



HEART'S RANSOM

By Sara Reinke

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CHAPTER ONE

The Isle of Wight, off the southern coast of England
October, 1748

Kitty Ransom awoke as a heavy hand clamped against her mouth. She started to yelp, but her startled breath was cut short against the large palm, and her eyes flew wide in the darkness. At first, still dazed with sleep, she thought it might be Michael Urry and other young men from the nearby village of Totland; they had snuck out to the bluffs, to her father's estate, Rosneath to have a spot of fun with her, a wicked prank of some sort. After a moment, however, it occurred to her that the hand against her face was rough and calloused, as if from a lifetime of harsh labor—something scrawny, privileged Michael Urry and his friends had never known.

That realization left her seized with sudden fear, a fright that only mounted as the man seized her above the crook of her elbow and hauled her abruptly, roughly out of bed. She danced on her tiptoes for a moment beside him, tangled in her bedclothes and heard scuffling footsteps and heavy breaths from around and behind them. By her quick estimation, the sounds accounted for at least five other men in her room.

Thieves, she thought. My God, we are being robbed!

She was spun smartly about and shoved face-down onto her bed. She felt the heavy weight of the man immediately behind her and winced as he grabbed her by the wrists, jerking her arms toward the small of her back.

“My jewelry,” she said as he began to bind her wrists together, cinching a coarse hank of rope tightly against her skin. “It is all in my highboy, the top drawer, in a wooden box. You can—”

“We do not want your jewelry,” the man said, his voice marred by a heavy, clipped accent. Kitty’s heart froze with bright, new horror as she realized what he must surely want, then. He would rape her. Perhaps the men all meant to take turns. This notion made her struggle suddenly, wildly, and she opened her mouth to scream in frightened, futile protest. Just as she hitched in her breath, the man shoved a thick wad of cloth between her lips, muffling her voice. She shook her head, mewling helplessly around the gag as he fettered it tautly in place with another scrap of linen.

He closed his hand against her arm again and hauled her upright. He jerked her about to face him. “Stop looking at me,” he seethed at her, and he slapped her roughly across the face, startling and hurting her. She could tell from his voice that he was only a young man, no older than she and probably a good half a head shorter, given the approximate origin of his voice. He spoke with murderous intensity edged in his voice, his fingers clamped tightly, painfully against her arm, and she was frightened.

“I cannot see you,” she tried to say, but around the gag, the words came out garbled. They did not know; they did not realize. No one ever did at first. Kitty could turn her head, direct her eyes towards the sounds of voices with uncanny ability and accuracy. It took strangers a few

moments to realize she didn't just rudely stare at them as they spoke; she was blind. "Please, I am—"

She mewled as again, the man slapped her, this time with enough force to knock the breath from her, and leave the distinctive taste of blood in her mouth. "Be quiet," he said and she whimpered as he hoisted her unceremoniously over his shoulder. He had obviously not counted on Kitty's considerable height, and he staggered somewhat beneath her, struggling to find his footing. He snapped something at his fellows in a breathless voice, and to Kitty, it sounded like he spoke in another language, perhaps Spanish or Italian. He began to move, the other men flanking about him as they left the room and hurried down the corridor.

Where are they taking me? Kitty thought, her head still swimming from the blow. *Think, Kitty. Panicking will get you nowhere. You do not have your eyes, but you have your other senses—and your wits. Use them.*

The man carrying her smelled like the sea; a bittersweet, metallic fragrance that had always seemed pleasant and fond to her when she would smell it in her father's clothing, but now seemed very cold and foreboding. She craned her hands, struggling to prod at the rope binding her wrists. Her father had taught her plenty about knots and she quickly recognized the design as a hastily drawn bowline, the most common sort known to those who made their life's work on the sea. *Is this man a sailor, then?* she thought. *A fisherman? Are they bringing me to the beach?*

The man's gait was hobbled and clumsy, as if he walked with a limp. It grew particularly pronounced as they descended the stairs toward the main foyer. She might have taken advantage of this, struggled enough to topple his balance and get him to drop her, but even as soon as this thought was in her head, she knew it was

useless. She could hear other men behind them, following closely, and more besides in the lead. She was surrounded and there would be no place to run.

