me taste you."

"I..." She bit her lip and stared up at him, unable to deny his accusation.

He smiled as he looked down at her. Her expression was docile and innocent. Letting go of her wrist, he trailed a finger over her shoulder and down towards her breasts, noting that she didn't try to resist him. Her hand remained on the bed as if he was still holding it there.

"What's got into you, Miss Miller? You walk out on deck dressed like a harlot, calling to me like the siren you are. Hoping to sway my ship or just me?" He let his tone drop and his voice soften. "I think it's me you're after...trying to wriggle..." He slid his finger into her cleavage and watched her lips part softly as her eyes became hooded. "...your way into my heart."

Elizabeth felt her body buzz and ache over his actions, her heart racing as her mouth went dry.

"That's not...what I want," she protested weakly, the words not wanting to be said and her heart telling her that she was lying.

Marlin let go of her other wrist and ran his hand over her breast, stroking her soft skin and memorising its warmth and silkiness.

"What do you want...this?" He watched her eyes open and move to look at his hands.

"No..." Elizabeth said timidly, her body aching under his fingers.

“Charles?” Marlin let his brows knit.

“No!” she breathed with more conviction.

He felt his heart rocketing, pounding hard against his chest, and he willed himself to remain calm under her scrutiny.

Catching hold of her right hand, he pressed her palm against his chest, letting his heart thud against it as he looked into her eyes and watched for an answer to his next question.

“This?” he whispered quietly and watched her blink. “Me?”

She didn’t answer. She just stared into his eyes. They were smiling as he looked at her. Her fingers ached where they were touching him, his heartbeat sounding against her palm and making her own speed up. She shook her head slowly, suddenly unsure of herself and her feelings.

He smiled inside as he saw the conflict in her large, green eyes. Dipping his head, he kissed her cheek softly before breathing into her ear.

“Won’t tell a soul.”

With that, he was gone.

Elizabeth closed her eyes and pressed her hand against her chest. Her heart was beating wildly and her body echoed his touch. She’d known the dance for power they had begun when she first came onboard was a dangerous one but now it had spiralled far beyond their control. The rules had seemingly changed since Beggars Haven. Their game was different now. Her eyes opened and she stared at the ceiling of the bedroom as it dawned on her. He could so easily break her but he wasn’t going to. They’d both changed by degrees that night and his actions today were a revolt against that change. She recognised it because she had seen the same conflicting feelings in his eyes as she felt. This was their game now, a game of hearts.

~

Marlin slammed the cabin doors hard enough to cause the panes of glass to rattle. The ship went silent as all eyes turned to look at him. He breathed heavily as he struggled against his emotions, against the overwhelming desire to walk back into the bedroom and kiss her breathless. Instead, he punched the nearest man to him square on the jaw.

“Get back to bloody work. The ship can’t sail herself!” he yelled and watched his crew hastily return to their duties.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

Growling to himself, he took the steps up to the quarterdeck quickly and leant against the balustrade on the back of the ship. He let his hands dangle limply over the edge as his elbows rested on the solid wooden rail. His fingertips still echoed the feel of her skin and he closed his eyes, picturing her below him. He chuckled to himself over how weak he'd become, how weak she had made him. She was making him the man he used to be, unleashing emotions in him that he'd never thought he'd feel.

"Captain?"

Marlin turned his head slowly and opened his eyes to reveal the owner of the unsteady voice.

"What now?" He rolled his eyes at Alexander.

"Just wanting to know if Miss Miller..."

"She's done with her bath, you can take it away now." He cursed himself for using her words.

"Nothing's wrong is it?"

He turned to look at Alexander with an expression of curiosity. He'd never shown concern for him before. Was it that obvious he'd been changing? Could all of the crew see what she was doing to him?

"What do you mean?" He let his tone turn nasty as he met Alexander's eyes, watching the boy blink rapidly in fear.

"Forgive me...only you don't usually stare out to sea, Captain. You seem a little out of sorts." Alexander's voice trembled as he watched Marlin's eyes narrow and then soften.

"Just need some peace, away from the girly twittering in my cabin. I've half a mind to throw her in the hold, teach her who's captain of this ship."

He frowned and Alexander looked like he wanted to say something and then thought the better of it, his look turning wary.

"What? Spit it out boy. I won't kill you." He chuckled dryly and watched Alexander build up the courage to speak.

"I just don't think she's done anything that deserves to be punished like that. She respects you, I know she does, and I think any action you take against her now is more like an action against yourself...you're punishing her for how she makes you..." Alexander trailed off as he saw a dark look enter his captain's eyes. He backed away and gave him a nervous smile as he berated himself for speaking so freely about something that was none of his business.

As Alexander moved to leave, Marlin drew his sword and pressed the tip of it against his chest.

"Finish that sentence, boy," he growled low and watched him swallow hard, his eyes widening in fear as he looked down at the sword.

"I was out of place. I don't know what I was thinking. It's just...I won't do it again." Alexander squeaked as he tried to avoid being skewered.

"Finish it!" Marlin twisted the sword and watched Alexander shut his eyes tightly.

"Feel." Alexander blurted out as he fell backwards, landing on the deck with a harsh thud. He panted hard as he stared up at his captain.

He looked a little stunned at first but then chuckled to himself.

"Alexander, in the future try not to think so much. You do such a poor job of it. Now, go scurry about Miss Miller and see what other nonsense she can fill your head with."

Marlin turned away from him and leant against the railings again. He stared blankly at the sea as it twinkled at him, the warm salty breeze cooling him as the sun slowly edged towards the horizon. He let out a long sigh and closed his eyes.

Alexander was right and he knew it.

Chapter 9

Marlin entered his cabin to find Elizabeth staring out of the window. She was watching the sun setting and he paused for a moment to take in the sight of her. In a few days, she would be gone, returned to her family and out of his life forever. The cabin and *The Merciless* would be his again, all in a few days. The trouble was he was no longer sure if he liked the sound of that.

She started slightly as he came to stand beside her. His eyes narrowed softly as he watched her profile and then turned his head to face the sun.

She felt her heart pounding against her ribs, beating madly at the feeling of him so close to her, her body aching with the memory of his touch. She needed to say something, needed to shatter the silence between them because it was too comfortable, too nice.

"Are we making good time?" She kept her eyes fixed on the horizon as she spoke.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

Marlin shifted his eyes to rest on her hair. He was so tempted to reach out and run his fingers through it gently.

“Yes, we’re making good time.”

Elizabeth noted the dreamy way he said those words, as if his thoughts were off elsewhere and his reply was automatic.

Turning slowly to face him, she found his eyes narrowed tenderly on hers, the hard lines of his face softened by the look of warmth he wore. She cursed herself for wanting to know what he was thinking and damned herself for hoping it was about her.

“Will you join me tonight, for dinner?” He spoke softly, his heart aching to hear her reply and his mind cursing its weakness.

She stared up at him blankly as she thought it over. Their previous dinner engagements hadn’t bothered her as she’d felt she had no choice but now he was offering her a chance to reject his invitation and it scared her to think that she couldn’t bring herself to do it. She didn’t want to say no.

Elizabeth nodded slowly and noticed it caused a smile to flicker on his lips. The corners of his mouth twitched slightly, almost nervously, into a warm smile and his eyes sparkled at her. She struggled against the desire to blush and avert her eyes. She’d never had a man look at her with so much affection as he was.

Feeling like a captive of the delicate embarrassed smile she was giving him, Marlin swore to himself he’d never had a girl show him so much of her feelings in so small an action.

“I...” they both said in unison and then smiled.

“Ladies first.” He watched her as she smiled warmly at his genteel air.

“I was wanting to say that after such an invitation I feel I should make myself more presentable. Therefore I was about to propose that I would go and dress for dinner.”

He tried to ignore the way his heart fluttered when he thought about her treating his invitation with such regard.

“Beats mine hands down. I was going to say I have rounds to do, have to check that the ship is ready for the night watch.”

“Until dinner, then.” She held her hand out gracefully, enjoying the light-hearted mood between them and hoping it would last this time. She didn’t want to fall back on the feelings of hatred and indifference that she felt obligated to feel due to her situation.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

He took her hand gently in his, letting his fingers curl slowly around it as he brought it to his lips and kissed it. In his head, he imagined pulling her into his arms and bending her backwards slightly as he kissed her fervently.

In her head, Elizabeth pictured him whisking her into his strong manly arms and holding her tightly as his lips brushed against hers in a long, passionate kiss.

“Until dinner.” He looked up at her as he straightened up and then let go of her hand and smiled before turning towards the doors that led out onto the deck.

As he turned his back on her, she blushed violently and scurried into her room to be alone with her thoughts.

~

Sipping her wine, Elizabeth smiled across the table at Marlin. So far, he’d been the perfect gentleman and it only served to confuse her emotions further. She was beginning to run out of reasons to make herself resist the pull she felt towards him.

“So...you were born where?” He placed his glass back down on the table and ran his fingers around the base of it as he stared at her.

She was astounded by how genial and talkative he was being. He seemed to genuinely want to know about her and she found that she couldn’t deny him.

“A little village in Cornwall, a place called Helstone.”

“I know it well. I’ve passed through it several times on journeys southwards towards Penzance. Pretty little village as I remember it, all cottages and...”

“Pretty?” Elizabeth interjected vehemently. “Helstone is *beautiful*. The vicarage and the manor, the rolling fields that surround it. Never in my life have I been as happy as when I lived there.”

He smiled at the release of emotion he’d invoked and relaxed into his chair.

“Because there were diversions...yes? Places you could escape to unnoticed, a sense of freedom, the ability to do as you pleased.” He sipped his wine and watched her cheeks turn rosy.

“Yes,” she replied quietly.

He mumbled something into his glass and she frowned.

“I failed to catch what you said.” She looked at his fingers as they toyed with the rim of his glass. His eyes were downcast.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

He drew a long deep breath.

"That's why I love the ocean so much, he stated flatly and let his eyes come to meet hers.

"If I asked you, would you elaborate?" She smiled and hoped it would encourage him. Since she was expected to offer up her life story, she wanted to know more about him in return, anything that might help her paint a more defined and clearer picture of her captain.

"Freedom, wind in the sails, vast empty ocean all around. I can go anywhere. I can do anything I want. My life is my own to do with as I please, understand?"

"More than you'll ever know." She took another sip of her wine and sighed.

He decided that she didn't look like she'd appreciate his pushing the subject so he moved back to a safer one.

"So, you were born in Helstone, most beautiful village in all England. If such a rose as you were born there it must be the epitome of Eden."

Elizabeth tried to stop herself from blushing but it came upon her too quickly and she was moved to silence by the force of his words. Recovering herself, she sat back in her chair and sighed as she thought about her life.

"I was raised there also. We moved to Plymouth when my mother died. I was eight, my sister, Dawn, was not yet two."

"So, you, your father, and your sister all vacate heaven and move to dreary Plymouth." He frowned at how drastically her expression had changed. When talking about Helstone she had seemed so happy, now she looked thoroughly miserable.

"Isn't it just? I felt as though I would die there..." She trailed off and subconsciously blamed the wine for making her speak so freely.

"Not enough freedom for my girl. No green hills to roam. Plymouth is all dirt and noise and boats, no?"

She quietly noted his reference to her and felt her stomach heat up.

"Father dare not let me go out. He was afraid I would be snatched..." She noticed his look darken at her words and decided to shift the conversation onto safer waters, one further away from their current situation. "You seem to know Plymouth well."

"All too well."

Elizabeth caught the edge of melancholy that entered his eyes and filed away his comment, waiting until he looked ready to talk about himself to bring it up.

She let her fingers play on her glass as she tried to think about how much of her life story he wanted to hear. Part of her was enjoying the easy talk between them and desired it to continue. It was obvious to her that they both wanted to forget their current situation even if it could only be for one night. She knew that she wanted to forget that he'd kidnapped her. She just wanted to talk to him as if they had met under normal circumstances and to listen to him so she could learn more about him, so she could understand who he was deep inside.

"I had to raise my sister, or at least I assisted in raising her. My father was so occupied with his studies that we didn't see much of him. He was constantly away from the house."

"Mother died, father practically abandoned you in pursuit of a career, what happened to Elizabeth?" He smiled reassuringly at her and saw her heave a sigh.

"I studied my father's library, attended to the education of my sister and learnt at an impossibly early age how to run a household." She tried to hold in her feelings so he couldn't see them but they bubbled up to the surface and as she looked into his eyes she knew he'd seen how miserable being trapped in a house had made her.

"And in the process you lost the sweet temper of a docile girl, replacing her by gradual steps with a learned woman. One who has the strongest defiant streak I've ever come across. Many would believe you weak at first look. I thought you weak, womanly, but your passion and fire, they burn bright enough to blind. I never knew a woman could be as strong as you..." Marlin trailed off into a whisper as he let his eyes drop to his glass. He surmised that drinking copious amounts of wine was not a way to stifle his feelings when he was sitting with the girl who inspired them. It just seemed to bring them to the surface for her to see.

Elizabeth didn't know whether to blush or be angry with him. He was the one that had brought out the fire in her. Until the day he'd thrown her overboard, she had kept it all locked inside for fear of people thinking her un-lady like.

As her cheeks coloured, Marlin grinned to himself, revelling in his ability to make her blush so easily. He was enthralled with her, fascinated by her temperament and beauty. She was a real tempest, a true siren. In the time she had been onboard he'd seen her change from a girl who simply thought she was strong to a woman who realised she really was strong. He let his eyes play with her green ones. They were large and open to him, letting him read her feelings and thoughts clearly.

She dropped her gaze to the table, shutting him out.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

Marlin filled her glass and then topped up his own as he waited for her to come out of her thoughts and back to him. As she sighed, she picked up her glass and drank a mouthful of wine before raising her eyes to rest on his hands.

“Did you ever venture out into Plymouth? I could quite imagine a girl like you enjoying the chance of an adventure. The thrill of avoiding being caught.” He watched her closely as her nose wrinkled, her look turning pensive.

Elizabeth knew what he was saying. He was pointing out that they weren’t as different as she thought, that they both longed for freedom and excitement in life.

“I did...when I turned thirteen. My father was working to get the papers signed that would lead to his governing Liberty. I left the house one morning and spent the entire day sitting on the end of the harbour wall, watching the boats, the sunlight playing on the sea and the birds as they wheeled overhead. I waved to the naval officers as they passed...” She let her lips twitch into a smile as it all came back to her. The night they had gone into Beggars Haven wasn’t the first time she’d seen *The Merciless* after all. “I remember seeing the *Pegasus* and *The Merciless* entering port.”

She watched Marlin’s head shoot up and he looked her square in the eye. She felt as though he was searching them and trying to see if she was telling the truth so she let him read them as she pondered his reaction. It had been her mention of the *Pegasus* that had made him look up and not the mention of *The Merciless*.

“*The Merciless* was young then, her first journey out to sea awaited her.” Marlin let his eyes drop down to his glass. He swirled the red liquid and watched it lick the side of the glass like waves.

As he closed his eyes for the briefest of moments, Elizabeth noticed that talking of his ship and others sometimes caused sadness in him. He seemed grieved by talk of the naval ships. She decided it was the right time to bring up his having been in Plymouth.

“You know Plymouth. You’ve sailed from there?” Her heart pounded hard as she asked him, unsure of whether he would answer the question or whether he would grow angry with her for asking.

“Once,” Marlin answered flatly, his eyes remaining fixed on his glass and his thoughts weighing him down.

“The boats fascinated me. I watched them all day and then snuck back into the study. The next day my father brought my sister, Dawn, and myself down to meet the officers. There was a grand ceremony taking place and I remember I had to wear this yellow monstrosity my father had bought me...” She trailed off as his eyes met hers again. He was frowning as he looked at her and she wondered what had caused his reaction this time.

Something clicked in Marlin. Not only had she seen *The Merciless* before being kidnapped but he'd seen her before he'd kidnapped her, long before.

Drinking his wine, he let his eyes move to the map in front of him. They wandered it aimlessly as his attention stayed wholly with Elizabeth. She seemed to be watching him closely as he pretended to go about his business. Stifling his feelings and his memories, he wondered if she was close to figuring him out. He'd let her in tonight, told her things he should have kept locked inside and he was sure she was close to working out who he was underneath the surface.

Elizabeth sat in silence, her eyes following his every move and her mind trying to arrange everything she knew about him into order.

His actions had been abrupt. By focusing on his maps he'd made it clear in a split second that he no longer wished to continue their conversation and now, she was left to her thoughts, and they ran along the lines of discovering just who he was. Alexander had told her that Marlin had changed since she'd come onboard and even she had noticed it. She'd seen the merciless pirate captain turn protective towards her and even affectionate, and she knew deep inside it wasn't a twisted fascination with his captive. She felt as though she'd captured him now or at least his feelings.

Her heart fluttered at the thought that she had altered him so vastly. She had awakened feelings in him and in return, he'd awoken them in her. Pushing the thoughts out of her head, she decided to see if she could get anything else out of him tonight. She wanted to know just how changed he really was.

Emptying her glass of its contents, Elizabeth stared out of the window and found her courage before letting her eyes come to rest on Marlin.

"Marlin?" she asked quietly, hoping he wouldn't see her intrusion as something to be angry with her about.

Marlin's heart skipped a beat over the sound of her saying his name.

"Yes?" He kept his eyes fixed on the maps.

"Why didn't you abandon me back in Beggars Haven? Charles would have still come for you, even without me."

He refilled her glass and weighed up his answer carefully.

"I just didn't. Couldn't."

"Couldn't?" She tilted her head slightly as her brows knit into a questioning frown.

"The men there, they would've killed you, or worse. I didn't wish to live with that on my conscience." He knew it sounded like a poor reason, especially after threatening to sell her in the port, but what could he say? He smiled slightly as a thought crossed his mind. He'd kept her onboard for his own selfish reasons.

"I see." Taking a sip of her wine, she wondered what was the real reason behind his keeping her around.

"You're still not as safe as I'd like." He stared blankly at the map and listened to her breathing softly. It seemed to quicken as the words reached her.

"I'm not?"

"The crew also believe I should have left you back in Beggars Haven. It's the old superstition that women on boats is a bad thing. They think you'll send us to meet our end."

"Oh." She wondered why he hadn't pleased his crew by leaving her at the port then. Would his conscience have weighed that heavily on him? Her fingers moved to rest on her lips as she remembered his kiss. Had he pleased himself by keeping her onboard?

They fell silent again as Marlin's concentration finally returned to his maps. Standing up, he spread them out across the table and began to calculate their course, occasionally pausing to see what Elizabeth was doing. Most of the times that he looked up, she appeared to be watching him and her attentiveness caused him to feel a brief warmth inside him before he stifled his feelings again.

Letting her eyes follow his hands as they masterfully worked their tools, she watched his long fingers as they nimbly moved the set of compasses across the maps and noted down distances and directions on some paper.

Her eyes moved of their own accord, weaving slowly up his arms, lingering momentarily on the bandages that covered the wound she had inflicted before they continued their journey up to his face.

