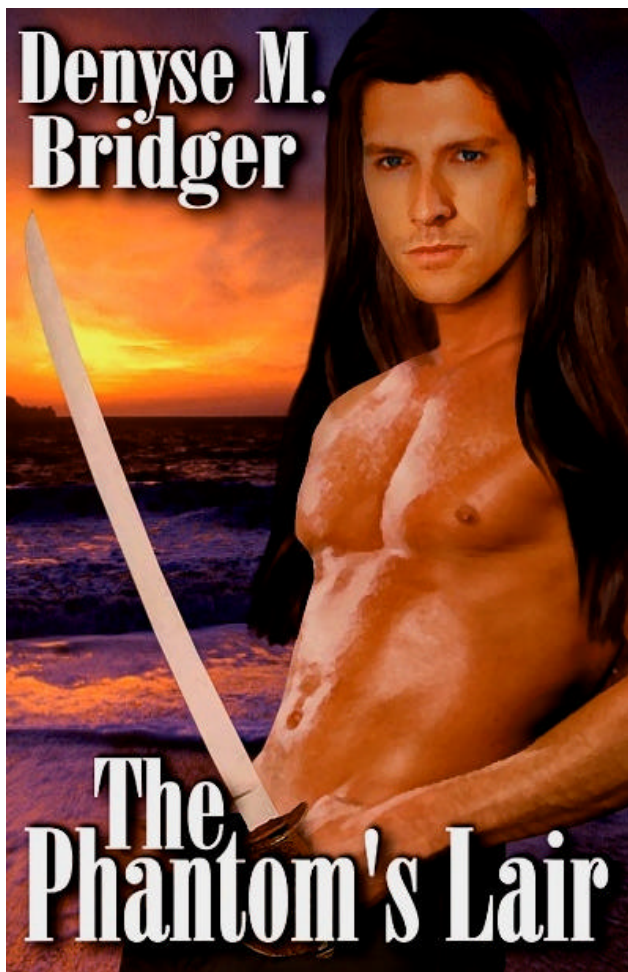


**Denyse M.  
Bridger**



**The  
Phantom's Lair**

## THE PHANTOM'S LAIR

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# THE PHANTOM'S LAIR

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BY

DENYSE M. BRIDGER

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THE PHANTOM'S LAIR  
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“Jack, ye can’t be seriously thinkin’ about goin’ back to Tortuga, lad?” Geraint O’Hara asked, his gaze searching the inscrutable mask that was Jack Stanton’s face. The captain’s pale, silver eyes glittered with humor and O’Hara knew the answer before Jack chose to reply.

“We’re rather in need of a full crew.” Stanton smiled, his dark hair whipping about his head. The intricately engraved gold beads that hung from the leather thong holding most of the lengthy mane of hair tinkled in the brisk wind. “And considerable repairs,” he added, gazing upward.

The tattered black sails had been replaced by the remaining crew, but there hadn’t been time to repair the damages that had been inflicted on Stanton’s reclaimed ship. He’d almost lost the vessel forever to a mutinous mate, and the crew who’d followed Marcos had very nearly killed Jack during the battle that had ensued when he did finally catch up to them again. Getting the ship back had cost Jack’s hastily gathered

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motley band of pirates a number of good men. He'd made it known that he fully intended to reward those who remained with a sizable portion of the plunder they'd retrieved from the *Carte Blanche*, the second of the ships in Marcos's fleet of two.

"What if your old friend Commodore Barkley is waiting for us?" O'Hara questioned, still concerned about the lack of wisdom in Jack's planned course.

"He won't be, mate," Jack said with a grin. "The commodore has much more important things to concern himself with. Like explaining why the *HMS Tracker* is now at the bottom of the ocean."

"Aye." O'Hara sighed. "That was a hard bit of luck for him."

Jack's white teeth gleamed in the morning light and his laughter rang out. "Don't tell me you're feeling sorry for Barkley?"

O'Hara shared his laughter, then sobered. "You was once part of his world, Jack," he reminded the younger man. "You know this won't go easy on him. And he was your friend."

Stanton nodded, some of the amusement chased from his angular, handsome features.

He'd had a tentative truce with Barkley for some time now. Edward "officially" hunted him, but never quite caught him. Jack, for his part, seldom did anything that was wholly loathsome enough to warrant a change in their understanding. And, as O'Hara had just pointed out, there was a time when they had been as close as brothers. The respect between them was genuine, despite the drastic difference in their chosen paths. Barkley had been one of his few allies when he'd been summarily dismissed from the ranks of the Royal Navy years earlier.

Looking closely at the captain of the *Scarlet Thorn*, O'Hara wondered if he'd ever really know the enigma that was Jack Stanton. It had been well over ten years since their first meeting, and O'Hara felt he knew Jack less now than the night they'd met again in Tortuga's rowdiest pub, The Siren's Reach. Stanton had been a young captain in

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the Royal Navy then, intent on arresting as many pirates as he could find. That goal had been altered radically when Stanton was forced into a duel with a drunk who turned out to be the son of a visiting nobleman from England. What had been self-defense was called murder, and Stanton had gone into the sweet trade shortly after. Still, the tall, imposing pirate had instincts that were infallible, and a sharp, quick mind that kept them ahead of their pursuers at every turn. It had earned him the nickname of the “The Phantom,” due to his propensity for disappearing from under his enemy’s nose. Stanton had remarked upon hearing the name that it was the *Thorn* who’d earned the moniker, not himself.

When Jack’s curious eyes bored into him, O’Hara left him at the wheel of the *Thorn* and went back to issue orders to the rest of the crew and tell them the charted course. If Jack was right, and there was no reason to assume he wasn’t, the time in Tortuga would be welcomed by everyone aboard.

\* \* \*

The turtle-shaped island of Tortuga was a place unlike any other Katheryn Hollinsworth had ever seen. It was wild and untamed, a place that seethed with life and adventure. She felt the thrill of excitement light a fire deep within her, stretching outward to course along the suddenly sizzling network of her nerve-endings until she trembled with the mere pleasure of looking at her new home. The savage beauty of Tortuga instantly burned into her soul, and she knew the eternal months and years of dissatisfaction that defined her life were soon to fade into unhappy memory. The late afternoon sun was magnificent as it poured golden radiance over the teaming city of Puerta de la Plata. The scattered houses gleamed white, and the colorful array of people working the docks seemed to glow in the glorious, encroaching sunset.

The ship that rolled beneath Katheryn’s feet was a small vessel, but fast and sleek. The recent destruction of the *HMS Tracker* while in



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pursuit of the infamous pirate ship the *Scarlet Thorn* had made the construction of this new vessel, the *HMS Navigator*, an urgent necessity. This was the Navigator's first assignment, and Commodore Edward Barkley had agreed to command the escort ship himself, a personal favor to Governor Godfrey Harper, Katheryn's uncle. Her father, Joseph Hollinsworth III, newly appointed Deputy Governor of Tortuga, was in serious conversation with the attractive commodore a short distance from where she leaned against the gunwale of the gently rocking ship. The docks were in sight, and their unheralded approach was drawing much curious attention. The arrival of a Royal Navy ship would have been note-worthy on any day in Tortuga, but the Navigator's obvious newness added speculation of a greater nature to the event.

"Katheryn?"

She turned slightly and smiled with warmth and affection at her father. She'd lost her mother years earlier, to dark circumstances about which they seldom spoke. Katheryn's lovely mother, Charity, had committed suicide mere months after arriving in North America. Joseph and his young daughter had been closer than many fathers and daughters often were, and the relationship was fierce and loyal. Still, Joseph had grown less and less understanding of his daughter's willful behavior during the past two years. He wanted her married and settled. She wanted freedom and adventures before she settled into the comfort of a routine life.

"What do you think of it, my dear?" he asked as they gazed at the nearby town.

"It looks like a wonderful place," she breathed, eyes alight with anticipation.

From the corner of her eye, Kathreyn saw his expression reveal his conflicting emotions; he was suspicious of her enthusiasm, as well as troubled by it. Before she could offer a reassurance that would have

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been more platitude than sincerity, he turned to examine the busy harbor.

“Why did the governor give you this post, Father?” Katheryn asked, continuing to watch him with speculative curiosity. “Juliet was quite surprised when he made the decision to place an acting governor on Tortuga.”

“Juliet Harper is hardly an authority in these matters, Katheryn,” he admonished.

“Pirates,” Commodore Barkley stated as he joined them. “That’s the reason, Katheryn,” he assured her with a smile. “This is probably one of the last true pirate ports, and we plan to insure that it doesn’t remain active for much longer.”

“You’re after the *Scarlet Thorn*,” she surmised. “The Phantom,” she added with a grin that was filled with impish delight.