I could call out for help, she thought. Even with the gag, Lloyd or Frances might hear me. If not them, then Hannah or Annemarie.

She abandoned this idea, too, as quickly as it came to her. Her father's retinue of household servants consisted of elderly butler Lloyd Burgher and his wife, housekeeper Frances, both of whom had served the Ransom family since well before Kitty had been born. Hannah and Annemarie Marchant, both housemaids, were only fourteen and fifteen years old respectively. Whatever the men had planned, whatever harm they meant to see done to Kitty, she did not want it brought upon the servants, as well, by alerting them to her plight.

She could judge by the direction they followed as they left the house that they meant to deliver her to the beach. There was only one way off of the Isle of Wight—by boat—and Kitty knew once they had her aboard and seabound, she would never escape. If she was going to get loose of them, and the entire terrifying predicament, she would have to do it quickly.

She strained against her bonds until her fingers brushed clumsily against the ropes again. She began to twist her hands back and forth, working at the bowline knot, slowly easing the ends loose. If she was to have any chance—any hope—at all, she would need her hands free.

The path leading down the rocky cliff faces upon which Rosneath Manor had been built to overlook the mouth of the Solent was narrow and winding. Once the man carrying her had started to pick his way along the steep slope, she began to struggle again, harder than ever. It caught him off-guard and forced him off-balance; he uttered a sharp cry as he stumbled, losing his footing, and

as he staggered clumsily, he dropped her from his shoulder.

Kitty stumbled as her feet hit the rocks, but jerked her hands, unfettering the knot in full and freeing herself. She thrust her hands out just as her knees barked against the rocks and managed to spare herself a fall face-first. Her captor had made up the head of the line as the would-be kidnappers had filed down the path, and now, as he floundered haplessly, he blocked the way for the rest of them. Kitty turned her face until the breeze off of the Solent brushed against her headlong; thus, establishing her sense of direction, she scrambled to her feet and took off running, scampering for the beach.

The path was treacherous, but Kitty had grown up in Rosneath Manor. She had followed the path's winding course nearly every day of her life; she knew it as well and fondly as the floor plan of her father's house. She ran with a frantic haste born of familiarity; as the rocks beneath her battered and scraped open the bottoms of her feet, she did not feel the pain or slow her gait. She could hear the men moving again behind her; she could hear the heavy, clumsy patter of their footfalls as they hurried after her as best they were able. Her breath frosted in a luminescent haze with each frightened gasp, the bitter night air sliced through the thin linen of her nightgown, cutting through to the marrow, but still she ran.

She made it to the beach, feeling the hard rocks beneath her yield to wet, coarse sand and cut to her right, racing north for the cliff walls. As she held one hand out before her, she wrenched the gag from her mouth with the other, but did not scream for help. The nearest village, Totland, was several miles away. Even with the rockfaces and water to carry her voice had she cried out loudly, there would have been no hope of rescue found there. She had to hide, someplace where the men would

not find her, someplace where she would be safe until the morning.

She yelped in surprise as she plowed headlong and at a full, fervent run into another man. He was remarkably tall, taller than she was, and hitting him was akin to smacking against a stone wall. She staggered back, nearly losing her footing and pitching rump-first against the cold, wet sand.

She reclaimed her balance and ducked to her left, hoping against hope that she could dart past him and still make it to the cliff walls. She heard a hiss of wind and a long shaft of wood, a quarterstaff, swung in front of her, blocking her passage. It caught her gently but smartly beneath the chin, drawing her feet and breath to an abrupt halt.

“Do not run,” the man said to her, holding the stave poised against her throat.

Kitty ducked beneath the shaft and bolted for the right. Again, she heard a whistle of breeze, and again, the quarterstaff fell against her throat, drawing her to a stumbling, wide-eyed halt. “I said do not run.”

She ducked again, panicked and ran with all of her might in the direction of the cliffs. She heard a peculiar, fluttering sound and then felt something brush against the top of her head, her hair. She heard the impact of boot heels landing heavily in the sand as the man dropped immediately in front of her to block her path. He had given chase and planted the end of his quarterstaff in the sand, using it as a fulcrum to launch himself into the air, vaulting over her head.