She studied him again; the arch of his brows as he frowned in concentration, the way his lips pursed when he calculated the distance they still had to travel. Settling her eyes on his, she wished it were brighter in the room so she could see them clearly and read in them if he was really thinking about the maps. As his eyes moved to meet hers, she saw they were neither tender nor cold. They seemed to reflect some kind of disbelief and she realised it was because she let her eyes roam over him so freely. Dropping her gaze to the table, she stood and walked a few steps towards the bedroom.

"If you do not mind, I'm tired and I think I shall retire now."

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

Marlin nodded solemnly and watched her continue to walk to the door. "I shall not disturb you."

She paused in the doorway, looked down at the couch and then up at him. He had been so different tonight and she knew he had let her see the real him, the man behind the mask. Tonight he hadn't been the man he was around his crew and other pirates. Shut safely in his cabin, he had been himself. He was just Marlin.

Raising her eyes up to meet his, she took a deep breath and hoped she looked confident as her insides trembled with nerves.

"Marlin, this is your ship, your room...I appreciate you letting me use your bed even though I am nothing more than your captive. Last night you proved you are a gentleman at heart. If you wish to sleep in your bed, I will not protest." She struggled to keep her eyes locked with his as her knees turned weak. She couldn't quite believe that she'd said that and realised that if people found out she would be labelled a harlot. She decided then that she didn't care because sleeping next to him was better than sleeping in the hold.

Marlin felt his breath hitch in his throat. She was openly inviting him to share the bed, to sleep next to her slim, delicate body and breathe in her fragrance as he slumbered.

She watched his look change from disbelief to pensive, before his eyes burnt into her with their desire. Not knowing how else to react to his passionate look, she blushed violently and walked into the bedroom.

He stared blankly at the now empty doorway and then at the map in front of him, and wondered if she knew what a temptation she was, especially after teasing him in the bath earlier. Could she see in his eyes how much he wanted her? Looking at the papers in front of him, he resolved that she was too innocent to be thinking thoughts like he was. She simply saw this as a way to alleviate her guilt about his sleeping on the couch and a way to keep herself from being forced to sleep elsewhere.

Finishing plotting their course, Marlin folded the maps away and tidied the room again before staring up the naval plaque above the rear windows. He sighed heavily as he felt a weight press down on his heart. He loved his ship dearly but he'd loved his future prospects more so.

Moving quietly into the bedroom, he extinguished the lanterns and let his eyes take in the vision of a sleeping Elizabeth. She was wearing her dress still and the pale light of the moon shining down on her made her skin glow softly and her hair look white. He reached over and pulled the covers up around her shoulders so they were no longer exposed to the cold before pulling his boots off and placing them at the foot of the bed with hers.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

He stared down at them as he wondered how different things could have been between them if his life had run the course he'd wanted it to. Sighing heavily, he hoped she'd learn to forgive him for the things he'd done to her in moments of rage. He grew angry with himself for treating her so cruelly, for revolting against the feelings she inspired in him by taking it all out on her.

Slipping his shirt off, he lay down next to her and rolled over onto his side, his fingers running gently over her hair as he looked at her where she lay with her back to him, her beautiful shoulders and graceful curve of her neck exposed to him. Marlin ran a finger down her spine and leant over, placing a soft chaste kiss on her neck.

She murmured quietly and he smiled as he closed his eyes, his mind still pondering how different his life could have been if not for one day and one man. He listened to her soft breathing as he drifted off to sleep, its rhythm and that of the ocean lulling him and his heart.

Chapter 10

Elizabeth opened her eyes slowly, half hoping and half fearing to find Marlin still sleeping next to her. Staring at the empty bed beside her, she let out the breath she'd been holding in anticipation. She could hear him out on deck, shouting commands to his crew, his voice the only sound in her ears.

Washing up and then dressing herself, she omitted her corset, letting the shape of her green dress hold her. She smiled at her reflection in the mirror, feeling liberated as she ran her hands down her sides. She'd always hated wearing corsets.

Running her fingers through her hair as a way of brushing it, she flinched at the knots and tangles and longed for her toilette table and her belongings. Although she hadn't forgotten the things that had happened to her since coming onboard, she felt as though she was growing accustomed to life on a ship, the adventure of the high seas and the company of her captain. She surmised that if she had a few things from home she could be perfectly happy living on a ship.

Having breakfasted, she started to wander about the cabin, occasionally peering through the windows onto the deck. The men seemed colder to her today and she remembered what Marlin had told her. They wanted her off the ship.

She edged away from the doors and left the men to their work.

Rifling through a trunk, she smiled as she discovered some books. They were mostly nautical and she simply looked at the pictures they contained as she worked her way through them. When she neared the bottom of the trunk she let her smile widen. In front of her were works of novelists and playwrights.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

Elizabeth took up a book that she recognised as one her mother used to read to her and settled on the couch near the rear windows. She sighed as she opened the book and read the first paragraph, her thoughts returning to England and her mother.

~

Marlin entered the cabin and watched her as she stared out of the window at the ocean. She was sitting sideways on the couch with her feet up in front of her as she curled up. He traced her profile as her eyes remained fixed on the scene outside the window, the warm glow of the evening softening her face. She moved her head and let her eyes come to rest on her hands. A book rested in them and he noticed she'd read a large portion of it in only a short time. He wondered if she would tease him about it now.

"Evening." He breathed as he came to sit near her feet. She raised her eyes to meet his and the beauty of them struck him. The sunlight streaming in made him notice for the first time how vividly green they were.

"I found it in the trunk. My mother used to read it to me...it makes me sad to read it." She blinked slowly as that feeling washed over her and was amazed by the depth of emotions she could see in his eyes and how tender his look became.

"So why read it?" He felt like reaching out and touching her hand. The look of melancholy she wore hit him hard and he wanted to reassure her, wanted to hold her and make everything better. He felt as though they were entering the eye of the storm and things had become deceptively quiet between them

"Because it reminds me of her," Elizabeth replied quietly, lost in her own thoughts as she let her eyes remain locked with his.

"I'm..."

"Don't say sorry. I think I prefer it when you aren't apologetic. It doesn't suit you... everyone says sorry and I don't believe you are everyone." She moved her eyes to rest on his hands. He was playing with his own fingers as though he was trying to stop them from doing something he'd regret and part of her wished they would reach out and hold her.

"Just someone." He drew a long breath and watched her eyes move back up to his face. They were wide and he could see the edge of sadness that filled her reflected in them. "It's mine...the book...I have quite the collection but then you probably know that already."

She smiled and he felt it deep inside him. It was a genuine smile this time, not like the false ones she used to cover up her feelings.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

"I do. I shouldn't have looked around your rooms, it was rude of me, but I need some form of entertainment, some way to take my mind off things." She shut the book and let her hands rest on top of it.

"You miss home, don't you? Miss your family...*him*..."

She frowned slightly at the reference to Charles and wondered just how involved Marlin thought they were.

"Yes, I miss my family to a degree, it's only to be expected. Can I ask you something?"

"Anything," he said gruffly as he smiled and let his fingers idly stroke the material covering her knees. He'd noticed her lack of corset and decided that it only made her look more stunning in her green dress.

"Who was I supposed to be?" Her voice was shaky as she asked him. She didn't want to break the mood between them but it was something that she had to know.

He frowned and looked confused.

"I'm the wrong girl, who was the right girl?"

"Victoria," he replied emotionlessly.

Elizabeth's eyes widened.

"My maid?" She couldn't hide her disbelief. He'd intended to kidnap her maid, the crazy girl that her father had insisted on bringing over from London. "Any particular reason why?"

"No, not really. She travelled onboard *The Merciless* before she was mine. I saw her a few times, we used to pass idle conversation about mundane things like the weather while she gave me her shy smiles. I thought she was pretty." He paused as a dark look entered Elizabeth's eyes.

"Are you in love with her, is that why you came to get her?" She spoke hurriedly, letting the words spill out of her and not thinking about the consequences or caring if he could see her feelings.

"No." He noticed her eyes narrow and thought that she looked as though she was fighting to hold back her emotions but was losing. He hadn't intended to upset her; he'd only wanted to be honest with her. "She was always good company, we were passing Liberty, and I intended to keep her onboard for a few days and then set her down at Freeport when we reached there."

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

Elizabeth mumbled something and opened her book again. She could feel the intensity of his frown as he watched her.

“What’s wrong?” He tried to read her look, tried to understand why she was suddenly ignoring him. He didn’t like the idea of her not paying him attention. A grin crept onto his lips as it dawned on him. “Don’t tell me you’re jealous? I wouldn’t change what happened for anything.”

Feeling her emotions wind themselves up tight in her stomach, she raised her head up defiantly and looked him straight in the eye, her face impassive as she tried to convince herself that she didn’t need him.

“You don’t care about me...and I certainly shouldn’t care about you...Charles is coming after you. You don’t need me anymore. Just sell me or kill me because I can’t take much more of this ship and her captain.”

She was shocked by the force of her words. It was all jealousy talking and she listened to her heart racing as she waited for his come back, waited for his anger.

Marlin watched her try to stifle her tears as she looked into his eyes and it pained him to see how she was bracing herself against whatever he was going to say. She was clearly hurting inside and it cut him like a knife. He quietly pulled the book from her hands and placed it on her lap. Capturing her hands with his, he let his face soften into a warm smile.

“Thought I made myself clear last night. I don’t want to leave you alone in a strange place, don’t want to sell you and I certainly don’t want to kill you. I wouldn’t swap you for Victoria even if Charles wasn’t a factor. Don’t for one second think that I would.”

She felt her ability to speak leave her, her anger and fear dropping away until all she could feel was her heart pounding hard and his fingers gently caressing her hands. Closing her eyes, she summoned up the courage to wrap her fingers around his and felt him start slightly at her responding to his touch. As he sighed, she felt her resolve crumble and the hold he had over her heart grew stronger.

The cabin doors swung open and she let her hand fall down by her side, concealing the book behind her knees. Marlin turned his head sharply to face Alexander, his eyes narrowing as he noticed the boy was out of breath.

“What the bloody hell is it?” He barked at Alexander and again Elizabeth noted how different he was around his crew compared to when he was alone with her.

“There’s trouble on the horizon, Captain,” Alexander wheezed as he caught his breath.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

“Show me...” He stood and then stopped abruptly. Turning back to face Elizabeth, he saw she was looking up at him with large round eyes, her mouth curving prettily into a smile. “...Stay here.”

She knew that he'd only said that because he didn't want her near the crew. Standing up, she hid the book under the pillows on the couch, subconsciously realising that he wouldn't want the crew discovering his passion for reading. Taking a deep breath, she followed him out of the door.

~

Marlin walked hastily up the steps that led up to the quarterdeck and stood next to the first mate. Holding his hand out, he felt the telescope being placed into it as his eyes remained fixed on the grey smoke ahead of them.

“Doesn't look good.” The first mate drawled as Marlin swung the scope around to settle on the distant ship.

Elizabeth stepped quietly onto the quarterdeck and tried to ignore the looks the crewmen gave her. Her heart sounded loudly in her ears as she stared into the distance and then up at Marlin. As he lowered the scope and let his eyes come to rest on her, she braced herself, expecting him to reprimand her for disobeying him and for putting herself in danger. He simply handed her the scope and as she held it up to her eye, he steadily guided her towards the ship.

Peering through the telescope, she could make out a cloud of light grey smoke that reminded her of fog and the tattered burning remains of a ship. As she stared at the driftwood scattered on the water, another ship loomed out of the smoke. It was dark and menacing as it slowly revealed itself. The new ship was far larger than *The Merciless* and it sent a shiver up her spine as she thought about the damage it could do to them.

“What is that?” she whispered as though she feared they would be able to hear her and she felt Marlin close by her ear as he replied.

“Real pirates. That's *Chaos*. Her captain is Raine. He rarely sails alone, there's usually another ship with him, *The Seven Stars*. Her captain is Morgan. She'll be about these waters somewhere, lurking and waiting for a curious ship to pass so she can make her move.”

Elizabeth felt a wave of tingles run over her body and she wasn't sure if it was caused by his proximity or the thought that *The Merciless* was in real danger.

Marlin turned to his crew and frowned. Scouring the horizon, he pointed towards a chain of islands off to the starboard side.

“Put them between us, lads,” he hollered and watched his crew move into action.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

As she felt *The Merciless* shift course, Elizabeth raised the scope to her eye again and settled it back on the ship. Her stomach turned as she saw what looked like two little children being thrown overboard into the water. She watched them struggle to stay afloat and could see the other captives onboard frantically trying to get to the edge of the ship. Her heart ached as she saw one of them slump to the floor and it looked like a man holstered a gun.

She almost dropped the telescope as her hands shook.

Marlin turned quickly and caught both the scope and her arm. He frowned intensely at her as she stared into the distance, her cheeks drained of colour and her eyes glassy. Raising the scope to his eye, he saw the pirates throw another child overboard and looked at the two bodies floating in the water.

Lowering the glass, he turned to Elizabeth and he ached inside as he saw her, her hands trembling and her skin white, eyes shimmering with tears as she tried desperately to say something. Holding her arm gently, he led her to Alexander and smiled when he nodded, silently understanding what he was asking him to do.

She let Alexander lead her to the top of the stairs. Before walking down them, she paused and turned to look at Marlin. He smiled at her and she saw his concern for her echoed in his eyes.

Marlin sighed as she disappeared from view. She'd borne everything he'd thrown at her, had seen two men killed and now this. Pushing his feelings back down inside, he walked to the pilot and aided him as they steered the ship onto safer waters. The quicker they evaded the *Chaos* and *The Seven Stars* the quicker he could check on his girl.

~

Elizabeth paced the cabin, her arms wrapped tightly around herself as she replayed the images over and over in her head. She couldn't stop thinking about them, the children frantically trying to swim and the people desperately trying to get to them. She shuddered as a cold chill swept up her spine. The memories of drowning haunted her still and caused her heart to grow heavy as she moved slowly to the other side of the cabin.

Tears falling silently down her cheeks, she didn't look up as the cabin door opened. She knew it was him, knew he'd come to see her as soon as the boat and her crew were safe again. She continued to pace as he stood watching her, her head aching with what it had felt like to drown. She wanted to be angry with him, wanted to punish him by not letting him comfort her now, wanted to make him watch her cry.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

Marlin let his eyes follow her as she moved quietly from one side of the cabin to the other. He could see the tears streaming down her cheeks and her hands caressing her sides where she held herself. His chest felt tight as he watched her, his arms wanting nothing more than to hold her, his lips wanting to comfort and soothe her.

Patiently, he waited a few moments longer for her to acknowledge him and when it became clear that she wasn't going to, he moved across the room to her. Stepping into her path, he caught hold of her shoulders tightly. She hung her head limply as she tried to continue walking but he held her tighter until she stopped trying to struggle against him.

Elizabeth felt a sob push its way out of her and his grip on her shoulders eased, his thumbs caressing her skin gently as if he was trying to draw the sadness out of her.

He looked down at her as her small frame became racked with her sobbing, her shoulders heaving as she cried and her arms hanging limp by her sides. As her breathing became laboured, he took a deep breath and sighed it out. It was obvious to him that her crying wasn't just about the children. It was about her situation too. It was about him.

"Shh...Elizabeth..."

She sniffed and kept her head hung, her eyes staring at his boots and his body's proximity to her. It would be so easy for her to step into his arms and take comfort from them.

"They...why?" she said quietly as fresh tears welled up in her eyes.

"Because they're worthless to them, the extra weight slows the boat down." He tried to keep his voice as soothing as possible even though he knew what he was saying would only cause her further upset. He had to be honest with her.

"What about..." Her voice was frail as another sob pushed its way out of her and she struggled to keep calm.

"The women? Hurt them, rape them...then when they're done with them they'll sell them, probably at Beggars Haven." He watched her hands tremble as he spoke.

Elizabeth pressed her fingers to her mouth as a bubble of panic rose up in her. She could feel her hot tears cascading down her cheeks as she stared at his chest and thought about what he'd said. Looking up at him, she saw his face was tender with concern, his eyes speaking silent words of affection to her. She swallowed the feeling of sickness that had loomed up in her.

"Did you ever..."

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

Marlin knew what she was asking. She wanted to know if he'd ever done something as abhorrent as he'd just said.

"No. Never." He smoothed her hair softly, his eyes following his fingers as they trailed down her arm to her hand. Grasping it tightly as he saw more tears forming in her eyes, he pulled her into the bedroom and slammed the door behind them.

Elizabeth started on being dragged into the bedroom but quickly realised she wasn't in any danger. She knew the reason that he'd brought her in here was so his crew wouldn't see them. She felt her insides warm and calm slightly as he wrapped his arms tightly around her shoulders and she couldn't stop hers from wrapping about his waist. As she pressed her cheek against his chest, she let her sobbing come freely and listened to him whispering quiet reassurances to her as he tried to soothe her.

She wondered if the feeling he gave her inside was love—all trepidation, warmth and safety. She buried her head further and cried harder as she pushed the thought out of her mind. She couldn't be in love with him; it was wrong.

Marlin tilted his head and let his cheek come to rest on the top of her head. He took a deep breath and caressed her smooth skin as she cried in his arms. Her hot tears soaked through his shirt to his skin and he closed his eyes, focusing all his attention on calming her.

He felt as though it took an eternity for her sobbing to subside and her body to become still in his arms. Her fingers gently grasped his shirt and she nuzzled him weakly, quietly showing him that she was done for now. Releasing her from his arms, he scooped her up and carried her to the bed, watching her as she wiped her eyes.

Laying her down on the bed, he met her eyes as she looked up at him and could see in them that she needed comforting still, that although her crying had stopped she still needed release from her thoughts.

Marlin settled down next to her and expected her to shuffle away from him. His heart leapt into his throat as she nestled her head against his chest and curled up.

Elizabeth felt her insides trembling as his arm wrapped around her and his hand came to rest on her waist. She closed her eyes and absorbed how safe it made her feel. His tight embrace comforted her, his warm skin and steady beat of his heart sedated her. It reminded her of how she'd felt when her mother had held her. She felt loved.

He pressed his lips to her hair in a long kiss and smoothed the loose strands from her face. Lying next to her, holding her, he felt as though he was a million miles away from reality. There was only her and nothing else—no pirates, no navy and no Charles—there was just Elizabeth.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

He closed his eyes as he listened to her breathing become soft and shallow, her head becoming heavy against his chest. He held her a little tighter to him, hoping he'd done everything she needed to be comforted.

As she slumbered on, her arm curled around his waist and held him firmly. He let his fingers play in her hair and found himself sighing again as she moved slightly in his arms. He had to go back out into the world soon, had to break the spell he was under and take command of the ship again but for now there was only her, sleeping in his arms, and he could love her.

Chapter 11

Elizabeth stumbled across the cabin as the boat rolled again, her muscles tightening as she tried to brace herself. Clinging to the wall as the ship swayed in the opposite direction and her stomach lurched, she silently thanked God that she hadn't eaten lunch.

Until an hour ago, the sailing had been smooth. She'd been content, reading her book by the window and wondering if she'd see Marlin at all today. Suddenly, he seemed to be incredibly busy and she'd got the feeling he was avoiding her.