Barkley looked at her, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. She had grown into a truly lovely woman, he mused in silent contemplation. Not as tall as Juliet Harper, nor as reed slender; but a beautiful woman nonetheless. Katheryn Charity Hollinsworth had a glorious mane of shimmering auburn hair, and eyes as dark and dangerous as the waters of the Caribbean at night. She was curvaceous and graceful, moving with a casual arrogance that was both appealing and disconcerting in a woman. But it was the intelligence and keen shrewdness of thought that made her truly intriguing. Like Juliet, she would never be told what her path in life would be. She would choose it herself and pursue happiness on her own terms. Under different circumstances, he would have immensely enjoyed her company. Their families had known each other for decades, but it had been a number of years since he’d last seen her. She’d been barely thirteen, and he’d been accepting his first commission.

“Jack Stanton, like all of his breed, has a standing appointment with the gallows, Miss Hollinsworth,” he noted when her eyebrows rose at

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his prolonged scrutiny.

"Captain Jack Stanton, I believe, Commodore," she corrected with a mischievous smile. "I know the history between you, as well. And, I think I'm beginning to understand your acceptance of this rather tedious assignment, sir. Tell me, Edward," her smile deepened, "how long *have* you been hunting Captain Stanton?"

He smiled at the impertinence of the query, and her father's obvious annoyance at hearing it. He bowed and returned to the bridge of the ship, issuing routine commands while also watching the new deputy governor. He couldn't help but wonder if the man would be able to bring any kind of order to the unruly island, especially in view of his complete inability to control his daughter's restlessness with any real success.

Once the longboats had deposited them at the docks, Katheryn and her father were to be escorted to the waiting house that would be their home now. Construction had only recently finished, and the white-washed exterior was set aglow with fiery color by the sinking sun, now blazing its final fury of the day across the western sky.

"You will join us for supper, Edward?" Katheryn asked with a smile that very nearly rivaled the brilliance of the sunset. When he made ready to decline her invitation, she shook her head and took his arm, pointing him toward the waiting carriage. "I refuse to take no for an answer, sir," she explained as they reached the conveyance and he helped her settle into a seat next to her father.

\* \* \*

Several days later the *Scarlet Thorn* approached the island of Tortuga. Jack had spotted the Royal Navy ship moored in the harbor and they changed course enough to glide into a cove, out of sight of any unwanted interest. O'Hara dispatched the first mate, Munroe Walters, and crewman James Cotton to find the men they needed to strengthen the *Thorn's* crew. Now, he and the captain walked the streets of the

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only real town, and O'Hara was acutely aware of Jack's outwardly casual manner as they greeted familiar faces. The young pirate's reputation had grown to mythical proportions since he'd reclaimed the *Scarlet Thorn* and continually escaped the wrath of the Royal Navy in general—Commodore Edward Barkley in particular. More than once they'd narrowly dodged the range of the firing cannons of the *HMS Intrepid* and her determined commander. Yet, in spite of his spreading fame and the riches they'd plundered, O'Hara sensed a growing disquiet in Stanton. Whatever was driving Jack, he clearly hadn't found it.

Before long they were nearing an old, familiar haunt. The Siren's Reach was in full roar when they reached the doors and were all but thrown inside by suddenly brawling rogues outside the rollicking establishment. Stumbling to a halt at the rough-hewn bar, O'Hara ordered ale and they made their way to the back of the tavern.

"You noticed the ship that's in port?" O'Hara commented, watching his captain.

Jack grinned, the expression taking more years off his already deceptively young features.

"The *HMS Navigator*." He nodded after taking a healthy swig from his tankard of ale. "The newest and 'fastest' ship in the Caribbean," he recited with mock seriousness. "If she isn't any faster than the Tracker, we've nothing to worry about," he concluded, silver-gray eyes glittering with mischief.

"What's on yer mind, Jack?" O'Hara asked, peering at Stanton.

Jack considered the words, his eyes thoughtful now as he leaned back a little and held Geraint's level gaze.

"I think it's time we found the *Thorn* a safe berth," Stanton said, pale eyes gleaming in the golden lamplight of the tavern.

"Aye." O'Hara nodded. "Have you got a place in mind, Captain?"

Jack's grin flashed. "Have you seen the other side of Tortuga, Mr.

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O'Hara?" he asked with apparent nonchalance.

O'Hara eyed Jack a little more intently. "Right under their noses? You don't think that be a might risky, Captain?" he asked, voice tainted with humor.

"Only if we're discovered," Jack replied. "What say you to a tour of Tortuga's other side, Mr. O'Hara?" Stanton asked, raising his tankard.

"I say that sounds like as fine a plan as any I've heard of late, Jack." He touched his tankard to Stanton's before they downed their ale and left the table.

\* \* \*

Skirting through the network of alleys and makeshift roads, Jack and O'Hara were making quick time when loud, angry voices made them pause. O'Hara would have moved on, but the sound of a muffled feminine scream assured him that Stanton would investigate the commotion. Despite his pirate lifestyle, O'Hara had often observed the spirit of a nobleman in Jack Stanton, and that sense of honor was never so obvious than when a woman was in distress.

They cleared the corner that had concealed them and stood in the torchlight at the mouth of an alley, watching the scene that was unfolding a short distance away. The woman who'd screamed had regained her composure and was now shoving at a drunken sailor who was equally determined not to be pushed aside. He made a grab for her and she let herself be forced against a wall, then used his momentum to pull him closer as her knee rose and connected with his groin.

Jack's mocking wince made O'Hara grin, and Jack winked at him, his real attention still with the woman and her would-be assailant.

"She don't appear to be needin' our help, Captain," O'Hara said. He knew immediately that it didn't matter; something about the girl had captured Stanton's interest.

Jack folded his arms across his chest and leaned casually against the wall, cloaked in shadow, still able to observe what was happening.

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“Meet me back at The Siren in two hours, Mr. O’Hara,” Stanton directed, his silver eyes never leaving the woman, who had just drawn a sword from beneath her cloak.

“Jack....” O’Hara began, then gave it up for a lost effort when Stanton strolled toward the battling couple. With a final annoyed glare at the young pirate’s retreating back, O’Hara slipped back into the alley and backtracked to The Siren’s Reach to await Jack’s return.

Stanton stopped a few feet from the two people who were squared off against each other. The girl’s sword moved like a shimmering sliver of moonlight as she parried and feinted with careless grace, easily deflecting the less-disciplined thrusts of her opponent’s blade. She was dressed like a buccaneer, but he sensed she was anything but what she appeared to be at that moment. It wasn’t until she slipped on wet ground that the drunkard gained an advantage and quickly made to deliver a fatal strike.

Without thinking Jack stepped forward, cutlass drawn, and intercepted the other man’s sword on its downward arc. Sparks flew as the blades clashed loudly, and Stanton circled until he stood between the woman and her unhappy attacker.

“Taking advantage of a lady when she’s down.” Jack shook his head in mock despair, while his mouth curved into a roguish smile. “That’s hardly fair play,” he quipped.

“Stay outta this,” the sailor snarled in reckless fury. “It’s between me and the *lady*,” he concluded and tried to shove Stanton aside.

Jack pushed back and waited for the stumbling man to recover. When he did, he had a new target, as Jack had anticipated. He raised his weapon and edged closer to Stanton.

“Do you really think this wise, mate?” Jack asked with a smile, truly beginning to enjoy himself now.

His opponent apparently felt he was up to Jack’s challenge, and he lunged. Jack smoothly stepped aside and tapped the other man’s

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shoulder with his sword when he hit the building and staggered, stunned for a second by the unexpected impact. The man whirled, growling his fury, and attacked like a madman. Jack hadn't calculated the ferocity of the other man's anger, and he barely escaped being run through.

The sword play began in earnest, and Stanton had no time to consider if he should have left this situation to the people involved. A few well chosen steps gave him the advantage and he parried awkward thrusts with more ease as he drove the fellow backward. When he struck the man across the face with the hilt of his cutlass, he thought the contest over. Until a slash of fire tore up his arm and he had scant seconds to realize he'd been struck. Stanton's annoyance went up another notch and he spun around, intent on ending the impromptu confrontation. He was spared further effort when the woman slammed the back of the sailor's head with the butt of a pistol and he went down with a groan.

Jack looked at her, a quizzical tilt to his head.

"I didn't think it necessary to kill a man simply for being stupid," she explained with a flash of pearly-white teeth. "But I thank you for your assistance, sir." She stepped closer and peered at her rescuer. He stepped back, sheathing his cutlass and watching her with the beginnings of suspicion in his pale eyes.

"Do I know you?"

"I think not, m'lady," Jack answered with a smile.

Now that he could see her clearly in the torch-light, Jack knew they had never met. He wouldn't have forgotten a woman as lovely as this one. The flicker of the torch flames seemed to be finding responding tongues of color in the falling waves of her hair, a long, tumbling mane that was presently slipping from the loose confinement of a leather thong she'd tied at her nape. The cloak she wore was open, and his sharp gaze took rapid stock of her clothes. His earlier opinion was

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confirmed in that sweeping appraisal as he inventoried silk shirt, close-fitting pants of heavy cotton, polished leather boots that reached her knees, and a wide belt from which hung the scabbard for her hand-crafted sword. She carefully placed the pistol at her hip, and watched his overt scrutiny.