“Stop running from me, Catherine,” he said and it did not occur to her that he had addressed her by name; she was too terrified for such realizations. She had been reduced to pure and primal instincts—fight or flight—and she ran squarely into him, tucking her head so that she

plowed her shoulder into his sternum and forced him back, whoofing for breath.

Kitty shouldered past him and ran once more, her hands outstretched as she pawed at the open air. *Please*, she thought, and she began to weep in frightened desperation. *Please just let me reach the cliffs. Please...!*

She felt the end of the man's quarterstaff hook against her ankle, tripping her. She tumbled face-first against the sand, her chin smacking down painfully, her teeth closing hard enough against her tongue to draw blood. She grunted breathlessly and then moaned as the man caught her by the arm and hauled her to her feet. "No...!" she pleaded.

He hoisted her over his shoulder, carrying her again, and no matter how hard she tried, how fervently she struggled, she could not wrestle free of him. He was taller and stronger than she was, and he bore her easily away from the cliffs, back toward the water's edge. When he set her down in the belly of a skiff, when she heard the wood creak as the men set to work shoving it off the beach and back into the waves, she knew she was in terrible, terrible trouble.

Daddy, she thought, one last, frantic plea. *Daddy, help me...!*

CHAPTER TWO

They do not know who I am, Kitty thought once she had been delivered aboard a ship. It must have been set at anchor off the coast of the island in the English Channel while the crewmen who had taken her had gone ashore on a landing skiff. They were underway now; she could feel the sensation of the ship in motion all around her, and through the stern windows, she could hear churning water as the ship plowed a broad wake.

They have kidnapped me, she thought. *The bloody idiots.*

The men did not know who she was: Catherine Ransom—"Kitty" among those known well and fondly—daughter of Captain John Ransom, the reputed "Hawk of the High Seas."

They could not know, she thought. *If they did, they would be fools to take me.*

She had been brought below the main deck into what she assumed was the captain's quarters, giving its location on the stern end of the ship. The tall man from the beach had carried her there, and Kitty had moved carefully about the quarters, her hands outstretched, her footsteps hesitant lest she flounder into the hard corner of a wayward piece of furniture.

She had explored the room cautiously, discovering well-laden bookshelves; a writing desk covered in mountains of papers, parchments, opened tomes; a broad bed with heavily quilted coverlets and tall, carved frame posts; a large wardrobe with a cool, glossy surface that was locked for some reason. She ran her hands across it all in turn, formulating a floor plan in her mind, imagining the chamber around her.

This was a habit she had developed early in her childhood, because otherwise her father would have been content to see her spend the rest of her life in the sanctuary of her bedroom, or with handmaids and valets to guide her about. She had not been born blind, but a fever had stripped her sight from her when she had been very young. She did not remember much of being able to see, but she remembered the litany of abuses that had been passed off as medicinal measures as a parade of so-called “physicians” had tried to cure her of the handicap. Her hair had been cut, her body bled regularly. Her diet had been altered, her liquid intake curtailed, enemas administered and vomiting induced, until finally, she had been more miserable from these “treatments” than any ailment. Her father had relented, accepting at last and years later, that to which Kitty had long-since grown accustomed.

She had learned to visualize things inside of her mind based on touch, to memorize the layout of rooms, even the entire breadth of Rosneath and most of its surrounding terrain. Sometimes she would use one of her father’s walking canes to guide her, tapping it back and forth in a sweeping path before her. Other times, she relied on her outstretched hands and the careful measuring of footfalls. *Ten paces from the bed’s footboard to the wardrobe*, she thought. *Turn about three paces and then it is twenty-seven more to the desk. The bookshelves are to the portside,*

five paces from the desk, and then around about and back again, fifteen steps to the bed.

That was how she had learned the path from Rosneath down to the beach, along the rocky, treacherous trail. At first, she had gone in the company of servants, her young handmaids whom she had begged and pleaded into compliance. Then, as her confidence had grown, as had the staff's faith in her inherent sense of direction, she had made the trek alone more times than she could recount. Of course, if John Ransom had ever learned of these sojourns, he would have promptly keeled over, likely dead on the spot. She was a grown woman now, yet he continued to dote upon her as if she were a child, or some fragile porcelain doll best left kept high on a shelf. Now matter her insistence or how often she had tried, he could not—or *would not*—admit that Kitty was not nearly as helpless as he believed.