She had been enjoying the late afternoon sunshine as it beamed down at her and the sight of the sea twinkling with tiny crests of white foam, and she hadn't thought anything of it until the sky had darkened and the wind had risen. The swell of the ocean had become dangerous in a matter of seconds.

As she grasped the doorframe, Elizabeth peered out of the windows and into the blackness outside. The waves rose high around the ship and she could hear the wind howling through the rigging. She couldn't tell if it were night or day anymore.

Her heart raced as a loud peel of thunder echoed overhead. The lightning illuminated the sea and for the first time she saw how treacherous it looked. The waves were towers of black all around her, almost as tall as *The Merciless* herself. The sound of her heart beating filled her ears and she could feel it smashing against the back of her eyes as her breathing quickened and fear rose up in her stomach.

Panicking, she tried to move across the room. She could hear the hull creaking and moaning as the boat was tossed around on the waves and it made the feeling of fear in the pit of her stomach worsen. As she reached the cabin doors, she struggled against the wind to open them and when they finally opened, she was hit by a cold blast of spray. Holding on tightly, she squinted into the darkness and searched hard for a sign of her captain.

~

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

"Tie that down," Marlin hollered into the wind at the men attempting to get the sails in. If they didn't get them down soon then the wind would break the main mast clean in two and he was damned if that was going to happen.

Struggling against the wind and the rocking of the ship, he quickly but carefully made his way down the slippery steps that led onto the deck from the bow of the ship. He intended to assist the men who were fighting with the ropes but something caught his attention as the lightning crashed all around him. That was when he saw her. She had wandered a few feet from the cabin doors and was wrestling to maintain a footing on the deck. Looking around him at the sea, he could see a wave coming directly at them and his heart sped as his eyes returned to her.

"Elizabeth..." he whispered and was astounded when she looked at him as if she'd heard.

Scrambling past the men, he ignored the peels of lightning coming from above him and the approaching waves. He had to get to her, had to make her safe again. His eyes remained fixed on her so she was all he could see. As the wave crashed over the deck, he braced himself and felt his heart might stop beating.

~

Elizabeth's eyes widened as she saw the wave. Grabbing hold of the nearest rope she held on for dear life as the water washed over her, soaking her to the skin and chilling her to the bone. She closed her eyes tight as the saltwater stung them and silently prayed she'd survive the next wave.

A cold hand grasping her wrist caused her to start slightly and the next thing she knew she was being hauled to her feet. Clinging desperately to him, she heard the cabin door slam behind them and she fell to the floor, taking him down with her. She could hear him panting hard by her ear as he held onto her tightly.

"What in God's name were you doing?" His tone was harsh but she could hear the concern in it.

Marlin felt her shivering in his arms and let his fingers stroke her cold damp skin in an effort to calm her.

"I...looking...for you," she said quietly, her body shaking with cold and fear.

"Me?" He couldn't quite believe what she was saying. She had gone looking for him out on deck in the storm. "Why?"

"I...I..." She nuzzled into him as tears formed in her eyes and wrapped her tired arms around him tightly. "...was scared."

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

Marlin let his eyes roll closed and held her, his fingers working through her tangled hair.

“Don’t be scared, we’ll be fine.” He listened to her breathing start to settle down and felt her body relax into him as he pressed a kiss to her hair and smiled.

As the ship lurched violently, Elizabeth tensed up. He could hear the shouts of the men outside and sighed.

“I have to get the ship set for the night,” he breathed quietly.

“No...” She held onto him tighter and looked up at him with large round eyes, trembling as she thought over what she was about to say. “Please...don’t leave...I need you here.”

He looked deep into her eyes and ran his fingers down her cheek. His heart hammered against his chest as she reached up and took hold of his hand, pressing it to her cheek as she kept her eyes locked with his. He felt pulled in two, half of him needing to set the ship and the other half wanting to stay with her and kiss her fears away. The ship rocked again and he saw panic enter her eyes as the hull creaked under the pressure of the waves. He wished he didn’t have to go.

“I’ll have Alexander come and stay with you. Lord knows he isn’t much use out there,” he said lightly, hoping she’d like that idea as she seemed to like the boy. “If you need me then you tell him to come and get me. You don’t go out of this room. I won’t be long.”

She stared at him blankly and nodded before closing her eyes as he pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“Won’t be long.” He smiled as he stood and headed out into the storm.

She remained on the floor, her body shaking with her mixed emotions. She knew it was wrong of her to feel for him; it was wrong to let him stir such deep emotions in her, but she felt as though he was the only man in the world that could make her feel this way—so loved, protected, and safe—that she couldn’t help loving him in return.

When Alexander walked in, she was still sat on the floor, her mind desperately searching for an explanation for her feelings towards Marlin. She looked up as he stopped in front of her.

“You alright, miss?” He smiled as usual and then held out his hand to her.

Elizabeth took hold of his wet hand and wobbled to her feet. The ship continued to roll tremendously as he led her to the couch.

"No," she replied flatly and then held onto the seat tightly as the ship rolled again in the opposite direction and thunder boomed overhead.

"It'll be okay, she's come through worse than this." Alexander noted that it didn't seem to ease her worry and tried a different tact. "*He's* brought us through worse."

He watched her raise her head, her eyes now large with curiosity.

"He has?" she asked quietly.

"Far worse, but I think those tales are his to recount, not mine. I'm a poor substitute for your captain." Alexander chuckled and watched her cheeks colour.

"He isn't my captain," she said defiantly.

"Oh, I think he is, miss, if you pardon my saying so." Alexander swayed as the ship rocked again.

Elizabeth could feel her cheeks burning up and avoided his eyes. She tried to think of a subject that wouldn't bring her affection towards the captain of *The Merciless* under scrutiny.

"If you won't recount his tales, will you at least tell me more about this ship and her crew?" She met Alexander's eyes and hoped that he couldn't read her muddled feelings like his captain so easily could.

"Ask away, miss."

"You mentioned before that he was different, that he has somehow lost his hardness since I came aboard."

Alexander noted how her version of talking about the ship and her crew was actually just talking about the captain. He smiled.

"He's very different. The crew see it now. It isn't just me anymore. They think you've bewitched him, given him his heart back. They tell me it's more like it used to be when they first started out five years ago. He was different then, too. Somewhere in the middle he changed, he became blacker, heartless almost, not caring about what happened to himself. They believed he should have had *The Fearless* because that was what he'd become. He feared nothing, not death, not hell and especially not the navy. He openly sought them out, boarded them and marooned them."

Elizabeth watched his expression fade into one of sadness and she wondered what he was thinking. The ship's hull creaked again as a wave rocked them and she could hear the shouts of men outside, her captain's voice rising above them as he swore in defiance of the storm. She smiled.

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“Like he did to your ship?”

Alexander raised his brows and stared blankly at the floor.

“Yes, miss. *The Merciless* caught the *Siren* in shallow waters off an island not far from Freeport. We were on routine manoeuvres and were about to turn around to head home. He was swift in boarding her. He burnt the ship and took a few of us onboard. The rest of the crew he left swimming for the nearest island. I remember he didn’t show any emotion the whole time. It was incredible to watch, like he was unaffected by it all, like it was a vendetta and nothing more. Everything was done so quickly and efficiently, like he was in a hurry to catch the next ship, like he was looking for something.”

Elizabeth thought about it. Over the past few days she had realised it was a vendetta. The whole of Marlin’s life as a pirate had been one. Not against one man, but it was one man who had pushed him into it.

“In your time onboard, have you ever done anything like we saw those pirates doing yesterday?” She watched Alexander think.

“No.” He raised his eyes to meet hers. “He’s never gone after a merchant ship, only naval ones. We take what they have onboard and destroy the ship, most of the time only having to kill a few officers. We can go months without attacking one vessel.”

“And this is a pirate ship? What of treasure seeking and marauding?” Elizabeth let her curiosity about the ship drive her to question him. From what she had seen, *The Merciless* was nothing like a pirate ship.

“Never, miss...he’s always been...”

Elizabeth and Alexander tried not to look startled as the cabin doors flew open and a bedraggled Marlin stumbled in. He ran his hand over his drenched hair and flicked the excess water off his fingers to the floor.

She watched the water cascade down his white shirt. It was plastered to his skin and she could clearly see his body underneath.

“All set,” Marlin breathed heavily, still recovering from his battle against the storm. He watched Alexander nod at Elizabeth and then move to leave. As the boy went to pass him by, he caught his arm. “Careful crossing the deck, it’s still rough out there.”

Alexander smiled at the kind words his captain had offered him and then walked out of the cabin. Marlin watched him leave and peeled his shirt off, letting it slap to the floor beside him as he dropped it.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

As he turned to face her, Elizabeth let her eyes roam over his body, studying the smooth curves of his muscles as they tensed with each move he made. She couldn't stop herself from tracing a line up from his navel, over his taut abdomen and his pectorals to his strong collarbones and shoulders and then finally up to his face. Marlin was smiling at her but she could see concern just below the surface.

He frowned.

"You'll catch your death in that dress." He pointed at her sodden clothes and she stared blankly at them as if she'd only just noticed they were wet.

In all her daydreaming, she had forgotten that she was soaked through. As he pointed it out to her, she felt the cold creep in again and steal away the warmth that looking at him had given her. Staring up at him, she saw him frown again before disappearing into the bedroom. She remained frozen to the spot, her fingers holding onto the couch tightly as the boat rocked again.

Her body moved against the direction of the boat as it lurched, her eyes fixed on the bedroom door waiting for Marlin to reappear. When he walked back into the room, she noticed he was wearing the breeches of a naval uniform and she frowned at them.

"Did you steal those, like you stole this ship?" She tested the waters to see what his reaction would be, hoping it would confirm her suspicions.

He just gave her a dark look and replied flatly. "No."

Elizabeth noticed the offended look in his eyes and decided to give him a few moments alone to recuperate after his fight with the weather. Heading into the bedroom, she shut the door and looked around the room, trying to find something to change into.

She stared at the two dresses in front of her and then down at the one she was wearing, before staring at the corset on the bed. She didn't want to have to wear it again. She'd spent far too long in it for her liking.

Undoing her dress, she hung it up and sighed as she looked at it. The saltwater was going to ruin the silk. Looking at the other dresses and then down at her other under dress, she let a smile creep across her lips.

~

Marlin looked up as she re-entered the room. The thunder rolled overhead and the boat rolled with it but Elizabeth stood firm. He felt his pulse accelerate and his stomach spin at the sight of her. She was wearing nothing but her under dress and a blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

He'd never imagined that she'd openly sit with him in such a state of undress and it hit him hard. He could see the swell of her breasts as the cream dress clung to them and the curve of her hips as she moved towards him. He swallowed hard and gave up fighting against her. There was no way he'd win against such a siren.

He could feel his desire for her building with each passing second and raised his eyes to meet hers. They brought him back to reality with a harsh bump. Her eyes were full of fear and trepidation and as the boat rocked in time with a flash of lightning; he could see how scared she still was.

"Marlin." Elizabeth furrowed her brows as she held onto the doorframe, listening to the ship as it creaked against the wave and then closing her eyes tight.

The next thing she felt was his arm wrapped tight about her, guiding her to safety.

"You're freezing. Come on." Marlin led her to the bed and settled her down on it, wrapping more blankets around her.

She looked scared as he moved to leave and he smiled warmly. Taking up a few pillows, he arranged them at the bottom of the bed and leant against them so his feet were touching the headboard.

Sitting up and hugging her knees, Elizabeth let her eyes meet his as his fingers played with her bare toes.

"Never sailed in rough weather before?" He smiled wide as the ship creaked again.

She shook her head and noticed the fascinated look on his face as he watched his fingers stroking her feet. He raised his head up and gave her a crooked smile.

"She's come through worse than this, waves so high it even made me feel sick."

She tried not to think about what magnitude of storm it would take to make him sick. Holding her knees a little tighter, she cringed as the boat lurched again and this time her stomach lurched with it.

Marlin stroked her feet gently as she slowly opened her eyes again. When they met his, it reminded him of how she'd looked when she'd confessed to searching for him because she was scared. He felt warm inside at the idea that he had the power to make her feel safe.

He sniffed and smiled wide. Puffing his chest out a little, his heart sped as her eyes settled on it for a moment before moving back to his face.

Looking her over, he let his eyes run down the length of her wet hair. He'd never seen her wearing it so natural before. Most of the time, she'd pinned it back as best she

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

could. As he reached the end of her hair, his eyes drifted across to rest on the small cross around her neck and he stared at it blankly.

It reminded him of being in Plymouth. He remembered having to meet the more wealthy families at the launch of *The Merciless*. The admirals had made it evident that he should pay particular attention to a chosen few. They had pointed out a grey haired man with two little girls, one dark haired girl that clung to him and a fair girl who stood apart from him, her eyes darting about to absorb the scene going on around her.

Marlin reached out and brushed Elizabeth's hair from her face, studying her countenance for a sign of the little girl he remembered. She frowned questioningly at him.

"So, you were in Plymouth, some big ceremony," he said quietly.

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes slightly as she looked at him. She wondered what had prompted him to suddenly rekindle their previous conversation.

"Yes, with my father and my sister."

Marlin stared dreamily at the cross.

"You had your hair a little shorter." The corners of his mouth curved into a smile. "But you still wore that."

He brushed his finger around her throat to her necklace and saw her eyes widen.

She couldn't tell if he was just guessing all the details or whether he knew them, whether he had really been there.

"One of the officers said it was the prettiest thing he'd ever seen. I told him it was my mothers and he told me my mother must have been very proud to have such a beautiful daughter." She continued to frown as Marlin stared at the cross. She could feel his eyes boring into her and it felt as though they were going straight for her heart as opposed to her necklace.

"And you blushed, like you are now." He narrowed his eyes on hers and saw that she was working hard to figure out how he knew all this.

"Then Charles appeared and the other officer was gone. I cursed Charles for that...for seeing off the one person who hadn't treated me like a child."

Marlin mumbled something and Elizabeth frowned.

"How do you know all this?" She searched his eyes but he dropped them to rest on the bed.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

"I was nearby," he said quietly as the ship lurched again.

"Forgive me if this sounds a little impertinent, but how old are you?" She held her knees tightly as she felt the boat rock.

"Thirty-two," he answered bluntly and watched her calculate something.

"When I was thirteen you would have been twenty-six?"

"Twenty-six," he repeated as confirmation.

Elizabeth tried to picture the men who had been around her that day. She couldn't remember any blond men of that age. Letting her eyes roam over his face to his hair, she noticed his roots were dark and she imagined him with darker hair. Her eyes widened as it dawned on her. He was the man that Charles had chased away.

Everything seemed to fit more easily now and the picture she had been building up of him made more sense. He had been a naval officer onboard this ship and something had happened to create a mutiny against Charles, something bad enough that Marlin now wished to kill him.

Marlin was the first to break the silence.

"Want me to tell you the story of your fearless captain and your Charles?"

"He isn't my Charles," Elizabeth said with quiet resolution.

"I can see you want to know. I've watched you trying to figure me out over the past few days so I'll make it easy on you and tell you. I was his second in command on this ship." He looked around the room they were sitting in. She followed his lead and looked around too, her heart rocketing from having him openly confirm her suspicions. "He isn't a good captain. For all his pretty words and kindness around others on land, he's a different breed of man onboard a ship."

"How?" Elizabeth was fascinated. Not only was she getting to learn more about her pirate captain but he was telling her more about the real Charles.

Marlin grinned and let his fingers work their way up and play with her ankles, noting that she didn't seem bothered by his actions.

"I worked my way up through the ranks quickly, first on the *Endeavour*, the ship he'll come after me in, then the *Pegasus*...the ship I was on when we met in Plymouth." He watched her smile coyly at him over his reference to their first meeting. "He held me back, didn't see eye-to-eye with me the very first day that I was transferred to *The Merciless*."

"Why? Was there a reason for him to treat you like that?" She watched his fingers play on her toes again and she realised that she liked the constant connection between them it was providing. It made the storm seem distant somehow.

"You mean, did I give him a reason not to like me?" Marlin chuckled and watched her blink languidly at him, and as the boat rolled, he noticed all the fear in her eyes was gone. "I was too headstrong for him, questioned his orders when he endangered the lives of the crew."

"He wouldn't," Elizabeth breathed quietly. The man she knew had always shown such affection for his crew at the parties he'd attended, he'd always spoke highly of them. She wondered if what Marlin had said was true. Was Charles different in different company?

"He would. I'm guessing you've never sailed with him?" He stifled the pang of jealousy her defence of Charles had caused and looked at his hand as his fingers brushed her toes, telling himself that Charles had never got so close to her as he had.

"We sailed to Liberty with the admirals," she answered quietly and felt warm over the fascinated look in his eyes. He seemed to genuinely like being allowed to caress her.

"Ahh...safe and sound onboard *Justice*."

"Yes." Elizabeth replied meekly, her eyes falling to her knees.

"She's a good ship." Marlin sniffed and ran his fingers through his hair, tousling it and making it wild looking. "Little too big for my taste."

Feeling that he was about to lose the thread of his story, Elizabeth looked deep into his eyes and brought him back to her.

"So what happened to my fearless captain and Charles?" Her tone was confident as she struggled against the nerves in her stomach.

Marlin looked incredulous, heat and desire sweeping through him over being termed 'her' captain.

Chapter 12

"It was not six months into my service on *The Merciless* and the crew had bore witness to Charles' continued attempts to break me and hold me back. When I was honoured with the captaincy of the *Endeavour*, *The Merciless* became stuck at Freeport. The

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crew, disgusted with the captain's attempt to intentionally delay me, a man they respected, mutinied." Marlin toyed with her toes and kept his eyes locked with hers.

Elizabeth saw his eyes fill with sadness as he moved them to rest on her hands.

"It wasn't you then?"

"No." His tone was solemn as he thought about the life he could have led, how he could have been the one attending parties and meeting Elizabeth under better circumstances.

"But you said you took over the ship..." She frowned.

"Big talk, can't have a pirate captain admitting to getting his ship by the default of its crew, can we?"

"I suppose not. Why didn't you throw him off the ship? I surely would have."

He chuckled at her anger over what had happened to him. He could easily imagine her throwing a man off a ship.

"I knew that no matter what he tried, the captaincy of the *Endeavour* was mine. I was very much the favourite of the admirals."

Elizabeth stared at her knees for a moment as something came back to her and then looked up into his eyes, readying herself to search for a sign of confirmation of what she was about to say.

"You're him," she breathed. "It was the night before we sailed for Liberty. The admirals were dining over my house and I was walking along the corridor when I overheard them discussing the matter of James. Admiral Forrest said he could never believe James capable of such a lawless act, he was the best and most upstanding officer in the navy and he placed his word on it. The other admirals said the sea was a darker place to sail upon now that Black-hearted James was out for vengeance."

Marlin smiled and let his eyes drop to rest on his fingers as they paused on her skin, his heart swelling but aching at the same time over hearing such praise of his former self.

He chuckled.

"Black-hearted James...there's a name I've not heard these five years."