“Jack Stanton,” she said, her voice holding a hint of wonder. “You’re Captain Jack Stanton, aren’t you? The one they call The Phantom.”

Jack’s head tilted slightly to the side again as he met her bold brown stare. What he saw there amused him. She was curious, and faintly excited by her discovery of his identity.

“And you are?” he prompted, not bothering to answer her question. She hesitated for only a moment, then smiled.

“Charity,” she said with a small bow that was little more than a nod of her head.

“Well...” He paused. “Charity.” The name didn’t feel right, but he used it anyway as he took her arm and began steering her away from the sailor who was slowly regaining consciousness. “Where are you headed, love?”

Katheryn Hollinsworth tried to look at him as they walked, and her heart pounded a wild staccato in her chest, so loudly she was surprised he couldn’t hear it for himself.

At her persistent prodding, her cousin Juliet had described Jack Stanton in considerable detail, having met him months earlier when he’d been captured, briefly, in Port Royal. But, she had failed to mention how strikingly handsome he was, Katheryn realized. Tall, broad-shouldered, with a wild tangle of thick blue-black hair, and incredible, exotic eyes that stole the moonlight from the night and shone it back at her when he glanced in her direction. Katheryn thought him the most intriguing man she’d met in her brief lifetime. His hair was almost as long as her own, and the braided tie that held it back



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from his face was adorned by exquisite golden beads, with a jewel worked into each of the many strands of leather in the intricate tie. His angular features were emphasized by a rich, deep tan, and his far too appealing mouth. He wore a finely tailored, lightweight cotton shirt of deep red, dark trousers, boots, and overcoat. On his head was a jaunty tricorn hat. Another man might have looked ridiculous; Jack Stanton looked romantic and alluring.

The cutlass at his side was well worn, as was the pistol. He walked with a natural swagger, and she sensed a sharp and nimble intelligence behind his mesmerizing eyes. Her nose twitched minutely as she caught the subtle scents that both surrounded and radiated from him. And again her awareness rose in response to an intoxicating blend of the sea, smoky taverns, a hint of rum, and the complex undercurrent that was uniquely Jack himself. When his grin flashed and he turned suddenly to catch her staring at him, she looked away quickly, blushing.

"I'd like to buy you a meal, Captain Stanton," she said, daring a sidelong glance at him. "To thank you for your help."

Jack's smile flashed again and he stopped their stroll with a hand on her shoulder, turning her to face him. Despite her height, she was almost a head shorter than Jack, and it took a finger under her chin to bring her eyes up to meet his.

"I can think of a much more interesting way for you to thank me, love," he challenged, voice pitched to a seductive low as he watched her closely for a reaction.

Something wild and powerful woke with a blaze in Kathryn's veins and she jerked back from his touch. Anger whispered past the furious roar of conflict that was creating a tempest within her, and she glared at him because it was easier to snap at the cause of her discomfort than it was to examine it.

"If you're feeling randy, Captain Stanton, I suggest you visit a brothel," she grated from between clenched teeth.

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“Ahhh.” Jack nodded, still smiling. “You’re not quite what you appear to be, are you, my lady?”

Like everything else about him, the lazy drawl of his speech was a caress to her heightened senses. Ignoring the screaming in her head, Kathryn leaned upward to place a soft kiss to his cheek. Jack’s hand moved before she could back away and his long fingers slid into her hair and drew her head forward to meet his. She swayed into his embrace, obeying instinct over reason, and Stanton’s mouth covered hers in a kiss that was unlike anything she’d ever experienced. His lips were soft but sure, and her arms wound around him as she pressed her body against the solid, muscular length of his. When the tip of his tongue traced her lips, seeking entrance, she opened her mouth and accepted his probing exploration, attempting to mimic his actions.

Jack knew the instant their lips met that she had no experience with sex, or with something as simple as properly kissing a man. Her lithe curves, while sorely tempting him, were also warning him that he wasn’t indulging himself with a whore. Her lush breasts pressed tightly to his chest, and he could feel the small, hard points of her nipples through the thin layers of her clothing. There were no corsets or stays under the silk shirt, only a light camisole.

He loosened their embrace just enough to give his hands the freedom to glide over her. She stopped him just as he would have tested the enticing weight of her breasts with his palms. Pulling back with a gasp, she stared at him in shocked surprise; which of them she was more taken aback with, Jack couldn’t readily determine.

“Calm down, love,” he murmured, tone pitched to a smooth, erotic purr. His grin appeared again, and he could almost hear the erratic flutter of her heartbeat.

“Good-night, Captain,” she said in a weak whisper, then spun on her heel and fled, cape billowing behind her before she drew it tight to her body and ran.

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Jack had glimpsed the fear in her eyes and it slowly stole the smile from his mood. Thoughtful now, he retraced his steps to The Siren's Reach, all the while wondering who the mysterious and lovely woman truly was.

\* \* \*

Katheryn slipped into her father's house through the servants' door and searched the entry hall for his tall form. She was safe. The large chamber was empty and the entire house quiet and still. She raced through the near-darkness and took the stairs two at a time as she sought the sanctuary of her bedroom.

Once inside, she shed her "pirate" clothes, snatched a nightgown from her chest of drawers, and pulled it over her head. A light footfall made her glance up, guilt and fright in her throat for an instant until she recognized her maid's sleepy smile. She lifted her hand to push back her wind-tousled hair and saw the stain of blood on her palm. *Jack had been hurt*, she realized as a sick feeling lodged in her stomach with the force of a kick. She turned and walked to the wash basin, fear twisting inside her at the crimson taint that quickly filled the white porcelain bowl. She tossed the bloodied water out a window and placed the bowl back on the washstand before she met the steady gaze of her maid.

"I see you're back home, Miss Katheryn," Patricia Tewson said with a remarkable amount of scolding in her soft tone. She'd been Katheryn's maid for most of her life, and tended to mother her despite Katheryn's objections.

"Did Father ask for me this evening, Patty?" Katheryn asked, and winced slightly at the quiver that lingered in her voice. *How badly had Jack been hurt?* Fear twisted within her as she tried to concentrate on her maid's words.

Patty nodded. "He did, Miss. Commodore Barkley's returned." She helped Katheryn into bed and tucked the blankets around her. "Why, Miss Katheryn," she exclaimed a moment later, "you're shaking like a

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leaf in a gale.”

“I’m fine, really, Patty,” Katheryn objected. “Please don’t fuss.”

The older woman tutted and fussed anyway, but eventually returned to her own room when Katheryn refused to answer her overt questioning about where she’d been. Once she was alone, Katheryn sank into her bed to contemplate the night’s events, and to try to quiet the tremors that continued to pour over her in waves.

*Captain Jack Stanton!* She had secretly hoped to meet the infamous pirate; it had been the reason for her interrogation of her cousin Juliet. She hadn’t dreamed he would affect her in such a manner, though. Her fingers shook when she touched her lips and remembered the exciting pressure of his mouth on hers. Her tongue darted out and she smiled when she tasted the lingering traces of Jack’s kiss. No man had ever touched her the way he had; she’d been kissed before, but not like that.

“He’s a pirate for heaven’s sake,” she muttered, disturbed by the watery sensation that settled in her limbs when she permitted herself to recall the overwhelming rush of feelings Jack had awakened with his casual caress.

*And that’s precisely why you want to see him again,* the voice of her conscience taunted.

\* \* \*

“I suppose that’s a souvenir of last night,” O’Hara noted diffidently as he joined Stanton on the bridge of the *Thorn*. Crossing his arms over his broad chest, he watched Jack wind a length of clean cotton around his arm, a few inches above the distinctive tattoo of a withered rose with a large thorn from which fell a single drop of blood.

Jack ignored the query and rolled down the sleeve of his shirt when he stood, then looked over the secluded cove they’d located on the sea-facing side of Tortuga. On the opposite side of the small island was the much larger island of Hispaniola, and that was generally where most ships came into port.

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“You’ve found a most suitable spot, Mr. O’Hara,” Jack allowed with a smile. “How long before we can safely careen the *Thorn* and begin proper repairs?” The idea of beaching his beloved ship wasn’t something that sat well with him, but he was also well aware of how necessary it had become. The hulls needed to be scraped and rid of barnacles, teredo worms, weeds and all other manner of debris that had collected there. Plus there were a number of holes that required serious repairs—tar and resin would only carry them so far. He wanted the *Thorn* in top form, especially when put to the test of out-running the *HMS Navigator*.

Several hours after work had begun, O’Hara approached a sweating Stanton and indicated the rise half a mile from the beach.