Her father would come for her; of this, she had no doubt. *But in the meantime*, she thought, *it would not hurt to find something to use for a weapon.* Thus far, her curious endeavors had yielded nothing more promising than a quill, but she kept exploring still the same, patting against a wash basin in futile hope.

An officer in the English Royal Navy, John Ransom had earned his reputation first during the War of Jenkin's Ear in the Caribbean almost ten years earlier. He had assumed the helm of his man-of-war following the death of his commander in an off-shore skirmish against Spanish privateers. From this vantage of command, Ransom had not only captured the Spanish ship, but shackled and delivered her crew to the nearest British outpost. By doing so, he had also rescued a veritable fortune in gold and silver bouillon bound in her cargo hull for Spain from West Indies mines.

In the years following the war, as captain of his own frigate, Ransom had hunted down and captured at least twenty-two vessels suspected of piracy or privateering in both the Caribbean and in European waters. His nickname, the Hawk of the High Seas, had come from his reputation for swooping upon his unsuspecting adversaries and catching them off-guard, much as a hawk seizes hapless prey. Ransom's exploits and adventures had swelled to nearly legendary proportions both in England and abroad, and he was considered a hero in his homeland—perhaps England's most famous citizen beside the king.

No man escaped John Ransom on the high seas once he had set his mind and frigate against them. He would come for Kitty; the hand of God Himself could not have prevented him.

A soft clack from across the room startled her, and she turned as she heard the chamber door, unlocked from beyond the threshold, swing open. Reflexively, she shied back against the nearest wall. She heard footsteps, a strange, shuffling sound as if someone approached with a maimed leg or injured foot.

"Who is there?" she asked, her hands outstretched. The man who had seized her at Rosneath had walked with just such a limp—and he had also proven violent toward her. The taller man might have delivered her to the ship, this chamber, but he had done so in a nearly gentle fashion, and of the two, she would have rather been facing him at the moment.

"Who is there?" she said again, when no one answered her. Her voice warbled slightly with fear, quivering shrilly. She heard a quiet snicker, a mean little snort of laughter from directly in front of her, and she shied again, pushing her hands in that direction. "Who are you? What do you want?"

“You really are blind,” said the man from the manor house, his voice as unmistakable to her as the unfamiliar, heavy accent punctuating it. Kitty cried out as his hands clamped heavily about her wrists. The man jerked her toward him, spinning her around, making her stagger clumsily in his tow.

“Let go of me!” she said, and then she yelped as he shoved her mightily, sending her stumbling. The backs of her knees met the side of the bed and she fell against the covers. Before she could even scramble to her feet again, much less try to fight him, he was upon her, grasping her wrists again and shoving her forcibly down against the mattress.

“No!” Kitty cried, struggling as he fell against her, his weight pinning her down. He forced her arms above her head and closed one of his hands about both of her wrists. His free hand moved, reaching between them, and she heard the sound of him wrestling with the ties on his breeches, unfettering them.

“No!” she cried again, shaking her head, shrugging her shoulders, bucking her hips, trying anything in her desperation to get him off of her. “Get off of me! Leave me alone!”

“Be quiet,” the man said, releasing her wrists and clapping his hand over her mouth to muffle her. Kitty screamed around his hand, beating at him with her fists, because now that his pants were opened, he was tearing at her nightgown, satisfied with ripping it off of her when he proved unable to hike the hem above her hips quickly enough.

Her fighting only made him all the more determined—and all the more enraged. His hand left her mouth and she heard a sharp hiss of wind as he swung at her. The blow as he struck her snapped her head toward her shoulder and left her ears ringing with the force; she

felt a tickling in her nose as blood slid in a thin stream toward her cheek. When she opened her mouth to cry out, he slapped her again, and her hands fell away from him, her protests subsiding as she reeled.

She felt his hand hook against her gown again, ripping at the fabric, and then, all at once he was gone. She heard him utter a breathless squawk of surprise, followed by a loud crash as he fell away from her. Someone else had come into the room: the tall man from the beach—she recognized his voice. He shouted at the other man, speaking in what sounded like Spanish or Italian, his tone sharp and angry.