"I still can't see how Charles could do such a thing to you. It's so heartless." She felt his fingers start their motion against her feet again.

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"I was a threat to him." Marlin frowned as the ship lurched again. It was so gentle that it made him suspicious. "I was too popular with the admiralty, and obtaining the *Endeavour* meant I was above him."

"I don't understand." She frowned questioningly.

"The *Endeavour*, she's a real beauty, powerful, sleek, outguns this ship two to one. She's the top ship on these waters. I would have dearly loved to be her captain."

Elizabeth watched his eyes turn tender as they met hers and then his face softened in embarrassment as he moved them down to rest on the bed. She noticed that he seemed to get a similar look in his eyes to when he looked at her. If he really loved the *Endeavour*, did that mean he loved her too?

"And now Charles has her by default, because you have his ship." She frowned and then reached out to touch his hand. His eyes moved to rest on it as her fingers brushed gently against his skin. "But you didn't do anything. You could have gone to Liberty and told the admirals what had happened."

He shook his head and sighed over how naïve she was, caught up in a personal war between two men and not knowing enough of the world to see what would've happened had he tried to meet the admirals.

"Elizabeth, no one would have listened to me. Charles had lost no time in making out I had planned the revolt and taken his ship by force. By the time *Justice* had anchored in Liberty, he was already in charge of the *Endeavour*."

She felt her stomach turn at the thought of him meeting the navy and Charles. Whatever he was now, Marlin had started out as a good man and she believed he could be a good man once more.

"What will happen if they catch you?" She blinked slowly as she let her fingers play on his hand, his skin warming her fingertips and causing them to tingle.

"Charles will see to it that I'm court marshalled for crimes against the navy and then I'll be hung for being a pirate." He answered her flatly, his voice emotionless.

"No..." She let a frown wrinkle her brows, her stomach twisting at the thought of him hanging like the men she'd seen before.

"Either that or he'll shoot me dead on the spot."

Marlin watched Elizabeth's eyes close as she sighed, her skin turning the colour of cream as it washed out and her arms wrapping tight around her chest as if she was holding herself in an attempt to give herself some comfort.

“What’s wrong? I’m a pirate now. We all accept that death is on our heels.”

He felt the ship rock slightly and then feel as though it was being pulled backwards. Frowning, he held his hand out to her, instinctively knowing that the next wave would be bad.

She stared at his outstretched hand, unsure of what to do.

As the ship creaked loudly under the pressure of the wave that rocked her violently, she threw herself into his arms and curled up.

“My God, we’re going to die.” Her heart smashed hard against her chest as she felt his arms around her. Lost in their conversation, she’d forgotten about the storm.

He held her tightly as the ship settled again, savouring the feeling of her body next to his and her heart beating wildly against his chest. He chuckled.

“All the things I put you through and now you’re scared?”

Elizabeth looked up with wide eyes. It wasn’t just the storm that she was scared of, it was everything. The thought of him and Charles meeting scared her most of all.

“Marlin,” she whispered quietly, a note of desperation lacing her voice. “Keep running...don’t fight him...please.”

Letting his fingers stroke her bare skin, he arched a brow.

“Scared that I’ll kill your Charles?”

“No...” Elizabeth said as she tried to hide her tears. “I’m scared that he’ll kill you.”

He felt his emotions hitch in his throat as she looked deep into his eyes, letting him read all her feelings for him. He ran the backs of his fingers across her cheek and smiled warmly as he wiped away her tears.

“No chance of that. I can more than handle myself. I’ve done things I never want you to know about. The worst of which have been in my time with the navy, not my time as a pirate.”

“The navy?” Elizabeth tried to will her body to stop trembling. She felt a nervous excitement over the position she was in, her body slightly pinning him to the bed and his fingers playing on her waist.

“The navy isn’t clean and pure and sanctified, sweetheart. It runs red with blood squeezed from men by hands like these.” He squeezed her waist slightly and she felt her heart flutter in her chest. “Captain’s are known for killing men who they suspect to

be pirates, gutting them or hanging them...I've killed men that didn't deserve to die, all commanded by your precious Charles."

She looked down at him and her brows knit slightly, her hands resting on his shoulders.

"He isn't my Charles." Her tone was resolute as her fingers moved to play on his chest.

Marlin looked down at them and smiled at how she was rapidly growing accustomed to touching him and being touched by him.

"No...he isn't strong enough, doesn't know how to handle such a beautiful, passionate girl like you." He reached around and caught hold of her hand, bringing it to his lips and kissing it gently. "Does he?"

She shook her head and watched him smile into her eyes. For a moment, she wondered how he'd react if she kissed him.

~

As they continued to talk, Elizabeth moved back to sitting on the bed holding her knees while Marlin lay on his back. Staring at the ceiling, he noted how calm everything was and wondered at what point they had left the storm behind.

"I used to have to sneak books into my room. If my father found them there, he would punish me. Once the education of my sister ended, he believed I should stop reading his collection. He told me that it was for my own good and that I shouldn't waste my time on studying when there were so many better things I could be doing." She stared at her knees and was surprised at herself for talking so openly about such a thing. A week ago she would have believed it impertinent of her to discuss such matters with any man, let alone a man she hardly knew.

Marlin propped himself up on his elbows as he looked at her.

"You'll always be frowned upon for wanting to learn. I personally like it in you. Your father allowed you to educate your sister, surely he must have realised that it would start something in you, that you would desire more knowledge."

"He believed it was a more productive use of my time to attend balls and gatherings, to win myself a husband and secure my future."

Her tone made him frown further. She sounded as though the thought of securing her future made her miserable.

"But you didn't. I'm reckoning that you weren't very genial at balls and didn't dance very often...in the hope that you wouldn't win yourself a husband to tie you down. I think you

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like being free to come and go as you please, answering to no one.” He smirked as she smiled shyly at him.

“And I think you like it, too. You love the ocean and the freedom she gives you more than anything.”

He wondered what she would do if he told her there was something he loved more than the ocean and he was looking at it. He decided to stick to safer answers. If he said what he wanted to she’d close up again and become distant, and he didn’t want that.

“Then we both love freedom and adventure. Something we have in common.” Marlin watched her smile again and part of him continued to wonder how she would have reacted to what he’d really wanted to say.

“Speaking of adventure...” Elizabeth looked towards the windows. “It’s gone terribly quiet.”

“We left the storm behind a good twenty minutes ago. I was just enjoying our discourse.” He let his fingers drum against his stomach.

“So, you got her through after all.” She smiled wide at him and felt her stomach flip slightly at the smile he gave her in return.

“I got you through. My first mate and the pilot got the ship through. Now...” Marlin stood and stretched. “I have to go out and check her over, see what damage we sustained.”

Elizabeth went to open her mouth and stopped. He frowned at her.

“You wanted to say something?”

“It’s nothing, you’d never agree...” She stared at the sheets and he noticed the sad edge to her voice.

“Try me.” He met her eyes as she raised them up to rest on his face.

“I would like to accompany you, if you would let me.”

“Dressed like that...no...put something on and we’ll check the ship over together.”

He watched her as she let the blanket around her shoulders drop to the bed and stood up. She picked up the cream coloured dress she had arrived onboard in and slipped into it before putting her boots on. Marlin smiled broadly as she turned to face him.

“I’m ready, Captain.”

“Come along then, my lady. Mind your footing though, it’s slippery out there.”

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Taking up two lanterns, he handed one to her and heaved a long sigh as they walked out onto deck together.

Elizabeth inhaled deeply as she felt the cool fresh air hit her and she let a smile play on her lips as she looked around her. The storm continued to rage behind them, she could see the thick black clouds gathered there and the distant lightning. Letting her eyes move to above her, she watched the small pockets of clouds drift overhead, the clear moonlight illuminating them and turning them silver. She sighed heavily as the stars twinkled brightly at her.

On hearing her sigh, Marlin turned to look at her. The pale light of the moon played on her skin and his heart leapt into his throat. As she smiled at him, he realised she'd been shut up inside for the past two days and he tried to imagine how dire it must have been for her. She smiled wide as she looked all around her, her eyes full of fascination as she took long deep breaths and sighed them out. He watched her close her eyes as she enjoyed the fresh air and he decided that she should never been cooped up and caged. She didn't suit big towns and houses. She looked at home in the wild, on the freedom of the ocean.

Forgetting about his duties to check the ship for damage, he let his focus stay wholly with her. Somehow her obvious enjoyment of letting her feet wander freely about the ship and her eyes roam the distance made him feel warm inside, happy that he could give her something that clearly meant a lot to her.

Elizabeth turned and caught him smiling at her. She mused that until recently the tender look on his face would have made her blush violently but now it just made her feel warm. Something had changed between them, something that made her feel connected with him.

A tiny voice said she couldn't trust him. It reminded her of his previous actions and quick temper and told her everything he said was a lie.

Shutting out the thoughts of what he'd done to her, she turned her face skywards and listened to him slowly approaching. Her pulse quickened as she watched the clouds drifting across the sky. There was something about him that drew her to him. It made her not care if his words were lies because it was already too late to save herself. She was lost in him, and all she could do now was fight against her desire to surrender to her emotions.

"Isn't it strange..." she said quietly to distract herself from her thoughts and the feeling of him so nearby. "How things can change so quickly. In the blink of an eye, everything is different. All it takes is a single moment and the thunderous storm passes, the clouds lose their rage and open up to let something beautiful shine through, calming the sea and all around it...changing the course of things."

Marlin watched her closely as she continued to gaze up at the moon. His stomach fluttered madly over her words and he knew she wasn't talking about the storm.

She could feel his eyes boring into her and the air seemed to become heavy, the atmosphere between them turning intense with feelings as she slowly moved her head to look at him. The tension between them was palpable, the raw emotions welling to the surface of both their hearts.

"Elizabeth..." He saw her start slightly at his addressing her so openly and ardently.

She closed her eyes as she heard him step towards her, his voice full of tenderness but tinted with desperation as if he needed to tell her something. She turned slowly to face him. He was stood so close to her with his head tilted to one side and his eyes narrowed on her, and she could see all his feelings for her in them and they caused her heart to swell and race.

"James." She let her eyes settle on his as she gave him a warm look full of understanding and affection.

Marlin ran his hand gently over her hair and followed it with his eyes. As his fingers settled on her shoulder, he noticed her smile and tilt her head back in an invitation to him. He read the signals clearly as she fluttered her eyelashes and caused his heart to flutter along with them.

As he took a deep breath and leant towards her, the first mate called out to him. He rolled his eyes and clenched his jaw tightly. Elizabeth let her eyes fall to the floor, staring at his boots as her cheeks burnt up with the knowledge of what she had been about to do.

He stroked her shoulder with his thumb before sighing.

"Take your time, just mind your footing and stay away from the edge of the ship...enjoy a little freedom." He trailed his hand down her arm to her hand, holding it for a moment before starting off up the length of the ship to the quarterdeck.

Elizabeth watched him walk away, his steps heavy on the deck, and she knew he was disappointed by the interruption. She felt the atmosphere lighten as she thought about the evening she'd spent with him and her heart soared over the way he'd looked at her, the way he'd touched her, deeper than he could have imagined.

Raising her eyes to the stars again, she thought about him and realised that she couldn't imagine life without him any more.

Chapter 13

Elizabeth walked around the room dreamily as the bright sunshine filled and warmed it. Moving over to the trunk again, she placed her finished book back inside and stared at the other belongings that occupied it, her thoughts remaining with Marlin and last night.

She felt like she knew the real him now. He'd decided to let her in and it only made her feelings towards him grow stronger. With a smile, she replayed their moment out on deck in the moonlight. She was sure he would have taken her invitation and kissed her had the first mate not called him away. She'd stayed out on deck for a while longer, listening to the water playing gently against the hull and watching the clear skies overhead. By the time Marlin had come into the cabin she'd fallen asleep and she vaguely remembered him lying down next to her, his arm pulling her to him and holding her tight as she slept.

Focusing her eyes again, she looked into the trunk at a large box. Struggling hard to free it of the other objects, she lifted it out and carried it to the table.

She sat down and slowly opened the wooden box, not quite knowing what to expect. When its contents were revealed to her, she frowned slightly and let out a sigh. A small smile played on her lips as she lifted up one of the medals for inspection.

Running her fingers over it she let her eyes take in the details before they settled on the word 'valour'. She flipped it over and read the back. There engraved in the metal was his name, 'James Worthington'. She sighed and desperately resisted the temptation to couple her given name with his surname.

Placing the medal back in the box, she gave a quick glance to the others there. He seemed to have so many, all locked away in a box. It made her sad to see them there, shut away from the world so it could never know what a good officer he had been. Heaving another sigh, she moved a few books and let her eyes widen at what she'd found.

Pushing the box to one side, she lifted the heavy book out and placed it down on the table, her fingers tracing the name of the ship imprinted in the leather cover.

Her heart pounded in her ears as she stared at it, unsure of whether she should be looking at the ship's log but wanting desperately to know the things that had been written in it, knowing they could confirm what Marlin had told her the night before.

Biting her lip as she slowly opened the leather bound book, Elizabeth felt her mouth go dry and hurriedly poured a glass of wine. Drinking it down, she hoped it would steady her nerves as well as quench her thirst.

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Her fingers trembled as she flicked through entry after entry until she reached the last three. She swallowed hard as she began to read the first one.

We are on route to Freeport, having just received news that James has obtained captaincy. It troubles me deeply. The man does not possess the skills required to run a ship. He isn't worthy of being a captain so early in his career. What is more, I have discovered that he is to take command of the Endeavour. That he should be above me and in charge of the finest ship in the Caribbean is a joke. The admiralty must be insane. They cannot see the James I witness each day, laughing with the crew and shirking his responsibilities, questioning my commands. I am disgusted. The Endeavour should be mine. I've captained for three years. He has not the experience to lead the crew.

Elizabeth frowned, anger boiling up inside her over hearing Marlin spoken of so disrespectfully. She wished that she had the power to do something, to defend him against the false accusations that Charles had told the navy.

Scanning down the page, she read the penultimate entry—it was dated two days after the previous one.

We are in Freeport. The crew is uneasy. They are turning against me by degrees. I believe that James is responsible. The crew have discovered that the ship is in no need of service. They are turning against me. They say that I have intentionally delayed James in his mission to join the Endeavour at Liberty so he is in command of her when the new governor and his brat daughters arrive. I will not let them make me sail for Liberty. I will not let him have that ship.

Her frown intensified. The man who had courted her had openly referred to her as a brat. A bitter taste in her mouth, she felt disgusted at herself for ever believing such a man was being sincere. Digging her fingernails into the table, she eased slightly as she heard Marlin shouting orders to the crew. He seemed to be in good spirits today and deep down inside she knew it was because of her.

Her eyes returning to the log in front of her, she turned the page and was struck by the change in handwriting. It seemed neater, more precise than the previous scrawl.

The crew has mutinied against Charles' false orders. On seeing him holding me back, they took action and the Endeavour is lost to me. All I had worked for slipped through my fingers and I am bitter. I swear vengeance on Charles but part of me does not wish to exact revenge upon the navy. It is dear to me still and I shall miss my life as an officer. I hope that I never again see the Endeavour for it will be like a knife in my chest to know that such a beauty was to be mine. Never will The Merciless be as good to me as she would have been. Never will I know real happiness now that I am forced to become a mercenary, a pirate. I feel it is my duty to lead them now, after all they have done, turning themselves into criminals for my sake. My heart despairs as I write this, forced to live a life I did not want, made to captain a crew that can never know what they

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have done to me, all for the sake of one man's petty jealousy. I will have my vengeance, in blood and death I swear it.

Elizabeth stared at the words. Everything he'd told her had been the truth and she felt horrible inside for ever doubting his words.

A small noise caught her attention and she slowly raised her head to see Marlin watching her. She blinked as she met his eyes, her body shaking as she wondered how he was going to react to her reading the captain's log.

Marlin felt his desire to reprimand her leave him as he saw the tears in her eyes. He knew what she had been reading and he knew her sorrow was all for him. Not quite knowing what to do he just looked at her, hoping to discover if she would use the information against him in some way or whether it had really touched her.

He watched her stand and move across the room to him, her motions slow and graceful. Her eyes narrowed tenderly on his as her hand came to rest on his cheek. He sighed down at her and watched the tears swimming in her green eyes.

Elizabeth looked straight into his eyes as her hand cupped his cheek. She didn't hide her feelings. Instead, she let him read them all and see that they were all for him. She let her thumb stroke the hollow of his cheek softly as her eyes remained locked on his.

"I'm sorry," she breathed quietly and watched his eyes become full of remorse. She didn't know what made her say it, only that part of her believed that he deserved an apology from someone in the world for what he'd had to endure. "I'm so sorry. To think you were forced to live with the knowledge of what you had lost, of what your life could have been. Charles is a man I no longer wish to know. I never returned the feelings he expressed towards me. I never loved him. He was never my Charles. He is nothing to me now that I have the knowledge of what he did to ruin one man's life so cruelly."

Marlin swallowed noisily as he tried to read her eyes, hoping to discern whether the tenderness displayed in them meant what he thought it did. Reading her feelings clearly, he let his fingers brush against hers as he looked down at her and her lips curved into a warm smile. Captured by her, he felt his breathing coming faster, desire welling up in his stomach. He wanted to dip his head to kiss her, only now he was scared he'd ruin what was happening between them, that by closing his eyes the loving girl in front of him would disappear and their moment would shatter like fragile glass.

Elizabeth felt as if they'd been looking into each other's eyes for an eternity, both bathing in the emotions the other was showing. As his eyes narrowed, the passion in them made her heart feel like it was on fire, as though she was flying but falling all at the same time.

Subconsciously licking her lips, she smiled up at him and watched his smile light up his face as he reached out and caught her around the waist.

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She braced herself, knowing that he intended to kiss her and hoping it would feel as good as last time. Her knees felt weak as her heart beat loudly in anticipation.

A shout from the deck made Marlin flinch. The moment shattered and the world came rushing back in around them like the tide.

Closing his eyes, he heaved a long sigh and then turned away from her.

Elizabeth watched his back as he walked out into the sunlight. She knew he was disappointed again. Twice he'd wanted to kiss her and twice they had been interrupted.

~

Marlin pulled out his telescope, his heart pounding fast beneath his cool exterior as he swung the scope to rest on the ship. He stared at the mast and frowned. It was still too far off to be sure but there weren't many ships of that size in the Caribbean and it looked to be sporting a naval flag. Lowering the scope, he watched the ship as it lurched towards them.

As he took a deep breath, he realised Elizabeth had followed him. He could smell her nearby, could feel the energy coming off her. Turning around, he looked straight over her head to the crew, openly trying to avoid her questioning gaze and fearing her reaction to what he was about to say.

"Get moving, lads, let's be ready to show them what we're made of."

Elizabeth felt her stomach lurch, his words sitting heavy in it like lead. She stared past Marlin to the distant ship as it sank in. They'd found them. Charles was coming.

Her heart raced as she blinked in disbelief, her mind becoming empty with shock. As she looked up at Marlin, she realised he didn't seem surprised to see the *Endeavour* closing in.