“Seems we have company, captain.”

A lone rider sat silhouetted against the mid-morning sun. The sudden twitch in the region of his stomach warned Jack of the stranger’s identity. A frown furrowing his forehead, he gave O’Hara a curt nod.

“Keep the men working,” he said, “and I’ll see to our guest.”

O’Hara was startled, but he didn’t have time to comment further when Jack grabbed his shirt from atop a nearby barrel and strode up the beach.

\* \* \*

“We meet again.”

Katheryn yelped in surprise when the voice of Jack Stanton emerged from the trees moments before the man himself came into view.

“How did you reach me so quickly?” She sputtered the question before she could think about it, and stared when he laughed and came closer to her, his height forcing her to look up at him.

“A man needs to know the land he’s on,” Jack replied with careless disinterest. “If he intends to stay alive.”

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His expression darkened as he measured her presence, and her changed appearance. Today she was dressed as the deputy governor's daughter would be expected to, like a lady, not a pirate.

"Why are you here, love?"

He interrupted her study of him, and she started in response to the question before she recovered her composure and, to a lesser extent, her wits.

"I was out riding and I heard men singing," she answered. "What are they doing, Jack?" She was curious, but it was also a way to force her mind to concentrate on anything other than the overwhelming desire to touch him. He was even more magnificent in daylight than he'd been the night before. His skin shone with sweat from his exertions of minutes earlier, and his shirt was thrown casually over his shoulders, open and giving her a breath-stealing view of sculpted muscles and deeply tanned skin. Around his waist he wore a silvery sash, a color almost the same shade as his eyes. His long, flowing mane of dark hair was shining blue-black in the glow of the sunlight, and she thought it like the fall of a raven's wing.

"Who do you plan to tell about this meeting, Charity?" In spite of himself, Jack was disappointed when the dreamy-eyed wonder left her pretty brown eyes and they sparked with anger at his overt accusation. The flicker of startled confusion in her eyes confirmed another of his suspicions about her—as he'd suspected, Charity wasn't the name she was accustomed to hearing as a form of address. He touched her chin and smiled down at her. "Who are you, love?"

She frowned and chewed her bottom lip for a moment. "I don't understand the question, Captain," she ventured, deliberate in her evasion. "What, exactly, are you asking me?"

"It's a simple enough thing to give a man your name, darling," he taunted, his smile sliding easily into a roguish grin.

"I did."

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He shook his head. "Have it your way." He shrugged. "I still need to know who you'll speak to if I let you leave here."

"*If* you let me leave!" She took a step back and glared at him. "I will leave here as freely as I came, sir," she assured him, her voice gone soft and edged with steel.

"Then you'll answer some questions before you deprive me of your charming company." Jack scooped her into his arms as she began to shout and squirm. "Carry on like that, miss, and you'll force me to keep you quiet," he taunted with a mocking grin. He headed back into the wooded growth that concealed the trail he'd used to approach her unnoticed.

Katheryn continued to twist and curse in equal fury, until she finally managed to escape his arms. She fell unceremoniously at his feet and he laughed at her outrage. His amusement was quelled a moment later when she regained her footing and darted off into the heavy forest. This time it was Jack who muttered colorful curses as he sprinted after her. His strides, so much longer than hers, and unhindered by skirts, allowed him to quickly overtake her, and as he made a grab for her arm, she tripped and tumbled headlong down a small slope, her squeals a combination of fright and annoyance. Jack tried to keep his footing, but he was too close to the edge and moss made the ground slippery. He skidded awkwardly, then fell into the same sliding tumble that had taken her down.

When he crashed to a halt his landing was surprisingly soft. Before that could more than register, a twinge of pain jolted him and he grabbed her fist before she could hit him a second time.

"Get off me!"

Jack made a blind reach and captured her second wrist, then he twisted and regained his advantage as he pressed her flat on her back and leaned over her. His lazy grin grew when he looked down at her and relaxed into the yielding softness of her body beneath him. Her

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chest heaved with effort, and her breasts threatened to escape the straining front of her gown. Jack bent his head to place a soft kiss to her forehead. She quieted, but her eyes were wary as she stared up at him.

“Get off me.”

This time it lacked the ferocity of anger, and Jack smiled at her. He touched her lips with the tip of his tongue and felt the tiny flutter of air that rushed from her at the light caress. The second time he licked at her quivering bottom lip, then covered her mouth with his, deepening the kiss as she stilled her efforts to dislodge him. When he released her wrists, she wrapped her arms around him and Jack permitted himself the pleasure of pressing more intimately to her lush curves.

The world spun crazily, even behind her closed lids, and Katheryn had a fleeting moment of sanity that warned her she had to stop Jack's kisses from robbing her of all sense of propriety. But when his tongue coaxed hers into a slow, tantalizing, stroking dance, she shuddered with a simple rapture that she wanted to drown in. Her hands drifted over the broad expanse of his back, exploring, drawing in the sensation of muscle moving smoothly under the thin layer of his shirt. His hands were as persuasive as his mouth, and she was aching in places she'd never been aware of before as he began to trace the curve of her waist, then his fingers were moving upward and she wondered if she'd faint in his arms if he touched her bare skin.

Jack's mouth moved to her neck, his bewitching tongue gliding over her skin until he stopped and began to stroke the sensitive hollow near her collarbone. Katheryn's fingers slid into the thick length of his hair and she hardly recognized the tiny, strangled whimper that came from her when one of his hands began to caress her breast, kneading firm flesh with gentle pressure. When his nimble fingers started to work the laces at the front of her gown, she didn't object. A few moments later, the warm whisper of the Caribbean breeze touched her as Jack eased back and opened the front panels of her dress. He tugged



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at the light camisole and drew it down to expose the thrusting peaks of her breasts.

Slowly, his eyes never losing their hold on her, Jack's fingers traced the shape and fullness of her ample bosom, his thumbs gradually moving closer to the pebble-hard points that crested the silken mounds of flesh. He flicked lightly at the hard buds and she arched into the touch, her spine curling with pleasure. He finally looked from her eyes to the naked beauty beneath him, and bent to take one rosy nipple into his mouth. His tongue licked repeatedly before he began to suckle.

His body ached with lust now, and he knew he was treading a dangerous path if he continued to indulge himself with this particular woman. Something in her trusting, awakening responses to him was piercing the armor he'd put on his heart a lifetime in the past. She was no whore, yet on the two occasions they'd met, she'd had him reduced to rutting need with no effort at all.

He rolled onto his back, dragging her across him as he moved, and his hips thrust upward into her, his body obeying its own want. She tried to sit up and ended up braced on her elbows with her breasts dangling before him, held in his hands as he moved from one to the other, kissing, licking, and sucking on their ripe bounty.

"Jack..."

He drew away from her reluctantly and settled on his back, allowing her to stare down at him. "Yes, love?"

When she hesitated and lowered her eyes, her cheeks flushed darker, he cupped her cheek and made her look at him again.

"You've never done this before, have you, darling?"

She chewed on her bottom lip for a second, then sighed. "No."

He nodded, and eased her off his body, stifling a groan when his erection pulsed an objection to the sudden lack of her warmth. She was on her knees, watching him closely, and as he stared at her disheveled hair and dress, and the naked beauty of her exposed breasts, he was

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sorely tempted to ignore the sense of honor that was making him stop what he knew would have been a splendidly passionate romp with her. It didn't help his resolve any when he noticed her gaze locked on the front of his breeches, and the very obvious thrust of his potent arousal.

"Jack!"

The harsh, subdued voice belonged to his quartermaster, O'Hara, and the instant it reached them, the spell shattered. Katheryn rose awkwardly and turned her back to Jack, pulling at her clothing in a desperate attempt to cover herself as quickly as possible. A moment later, O'Hara's smiling face looked down on them.

"Well, I see you've managed to take a tumble, Cap'n," he said with a laugh. "And make a soft landing as well, it would seem."

Jack scowled at him. He drew Katheryn to his side and led her back up the bank they'd slid down. As they neared the top, O'Hara took her hands and practically lifted her out of the shallow.

"Miss Katheryn?"

"Katheryn?" Jack repeated when he joined them.

"This is the deputy governor's daughter, Jack," O'Hara informed him. "Katheryn Hollinsworth."

Before Stanton could anticipate her action, Katheryn turned and ran. When he would have followed her, O'Hara grabbed his arm. "She's the least of your problems at the moment. We've just had word that the *Fury* is in the area."

Jack's eyes blazed with emotion at the mention of the other ship, and he nodded, forcing Katheryn Hollinsworth out of his mind for the moment. It wasn't easy when every step he took reminded him of the frustrated lust that surged through him.