The two argued, a furious exchange Kitty did not understand at all. She shied back on the bed, gasping for breath, trying to drag her poor, tattered gown back into place about her legs. She touched her nose with tentative fingertips, and winced at the soreness even this gentle touch brought. When the shouting abruptly ended, and the chamber door slammed shut with a startling report, she fell still and silent, her breath hiccupping beneath her bosom, her eyes wide.

“Who...who is there?” she said, because one of the men remained. She had heard only one set of footsteps just before the door had slammed. She thought it had been the slight, scuffling sound of the limping man’s gait, but she couldn’t be certain.

“It is alright,” the tall man said. “He is gone now. He will not hurt you anymore.”

She felt him touch her, his hand falling lightly against her calf, and she recoiled in bright, new terror. He might have just prevented his fellow from raping her, but that did not mean he had not done only so because he wanted first turn.

“Do not touch me,” she whispered, her voice hoarse and damnably tremulous with fear.

“I will not hurt you, either,” the tall man said, his voice gentle. She heard a splattering of water from the basin and jerked her face toward the sound. When he leaned over the bed, pressing the corner of a cool, wet rag against her bloodied nose, she jerked away, slapping at him.

“I said do not touch me,” she said, forcing resolve into her words, ferocity into her tone.

The man was quiet for a long moment, and then let the rag fall against her lap. “Alright,” he said.

Kitty lifted the rag and drew it toward her face, sniffing against the rivulet of blood from her nose. She blotted gingerly at her nostril.

“Pinch the bridge and lean your head forward,” the man said.

She ignored him, keeping the rag where she had placed it. She heard a quiet jangling sound, like keys on a keyring, followed by a low creaking. *The wardrobe*, she realized. *He is opening the wardrobe.*

“My name is Catherine Ransom,” she said. “Please, I am blind.”

“Yes, I realize that,” the man replied, adding swiftly, quietly and with inexplicable rue: “Now.”

“I have not seen your faces, any of you,” Kitty said. “You can let me go. No one will ever know differently. You can just let me go.”

“No,” the man said, his voice approaching her again. “I cannot.”

She heard something drop against the bed, lightweight and slight, and flinched at the sound. “It is a clean shirt, some dry breeches,” he said. “I have you in the length, but they should still fit. You can change when I am gone.”

He touched her again, his hands against her ankles, and frightened, she jumped, kicking at him. He caught her ankles firmly, but stilled her voice before she could cry out. "I give you my word that no man aboard this ship will show you another discourtesy as long as you are among us—myself included. I only want to examine your feet. You cut them open on the rocks."

She did not fight him, but nor did she relax as he touched her feet. She held her legs as stiffly as cross beams as she felt his fingertips prod lightly against her sore and swollen soles. To her surprise, he bathed her feet, drawing a cool, damp rag against them each in turn, carefully washing away sand and mud. There was something gentle and experienced in his touch, and she had the distinct impression that this gesture was not some sort of courtesy he extended, or an effort to endear himself to her. He worked clinically, as if he simply knew to do so, and approached the task out of habit.

She heard soft, unusual sounds, tinkling and clunking, and the only explanation she could conjure in her mind was that he sifted through a wooden box filled with glass or ceramic vessels lined closely together, so that they would clink against one another if jarred even slightly. She caught a whiff of something distinct and pungent, and jumped when he touched her feet, applying something cold and slimy against her skin.

"What are you doing?" she asked, repulsed, trying to draw away from him. "What is that?"

"Basil and garlic paste," he replied, holding her ankle firmly when she tried to kick him away. "Stop that."

"You stop," she said. "It is cold and it smells terrible."

"It will keep fever from settling in your wounds," he said and his grasp on her leg tightened. "*Pare, pasado!*" he

snapped at her in his foreign tongue, and she did not need to understand him to glean his meaning: *Hold still!*

She stopped squirming and felt him begin to wrap strips of linen about her feet, swaddling them. “Who are you?” she asked.