"No..." she breathed, frantically trying to get him to look at her because his avoiding her gaze only made her panic worsen. "It can't be. She isn't fast enough to catch us. You said it yourself. She isn't fast enough to catch us when we're at full..." She looked up at the masts and felt her head spin. Only half of the sails were open. "Sail...no..."

She shook her head and shrank away from Marlin, her eyes widening as her breathing became more erratic and panic took over. All she could think about was what was soon going to happen. She frowned as Marlin finally looked at her with eyes full of regret. Her heart pounded hard and her mind swam with despair.

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"You...why...she'll blow you to kingdom come!" Trying to gasp for air, she backed towards the stairs and away from him, her mind running with wild abandon and leading her into hysterics. "I can't...I can't...I..."

Marlin watched her breathing coming faster; her body restricted by her tight corset, she couldn't get enough air to calm herself. Her eyes clearly reflected her panic and he felt the stab of guilt in his heart.

Dashing towards her as her eyes rolled shut. He caught her in his arms before she hit the deck. Closing his eyes, he tried to stifle his feelings of pain and guilt as he lifted her up, cradling her gently as he pondered that he'd done it too many times now.

He carried her slowly down the steps and into the cabin. Laying her out on the bed, he looked down at her, unsure of why she had reacted so badly. He wondered if she somehow felt that he'd betrayed her by letting the *Endeavour* catch up, or if she was scared of going into battle. He realised what it was as her words the other night echoed in his head. She was afraid for him to go into battle. She was scared Charles would kill him.

Pressing a long kiss to her lips, he cleared the hair from her face.

"Won't let him take me from you. I won't let him take you from me. I promise you, Elizabeth."

~

The sea was darkness all around her, the sky clear, letting the moon beam down at her, its silvery light struggling to illuminate the world. Elizabeth shivered as the wind blew against her, her eyes fixed blankly out to sea, watching the faint pin pricks of light that were the *Endeavour*.

Turning her head, she looked up at the masts of *The Merciless*. Her white sails were full now, catching the breeze that was managing to keep a steady distance between her and her pursuer. Letting her eyes drop to the deck, she saw movement in the crew's quarters, the men silhouettes in the lantern light as they laughed and drank. At least someone was happy tonight.

Swivelling her head again, she felt her heart grow heavy as she fixed her eyes on the *Endeavour* once more. She wanted nothing more than to extinguish all the lights around her, plunging the ship into darkness and making her invisible to the *Endeavour*. Part of her hoped that way they would be lost to them and Marlin wouldn't have the chance to fight Charles. Heaving a long sigh, she tried to expel all her hurt as she stared blankly at the distant ship. It was hopeless. No matter what she did to try to sway the course of destiny, it would find a way to get the two captains together and she was powerless to stop it. Closing her eyes and lowering her head, she gave up fighting against fate and felt empty inside as she surrendered to it. The thought that she was going to be torn

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away from *The Merciless* and Marlin caused her to feel hollow and dead, as though her only chance for happiness would die with her pirate captain.

Marlin stepped quietly up onto the quarterdeck, hoping not to disturb her so she wouldn't run away from him. She'd locked herself in the bedroom all afternoon and no matter how hard he'd tried, she'd refused to speak to him. After dining with the crew, he'd gone back to his cabin expecting to find her still locked away from him but instead he'd found she was gone.

He nodded to the first mate as he intimated that she'd been there a while and then went back to steering the ship.

Slowly walking towards her, he came to a halt by the railings and leant against them, keeping a distance between him and Elizabeth that felt like an ocean. Turning his head to look at her, he followed her gaze to the distant ship. Her face was blank and cold as she stared at the lights flickering in the darkness like bright stars.

In her eyes, he could see the tears still lingering and it pained him to think that he was the cause of her sadness, him and his decision to let the *Endeavour* catch up.

His heart jumped into his throat as her lips parted softly, his heart pounding in anticipation of her finally speaking to him.

"Why do they light the ship?" Her tone was solemn and distant as her eyes remained fixed on the *Endeavour*.

"To let us know they are coming," Marlin said softly, carefully choosing his words so he avoided causing her further upset.

"The same reason you lit the ship up?"

"Yes. Only I did it to show them I'm not scared of them..." He watched her eyes fall to rest on her hands where they were gripping the balustrade. "I'm..."

"Don't..." Her voice was low and harsh as she closed her eyes, visibly bracing herself against his words, her knuckles turning white as her grip tightened. "When I said you didn't suit apologies I meant it, please don't."

"You don't suit pleading. You only need to tell me."

Elizabeth sighed and opened her eyes again, focusing on the feeling of the wind dancing over her body and causing her skin to turn to goose flesh.

"The world feels cold tonight. I feel cold," she said dreamily.

"Let's go indoors." Marlin moved to catch her arm but paused halfway, unsure of how she would react to his touching her now.

"Not yet...I want to keep this feeling, this memory, with me for a long time to come. I don't want to forget what this feels like."

"What, what feels like?" He frowned questioningly and watched her stare into the distance again.

Elizabeth felt the butterflies in her stomach whirling around and tried to remain steady under his scrutiny as she built up the courage to ask him what she needed to know above everything else.

"Marlin?" She swallowed hard, her voice trembling slightly as she dropped her eyes to rest on her hands again. "What happens to me when all this is over?"

He noticed that she avoided answering his question and let his frown intensify as he looked down at her. His heart was telling him what she'd meant but his mind wouldn't believe it until she said it out loud, until he heard her tell him that it was being on *The Merciless* with him that she was trying to put to memory, that it was love she wanted to remember.

As he considered his answer to her question, he felt his emotions swirling inside him. He couldn't form the words to tell her what he really wanted to. He didn't know what to say. Unsure of her feelings, he didn't want to lay himself down at her feet for fear of being trampled into the dust.

"Will you let them take me home?" Her voice trembled as she said the words, hoping to prompt him into answering her.

"Depends," Marlin said quietly as he leant against the railings and looked at her.

"On what?" she asked as she finally looked at him. She could see him struggling with his feelings as he looked at her.

"If you want to go home." He waited for her reply.

She took a deep steadying breath and moved closer to him, feeling her body ache as she let it brush against his. Running her fingers up over his chest, she caught him around the back of his head and brought his mouth down to hers. Kissing him softly, she felt a spark run through her, dancing along her nerve endings and causing warmth to spread through her as he started to kiss her back.

Closing her eyes as his arm snaked possessively around her waist and his tongue slipped into her mouth, she let her own tongue come to meet it and smiled when he moaned quietly.

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Marlin broke the kiss and pushed a strand of hair behind her ear, letting his fingers weave into her golden locks. He'd never thought she'd kiss him. A smile crept across his face as he realised just how different she was to every other girl. She was perfect.

"You're beautiful." He smiled into her eyes and watched her blush, her eyes dropping to rest on his arm where it was wrapped around her.

Marlin caught her chin and raised her eyes to meet his.

"Don't hear it very often, no? You're beautiful, Elizabeth. I've never met a woman like you, so strong and spirited, yet so feminine at the same time. You're perfection. I didn't think in all the world I'd find someone who makes me feel like you do. I tried to break you, push you away and make myself hate you but it only served to make me love you more."

Elizabeth tried to lower her eyes but found he wouldn't let her. He held her firm as he narrowed his eyes on hers. Her heart raced and her mouth went drier than a desert as she was filled with half fear and half excitement.

"Is this another game? It's too cruel. You can't play with my feelings like this. I have to know if you're being sincere. Everything I've seen in you the past few days would say you were but now I don't know what to believe."

Marlin pressed his finger to her lips to silence her. He gave a quick glance to the first mate and noted he was doing an admirable job of looking like he wasn't listening.

His tone dropped to a hurried intimate whisper.

"No game, sweet Elizabeth, but if you felt so inclined you could exact a swift vengeance on me for everything I've done to you. You could break me. I'm laid bare and only one question begs to be answered...burns in my heart...is there any part of you that could love me?"

Elizabeth raised her head defiantly and met his gaze. Suddenly feeling steady inside, she watched the edge of trepidation as it danced around his eyes. She could feel his fingers trembling where they rested against her skin. Here he was, the fearless pirate captain, laying his heart at her feet, hoping she wouldn't crush him. Here she was, the innocent hostage caught up in a personal war, at first made to suffer at his hands and now realising that underneath his hard exterior beat the heart of a true man.

A man she loved.

"Yes." She let her lips curl into a smile and then closed her eyes as he pulled her back against him and crushed her lips under his.

Chapter 14

Marlin knelt before Elizabeth where she sat on the bed, his hands slowly pushing her dress up and revealing her long white stockings. Dipping his head, he kissed up her thigh until he reached her bare skin, where he pressed his lips to it and felt her quiver under him.

“Marlin...” Her voice trembled as her body ached and her skin prickled with heat.

“Shh. Won’t hurt you,” he purred as he kissed her thigh again.

Standing up, he slowly unbuttoned her dress and took hold of her hand, pulling her up so she stood before him. He watched as she pulled the dress up over her head and then held it to her. He could see the nerves in her eyes as she waited for his next move and he smiled reassuringly as he took the dress from her, placing it over the nearest chair.

Moving around her, he started to unlace her corset, pressing soft kisses to her back and neck as he did so. As she pulled the corset from her body, his hands coursed down over her under dress to her hips and she turned her head to look over her shoulder at him. Leaning towards her, he captured her lips as she leant her back into him.

Elizabeth trembled as she realised what came next. Desire and excitement flooded her veins and she felt her heart beating faster as he walked around and came to a stop in front of her.

Marlin smiled at her nervousness and pulled his shirt off over his head, noticing that her eyes moved immediately to rest on his stomach and chest as they were revealed to her. Removing his boots, he slowly undid his breeches and slipped out of them. His heart pounded hard against his chest as she took a step towards him.

Elizabeth blushed as she let her eyes weave down his body to his erection. She blinked at the sight of it and reaching out a shaky hand, she bit her lip as her fingers came to rest on the smooth skin of his chest. Slowly she worked them downwards, memorising all the curves and finally settling on his cock.

He moaned as he felt her small hand encircling his length. When he opened his eyes, he noticed the look of fascination and desire in her eyes.

Smiling nervously, she backed away from him and slipped her under dress off her shoulders, letting it fall away from her body. Marlin ached inside as she slowly revealed herself to him. He let his eyes follow her dress as it pooled around her feet and then started working his way up her body.

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His eyes roamed up her long white stockings to her hips, her toned stomach and her pert breasts. He smiled slightly at the sight of them and the thought that she was so untouched. When his eyes finally met hers, he could see how nervous she still was.

Stepping towards her, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her hair as her body pressed against his. As he held her, he felt her start to place small, wet kisses against his chest while her hands traced the curve of his spine and came to rest on his backside.

“Elizabeth...” Marlin breathed as he looked down at her. The sensation of her touch was like fire on his skin, making him burn with desire for her.

“James...” Elizabeth swallowed her nerves and gave in to the thrill coursing through her.

He crushed her mouth under his, kissing her fervently and feeling her hands running over his hips and settling on his cock.

“Mmm God, Elizabeth.” He moaned into her mouth and grabbed her around the waist, picking her up and moving her to the bed.

She rolled her eyes closed as his fingers ran down her body, her skin humming wherever they moved and tingles running over her as his warm breath and soft kisses brushed her shoulders and neck. As he slipped a long finger over her golden curls and up into her heated depths, she flung her head back and moaned loudly.

Marlin grinned and kissed down to her stomach, his finger slowly starting to move inside her.

“I’m going to hell for this...” Elizabeth grasped the sheets as her body quivered with desire around his finger.

“You and me both. Best go to heaven first.” Marlin chuckled and ducked his head, kissing her thighs as he nestled in between them.

Darting his tongue into her wet folds, he felt her fingers slip into his hair, grasping it tight as her body tensed up.

“Oh God.”

Marlin licked up the length of her, savouring her warmth, taste, and how wet she was. His finger still pumping her slowly, he licked and suckled her arousal until she moaned harshly, her muscles contracting around his finger as she came.

Elizabeth panted hard as the feeling of it hit her. She felt as though she’d been sedated as the warmth of her orgasm spread through her. Just as she closed her eyes, she felt

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Marlin pull his finger out of her and then slip two back in. It stung a little and she looked down at him with a questioning look in her eyes.

He smiled up at her and wriggled his fingers, trying to get her to adjust to the feeling of having both of them inside her. She tensed slightly and then relaxed as she met his eyes. They were tender and soft as he watched her.

Dipping his head again, he kissed her thighs as he moved his two fingers slowly inside her, stretching her body so she wouldn't hurt as much when the time came. Curling his tongue up he licked her arousal, feeling it growing pert again under the pressure of his probing fingers. He raised his eyes to watch Elizabeth as he circled her nub with his tongue. Her eyes closed and her body open to him, he felt his desire to have her growing.

Pulling his fingers out of her, he kissed his way up her stomach and wrapped his lips around her nipple.

She arched her back as he took it into his mouth, suckling gently as he palmed her other breast. She moaned breathily and bucked her hips against him, nervous excitement coursing through her as she felt his hard cock against her thigh.

Marlin groaned as he felt her leg rubbing against his length. He couldn't resist her for much longer. Kissing up her chest to her neck, he smashed his mouth against hers. She grasped his shoulders tightly as she kissed him back, her teeth clashing with his and her tongue in his mouth as she tried to get closer to him. She felt a need awakening in her. It was as though she was possessed with it and not in control of her body as she arched against him again and watched his eyes roll closed.

"Sure?" he breathed into her ear as he kissed down her throat.

"Sure," Elizabeth felt the words leave her mouth of their own volition.

He nearly lost the ability to breathe on hearing that word uttered so confidently by her. She was going to let him love her, let him be the one to take her innocence, and he felt awed by it.

Holding his cock, he guided himself to her slick opening and nudged against her.

"This may hurt a little, but I promise it will feel good...promise."

Elizabeth nodded and held onto his shoulders as his length pushed up inside her. Her body protested over the new sensation, it ached and stung. Screwing her face up slightly, she felt Marlin stop and kiss her lips gently as if he were trying to coax her into relaxing. She kissed him back slowly, letting them remain sensual and tender. As he started to move inside her again, she bit back the pain and continued to kiss him, concentrating on his warm mouth against hers.

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As his hips met hers, Marlin pulled back and smiled.

"Might take a while to get used to it, just keep from tensing up and give me your sweet lips."

She swallowed and smiled as he dipped his head towards her again. As he kissed her, she felt him shift his weight slightly and his hand came to rest on her breast. He gave her long slow kisses as he circled her nipple with his fingertips, keeping her desire burning while her body grew accustomed to him being inside her.

Moaning quietly into his mouth, she couldn't help thinking that she'd never felt so full before. She could feel him inside her, his cock twitching occasionally as it waited for her to adjust. As the ache subsided, Elizabeth moved her hips slightly and watched his eyes roll shut. It gave her immense pleasure seeing him do that and she moved again, tightening her muscles around his length.

"Oh, Elizabeth, love...I won't hold off if you do that." Marlin kissed her throat and shifted his hips, testing her as her fingers grasped his shoulders tightly. He looked into her eyes. "Hurts?"

She shook her head in the negative.

He smiled and moved his hips again, giving her an experimental thrust to gauge her reaction. She closed her eyes and sighed. She was going to hell but it felt like it was going to be worth it.

Moving slowly inside her, he revelled in the feeling of being with his girl. It had been so long since he'd felt anything like this but all the times before her didn't come close. The feelings he held deep inside pushed their way to the surface and he finally admitted completely how much she meant to him. For the first time in his life, James was in love.

Staring into his eyes as he continued to move against her, Elizabeth raised her hips slightly and let her hands slide down to his backside. She cupped his buttocks as his cock pounded into her, making her body ache with a need for release. As he shifted position slightly she couldn't stop herself from moaning, his kisses on her throat growing more passionate as the tip of his cock struck deeper inside her.

"Shh...sweetheart...not so loud. God you're the sweetest thing." He murmured the words to her.

Elizabeth breathed heavily into his ear as a response.

"I could spend eternity making love to you," he continued.

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She smiled at him as he kissed her, her abdomen tightening again and her hips bucking slightly as they begged him to release her from her need.

Marlin moved his hips a little faster, curling them as they met hers and moaning as she tightened her muscles around him, milking his cock as she groaned softly with each meeting of their hips.

She grasped the sheets as he felt him delving into her core and she pushed her hips against him, encouraging him to move faster and harder inside her. As his hips smashed against hers, she felt a sweep of tingles run over her body and her muscles quivered around his length as she came and felt him thrust into her a few more times before spilling his seed inside her, his cock pulsing and throbbing as he did so.

His hips slowing, Marlin breathed hard as he felt her body trembling under him. He let his fingers caress her shoulders softly and held her tightly to him.

She sighed and closed her eyes as she relaxed into the warm, soft bed with Marlin on top of her and his length still inside her. Running her fingers over his back, she let them curl into the short hair at the back of his head and smiled to herself. There was no denying her feelings now.

~

Elizabeth awoke slowly, a smile creeping across her lips as she remembered the night of passion she'd spent with Marlin. Hooking her leg over his, she snuggled into his chest and let out a contented sigh.

Marlin watched his thumb as it idly stroked her forearm where it rested across his chest, her fingers tracing patterns on his skin. Pressing a kiss to her hair, he breathed in her scent and smiled.

Moving her hand, she looked at his arm and the long wound that ran along it. Her stomach squirmed as she thought about what she had done but she didn't let it bother her. He'd given as good as he'd got.

He watched as her fingers stroked the gash that she'd inflicted. He'd noticed during their love making last night that the small cut on her ribs had almost fully healed and it had made him realise that the saying was true—you do always hurt the ones you love, mainly because you don't want to have to deal with the possibility that you love them. His thoughts turned to the upcoming battle and the girl in his arms. As much as he wished to stay locked in this little world with her, he had to face what was chasing hard on his heels. He couldn't run, not any more.

"This doesn't change what I have to do. I have to lay my past to rest, Elizabeth, so I can move forwards." He spoke quietly, listening to her soft breathing.

"I know." She ran her fingers down his chest and kissed it gently, letting her lips barely brush his skin. She felt her insides trembling as she built up the courage to ask him something. "Marlin?"

"Hmm?"

"Let me stay. Let me fight." She raised her eyes to meet his. "I don't want to leave this ship. I don't want to leave you."

He smiled and cupped her cheek. "I don't want you to fight. I want you far away from the dangers of battle."

She stifled her tears as they welled up and lowered her head, pressing soft kisses to his chest as her fingers caressed him gently.

"Please don't make me leave. Let me stay. Let me stay with you."

Marlin stroked her hair as he looked at her. He could hear the note of desperation in her voice and it swayed his heart. "Told you, you just need to tell me, not plead me."

He watched her raise her head, her eyes smiling at him.

"I'm staying then. I'm not leaving you." She smiled wide as she felt his arms snake around her waist, holding her to him.

"Listen to me." He gave her a serious look and watched the smile on her face fade away. "You can stay on the ship but you have to stay safe. You can't fight. I can't be worrying about you when I'm out on deck."