\* \* \*

For nearly a month, Stanton's ship pursued their elusive prey, and each time they came into range and lost Lucian's ship again, Jack's mood grew darker and more dangerous. On a fine, clear morning, the

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first day of their fifth week out, the lookout high up in the crow's nest shouted that once again the *Fury* was within their range. Jack had been summoned to the main deck, and had immediately issued orders for all guns to be manned and ready. The chase was on...

"We're closing on her, Captain!" O'Hara shouted as the other ship grew steadily larger in front of the *Scarlet Thorn*. All hands scurried to carry out the orders Captain Jack Stanton was issuing as he calmly manned the ship's wheel. A gleam of determination shone in the captain's eyes, one his quartermaster had seen many times before, but there was a very real anger burning in their silvery depths, as well. They'd been chasing this particular ship for a very long time, not merely the past weeks, and somehow, they had always been a few hours behind her. Jack's rage grew each time he returned from ports the vessel had visited, but he had, thus far, been reluctant to say why. O'Hara knew it wouldn't be much longer before they all knew what was driving their captain this time.

The restless sea pounded the sides of the *Thorn*, and foam-flecked waves broke against her and sprayed the decks, as well as the men rushing around.

"As soon as we're in range, fire all guns!" Stanton shouted above the surf.

O'Hara nodded and headed for the deck. The mainsail was stretched taut, and the smaller topsail was unfurling quickly under the expert guidance of the riggers. The powder monkeys were ready, as were the youngest seamen, buckets of damp sand ready to dump onto the decks in the event that blood was spilled aboard the *Thorn*.

"Finally..." Stanton murmured, grim satisfaction in his tone and his smile. He made a slight course adjustment with an easy swing of the wheel, instinct guiding his hand as he focused all his attention on the ship-rigged vessel attempting to outrun them.

"Ready the guns, Mr. O'Hara!" Jack called when he knew they

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were closing.

Less than a minute later, the boom of the *Thorn's* cannons rocked the sea and the air around him. The smell of gunpowder filled his nostrils and he knew a second round would be fired within minutes. Screams, shouts, and general mayhem could already be heard from the damaged ship ahead of them and Jack spun the wheel of the *Thorn* again, positioning her alongside the other ship so they could board.

"Let them know who we are, Mr. Walters," he ordered, spotting the mate a few yards away. Walters nodded, and seconds later the black flag was being hoisted, its skull grinning wickedly above a pair of crossed cutlasses, their hilts each adorned with a thorny rose.

The guns boomed a second time, and Jack spotted several large holes in the hull of Lucian's ship. He was just enjoying the taste of sweet victory when it all turned to ash in the space of a few minutes.

"Cap'n," the lookout shouted frantically, trying to be heard above the general din on deck. "There's a British man-o-war coming up on us!"

Stanton glanced upward to the crow's nest, then turned his spyglass in the direction indicated. He cursed when he spotted the vessel that was rapidly closing the distance. *The bloody HMS Navigator!* Which meant Edward Barkley would be at her helm. Stanton had no quarrel with his one-time friend, but if Barkley forced his hand, he'd fire on the navy ship.

"Take the *Fury*," he ordered, voice harsh with anger when O'Hara rushed up to his side. "Give the crew a chance to make a peaceful surrender, O'Hara, but keep deBeaupre in chains until I get there."

"What about that, Jack?" O'Hara gestured to the nearing Royal Navy ship.

"I'll deal with Barkley myself," he informed his quartermaster. "The bridge is yours, Geraint."

\* \* \*

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"What brings you on board my ship, Jack?"

He met Barkley's level stare with no outward emotion. "The *Fury* is mine, Edward," he said with quiet steel in his tone. "I have an old score to settle with her captain."

"I have a new one, I'm afraid," the commodore answered.

Curious, Jack fell into step next to his former comrade as they headed for the ship's bridge.

"Aside from the obvious fact that Lucian deBeaupre is a pirate of the worst order, what could you want with him?"

"He's taken the deputy governor's daughter hostage." Barkley informed him when they were away from the interested ears of the rest of the crew. "Almost two weeks ago. He's demanding a full pardon from the King."

Jack's heart began to pound with a rage that filmed the bright day in shades of blood when he looked at the captured ship his men were plundering. So far, there was no sign of deBeaupre, or his captive.

"We've been tracking this ship for over a month, Commodore." Stanton forced calm into the words, and met Barkley's shrewd blue eyes. "There's been no sign of a hostage."

"How many times did you lose her over the past month, Jack?" Barkley asked in a curious, reasonable tone.

Stanton didn't bother with an answer, they both knew the *Fury* hadn't been in his sights the entire month. The *Thorn* would have had her at the bottom of the Caribbean weeks sooner if that had been the case.

"Jack," Barkley began, his eyes alert, "how fast can your men get off that wreck?"

Jack spun and snarled in anger when he saw what Barkley had spotted first—the *Fury* was sinking, quickly. O'Hara was already abandoning the ship, and men swung back aboard the *Thorn*, loosening the grappling hooks with experienced ease. When Jack finally spotted

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Lucian deBeaupre, and struggling to escape him, the familiar beauty of Katheryn Hollinsworth, he pulled his pistol and took aim.

"You'll never make that shot, Jack," Barkley snapped. "Not without killing Katheryn, too."

"I don't have to," Jack breathed, relief making him weak. O'Hara hadn't left the *Fury* yet, and he was a crack shot. A shout made Lucian turn, and Katheryn kicked him viciously. When he threw her aside, O'Hara's shot took Lucian full in the face. By the time the quartermaster reached Katheryn's side, she was leaning over the gunwale, retching violently.

"Get him to bring her here, Jack," Barkley suggested, his voice low and heavy with meaning. "Given the circumstances, and the fact that the governor is so anxious to have his daughter returned safely, once she's aboard, the *Thorn* is free to go."

Jack measured the truth in Barkley eyes, knew he was not being tricked, and nodded. Their battle would come, but it would not be fought today.

\* \* \*

Katheryn had been back in Puerta de la Plata for several days before she was able to escape her father's home and make her way down to the village. She'd caught only a glimpse of Jack Stanton on board the Navigator when she'd been rescued, but she hadn't been able to speak to him. They had things to talk about. And she was determined to make him listen. The two weeks she'd been held by Lucian deBeaupre had taught her things about herself she might never have understood, among them the depth of her feelings for Jack. Lucian had accused Jack of evil things, but when he was drunk, he was more honest, and she had learned that the feud with Stanton had begun over five years earlier—when deBeaupre had stolen Jack's wife, Elaine, as the result of a disagreement over treasure taken from a Spanish galleon. By the time Stanton had caught up with the *Fury*, Elaine had been near death. She

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had never recovered, and had died less than a month later.

Banishing the past, and the pain it created in her heart, Katheryn hesitated when she reached the doors to the Siren's Reach tavern. She knew some of the *Thorn's* crew would be found here, but wasn't as certain Jack would be among them. She drew up the hood of her cape and dragged in a deep breath, her hand resting on the grip of her pistol under the concealing length of dark, heavy linen that was her cloak. Then, before she lost her nerve, she went inside.

The shock of sound and smells assailed her the instant she passed through the doors, and it took several seconds for her vision to adjust to the change in light. Lamps shone brightly, and the tavern was packed tight with drunken sailors and the ladies who entertained them. She made her way to the bar and almost drew her pistol when a rough hand on her shoulder turned her away.

"Miss Katheryn, what in God's name are you doin' here, lass?"

"I've come in search of your captain," she replied, and let herself be led by Geraint O'Hara into a less noisy corner of the tavern. He glared the table's two occupants into moving, then pushed her onto a chair.

"Don't move," he ordered sharply. "I'll be right back."

Less than five minutes later, O'Hara returned with two tankards in hand, and put one of them on the table in front of her. "I told the barkeep to water it down a little," he explained when she looked up at him in surprise.

Katheryn shrugged and lifted the heavy cup, then experimentally sipped. She almost choked the instant some of the liquor slid down her throat. O'Hara laughed, and she didn't have the strength to glower at him for the effrontery.

"What, in God's name, do you call that concoction, Mr. O'Hara?" She finally gasped, her eyes still stinging from the shock.

"Punch, Miss Katheryn," he chuckled. "Spirits, wine, tea, lime juice, sugar, and whatever spices come to hand. I did tell him to go

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heavy on the water, lass.”

“Punch,” she muttered. “A most appropriate choice of name, sir.”

“Why are you in a place like this?”

“I want to see Jack,” she replied with complete candor. “Is he here?”

O’Hara shook his head. “Probably back at the *Thorn*. He’s been... difficult,” he chose his wording carefully, “since we left the *Fury* at the bottom of the sea.”

She mulled over his reluctant admissions, then nodded. “Where can I find your ship, Mr. O’Hara?”

“That is *not* a good idea, Miss Katheryn.” He shook his head, and locked eyes with her, an easy match for her stubborn determination.

“Then give him a message for me?” She withdrew a small envelope from the folds of her cloak and put it on the table, sliding it across to him.