“My name is Rafe Serrano Beltran.” He finished binding her feet and released her, drawing his hands away. He shifted his weight, leaning against the mattress. When he touched her face, his hand drawing the damp rag she held somewhat loosely against her nose more securely in place, she jerked away.

“Pinch the bridge of your nose and tilt your head forward,” he said. “It will stop the bleeding faster that way.”

“How would you know?” she demanded, directing a glower toward the sound of his voice.

“I am a physician,” he replied, and his tone lent itself to a wry smile. “I studied medicine and surgery in Madrid.”

She was surprised into momentary silence. *Why would a physician be a part of a kidnapping?* she thought. “Is that where you are from, Spain?” she asked, and then, in sudden, breathless dismay: “Is that where you are taking me?”

“No,” Rafe said. She heard the soft clinking again as he gathered together his supplies and carried them back to the wardrobe. “I am bringing you to Lisbon, in Portugal.”

Portugal? Kitty thought. Her fear had diminished with her would-be rapist gone, and up until that moment, she had summoned enough inner pluck to bait Rafe, challenge him. The realization that this was real; it was not just a game undertaken by mischievous boys, and that she might be in genuine danger returned now and in full,

shuddering through her. "Please," she said quietly, turning her face toward the sound of him, his footsteps as he moved to leave the room. "Whatever you want, my father will give it to you. Whatever your price, whatever you ask of him that is within his power, he will do it. He will do whatever you say for my safe return."

Again, the sound of Rafe's voice seemed to hint at a crooked smile. "I am counting on that, Catherine," he said, and she heard the chamber door close behind him.

CHAPTER THREE

My God, if I was less of a gentleman and more of a pirate, Rafe Serrano Beltran thought as he stood in the corridor just outside the captain's quarters aboard his ship, *El Verdad*. He closed his eyes and rapped the back of his head soundly against the wall, hoping to knock the wits back into his skull. He succeeded in little more than drawing the curious attention of the two crewmen he had assigned to guard the companionway ladder.

He had not prepared himself for the notion that Catherine Ransom might be beautiful. Or tall. Or blind. The blindness he could find a way to deal with; after all, he was not taking the young woman on a sight-seeing voyage. But as for the others, he was left at a speechless, witless loss.

It had been too dark on the beach for him to notice anything at all about Catherine's face or form when she had tried to bolt past him. He had not even really noticed how tall she was; he had been too concerned with preventing the obviously frightened and determined girl from getting away. It had not been until the skiff had returned to *El Verdad* and he had brought her aboard, bearing her below deck and to his quarters, that he had truly and for the first time taken her fully into account.

It had not occurred to him that she would be beautiful—much less that the sight of her would cause such a powerful reaction within him. She was lovely, her face in perfect, rounded proportion to her large eyes, petite nose and upturned, shapely mouth. Her eyes were an unusual shade that reminded him poignantly of the Mediterranean as it encroached upon the shores of the island of Mallorca, his home; a vivid blue-green blanced and softened by the cream-colored sand of upward-sloping shallows.

Her hair was absolutely magnificent, even unfettered and unruly from her struggling; a wondrous tumble of loose curls, tangled tendrils of honey and amber nearly to her waist. And her body...all long, lean legs and a strong, tall frame—too tantalizingly revealed by Cristobal's clumsy efforts to rip her nightclothes from her, to force himself on her.

Stop it, Rafe thought as again, he rapped the back of his head against the wall. *Stop thinking about her like that*. Never mind that as one who was tall himself, Rafe had long-since grown weary of diminutive women who stood against him or lay beneath him in childlike proportions. Never mind that he had often imagined what it would be like to make love to a woman of complementing form; a woman he would not have to show mindful restraint with when delving between her thighs for fear of crushing her, damaging her, punching clean through her miniscule and dainty form if observing a too-vigorous rhythm inside of her.

He sighed heavily and forked his fingers through his hair. He had posted the guards below too late. He had not realized Catherine's handicap until he had delivered her to the captain's quarters, and when he had recognized her blindness, it had been like a blow delivered swiftly, soundly to his gut. *My God, what kind of sorry bastard abducts a helpless blind girl?*

He had watched her stumble about the room, her footsteps tentative, her hands warily outstretched, her striking green eyes wide but fixed on nothing in particular.