Her smile returning, she leant down and kissed his neck, working her way around to his mouth and pressing a long kiss to it. When she pulled away, she found herself blushing at the tender look in his eyes.

Marlin ran his fingers through her hair and watched it shine in the morning light. He held her closer to him as she smiled at him.

"God, I love you, Elizabeth," he breathed out quickly.

She felt her skin flush over hearing him declaring his feelings for her so passionately and bluntly. Capturing his hand and locking fingers with him, she smiled into his eyes.

"I love you, too."

Chapter 15

Marlin lowered the scope and took a deep breath to steady his heart. The *Endeavour* had finally caught up and was slowly closing in. It was only a matter of hours before they would be side by side and suddenly it didn't seem like enough time.

Looking around at his crew, he couldn't help noticing how nervous they were. He couldn't blame them. This was their first battle against a ship with the size and gun power of the *Endeavour*. Taking another long, deep breath, he tried to clear his head of thoughts of Elizabeth and focused on getting the ship ready to meet her pursuer.

"No need to fret, lads, just keep your heads and we'll win through this. The *Endeavour* will be sailing with half a crew. She wouldn't have had time or resources to crew her fully and they won't outnumber us." He watched the majority of his men start to look a little more confident and tried to think of what else could reassure them. "Just think of it, lads, we're on the brink of being known as the most feared ship on the seven oceans. We're going to beat the navy's finest. We're going to take the *Endeavour*."

A huge cheer went up and Marlin felt his heart jump with it as the adrenaline of the upcoming fight entered his veins. The thought of winning the *Endeavour* and defeating Charles was exhilarating.

"We're going to win, men. Ready the ship and let's show them who the better crew are," Marlin hollered above the noise, ignoring the quiet voice in the back of his head that was making him worry about the safety of his girl.

He walked down the steps from the quarterdeck to the main deck as he watched the crew moving about the ship, readying cannons and distributing weapons as they set the sails ready for manoeuvres. Wandering amongst his men, he listened to the excited chatter going on between them. They talked of riches carried onboard the *Endeavour* and the number of men they were going to claim the lives of. The only person who didn't seem happy now was Alexander. He was cleaning his sword in one corner with a nervous look on his face.

Marlin leant back against the railings beside him and folded his arms as he looked at the boy. He couldn't blame him for looking nervous. In all the times they had boarded ships and fought crews, Alexander had remained safe below deck. He had always seen him as too young to fight. He was barely older than Elizabeth. Heaving a sigh, he smiled as Alexander looked at him.

"Scared?" He raised his brows.

"No." Alexander's voice trembled as he replied, his fingers shaking where they held the sword.

"Don't worry. I was scared too the first time I went into battle. You'll do fine, in fact I think you'll be perfect for the task."

"Task?" Alexander looked up and met Marlin's eyes.

"I need you to protect her." Marlin gave him a look that showed Alexander how deadly serious he was about this mission.

"Miss Miller?"

"Elizabeth. I need to know she's safe. I need you to make sure she's safe. Defend the cabin, protect my girl for me, Alexander."

Looking into his captain's eyes, Alexander realised that he was being handed the mission that Marlin held dearest and closest to his heart. To him this was the most important one, ranking higher than his winning the *Endeavour*.

"I'll try...I don't want to see her hurt either." Alexander nodded and watched his captain stand and nervously run his fingers through his hair.

"You tell a soul, Alexander..." he started.

"Won't tell anyone. You can count on that." He motioned a cross over his heart and Marlin smiled as he patted him on the shoulder.

As he watched his captain walk back along the deck towards the cabin, Alexander heaved a long sigh. He'd been entrusted with the life of the girl his captain loved and he wasn't sure whether he should be more scared now or less. He realised that he was putting himself in more danger by protecting Elizabeth. The naval officers would know where to find her and would immediately go there, and there was only him to protect her. Sharpening his sword, Alexander let a look of grim determination settle on his features. He would do as his captain asked. He would protect the girl as best he could but he got the feeling she'd kill anyone who tried to take her anyway.

Marlin pushed the doors to his cabin open and found Elizabeth pacing the room. She looked up as he entered and gave him a warm smile but he could see her mixed emotions in her eyes, all fear, excitement and defiance.

"Are they close yet?" Pushing her feelings down into her stomach, she stepped towards him and watched his eyes turn tender.

"Not yet, soon though." Capturing her cheek with his palm, he smiled at her as her eyes grew soft and large. "We'll be okay. You know the navy and you know as well as I do that they will go for a boarding procedure. They won't risk it. Charles won't risk it. He'd

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rather fight me than blow me up, and I'm certain the admirals have told him to recapture the ship."

She nodded and tried to force the thoughts of Marlin and Charles fighting out of her head. She knew there wasn't much time left. Soon the ships would clash and the fight would begin, and what she did in that time could help determine the outcome, could help decide who won.

She watched Marlin as he slipped one pistol into its holster and then looked at the other one. Frowning, he moved his eyes from it to her, and then placed it down on the table.

"You know how to use it." His tone was firm and she nodded again.

"I'm not afraid to die, James. I won't let them take me. I won't leave you." She touched his hand where it rested on the pistol on the table and watched him as he locked his fingers with hers.

Bringing her hand up to his mouth, he kissed it and then pulled her towards him, wrapping her up in his arms. He dipped his head and captured her lips, kissing her passionately as she opened her mouth and let her tongue play with his. Closing his eyes, he kissed her harder, letting her know without question how he felt about her and fearing it would be his last chance to be close to her.

Lips parting, he rested his forehead against hers and then pulled back and looked into her eyes. They were smiling at him as she caught her breath and he knew what she said was true. She wouldn't leave him willingly.

Marlin took up a sword and placed it in her hands. When she smiled warmly at him, he smiled back at her.

"Won't let them take me without a fight." Elizabeth looked defiant again and weighed up the sword in her hand. It was heavy but she knew that when the time came she wouldn't be afraid to use it.

"You really are perfect, Elizabeth. Never met a woman as perfect as you before. You must have a little pirate blood in you somewhere."

Elizabeth placed the sword down on the table next to the pistol and stepped into his arms. Feeling his hands grasp her waist, she wrapped her own arms around his neck and tilted her head back in an invitation.

Taking her hint, Marlin pressed his lips back against hers and kissed her tenderly, pouring his heart out as he listened to the sounds of cannon fire outside. Pulling away from her, he caught hold of her hand and looked into her eyes, watching the tears that swam in them.

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"I love you. Don't for a second think I won't come back to you. Charles is weak. I won't have a problem beating him. Stay safe, only fight if you have to...if anything happens I'll find you, Elizabeth. I love you." Marlin brushed away her tears with his fingers and smiled at her as she tried to steady herself.

Reaching up and kissing him again, Elizabeth struggled to tell herself that it wasn't goodbye and that she knew in her heart he'd win through and she would see him again. As she broke the kiss, she ran her fingers down his cheek and put his look to memory, his narrowed eyes and slight smile.

"I love you. Be careful out there, come back to me." Biting back her tears and nerves, Elizabeth listened to the sound of the cannons firing warning shots outside and sighed. "Go...they need you."

He kissed her one last time and started towards the door, his hand not leaving hers until the last possible moment. As she watched him leave, she couldn't help feeling overwhelmed by her emotions. Her heart ached to see him going into battle and her body trembled in anticipation of the fight ahead.

~

Grasping the sword tightly in her hand, Elizabeth listened to the sounds of battle outside, the metallic ring of the swords as they clashed and the occasional gunfire. Through the cabin doors windows she could barely see the men as they fought against each other. The deck was swathed in smoke from the cannons and it obscured her view. Standing firm, she kept telling herself that Marlin was fine. If she could make it through this then he would too.

Wobbling slightly on her feet as the ship's hull creaked, she realised the *Endeavour* was butting up against them, allowing its men to pour onto *The Merciless* and heighten the battle. She smiled as she remembered Marlin's words about how they would try to recapture the ship rather than blow them out of the water.

~

Marlin grinned as the *Endeavour* pulled up alongside them, her men throwing more hooks over onto *The Merciless* and securing her. Weighing his sword up, he watched his crew battling against the naval men. At the moment, it seemed his side was winning, but all that could change in the blink of an eye. Standing on the small deck above the forecastle at the bow of the ship, he waited for the officers to approach him, dispatching them quickly with his sword as they neared the top of the steps and securing his viewpoint above the crowd of men below him.

Standing his ground, he waited for Charles to come to him. To leave *The Merciless* would be to lessen his chances of survival. He was safest on his own territory, surrounded by his men in a small fighting space. Biting his lower lip as he slashed a

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nearby officer across the back, he surrendered being able to keep one eye on the cabin and threw himself into the fight. Alexander would do his best and something told him that if anyone got through, Elizabeth would fight.

~

Elizabeth heaved a sigh as she waited. She could hear voices outside the door and the smoke of the cannons was slowly dissipating, leaving her with a clear view of the fight on deck. There were screams and cries of agony all around her, the sounds of men clashing and dying as they fought to defend the ship or to recapture it.

Listening to the sounds of battle and death, she felt as though she was suffocating on her thoughts about how she was unable to protect the man she loved because she wasn't strong enough.

Her anger grew inside her over not being able to go into battle beside him and her fear disappeared as she grasped the sword tight and watched the men as they neared the door. As it crashed open, she steadied herself, knitting her brows tight and setting her jaw defiantly as she grasped the sword hard enough to turn her knuckles white.

Watching the naval officers as they slowly approached her, Elizabeth licked her lips and readied herself to fight them. Her heart smashed hard against her chest, skipping a beat as her nerves threatened to overtake her. This was it. It was kill or be killed. It was either let them take her, or fight to stay.

She knew what she had to do.

The two men raised their hands and made a motion to her that she knew was supposed to tell her to relax.

"It's all right, Miss Miller, we've come to rescue you. The *Pegasus* is waiting." The first man watched her as she continued to stand firm, the sword still grasped tightly in her hand.

Elizabeth lowered her head, narrowing her eyes and knitting her brows as her hair fell down to messily frame her face.

"I'd sooner die than leave this ship!" She spat out as the two men stopped their approach.

They looked at each other in disbelief, both wanting the other to confirm that such a slip of a girl had just threatened them.

"We've come to take you back to Liberty, miss." The second man frowned slightly and waited to see how she would respond as he took a step towards her.

"Don't you come near me!" Elizabeth growled and took hold of the gun from the table. Pointing it at the nearest officer, she tried to steady her hand as it shook uncontrollably. "I mean it...don't you come near me."

"Miss..." The second man took another step towards her and she remembered watching Marlin shoot Jeremy when they were in Beggars Haven.

She narrowed her eyes and silently prayed for forgiveness.

~

As a shot cracked and echoed around the ship, Marlin's eyes were immediately drawn to the cabin. He could see the doors were wide open but couldn't make out anything else.

"Elizabeth!" he shouted as he began to move.

Killing the man nearest to him, he forced his way through the throngs of men to the steps that led down to the main deck.

Marlin cursed as the naval men hampered his progress towards the cabin. Every time he had made some ground, another appeared to fight him. He watched an officer approach him and set his jaw tight, thinking only of having to reach the cabin and ensuring his girl was safe. He lashed out and sliced the man across the stomach, watching him fall in a heap on the floor before continuing his fight across deck.

There were men fighting everywhere. Several of his crew were dead already and a large proportion of them were injured. He was thankful that the navy side seemed to be suffering more losses than his but he knew that it could change any time. Growling as he pushed through the crowd, he slashed and stabbed each naval man that tried to hinder him, leaving them behind for his crew to finish off as he tried to get to Elizabeth.

~

Elizabeth stared at the smoking gun in her hand and then down at the dead man on the floor. She felt the cold numbing sensation of shock sweeping through her, but as the other officer stepped towards her, she came out of her reverie. As he reached her, she slashed him across the chest with the sword as best she could and then threw the pistol at him, hitting him square on the temple. She watched him stumble towards her and took a deep breath to calm herself. Sticking the sword into his side, she closed her eyes as she whispered.

"I'm sorry."

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Opening her eyes as she withdrew her sword from the dead man, she saw three more men appear in the doorway. As she steadied herself, she saw Alexander appear in view and start fighting one of the men, leaving her with two again.

She gripped her sword tight, watching them as they looked down at the two dead men and then up at her. As soon as they split up to circle her, she knew they had realised it was her who had killed the two officers.

Swiping the sword at the man nearest her, Elizabeth slashed him across the leg and then panicked as the larger of the two men grabbed her from behind. His arms circled her chest as she struggled, effectively pinning her arms to her side, and she found herself kicking and wriggling as she desperately tried to break free.

As the other officer tried to get closer to her, she kicked him hard in the face and struggled frantically against her captor.

Continuing to struggle as the man carried her out onto deck, Elizabeth felt his grip on her tighten, his arms squeezing her chest until she felt like she couldn't breathe. Feeling tired from the fighting and lack of air, she struggled aimlessly as the man set her down on deck and started to tie her arms behind her back. She could hear the men fighting around her and saw Alexander was now frantically battling the officer she had wounded. Raising her head wearily, she turned to see Marlin fighting his way towards her.

"James!" Elizabeth yelled as the man holding her captive finished tying her hands.

"Elizabeth!" Marlin shouted in response, watching the brute beside her as he placed a sack over her head and slung her over his shoulder. Anger boiling up inside him, he couldn't help thinking how she was going to leave the ship tied up in the same way she'd boarded it.

He wouldn't let that happen.

Slashing wildly as he tried to get to Elizabeth, he felt his heart pound hard against his chest and the sound of it swirled in his ears. He forced his way through the crowds towards her where she was struggling against the officer as he tried to carry her towards the side of the ship.

"James Worthington." A familiar voice caused Marlin to stop in his tracks, his anger boiling over as he turned to face the man behind the voice and as he saw him, a sense of calm washed through him.

Charles smiled at Marlin and looked over his shoulder towards his men and Elizabeth. "Take her away, boys."

On hearing Charles' voice, Elizabeth started kicking madly, trying to get free and back to Marlin, back to the man she loved, the man she needed to protect. As she kicked the

man holding her, she heard Marlin chuckle and say something to Charles, and then felt a sharp pain as the world faded to black.

Chapter 16

Elizabeth woke slowly, her head a riot of pain as she struggled to open her eyes. A cold chill swept over her as she looked at her unfamiliar surroundings. She was in a large room. All the walls and furniture were rich red mahogany and she could hear the ocean through the open windows. Sitting up little by little, she looked blankly at her sister and father. Their faces were bright with smiles and tenderness that caused her to ache inside for the man she'd left behind in battle.

Rubbing her sore eyes, she braced herself for the impending talk from her father and sister.

Dawn rushed forwards, her lashes wet with tears as she sat down next to her sister and pulled her into a hug.

"My God, it must have been terrible. I can't imagine what you must have gone through, the torture of being held captive by such a tyrant."

Elizabeth didn't listen to what her sister was saying to her, she just stared blankly at the far wall, her mind numb and her body cold as she clung to the thought that Marlin was still alive, that he would come for her like he'd promised.

"Now, Dawn, don't go upsetting your sister further, she's been through quite the trial onboard that rotten pirate ship I'm sure, but she's safe now, back with the people who love her."

She felt her defiance boil up inside her over her father's words. She wanted to defend Marlin, to tell the world that she loved him, but her anger quickly passed and all that was left was the unending chill she'd felt since being taken away from him.

"Elizabeth?" Henry sat in the chair near his daughters and watched his eldest as she stared into the distance. She looked more than traumatised and he wondered how long it would take for her to recover from her trials.

Elizabeth turned her head to look at her father, wanting nothing more than to be alone, to push her sister away from her and tell them to go away and leave her with her thoughts, with her hopes.

She let her blank eyes fix on her father's.

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“There’s no word from the *Endeavour* as yet but we do not expect to hear from them until they are safely anchored in Liberty in a few days time.”

Elizabeth chuckled under her breath on hearing the name of the place she was returning to. What was once a place of freedom now seemed like a cage to her, a dreary torture without her love, her fearless captain.

“Charles will win, I’m sure of it. There’s no need to worry, Elizabeth.” Henry watched her as she blinked slowly. He wondered if she was even listening to him. She looked so vacant, as though she was far away from them.

Her mind filling with Marlin and *The Merciless*, Elizabeth curled up and held her knees, shunning her sister’s embrace.

“You can have a bath if you want. We made sure they had one onboard, and we brought some clothes with us so you could change.” Dawn looked down at the red silk dress her sister was wearing and frowned. She’d never seen it before and she swore that when Elizabeth was taken hostage she had been wearing a pale dress.

Elizabeth nodded and watched her father leave with her sister. She wondered if they knew she had killed two men in an attempt to stay onboard *The Merciless*. Deep down inside, she knew the man who had brought her onboard the *Pegasus* would have neglected to mention the fact that she had killed two officers and called after Marlin. The navy would have been sorely embarrassed had it become evident that their men were so easily despatched by a woman.

She chuckled dryly as she thought about it. In the face of adversity, she had beaten two men and injured a third before being captured. She was as strong as they were. She just had to let go of her inhibitions and the notion that women had to be gentle and sweet and she was as good as a man. She smiled as she realised it was Marlin who had finally given her the strength to break free of the confines of being always a gentlewoman. He’d taught her so much about the world in such a short amount of time and she loved him dearly for it.

Starting a little as her sister walked back in, she stifled her emotions and looked at her blankly. She hadn’t changed much in their time apart but she seemed so different to how she remembered her, so much more grown up and less like a little girl. Her brown hair was pulled back and her dress was plain. Elizabeth realised that it was probably her father’s idea—a way of keeping pirates uninterested in her.

Dawn sat down in the chair near her and watched her sister closely.

“Was it so bad that you can’t speak? I know you still have your tongue because you spoke in your slumber. You spoke about him and you are lucky father wasn’t here when I was nursing you. He would have thought you insane.” She raised her brows at Elizabeth and waited for her sister’s answer.

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Elizabeth sighed, not at all surprised to hear that she had spoken in her sleep.

“What did I say?”

“That he would come for you. Not in so many words but you kept saying his name over and over...Marlin.” Dawn felt satisfied when her sister blushed. She had always had a way of drawing out all of her sister’s secrets so easily. “I heard the men talking outside. The man who brought you onboard said you didn’t want to leave *The Merciless*, that you fought against them in an attempt to stay with the captain and that he fought to try to save you.”

“He loves me,” Elizabeth said quietly, her heart fluttering in her chest as she let it out into the open. She raised her eyes to meet Dawn’s. “He truly loves me...not at first of course but something changed. After all the fights we had against each other and the things he did, something changed and we fell in love.”

“You fell in love with a pirate?” Dawn looked incredulous as she realised that it was a better secret than she’d been expecting.

“I fell in love with a good man, a man who Charles wronged and I will prove that to the admiralty. If Marlin lives or dies, I will show them just what happened onboard *The Merciless* and what happened between Charles and him five years ago.” Raising her head defiantly, she watched the smile creep across her sister’s face.

“You certainly are in love. You really believe that he’ll defeat Charles?” Dawn moved to sit next to her sister.