Warily, O’Hara picked it up and put it inside his shirt. When she rose, he stopped her with a light hold on her wrist.

“It ain’t safe for you to be out alone, miss,” he warned.

She smiled. “Then perhaps you should see me home, Mr. O’Hara?”

For a moment, she wondered if he’d refuse, then he sighed and nodded his acceptance of the suggestion.

When they were walking through the town, she led him away from the governor’s mansion, and he grabbed her arm and made her face him.

“I’ll take your message to the captain, Miss Katheryn,” he stated. “I won’t take you to him.”

“My house is this way, Mr. O’Hara,” she informed him. “While Jack had you chasing all over the Caribbean for the *Fury* and before I was abducted, I persuaded my father that I needed a private place of my own. I found the house the day Jack had the *Thorn* careened on the beach.”



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O'Hara was skeptical and made no effort to pretend otherwise. "He never did know how to control you, did he?"

She laughed. "He learned a long time ago that it was easier for us both if he didn't try." They continued to walk. "How did you come to be a pirate, Mr. O'Hara? When I last saw you in England you were a lieutenant in the Royal Navy."

"Aye." He nodded. "And Jack Stanton was a captain. When Lord Chesney had him court-martialed for killing that ridiculous dandy of a son, I helped him escape, and went on the account with him when he headed for the Indies and I met up with him again. I can't say I've regretted it much, Miss Katheryn."

"Nor would Jack, I'd venture to guess." She smiled. She stopped him and pointed. "That's my home, Mr. O'Hara," she told him, then grinned. "It's called The Phantom's Lair."

O'Hara stared for just a moment, then he burst into hearty laughter.

"Aye, miss, and a fine name it is. I'll tell the captain."

"Tonight, Mr. O'Hara," she pleaded softly.

He nodded, and watched her slip into the heavily wooded growth that virtually surrounded her small house but for a tiny clearing in front of the doors. A closer look showed him the narrow path that had been hewn into the underbrush, and a second look told him that she'd chosen it for its visibility from the upper balcony. She'd be able to see anyone nearing the place if she was watching, and only a chosen few would be able to find the second path that would lead to the rear entrance. She'd shown him so that he might tell Jack how to safely approach the place.

\* \* \*

Three nights after her foray into town, Katheryn heard a knock on the rear door of her home. She was alone here, only permitting her maid Patty to work during the day. At night, she insisted on being on her own, much to the outraged maid's displeasure. But, like so many others, Patty had long ago learned that Katheryn could be more

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contrary than the average mule when it suited her. And, when it came to this house, it suited Katheryn to be the mistress and not to have her actions questioned by anyone.

Climbing from her bath and pulling on a nightgown and robe, Katheryn when to answer the quiet knock the second time she heard it. Heart pounding wildly in her ears, she reached the door and tore it open in her eagerness. Before her, more breathtakingly handsome than she remembered, stood Jack Stanton. He looked curious, and wary.

“Come in, Jack.”

She stepped aside and he hesitated for only a moment before walking into the house and closing the door behind him.

“Your note was most intriguing,” he said, looking into her eyes.

“Is that why it took you several days to come to me?”

“Katheryn,” he began sternly. “This is a very bad idea, love.”

“Is it?” she challenged, and stepped toward him, amused when he backed up a step. If she’d drawn a saber he wouldn’t have been more edgy. “I think it a very fine idea, my dear Jack.” She again closed the distance between them and stood mere inches from touching him.

His gaze drifted over the smooth, delicate features, admiring with new perceptiveness the striking beauty in her face. There was no doubt in her eyes, only a determination he couldn’t deny. His look dropped to the slightly parted lips that had haunted him so frequently during the past few days, and he leaned closer to cover her mouth with his own.

The contact was electric and Jack melted into the caress, his tongue slipping between her lips to taste again the tantalizing warmth of her mouth. She met the thrust of his tongue with her own and drew him deeper into the kiss as she shifted closer to him and molded her body to the tall pirate’s. Long minutes later, they broke the kiss with a gasp and he looked into her dazed brown eyes and smiled.

“Are you sure about this, Katheryn?” Every part of him longed to ignore the query, but he truly needed to know that the woman he held

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understood what she was asking him for, and how it would affect her future life. Jack was extremely conscious of how badly he wanted to be with her, but he wasn't willing to risk regrets on her part. He knew in his heart that he was already bound to her, however unwanted the connection was, and also that he wanted nothing more at that moment than to make this a real beginning for them.

Katheryn couldn't trust her voice, her head was spinning with the combination of confusion and excitement. The intense kiss had reawakened the hungry passion she'd felt the day she'd discovered the *Thorn* careened on the beach a few miles away—the day Jack had very nearly made love to her on a bed of moss, in a shallow hollow. Now, like then, she was left shaking with the desire she felt for more of the intoxicating contact. She drew in a quivering breath and very slowly nodded, her eyes locked with his.

"Why?" *Why are you pushing this?* a tiny voice in Jack's head whispered. He heard the answer, as well, but shied away from it just then.

"Because I think I love you." Katheryn closed her eyes once the words were out, as surprised at having said them as he appeared to be at hearing them. "I think I've loved you for a long time, Jack. From the moment I first heard your name, so many years ago. They tell stories about you back in England. I just never knew my dreams might one day become reality." She felt the pirate's hand under her chin and she opened her eyes again to meet Jack's pale, silver gaze.

"I think I may love you, as well, my pretty Kate," he whispered. He was almost surprised by how sincerely he felt and meant the words, then it disappeared in the glow of happiness he read in her radiant smile.

"Would you like to see the master bedroom of this house, Captain?" she whispered.

The blush that stained her cheeks charmed the jaded buccaneer more than she could ever have known.

"The Phantom's Lair, indeed." He smiled. "Please. I am yours to

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command, Lady.” He inclined his head in a small bow, and she took him by the hand and headed for the stairs.

The bedroom was deceptive in its size, and was dominated by a massive, four-poster bed. Floor to ceiling glass doors were open, the warm scent of the Caribbean drifting in to add a distinctive tang to the night air. The bedding was worth a small fortune, he noted, the finest silk and linens, trimmed with lace that had no doubt been made by Katheryn herself.

The colors in the room were soft and cool, and the hardwood floor beneath his booted feet gleamed so that he was certain he would see himself reflected in the shine once morning came.

Katheryn released her hold on his hand and went to light several lamps, which cast golden warmth into the room and dancing shadows onto the walls.

He leaned on the doorframe for a moment, drinking in the loving thought that had gone into every detail of the splendid bedroom. Then his attention was once again captured by the lovely woman who had created a sanctuary fit for a king, let alone a hunted pirate.

“What do you think of it, Jack?”

He laughed quietly. “’Tis a fine refuge, my love,” he replied with a nod. “Better than any I’ve been offered in my lifetime, Kate.”

“I want this to be a safe place for you, Jack. It’s one of the reasons I asked my father to allow me to find a house of my own.”

“And does he know what you have christened this sanctuary?”

“No,” she conceded. “Though I would proudly have an engraved plaque put on the gate if it would suit you.”

“That won’t be necessary, darling,” he assured her and came fully into the room. He didn’t stop until he was directly in front of her, and she had to lean back to meet his gaze.

She saw the shift in his expression and her nerves responded vividly to his very presence. Her look moved over the pirate’s features and she

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smiled when she realized how different Jack looked to her now. She was noticing things that she'd never taken the time to see before, things that made her want to be as close to him as it was possible to be. Her hand seemed to rise of its own volition, and she let her fingers whisper across the high, curving cheekbones that dominated his features. Her sensitive touch lingered at the deep laugh lines near the corners of his remarkable silver-gray eyes, then moved lower to brush a feather-like caress over his slightly smiling mouth.

Jack felt the light touch stir a tremor that ran the full length of his body and he stepped closer to her, their bodies not quite touching, yet. He was surprised by how intensely he was reacting to everything, as well as how much he wanted to draw out the sensations he was feeling. Katheryn's eyes were shy when she met his again, and Jack's conscience pushed him for what he knew would be the final time.

"Are you sure this is what you want, love?" He asked again, the words little more than a breathy whisper between them.

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about this," she acknowledged in a quiet murmur. She looked rather embarrassed by the revelation, and her color rose again, but her eyes never left him. "I want to be your lover, Jack."

"Katheryn, you have to be certain," he pressed. "There are men who'll brand you a whore, or worse, especially any you might later choose to marry."

Katheryn thought about the words for a long minute, weighing the honesty of them against the undeniable fear they stirred within her heart.

"I don't care, Jack." She finally forced her voice to work, and discovered as she made the statement that it was a more simple and honest truth than many others she'd uttered throughout her life. She belonged to Jack Stanton, it was in her soul, and no other would ever touch her.