She cannot be blind. He'd waved his hand in front of her face, trying vainly to catch her in some ruse or act. *Oh, Madre de Dios...Sweet Mother of God...she cannot be blind!*

He had immediately retreated, locking her in the room and returning to the main deck. The men would have to be told. There would be no avoiding it. The crew was not particularly enthused by the prospect of sailing with a woman aboard to begin with, as it was said to be bad luck. When they learned that Catherine Ransom was blind, as well, they would like mutiny if only to turn the prow for England again and return her home unless he qualmed their anxieties.

"It is a trick," Cristobal had said, and why had Rafe not noticed straight away afterwards that his brother had disappeared from the gathering of crewmen, that he'd ducked below deck, heading for the captain's quarters? Rafe had locked the door, but Cristobal had a key. Rafe shared everything with Cristobal, even his own quarters aboard the ship. Why had he not realized Cristobal's outrage enough to think to post guards sooner?

Rafe sighed again, turned and left the corridor, climbing up the companionway and back topside.

"We lost the bowsprit," his boatswain called as he crossed the main deck.

Rafe blinked, startled from his thoughts. "What?"

Claudio Figueroa Escoto turned to him, his little silver whistle poised before his mouth as he called orders up to the highest riggings. "I said we lost the bowsprit."

Claudio had been a member of *El Verdad's* crew since Rafe's father had first bought the frigate nearly ten

years earlier. Before that, Claudio had worked the sea for Rafe's father, crewing aboard several smaller fishing skiffs since before Rafe had been born. He was a widower with eight sons of his own; the eldest, Eduardo, served on the crew of *El Verdad*, while the youngest, Felipe, was only ten, and remained at home on Mallorca with his grandmother. Claudio knew the open seas as well and intimately as a lover and Rafe was under no false impressions on their voyage—Claudio was the one in command of *El Verdad*.

"When did we lose it?" Rafe cried, looking out toward the stem of the ship. After a momentary panic in which his heart had nearly collapsed inward upon itself, he turned to the boatswain, bewildered. "What are you talking about? It is right there, where it is supposed to be, off the prow."

At least, I am fairly certain it is, he thought, running momentarily and swiftly through the list of sails, yards, masts and lines in his head, tacking off each mentally. He had not been aboard a ship for any measure of time in more than a decade, and then, only to bridge the short distance between Mallorca and mainland Spain. This was the furthest he had ever sailed from his home, and his inaugural voyage as a captain.

Claudio nodded once. "Of course it is now. I had it fished back into place straight away. Looks like the gammon iron came loose and the tip cracked. When we tacked into the wind, she broke clean away."

The bowsprit was the mast that jutted forth from the bow of the ship. It anchored rigging lines and staysails that in turn secured the foremast. As for the rest—*gammon irons, fishing* and what-not—Rafe had no idea, but he understood enough. If the bowsprit broke and the lines tethering it to the foremast slackened or snapped, there

would be nothing to hold the mast in place at the foredeck, and it could topple, crippling the ship.

“It will hold us until we are home again,” Claudio said. “But it will slow us down, Rafe. We will have to keep the wind abaft her beam as much as we can, or we risk breaking it loose once more—or worse. We will lose time for it.”

Time was the last thing they could afford to lose with John Ransom, the Hawk of the High Seas fast on their heels. Rafe’s brows furrowed and he shook his head. “Damn it,” he said. “How the hell did it happen?”

“I do not know to say,” Claudio said. “It could have happened overnight. It could have worked itself loose before we even passed Gibraltar. Perhaps our Lord meant it as a message.”

He crossed himself with the practiced ease of a lifelong and devout Catholic. Claudio had made no secret of his disapproval of their plan. He kept saying it was wrong, and had tried his best to dissuade Rafe from sailing for England. However, there had been no countering Cristobal’s desperate insistence, or Rafe’s own guilt-ridden concession.

“You did the right thing by Cristobal,” Claudio said, returning his attention aloft, watching crewmen scuttle along ratlines to make minute adjustments in the sails at his whistled commands.

Rafe blinked. “I...I did not do anything by Cristobal.”