“I believe in him, I believe him when he tells me he loves me and I believe him when he tells me he will defeat Charles and come for me. He’ll find me Dawn, I know he will.”

“From what I’ve heard about him whilst onboard this ship I have no doubt in my mind that he will find you. There is mixed talk of your Marlin. Half of the crew think him black hearted and the other half talk of him like he were saintly, the finest man they ever saw. Charles grew mad over hearing them talk so about the man he intended to kill. I think it very wicked of you to fall for a pirate but at the same time it is so romantic. I wish I could fall for a pirate...be swept away on his ship under the moonlight and marry him in some far off town.”

Elizabeth couldn’t help smiling at the wistful look in her sister’s eyes as she stared dreamily out of the window. She realised she had more in common with her sister than she ever knew.

Dawn turned and caught the wide smile on her sister’s face. She blushed slightly and looked down at her hands before raising her eyes to meet Elizabeth’s again.

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“You should rest. It will take a few days to get back to Liberty but I’m sure your captain won’t be far behind. If he’s as strong as I’ve heard he is then Charles won’t be much of a match for him. I never did like him, too broody and pompous.” Dawn smiled and stood up, watching her sister lay down on the bed.

Elizabeth gave her a small smile as her thoughts returned to Marlin and Charles. She knew her sister was trying to make her feel better by telling her he would win through and it did improve her spirits to some degree but doubt was starting to settle in the back of her mind.

Wanting to be alone with her thoughts, she nodded quietly and curled up into a foetal position on the bed, holding her knees as she let her tears slip silently onto the sheets. She stared at the window as she listened to Dawn leave, wishing herself far away from the *Pegasus* and back to *The Merciless*, and taking small comfort in remembering that Marlin had once been an officer onboard this ship.

As the day drew on, she continued to stare out the window, watching the change in light and weather as she lay on the bed with eyes wet with tears and a heavy heart. Elizabeth heaved a sigh, trying to breathe life into herself and get rid of the feeling inside her. The world seemed strangely hollow and it gave her a feeling like she didn’t exist. Closing her eyes to sleep, she realised that without Marlin life wasn’t worth living.

~

Elizabeth stood motionless, her eyes fixed on the distant blue horizon as she stared out of the window of her cabin. Her right arm was wrapped tight around her waist, holding herself in the way that he couldn’t, trying to emulate the feeling of safety his embrace had given her. Her left fingers played with the cross that hung around her neck, the tips of them running over the patterns that were etched into the silver.

She sighed.

It had to be over by now. It had been two days since she had been snatched from the arms of the man she loved, two long days full of anxious thoughts and trying to pretend to be like she used to be. Fooling her father was becoming increasingly hard as time drew on. Her heart grew heavier and she swore he would be able to see it all in her eyes like her captain would have.

Closing her eyes, she let her head drop forwards slightly as she thought about Marlin. The battle would be over and one of them would be coming for her. Her heart ached as she hoped it would be Marlin and feared it would be Charles.

“You didn’t change.” A quiet voice stole into her thoughts and she knit her brows tightly.

“He bought me this...I couldn’t...didn’t want to...” Elizabeth said.

After her bath, she had tried to change into one of the dresses that Dawn had brought from home but she found she couldn't do it. Part of her felt that to change out of the red silk dress that Marlin had given to her was to let him go, to give up hope that he would come for her. She wanted to look exactly as he'd remembered her, exactly as she had left him so it was as if their parting had never happened.

Dawn tried to smile. Over the past few days, she had seen her sister sink further into herself, drawing in all her emotions and leaving behind a hardened shell of the girl she used to be. Stepping over to her, she brushed her fingers down her sister's long golden hair, smoothing out the tangles and sighing as she did so.

"He'll come. If you love him, never give up on him." Letting her hand rest on Elizabeth's shoulder, she smiled warmly as her sister returned her gaze to the window for a moment and then moved to sit on the bed.

Elizabeth sighed as she sat down, her heart feeling like a lead weight in her chest and her anxiety pressing down on it further. She felt as though her memories of him were fading after only a few days, that she was giving up when she should have been fighting.

"I feel so useless." She let her eyes peruse the pattern of the worn wooden flooring as her feelings of despair and longing pushed their way to the surface. "There's nothing I can do, Dawn. I can't make them turn the ship around. I can't save him...couldn't do anything to protect him..."

Dawn sat down next to her and took hold of her hands, wrapping them up tightly in her own and giving them an affectionate squeeze.

"You did everything you could have done..."

"No!" Elizabeth frowned as she raised her eyes to meet her sister's. "I should've been out there with him, fighting along side him. I shouldn't have let them take me. I should've used my head and found a way to get rid of them in the same way I got rid of the other two..."

Dawn dropped her sister's hands. "What are you saying, Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth stared at her hands. They felt suddenly cold and alone, her sister's warming touch snatched away by what she'd said. She didn't need to look up to know how her sister would look, shocked and scared by the thoughts that were running through her head.

"I killed them." Elizabeth said flatly. "I did what I had to do and I'd do it all again if it meant saving him."

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

“Elizabeth!” Dawn let her eyes widen and hurriedly looked back at the door to make sure it was closed. Her tone dropped to a curious whisper. “You killed them?”

“I did what I had to do.” She repeated. “I wasn’t going to let them take me away from him...he needed me...I need him.”

Dawn watched a single tear run over her sister’s pale cheek. Her eyes were downcast but she could see more tears forming there, memories of what had passed onboard *The Merciless* clearly breaking her heart.

“What happened?” She reached out and took hold of her sister’s hands again, trying to show that she wasn’t angry with her, that in a small way she understood why she had done such a thing. Speaking softly, she hoped to encourage her sister to open up to her, to tell her everything and by doing so help her re-ignite the hope that her love would come for her. “Tell me what happened.”

Elizabeth shifted into a more comfortable position on the bed and sat facing her sister. She glanced at the window again and then met her little sister’s eyes.

“It wasn’t smooth sailing, Dawn. He didn’t whisk me off my feet like they do in the stories girls tell. He tried to drown me, forced me to endure hours of hot sunshine with the bitter taste of his own blood in my mouth.” She swallowed down the lingering feelings of anger her words brought to the surface and kept her eyes fixed on Dawn’s, not letting her shocked look break her flow. “But something changed. I gave as good as I got. He awoke something in me, a spark, defiance and I didn’t look back. He showed me I could be as good as any man, as strong as anyone else in this world and he made me stronger still. He gave me so much more than anyone ever has. He showed me what it was like to be truly free and how it felt to be truly loved. I’m ruined to all but him.”

Dawn tilted her head to one side as tried to absorb her sister’s words.

“Something changed the night he took me into Beggars Haven. He protected me so fiercely. I could see in his eyes things were altering, our path was shifting. Not destined to be each other’s enemies but fated to be each other’s world, each other’s strength and saviour, each other’s love.” Elizabeth dropped her eyes to rest on her small hands where her sister held them tightly, her red dress framing how delicate they were and making it seem like they were resting in a pool of blood. She had blood on her hands. “I couldn’t let them steal me away from him. Destiny placed me there, fate made me his for a reason and I love him with all my heart. I had to do what was necessary to stay with him. I killed two officers, injured a third. I was stupid. I should have fought harder to protect myself, so I could stay with him.”

“But Elizabeth...you did more than any other girl imaginable. I don’t think I could’ve done that, not even for the man I loved. He treated you so roughly, why?”

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"The same reason I treated him so badly. Neither of us were willing to accept the feelings we were experiencing. We both fell so fast, so deep...but once he saw I felt the same way about him, once I stopped fighting against him, it all became so peaceful between us...I love him, Dawn."

Elizabeth leapt into a standing position as the door flew open, making a loud bang as it hit against the wooden wall of the cabin. She felt her heart rocketing in her chest and her breathing quickened as she saw her father standing in the doorway, his time-worn face knotted into a frown and a disdainful look in his eyes as he fixed them on hers.

Dawn stood slowly, looking from her father to her sister and back again. She made to move towards Elizabeth but stopped with a jolt when their father spoke.

"Dawn! Get to your room. You're to stay there until I say you can leave. Understood?" He cast an angry look at her and she nodded in acceptance before moving past him and out of the door.

On the step, Dawn turned and looked back at her sister, seeing the coldness return to her eyes and the barriers come back up again. Silently she hoped she was as strong as she believed she was.

Elizabeth stood firm, her heartbeat now back to normal and nothing but defiance fuelling her. She knew what he was going to say to her, the spiteful words that were going to issue from his lips. It was clear that he had overheard their conversation about Marlin.

Closing the door on them, Henry turned with a cold look and saw for the first time just how changed his daughter was. It wasn't that she'd been treated so badly that she was going to take time to recover, he saw now that she had been brought to life, that the spirit within her that had been dulled by years of confinement on the small island of Liberty had been awoken by her adventure on the seas. It had been awoken in the embrace of a pirate.

He ground his teeth and narrowed his eyes on her, noting how she raised her head in a show of defiance as he did so.

"Harlot!" he spat out and she didn't even flinch.

Elizabeth flared her nostrils as she tried to let the word bounce off her. She wasn't a harlot, they were in love and they were going to be together. She remained silent and just stared at him, waiting for his next words.

"Dirty, filthy little harlot." Henry took a step towards her and saw her whole body go rigid as though she was waiting for him to fly at her, for him to become violent. Somehow, this one movement by her made him realise that she'd been expecting this. She had just been passing the time and waiting for him to find out the truth. Knowing that she had been intending to let the world know about her and the pirate only served to

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heighten his anger. "Where is your sense of propriety? Didn't you learn anything from all those fancy books you read, always lost in your own little world and ignoring the wants of others, learning when you should have been looking to secure your future and provide means to your family?"

"Means?" Elizabeth narrowed her eyes and stood a little straighter as she felt like her blood was starting to rise in temperature. "By that, I presume, you mean I should have married some wealthy man of good standing in society and been a quiet woman. Keep my mouth shut and act dumb, pleasing the world with false airs and graces. I would *never* have done that. Couldn't you see that when you were raising me? No...because I raised *myself*."

"Don't you dare blame this on me." Henry took another step towards her and noticed that this time she didn't move to brace herself. She stood quietly confident and waiting for his next move. "You always were stubborn, too self-involved to see how you were neglecting the needs of others..."

"By others I believe you mean Charles? Was I to forget love then? Marry because it was the right thing to do? Because he was a naval captain? Maybe even one day he would have been an admiral. You would have loved that wouldn't you? It wouldn't have bothered you that I would have been unhappy, leading a caged life with a man I couldn't respect, all for the sake of you being able to tell the world how your daughter was married to an admiral."

Henry swallowed hard, taken aback by the fiery way his daughter had spoken to him, showing him no measure of respect.

"And this pirate of yours..."

"I respect him. He's an honest man, a man who didn't choose to lead the life he was given, a man who was double-crossed by Charles. Nothing you can say or do would move me to alter my feelings towards him. I love him. I know he loves me." She felt her heart picking up pace again as she took a step towards her father, looking him square in the eye as she did so.

"Then you're more of a simpleton than I thought. Clearly those books you kept stealing from my library did teach you nothing." Henry felt his own anger starting to rise. A bitter taste lingered in his mouth as he thought about what his daughter had done and how she had defied him. "How far did you go? No, don't answer that. I can see in your eyes and the way you're acting that he's weaselled himself into more than your heart. You're nothing to me now. You're a cheap whore for a cad of a pirate, but he doesn't get the last word in this, miss."

"Neither do you," Elizabeth spat at him and knit her brows tight.

"Think of what you're doing to your reputation, to your family, how would your mother..."

"Don't you dare!" She stepped up to him and gave him a look full of hatred. "My mother would have wanted me to marry for love."

"Marry? Are you married then?" Henry looked down at her and saw her defiance of him falter for a second. "You're not married. He took you hostage, forced you into dreadful acts, made you do those things...he didn't want a girl to love, to be his wife. He just wanted what he couldn't have and you gave it up to him, letting him touch you, mar you."

Grabbing a fistful of her hair, he pushed her roughly to the table and forced her to look at her reflection in the mirror.

"Look at yourself. Dressed like a harlot, tainted like one. They'll all know. They'll all find out and not one of them will ever speak to you again."

"I don't care." She ground out and watched her father in the mirror as he frowned. She flinched as he tugged on her hair.

"You're nothing to me. You're not my daughter...you belong in hell with the rest of the sinners."

She breathed out sharply as he flung her against the table and let go of her. Taking a moment to even out her breathing and her feelings, she closed her eyes and tried to ignore the way his words cut into her.

"He's poisoned you, used you up and left you a shell of the beautiful girl you used to be. You really believe he'll come for you when all this is over? Even if he's alive, he won't come to rescue you like a knight in shining armour you silly girl. He's got what he wanted. He's taken everything from you that he needs. He doesn't love you."

Elizabeth shot her head up and turned sharply, frowning hard as she glared at her father.

"You're wrong," she said in a low, dangerous tone that signalled he'd chosen the worst thing to say. "He loves me, he needs me. I know he does."

"How?" Henry chuckled. "Did he tell you? Weave a little storybook of lies so you would sleep with him? If this is what education brings then you were better off without one."

"No..." She shook her head and tried to clear the words that lingered there, convincing herself that what she believed was true.

"He treated you badly. I heard you telling Dawn...forced you to do things...tried to kill you. You truly believe a man like that could ever love you?"

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“Yes. I saw him. I was there. You know nothing.” She smoothed her dress down and then raised her eyes to meet her father’s again. Her tone was soft but laced with confidence. “He’s a good man. I have proof of that. He’s worthy of my affections, of my heart.”

“Worthy.” Henry snorted in contempt of the word she had chosen. Quickly stepping towards her, he caught her arm and held it tightly. “You fool. He wasn’t sincere, he was telling you a pack of lies to get his own way. When everyone back home hears about this our reputation will be ruined.”

She struggled against him and desperately tried to push him away. His fingers were gripping her arm so tightly that she could almost feel herself bruising.

“That’s all you care about isn’t it, *your* reputation. You don’t care about me. You don’t care about my happiness. I really mean nothing to you.”

“Listen to me.” Henry dropped his tone to a deadly whisper. “You will return to Liberty with this ship and until we make anchor you will stay in these quarters. No one will speak to you and you will speak to no one. Once back in Liberty you will marry your rescuer, Charles, and there will be no more talk or thoughts of this pirate, or any other. You will forget him and you will do as you are told. If I hear one word of this, this Captain Marlin, then so help me God I will see to it you never talk again.”

Throwing her arm roughly aside, he turned and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Elizabeth listened to the metal key grating in the lock and then stared down at her arm. It was throbbing madly and she could see a deep red imprint of her father’s hand on her skin.

“I’ll marry my rescuer like you want me to. He loves me and I love him. This feeling, this connection between us isn’t a lie.”

Taking a weary step towards the window, she looked out at the clear horizon.

“He will come for me.”

Chapter 17

The night was still and the only sound was the gentle lapping of water against the hull of the ship. Elizabeth could hear it through the open window. With nothing else to do, she had resigned herself to looking out at the darkness and the stars, only to have that small joy stolen from her too.

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The mist swathed the scenery in a matter of seconds, a thick white expanse that blanked out everything in its path until the only thing left for her to concentrate on were the eerie noises in the darkness. She mused that they wouldn't have seemed so eerie if it hadn't been for the fog. Or if Marlin had been with her.

Closing her eyes, she sighed out her breath and let her imagination run away with her as she remembered the time she'd spent by the window of his cabin listening to the ocean swell breaking against the hull of his ship. It had sounded different to the sound now filling her ears, more peaceful and less menacing.

~

Henry pulled his long red jacket tighter around him as he slowly walked along the deck. He cast a look over at the man walking alongside him and smiled.

Admiral Forrest had volunteered his services the moment it had become apparent that the eldest Miller girl was missing, presumed kidnapped by pirates. He wasn't a young man anymore. His advancing years had turned his hair so grey that he no longer needed to wear a wig with his uniform. He smiled back at Governor Miller as he puffed on his pipe.

"And how is your daughter?" His smile widened as he thought about her and the tales he'd heard of her since she came onboard. Deep inside a part of him hoped they were true.

"Doing as well as can be expected and looking forward to being home with her family, and Charles." Henry smiled and ignored the way his words made his stomach squirm, the taste of his lies bitter on his tongue.

He cast a glance around the ship and felt a chill run up his spine. There was something unearthly about the way the fog had descended and the way it clung to the ship as though it was holding it fast. He listened to the gentle noise of the ocean. No waves were present and it only made the feeling he'd had all night worsen.

"There's something ominous about this weather. It clings too tightly. Surely the men can't see to sail and there is no breeze to speak of."

The admiral looked up at the sails. From what he could see of them, they were barely moving. The sound of creaking made him look at Henry before they continued walking.

"Strange that a ship should creak so much when she's hardly making distance," Henry commented and watched the admiral raise both his brows.

"I've seen and heard stranger things." He smiled and patted his friend on the back as they walked.

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The Merciless

A stiff breeze caused the canvas of the sails to flap and the fog to lift slightly. Henry shuddered and frowned.

“The atmosphere is too quiet. There is a scent in the air like misfortune.”

A creak of ropes caused them both to look at each other and they froze as a loud thump came from behind them. The unmistakable sound of boots hitting deck caused their blood to run cold.

Turning slowly, their eyes widened as they saw him. Straightening up with a pistol held firmly in each hand was the pirate they had left for dead.

Marlin grinned wickedly.

“Personally, I always thought it smelt more like blood.” He let his grin grow wider and cocked his pistols. “Really shouldn’t travel in such weather. It’s dangerous you know. I hear there are pirates on these waters.”

He watched them both go to reach for their side arms and shook his head. Their hands froze mere centimetres from their weapons as *The Merciless* emerged from the fog-enveloped darkness.

Marlin smiled wide and sniffed.

“Running light?” he chuckled quietly as the captain of the ship skidded to a halt and he turned one of his guns on him. “Honestly believed you’d outrun her? I know this ship, mate, could see the tide line on her hull telling me you were low on either crew or cannons. Nothing else could raise you that much out of the water.”

Captain Adams looked up as *The Merciless* came up close enough to broadside his ship. He moved his eyes back to meet Marlin’s and cocked his gun.

“Not a wise move.” Marlin smiled as he heard the clicks of guns being cocked behind him. He watched the three men in front of him raise their eyes up and their faces blanched as they saw half of his crew with their guns trained on them.

~

Excited shouts alerted Elizabeth to something happening. She could hear men scrambling about in the narrow hallway outside her room, the sound of their boots pounding the floorboards coming clearly through her door.

Racing over to the door, she pressed her ear against it and desperately tried to hear what was going on. She caught snippets of muffled conversations and from what she could tell, something was occurring up on deck. Unable to glean any clear information, she gathered her skirt up and dashed over to the window.

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Flinging it open, she gasped as there was a loud creak and a ship blotted her view. Her heart thudded hard against her chest as she smiled in recognition of the ship that was moving closer to the *Pegasus*, jostling her as she butted up against her. Her smile grew wide on her lips.