Jack hesitated for another moment, until her hips moved into his, then he caught her mouth in a kiss that conveyed exactly how much he wanted

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her. The surge of desire that swept through him left him trembling against the curvaceous body pressed so tightly to his and he had to pull back enough to gasp air into his lungs. Her breathing was easily as strained as his, and Jack smiled into the silken hair beneath his chin as he held her to him. The second time he claimed her tempting lips, his caress was gentle and exploring. His hands dropped to her slender waist, then began to glide upward over the lithe muscles of her back, as his tongue entwined with hers, tasting again the warmth that had taunted him so often in his daydreaming. She was clinging to him and he answered the restless thrust of her hips with his own movement, pleased at the shudder of response that rippled through her.

He finally stepped back and smiled at her flushed features.

“We don’t have to do anything you’re not ready for, Kate, I promise,” he said, his tone one of reassuring warmth. “We’ve got all the time in the world.”

Katheryn shook her head and tried to smile. “It’s not that, Jack.. I just...” She trailed off as her gaze dropped to the floor. “I don’t want to disappoint you,” she finally managed, feeling both foolish and relieved now that she’d made the confession.

Jack’s eyes closed and he had to force the roar in his ears to dim. If that was the only thing worrying her, he was well and truly blessed, to say the least. He had an extensive list of possible problems that he was currently ignoring. He moved closer again and drew her into a gentle embrace.

“Nothing you will ever do could disappoint me in any way, Katheryn,” he murmured next to her ear. He smiled when her arms tightened around him and she relaxed against him with a soft sigh.

Jack felt the stirring of responsive desire awakening inside him. He brushed aside the heavy tangle of copper-tinted auburn hair at her neck, and lowered his lips to the enticing curve. Katheryn’s hands glided over his back as he began to trail kisses up the side of her neck, then continued

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the exploring trek across the smooth contour of her jaw until he caught her mouth with his. Their tongues met and Jack silenced everything in his mind as he answered the demand of their shared passion.

When the kiss finally ended long minutes later, Jack led her over to the bed and sat her down. She slid to the center and opened her arms to him, then arched upward into the embrace as he settled over her and covered her mouth with another breath-stealing kiss. His hands worked the buttons on her nightdress and pushed it aside to give him access to the smooth, flawless expanse of her ivory skin. Sensitive fingers moved over the finely molded contours of her shoulders and upper chest, then drifted downward to the gentle, sloping swell of her breasts. He felt the tiny gasp of pleasure when his thumbs brushed a whispery caress across her taut nipples. He released his hold on her lips and his mouth moved to the soft hollow at the base of her throat, his tongue stroking gently, then with increased pressure when her head fell back and her breathing grew strained.

Her low moan vibrated against his tongue when, seconds later, his hand shifted and he pulled one of her legs over his hip. He bent his head to one of her nipples, his teeth tugging on the hard tip while his fingers probed between her thighs. A moment later, he was surprised when she pushed his hand away. He eased back and stared into the glittering dark eyes, only then noticing the hoarseness of his own breathing.

Jack watched through hooded eyes as she slid off the huge bed and turned to look at him. His fascination increased as Katheryn began to undress, discarding first the simple robe that hung from her shoulders, then tugging at the nightgown until it pooled around her feet. Each movement was made with calculated, evocative grace. His eyes wandered openly over the glorious beauty of the woman before him, her luscious curves and pale skin glowing in the shifting gold of the lamplight. His entire body responded to the sight of her. His gaze dropped to the dark auburn triangle that dipped enticingly between her thighs, and he felt his shaft hardening in anticipation and excitement.

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Jack tossed her a grin and stood up, but she evaded his reach. She crawled back onto the bed and knelt there, facing him.

"I want to see you, Jack," she requested.

He nodded and began to remove his clothes, his eyes watching her expressive features for every subtle nuance of reaction. The last thing he discarded was the heavily beaded leather thong that held his hair out of his face. He dropped it on the bedside table and turned to face her. He wasn't fully expecting the open appreciation he read in her pretty face when he was totally naked and her eyes wandered over him. In the back of his mind he acknowledged the fact that this was the first time in a very long time that he'd taken the time to truly look at a woman he intended to make love with, and probably longer again since he'd permitted the luxury of having his lover drink her fill of him without a single touch exchanged.

Katheryn stared in open interest at Jack, feeling the ache in her body growing as her eyes caressed the tall, muscular form in front of her. His shoulders were broad, and the smooth, curving chest flowed into a flat, solid stomach, then tapered into narrow hips. Long legs were well-muscled and strong, and her stomach did a wild lurch when she recalled the feeling of this magnificent body pressed tightly against hers. Her look drifted back up to Jack's straining erection and she felt a moment of uneasiness when she allowed her mind to contemplate what it would feel like to have him inside her. She dismissed the momentary twinge and turned trusting eyes back to her handsome pirate.

Jack had said he loved her; that knowledge took away any traces of fear which remained. She grasped his hand and pulled him down to the bed as she settled back. Her fingers entwined in his thick, lush hair and she opened her mouth to the probe of his tongue as Jack's body covered hers. She arched against him, wanting the feel of his smooth skin touching her completely, enjoying a perception of him that she would never have thought possible.

Jack released her mouth and shifted lower in the bed as his lips



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continued to trail soft caresses over her silky skin. His hand moved lower to part her thighs and he felt the reactive rise of her hips when he brushed a light caress over the thatch of auburn hair, then moved his fingers farther down and parted her already slick folds.

Her gasp of pleasure a moment later brought an indulgent smile to Jack's lips. He stared into her drowsy eyes for reaction to the steady stroking of his fingers over her hypersensitive skin. As her breathing evened out, his probe became more intimate, and he slipped one finger into her tight, wet heat. When he lowered his head to taste the sweet core of her passion, her hands tangled in his hair, though he didn't know if she was asking or denying. He avoided the contact she clearly expected, and let his tongue play in the curving hollow of her hipbones.

Katheryn felt a surging wave of sensation begin to build to an inferno inside her, turning the blood in her veins to something wild and hot. She was burning from the inside out, and she wanted it never to end. Jack's teasing fingers between her legs kept her gasping for breath. She shuddered again when she felt the satiny touch of long strands of midnight hair tickling her thighs. A second later she cried out and her entire body convulsed when he lifted her hips and his mouth trailed open, wet kisses along the length of her thighs before his tongue slid into her and began to lick in leisurely strokes.

Jack felt the spasms of pleasure running through her body as well as the betraying tension that grew with each careful thrust of her hips. Katheryn's hands in his hair tangled almost painfully and he had to grip her hips as her sudden release rocked through her with a force that left her choking for air. She fell back against the pillows and Jack let his head rest in the curve of her hip for a few seconds as he fought for air himself.

He shifted to stretch out next to her and his fingers brushed feathery caresses over the dampness between her breasts. She turned dazed eyes to him and the smile that lit her features was dreamy and so filled with love that Jack felt it flood over him and bypass a veritable lifetime of acquired

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defenses. The innocence and honesty he read in her expression warmed his heart, and filled him with a security he hadn't known in far too many years. He would never have to guard any part of himself from this gentle woman, he realized with a sense of near awe.

Katheryn saw the change in his face, and she reached out to touch his cheek, concerned by the subtle change she felt in him. "What's wrong, Jack?"

"Nothing, love," Jack reassured quickly. "I was just thinking how special you are."

"You're pretty special, too." Katheryn smiled, her fingers moving from the high cheekbone to whisper over the fullness of his bottom lip. She parted the pirate's lips and leaned over to cover his mouth with a deep, seeking kiss. She moved as the pressure of the caress became a demand and when Jack rolled onto his back and lifted her off the bed, she settled over his hips, then sat up. She grinned down at him as her hands traced light patterns of touch over his broad chest. She could feel the hardness of his erection nestled against her warmth, and she shivered.

Jack's hands at her waist pulled her down again and Katheryn's hips answered the restless, thrusting movement of his body rocking beneath her. Her hand slipped between them as she shifted and her fingers curled around the smooth, hot velvet of his shaft. Jack's hand covered hers and began to stroke, his hips moving into the rhythm instantly. She quickened the firm strokes for several moments, enjoying the strain in his breathing, then she stilled the action and leaned over to cover his lips again.

Jack's tongue slipped between her parted lips, probing deeply, and she answered the hunger she felt in the caress, her own excitement creating a heady dizziness inside her. She finally broke away from the searing kiss and her lips moved to his throat, sucking gently on the skin as her tongue pressed into the smooth hollow. She could feel every shaky breath of air he dragged in and her mouth moved to his chest, where she teased the hard, sensitive tips of his nipples, her tongue tracing tiny circles around

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each of them before she closed her teeth around one and teased at the other with bold, exploring fingers. Jack's gasp of pleasure became a soft murmur of encouragement when she began to suck on the nipple in her mouth.