The Merciless.

He had come for her.

He was alive.

~

Admiral Forrest swallowed noisily as he looked up to see twenty men with guns pointed at him. He watched as more crewmen threw hooks over onto the *Pegasus* and secured the two ships so they couldn't break apart from each other.

He could hear the crew of the *Pegasus* lining up behind him, crowding him as they formed a rough semi circle around the pirate captain who was standing proudly on deck in front of him.

Marlin moved his eyes briefly to meet the admiral's and gave him a look that made it clear that he recognised him. Admiral Forrest felt as though there was a lead weight in his stomach as he looked into his eyes, seeing the man he used to know locked deep inside them.

"You have something of mine," Marlin said slowly, watching the man beside admiral Forrest frown. He quickly realised that he was dressed well, a little too well to be anything other than Elizabeth's father. "If you hand her over it will all go smoothly."

The Governor took a step towards Marlin and breathed out through his nose as their eyes met. "You won't be going anywhere near my daughter. She is to marry Charles."

Marlin flung his head back and laughed hard at him. His crew followed suit and when he finally opened his eyes again, he saw the man in front of him had altered harshly. His expression of anger was now gone, replaced by one of disbelief.

"That'll be a little difficult. Last I heard you couldn't marry a corpse."

He listened to his crew laughing as he spoke and grinned wide at the two men in front of him before shifting his eyes to rest on the captain of the *Pegasus*. His eyes were wide with fear.

Moving his attention back to Elizabeth's father, he cleared his throat and then smiled.

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The Merciless

“Here’s how it’s going to work, mate...”

~

Elizabeth frantically tried to break free of the cabin that now seemed like a cage. She braced her foot against the doorframe as she tugged on the handle, willing it with everything she had to open and let her get to Marlin before it was too late.

Casting a glance around the room, she searched desperately for something she could use to pry the door open. There was nothing.

Gripping the handle tighter, she pulled hard and pushed her foot against the wall as she did so. As the door flew open of its own accord, she stumbled backwards into the dresser and looked up. She smiled as she saw her sister stood in the doorway.

“They’re on deck. I heard them, saw them. Charles is dead and Marlin has come for you.” She breathed the words quickly, smiling at her sister all the while.

Elizabeth ran forwards and hugged her sister briefly before gathering her skirts up and dashing up the steps to the deck.

Moving swiftly towards the group of men, she took a deep breath and started to push her way through the officers and the crew. She made a low growling noise of frustration as one of the officers grabbed her arm and held her back.

Struggling to get free from his grasp, she stomped hard on his foot and then punched him square on the jaw. As he reeled from her blow, she grabbed hold of the gun on his belt and tugged it free. Taking another deep breath to steady her heartbeat, she turned around and looked at the wall of men in front of her, their backs all facing her. This was her chance, her moment, this time she could defend him.

~

Marlin watched with increasing curiosity as the rows of men jostled and parted before regrouping.

“Let me through...you touch him I swear to God I’ll kill you all...”

He smiled as he heard her voice, his heart racing with anticipation as the last of the men parted. As she was revealed to him, he saw the gun in her hand and his smile widened into a grin. That was his girl.

Elizabeth turned her back on Marlin as she left the boundary of the men and entered the semi circle. Backing slowly towards him, she kept her gun moving along the rows of men before settling it on her father.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

“One move, I swear I’ll kill someone. I’ve done it before.”

She watched her father’s face blanch, his look turning sick as he realised what she was saying.

As she bumped into Marlin, she turned and flung her arms around his neck, her lips instantly meeting his. She kissed him passionately as he held her, the cold metal of his guns pressing against her skin and she knew he’d be watching the admiral and her father even as he kissed her. His desire to protect her was as strong as her desire to protect him.

Pulling away from him, she smiled wide when he smiled down at her.

“I knew you’d come.”

Marlin let his smile widen until it couldn’t go any further. “Just like I promised you, sweet Elizabeth.”

Dipping his head, he closed his eyes as he briefly kissed her and as she pulled away, he frowned.

Turning around to face the admiral, she looked him straight in the eye, keeping her gun fixed on him as she felt Marlin’s arm snake around her waist and hold her to him. She smiled inside over how possessive he was, not wanting to let go of her now that he’d found her again.

“You know in your heart that James is a good man, even though your eyes try to deceive you. You know he didn’t take *The Merciless*, but I have to prove it to you anyway.” Turning away from him, she looked up and smiled on seeing Alexander alive and well. “In the trunk, in the captain’s quarters, is the ship’s log. Please retrieve it for me.”

She smiled nervously at Marlin as he searched her eyes in the long silence that ensued.

He wasn’t sure what she was expecting to gain by showing the captain’s log to the admiral but he knew better than to question her. He could see that she knew what she was doing.

As the book was handed down to her, she walked over to the admiral and passed it to him, flicking it open to the entries that she had read and pointing to the one that he should start on.

“I know it doesn’t acquit him of everything he’s done, but surely it counts for something? The men were only doing what needed to be done. Justice is blind, admiral Forrest, lead her to the right decision.”

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

The old man smiled as he heard her words, the heartfelt plea behind them clear as anything as he lowered his eyes to read the entries in the log.

Heaving a long sigh as he finished reading, he raised his eyes to meet hers and then Marlin's.

"Where is your next port of call?" Admiral Forrest watched Marlin step forward as he addressed him. It reminded him of when he'd last seen him all those years ago—a young officer with great potential.

"Freeport," Marlin answered bluntly and caught the frown on Elizabeth's face. He smiled down at her and pushed a strand of hair from her face. "I'll tell you later."

"I'll hold you to that." She looped her arm through Marlin's and gripped her gun tighter.

"I presume the *Endeavour* is safe?" Admiral Forrest raised his brows into a questioning look.

Marlin nodded. "Left in the capable hands of an old friend."

"In light of the information presented to me, I wish to know if the navy has secured another privateer?"

Marlin smiled down at Elizabeth as she wrinkled her nose up in confusion. "Licensed pirate of sorts. No more navy ships, well, least no more British navy ships. If war starts, we get to play, until then we just pretend to be good."

She smiled and shook her head at the gleeful look that had entered his eyes as he thought about being able to fight alongside the navy.

"Yes," she answered the admiral and he smiled.

"Already making decisions for you, James." Admiral Forrest smiled at him and he smiled in return.

Coming to his senses, Henry realised that his daughter was about to leave with the pirate next to her. She was going to expose his reputation to ridicule by openly running away with a pirate in front of an entire naval crew.

Lunging forwards, he moved to grab her arm and pull her away from the pirate but found the muzzle of a gun pressed into this forehead. Raising his eyes, he felt sickened as he met his daughter's eyes. They were hard and cold as she pressed the pistol against his head.

"Time we were leaving." Marlin caught her hand and pointed his gun at her father as he moved with her towards his ship.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

Elizabeth caught hold of Alexander's hand as he leant over the edge of the ship and gripped it tightly as he pulled her up onto the deck. Stepping over the edge, she took his gun off him and pointed it at her father as Marlin made his way up onto deck.

Looking back at her sister where she stood on deck amongst the officers, her face full of sorrow, Elizabeth realised that she couldn't leave her there. Reaching her hand out over the balustrade, she beckoned her sister.

"Dawn...I won't leave you here." She ignored the look of disbelief that Marlin gave her. She knew he would have something to say about another woman being onboard his ship, but he wouldn't argue with her in front of his crew and the crew of the *Pegasus*.

Dawn hesitated for a moment before gathering up her skirt and dashing across the deck to her sister. Her foot was on the balustrade of the *Pegasus* before anyone could stop her and she grinned as she found her sister's hand tightly gripping her arm.

Marlin leant over as Elizabeth began to struggle and took hold of her sister's other arm, hauling her easily onto *The Merciless*. Looking at the two of them as they embraced each other, he decided it was better they take her sister now than have to go back for her.

Elizabeth smiled at her sister and then smiled at Marlin as he wrapped his arms tightly around her, showing her that he wasn't going to say a word against her sister being onboard after all.

"Hoist the main, set the top sail, let's get the bloody hell out of here," he hollered at the rest of his crew and watched Alexander as he cut the ropes that were holding *The Merciless* against the *Pegasus*.

Turning with Elizabeth in his arms, he led her safely towards the cabin as *The Merciless* turned away from the *Pegasus*. He smiled as he pressed a kiss against her hair and listened to the frustrated shouts of her father fading into the distance.

"Open fire, damn it!" Henry growled as he watched *The Merciless* slowly drifting away from them.

Admiral Forrest looked down at the logbook in his arms and smiled before raising proud eyes to rest on *The Merciless*. "We don't fire on one of our own."

Elizabeth walked up to the quarterdeck, watching the silhouette of the *Pegasus* slowly disappearing into the distance. The fog had lifted and the sky was clear above her. She frowned as she watched her old life drifting away. She wouldn't miss her father or Liberty. She had everything she needed with her.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

Heaving a long sigh, she leant with her elbows against the wooden railing and let her heart say goodbye to her past.

“So I was wondering...”

Elizabeth raised her head slightly and opened her eyes as the voice appeared from behind her, its dulcet tones ringing in her ears as her heart raced and warmed.

“...what a beautiful, passionate girl like yourself thought about being kidnapped, taken to Freeport and forced to marry a scoundrel?”

She stared blankly at the vast ocean in front of her, the moon illuminating every tiny crest of white as *The Merciless* continued to head towards their destination. Her body ached inside as she mulled over his words. Each time she ran them through her head they came out the same—he wanted to marry her. She almost smiled.

“A scoundrel?” she asked quietly, her body trembling as she breathed in shakily, playing along with his charade.

“A captain, no less.” Marlin stepped up beside her and tilted his head to one side as he looked at her profile, watching the tears drying on her cheeks as the wind blew against her.

“It depends on the captain,” she replied solemnly as she moved her eyes to rest on her hands.

“I’m thinking me.” He narrowed his eyes on her.

She turned and threw herself into his arms, savouring the feeling of them as they wrapped possessively around her waist. His cheek came to rest against hers as she nuzzled into his neck. She listened to him as he took a deep breath and she did the same, taking comfort from his scent.

“I thought you were gone. I heard Charles on the ship...it’s been an eternity since that day.” She held him tightly as he lifted her up in his arms as though she were light as a feather. As he raised her up, she finally looked down at his face and let her eyes trace the contours of it before settling on his eyes.

Marlin smiled as his eyes met hers. He could see the tears threatening to spill over in them.

“It’s barely been a few days, sweetheart. It took a while to catch up with that old barge.” He lowered her to the ground and winced slightly. “The weather was kind, think she knew I was in a hurry.”

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

"Hurry?" Elizabeth looked innocent as she watched him closely, waiting to see if he would wince again or show any sign of being hurt.

"Had to rescue the girl I love." His voice was gruff and tender as he stepped towards her, closing the tiny gap between them.

As the moonlight filtered down onto him, Elizabeth could see the array of small cuts that littered his arms. Her eyes came to settle on his left arm where a bandage was wrapped tight around it. Reaching her hand out slowly, she brushed her fingers over it.

"You're hurt..." She raised her eyes up to his and searched them. "And Charles?"

"Let's just say I laid my past to rest in a watery grave and not speak of him any more."

"This girl you had to see, the girl you love, does she love you, too?" Elizabeth watched him smile wide as she tilted her head back.

Marlin ran his hand down her hair, clearing it from her face and watching her half close her eyes as his fingers brushed against her cheek.

"Let's find out." He dipped his head and pressed his mouth against hers, capturing her lips as she responded by wrapping her arms around his neck.

Elizabeth kissed him deeply, letting her tongue play against his and holding him gently to her in case he had other injuries that she couldn't see. Her heart swelling with emotions, she broke the kiss and fought to catch her breath as desire welled up inside her.

"I love you." She smiled into his eyes and watched him smile in response.

"Love you too, beautiful." He slipped his hand into hers and took a step backwards, his eyes dropping to her dress as he lifted a brow.

"I couldn't...I didn't want to let go. I had to keep it...I couldn't take it off...I love wearing it...it's the most beautiful dress I own."

He grinned as he was warmed inside by her words. The thought that he'd given her something she saw as beautiful touched him.

"I love you in it. You make it beautiful."

A small coughing noise caused them both to look up. Elizabeth smiled as she saw Alexander standing nearby, her sister stood next to him.

"Good to see you again, miss."

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

“Elizabeth...if we’re going to be sharing a ship, I think you should probably call me Elizabeth.” She smiled.

“He gets to call you Elizabeth anyway. He’s just not used to it yet.” Marlin looked over at Alexander and watched the awkward smile settle on his face.

“Not used to what?” She frowned at Marlin and then looked at Alexander for the answer.

“We...um...lost the first mate and the pilot in the battle. Guess the captain, I mean Marlin, thought I did a good job...although I failed...I’m the first mate now.”

Marlin clapped him on the shoulder and grinned. “Turned out Alexander here is a good pilot and the crew seem to like him, so we gave him a promotion. Once Clancy and *The Fearless* showed up to finish off the *Endeavour*, Alexander managed to get us clear of danger and set the course to Liberty while I escorted a certain captain off my ship. Alexander will be first mate and pilot until we find ourselves another crewman to steer the ship.”

“Congratulations, Alexander. You’ll make a fine first mate. I’m not sure what you’ll be doing except steering the ship but I’m sure there are probably other things involved.” Elizabeth looked embarrassed and Marlin squeezed her hand reassuringly.

“Not to fret, got all the time in the world to teach you about life on a ship.” He slipped his hand free from hers and moved his arm to rest around her shoulders.

“Good to have you home.” Alexander gave her a wide smile and then looked at Marlin. “Because he’s a nightmare without you.”

Marlin arched a brow and Elizabeth giggled as Alexander backed away and whistled as he caught hold of the ship’s wheel.

“Hoist anchor, get those sails open, we’re going to need all the speed we can muster if we want to make good time,” Alexander hollered at the crew and then turned to find a brown haired girl frowning at him.

“Where’re we going?” Dawn asked, curiosity evident in her wide eyes.

Marlin held tightly onto Elizabeth’s hand as he smiled at the look on Alexander’s face. “You can tell her. She’s part of the crew now.”

“I am?” Dawn smiled wide.

“What do you reckon, my love? Scullery maid? Or cook’s assistant?” Marlin grinned at Elizabeth and she slapped his chest playfully as Dawn looked mortified.

Felicity Heaton
The Merciless

"He's joking," Elizabeth assured her as she broke free of Marlin's grasp and put her arm around her sister's shoulder, leading her toward the back of the boat.

Leaning against the balustrade, she watched Dawn's profile as she in turn watched the *Pegasus* and her old life disappearing into the distance.

"So where are we going?" Dawn asked without taking her eyes off the horizon. She felt oddly free.

"Freeport," Marlin answered her question as he leaned against the railing next to Elizabeth and put his arm around her waist. "And after that, somewhere we'll all be safe for a while. Maybe Dominica."

"Will there be lots of other pirates...and will we be able to board their ships...and will they have more guns than us but we'll win anyway, and we'll take their treasure...and ...loot...and their...um...parrots?" Dawn rambled on as she grinned at her sister and Marlin.

Marlin just looked at Dawn and then down at Elizabeth. He smiled as he saw the happiness in her eyes and her smile, and then turned back to her sister, humouring her.

"There'll be more ships to the square mile than you've ever seen, all black sailed and black hearted, ruthless pirates that will fall to their knees in front of the fearless Dawn." He grinned at the same time she did and realised that with her onboard there was never going to be a dull day.

Turning around, Elizabeth looked out at the dark sea behind them.

She felt warm inside as she smiled wide, her eyes twinkling as she heard the water lapping against the hull. Taking a deep breath, she felt his arms snake around her waist and turned in his embrace, letting her own arms come to rest around his neck as her fingers wound their way into his hair.

Marlin smiled down at her and held her flush against him. She was all his now. Not forced to be on his ship and not his captive any longer, she had willingly come back to him; she loved him. His heart beating hard against his chest, he felt weak inside at the smile she was giving him.

"So, Freeport?" she asked, smiling as she heard her sister rambling at Alexander.

"Freeport." He smiled at her, waiting to see what she was going to ask him.

"It's not like Beggars Haven is it?" she said quickly as she wrinkled her nose up, not liking the idea of getting married surrounded by pirates, harlots and dirt.

Felicity Heaton

The Merciless

“Not at all. It’s more like Liberty. Small town, nice people. They know me there. There’s a church on a spit of land, views of the ocean all around, purest white sands stretching as far as the eye can see.”

“Sounds nice.” She tiptoed and pressed a kiss against his cheek. “Thank you for letting me bring Dawn.”

“Already have one woman onboard, don’t think another will cause any more problems.” Marlin dipped his head and trailed kisses down her throat, smiling inside as she sighed out her breath and leant her head back to grant him better access to her.

“How far until Freeport?” she breathed the words out in a whisper as she stared at the blanket of stars that stretched across the heavens above her.

“Few days...” Marlin kissed down her chest and then grinned as she caught hold of his hand and began tugging him towards the stairs. “What about your sister?”

“She’ll be fine where she is. Alexander will take care of her, you just worry about taking care of me.” Elizabeth started down the steps to the cabin and smiled at Alexander.

Marlin decided it was best not to argue and followed her in silence as she led him through the cabin and into the bedroom. Kicking the door shut, he sent a silent prayer up that the sailing would be smooth and with little wind to hurry their progress so he could spend as long as he wanted getting reacquainted with his love.

A new horizon seemed to lie before him.

The past seemed to lie behind, resting in a watery grave.

But the past can never be laid to rest.

It always comes back to haunt you.

The End

Felicity Heaton is a great believer in love at first sight and the romantic ideal. Having grown up reading extensively, she developed a deep love of classical literature, ranking Jane Eyre, North & South, and Persuasion amongst her all time favourite reads. The most romantic moment of her life was when her husband got down on bended knee on the steps of Sacré Coeur, Paris, at night in front of several hundred spectators and proposed. She was too drunk on love, and subsequently champagne, to care about the audience. All she could see was the man that she loved. A writer of emotion and life, she always strives to touch a chord of familiarity in her readers and give them characters they can love and a read to remember.

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Other works by Felicity Heaton:

The Merciless

Young and innocent, Lily Walker finds herself suddenly confronted by the harsh reality of life. She travels to New York City to be with the man who supposedly loved her, only to find him in the arms of another woman. Cold, desolate and penniless, Lilly runs out into the freezing January rain. Suddenly, the echo of a gunshot reminds her just how dangerous the city is at night. In the space of a moment, in the blink of an eye, she finds herself face to face with Cain.

Cain is a hit man who lost his innocence long ago. Hardened by circumstance and life, he finds himself unexpectedly drawn to Lily. When he offers her a place to stay under the pretence of discovering whether she saw anything, it awakens a desire to protect her from the world he was pulled into, and he finds that he wants to give her a chance at a better life, one he never had. Can a man change his destiny? Will Cain be able to save her, or will his feelings for her draw her into his world...and into danger?

Coming soon by Felicity Heaton:

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If you enjoyed The Merciless, you'll love it's sequel!

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