Jack's hands glided over the curving expanse of her back as his entire body responded to the gentle, seeking touches. His body ached with the denial he was imposing on himself, and he was torn between the longing to satisfy that need and the equally strong desire to prolong and savor every second of their lovemaking.

Katheryn's tongue leaving a wet trail across his chest and down his stomach transcended everything except the intoxicating swell of passion that washed over him, and he arched into the sudden bliss of her warm mouth as it slid over his swollen shaft. His hands dropped to her shoulders and he thrust carefully into the exquisite, engulfing wetness. He moaned softly when her mouth began to move over him, and his hips answered the motion with growing urgency. He felt the betraying tension in his body and he stilled the movement of his hips, determined to control his release until he was ready.

Katheryn was momentarily startled by the sudden stillness in Jack, and she pulled back to look at him.

The erratic rise and fall of his chest as he fought for air brought a smile to her face and the knowledge of her sexual power made her wickedly brazen. Her fingers slipped between his thighs as the pirate willingly spread his legs. Katheryn's mouth moved back to his rigid cock and her tongue licked the smooth length of the glistening shaft, her touch soft and teasing. Jack groaned in an agony of arousal when her tongue played over the tiny slit in the head of his penis and licked at the moisture there. Her head ducked lower to follow the path of her exploring fingers, but Jack pulled her back into his arms and caught her in a kiss that left them both struggling for breath several minutes later.

When he reversed their positions again, and was lying over her,

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nestled between the silk of her thighs, Jack kissed her forehead and made her meet his eyes. “Kate,” he whispered, voice hoarse. “Do you trust me, love?”

Katheryn didn't trust her voice. She nodded, and caught Jack into another kiss that removed any doubts that may have lingered in her handsome pirate's heart. He withdrew from the caress and through heavy eyes, she watched him, fascinated at the ripples of passion she could feel running through his magnificent body. He hesitated for only another moment, then guided his eager cock to her slick entrance. “There will be pain, love,” he warned her. “But, after that, I promise you nothing but pleasure.”

She nodded, and her eyes locked with his as he began to push deep into her. Jack saw the quick widening of her eyes as surprise flickered there, then she moved slightly under him, her hips rising to meet him. Gritting his teeth, he thrust hard and was buried completely in her tight heat. She gasped as the pain froze her for a few eternal heartbeats of time and he held himself motionless as she adjusted to him inside her.

“Katheryn?”

“Love me, Jack,” she breathed next to his ear, and he groaned, swept into the tidal wave of passion that had been waiting for this moment. He closed his eyes again and let himself bask in the incredible sensation of their bodies joined together, the passion that filled him fueled by the depth of love that bound them. Katheryn's tiny whimper of need was accompanied by a restless thrust upward and Jack allowed his hips to answer the demand. He moved slowly at first, his strokes shallow, mindful of her inexperience. As she began to match his rhythm, he reached down to lift her legs and place them around his waist. She wrapped her arms around him and her soft, “Oh, Jack...” blurred in his mind as he lost himself to the near desperate need for release.

His name mutated into a sobbing scream of ecstasy long minutes later, and Katheryn shuddered in his arms. As her muscles clenched and

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quivered around him, his orgasm swelled within him and his hips moved with greater urgency. Seconds later, his release rushed through him and tumbled him into the same euphoria that was staring at him from her dark, ebony eyes. He moaned as his orgasm spilled into her and left him shuddering against her still shaking body.

Almost ten minutes passed before Jack stirred from the sated stupor that held him, and he very gently slipped free of her. He heard the tiny murmur of sound that escaped Katheryn and he tilted her head up to his and covered her mouth with a tender kiss, the probe of his tongue caressing. She stared up at him a minute later and Jack's heart smiled at the look of unabashed love he saw in her drowsy brown eyes.

"Your father is going to kill me," he murmured, and kissed her forehead.

"He'll have to catch you first," she whispered, voice tainted with laughter. "And a phantom is an elusive prey, my love."

"Mmmmm..." He settled on his back and closed his eyes, fighting off the desire to sleep soundly for at least a week.

"Jack?"

He opened one eye and saw her staring at the rose tattoo on his arm.

"Katheryn?"

"Why a wilted rose and the bloody thorn?"

He sighed, then turned on his side and faced her. "The first woman I loved was a pretty parlor maid named Rose. When she chose to marry someone else, I discovered that roses have thorns, and they rip into a heart until it's bloody and wounded. This always reminded me not to fall in love again. I failed, of course, and did marry. I met her in Jamaica. Elaine was a beauty, and I was captivated. I was also quite foolish, and it renewed my determination never to fall in love again." He grinned at her, and kissed her until the concern left her pretty features. "The second time, I managed nicely—until you came to Tortuga and set your sights on a poor, ignorant pirate unable to resist your charms."

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"You are many things, Jack Stanton," she teased, then pushed him onto his back again before she climbed across his hips and sat back, "I would hardly count ignorant or poor among them," she concluded. "You, my darling, are wicked, and by far too handsome for anyone's good."

He chose not to answer, but merely grinned in his roguish way. She traced a circle over the smooth expanse of his chest, stopping when her palm rested over his heart.

"Lucian told me about Elaine," she said cautiously.

He nodded.

"You loved her."

It wasn't quite a question. He decided to answer anyway.

"I did, once. Sometimes, now, I wonder if it was Elaine I loved, or the idea of her. I've heard more than once over the years that she wasn't unwilling to go with deBeaupre, though in truth, I will never know for certain." He reached out and picked up the hair thong he'd tossed on the table earlier, his fingers toying idly with the golden beads. "This..." He pointed out one particularly ornate bead, more carefully fashioned than the others. "...was made from the wedding ring I gave her. There is one trinket or jewel for every treasure I've taken. Though I am not certain I will be able to add one for the treasure I've taken this night," he added with a mildly wicked grin.

"I want to go with you," she announced.

He shook his head. "No, love, not aboard the *Thorn*. T'would be far too dangerous, for both of us."

"Jack—"

He pulled her down to him and kissed her with leisurely thoroughness. When he did draw back to look into her glittering dark eyes, she was soft and pliant with reawakened desire.

"Stay here, Katheryn," he whispered. "In this home you've created for us."

She considered the request for a few minutes, then nodded. "On one

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condition.”

He was about to kiss her again, but drew back, his silver eyes sharp with suspicion.

“Your terms, lady?”

“I want to see if my father can have your name cleared, Jack,” she replied seriously. When he started to shake his head, she touched his cheek and smiled. “I will do it anyway, my love. I remember Lord Chesney. His son was a fool, and he is a bigger one.”

“Do as you will, Katheryn,” Jack relented. “But do not be surprised if your father is less than helpful.”

“Leave my father to me, dearest.” She grinned, an echo of his wry humor.

“Suddenly,” Jack said, “I feel distinctly sorry for the Governor.”

## DENYSE M. BRIDGER

Denyse is a native of Atlantic Canada, born in the country's Easternmost province, Newfoundland, and raised in Nova Scotia. A lifelong dreamer, she began writing at an early age and can't recall a time when she wasn't creating in some artistic form.

"My first published story was, oddly enough, a media based tale written for the TV series *Miami Vice*, first published in 1986. Up until that time I had never heard of fanzines and fandom. It's proven to be an immensely valuable training ground for professional writing in that it teaches discipline and attention to detail. There's no tougher critic than a fan who knows their show or movie down to the tiniest nuance, and they're not shy about telling you when you've missed the mark!"

An active interest in the American West has been a lifetime obsession, too. Cowboys have been a love-affair that began at the tender age of three, and eventually expanded to encompass an equally timeless passion for pirates, Greek Gods, and Ancient Egypt. The other side of the Old West intrigue is an affinity for Victorian England, particularly the 1885-1895 part of the century.

The American Civil War has also been a source of avid interest. "How can anyone not be moved by the tragedy that defines that conflict? There are endless stories of courage and honor, and each man and woman who lived through America's greatest turmoil was left scarred in some way. Those who rose above their losses and went on with the stoicism and utter bravery of eternal legends really have to inspire and humble anyone who reads about them."



At this point in her career, Denyse has had published in the vicinity of 400 stories and novellas, in almost any genre you can name. “The only thing I haven’t tried yet is hard-core science fiction, and horror. Since I don’t consider vampires as I write them to be the fodder of horror, I classify those stories as Dark Fantasy.” Many of her vampire stories have appeared in Margaret L. Carter’s anthology, *The Vampire’s Crypt*, and *Night To Dawn*, published and edited by Dawn Callahan. Her poetry has been published internationally.

Denyse has also been the recipient of numerous awards, most notably the Fan Quality Award, which is given annually for excellence in fan fictions based on film and television. As of May 2004, there are four awards in her collection, and no less than a dozen nominations to her credit.

What’s next on the agenda? “I hope many more stories for AQP. A home for my ‘labor of love’ Greek fantasy novel. And more time to get all the ideas in my head down onto the written page...”

\* \* \*

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