Claudio glanced at him, lowering the whistle from his pursed lips. “What he had in mind for the girl was disrespectful and a sin.” He crossed himself again, an unspoken admonishment: *Just like everything else about this voyage thus far.* “You did the right thing.”

Rafe had tried to be discreet as he had followed Cristobal below. He wondered if anyone else besides Claudio suspected what had happened.

“The men know,” Claudio said, as if reading Rafe’s mind. “The girl is blind, Rafe. They are not.”

Rafe saw Cristobal standing abaft the binnacle on the quarterdeck, his hands tucked into the deep pockets of his greatcoat, his tricorne drawn low upon his brow, hiding in shadows what was surely a scowl in Rafe’s direction.

“I should apologize to him,” Rafe said.

“For what?” Claudio said.

“I called him out in front of the girl, embarrassed him in the eyes of the crew.”

Claudio snorted, shaking his head. “You reminded him of his manners, Rafe,” he said. “And his place in things aboard your ship. You have nothing to apologize for.”

“Why are you always so hard on him?” Rafe asked.

Claudio raised one bushy brow. “Why are you always so easy on him?”

“Because he is my brother.”

Claudio said nothing more, apparently willing to let the matter lie, even if he disagreed. Rafe walked toward Cristobal, not missing the way the younger man deliberately positioned his body, turning away from his approach.

“There is no sign of him yet,” Cristobal said, his eyes trained out upon the gun-metal grey sea. Rafe followed his gaze and could not prevent the corner of his mouth from hooking slightly.

“He has not left London yet,” he said. “It is only daybreak. By now, he is just getting the news.”

“Oh, he has left London,” Cristobal said, nodding once, as if to himself. “And he is on his way.” He fell momentarily silent, his brows pinched in a troubled furrow. “They say he rides the wind currents like a hawk in flight,” he murmured.

Sometimes, Rafe felt hard-pressed to decide whether or not Cristobal more admired or hated John Ransom. “You heard about what happened with the bowsprit...?”

“I had the deck when it happened,” Cristobal replied. He met Rafe’s gaze solemnly. “We will have to keep her downwind or it will break again.”

Rafe hated it when Cristobal spoke to him as though he was completely ignorant of the sea. True, Cristobal had always been the sailor between them, and Rafe, the scholar, but Rafe did not need constant reminding of it. “I know,” he said, frowning. “Claudio says it will hold.”

Cristobal offered a slight shrug. “If it was my ship, I would put her into port at La Coruna, on the Spanish peninsula. Have her re-rigged, the whole thing replaced.”

Rafe’s frown deepened. “We do not have that kind of time. Ransom could easily catch us then.”

Sometimes he worried that this was exactly what Cristobal wanted, and the notion troubled Rafe deeply. It was the primary reason he had agreed to Cristobal’s plan only if they sailed aboard *El Verdad*. Had they traveled by Cristobal’s command, *La Venganza*, Rafe would have feared all the while that Cristobal would find some way to confront Ransom directly and on the open water.

Cristobal shrugged again. “I am just saying, if it was my ship...”

“But it is not, Cristobal. It is mine. My ship, my helm, my rules.”

Cristobal smiled wryly. "Yes," he said. "It is." He held his brother's gaze evenly for a long moment and then his smile widened. "Isabel is in La Coruna."

Rafe frowned. "Then there is as good a reason as any to stay away."

Cristobal laughed. "I'm sure she would delight to see you again. It has been how long since you saw her last?"

"One year," Rafe said. It had been almost exactly one year since he had last seen Isabel Aniceto Zuniga; one year since she had broken Rafe's heart and married Guillermo Narcisco Coronel, *el Conde de la Torre*—the Count of the Tower; one year nearly to the day since he had disgraced himself on Isabel's wedding day and had sworn that he would never see her again.

Eager to drop the subject, he clapped his hand against Cristobal's shoulder. "I am sorry for what happened below," he said. "I should have drawn you aside, outside of the room and settled the matter between us."

"You did me a favor," Cristobal said. "Kept me from smutting myself with that sightless whore. I should rightly thank you."

She is his daughter! Cristobal had shouted at Rafe once he had recovered from his initial shock at being forcibly hauled off the girl. *She is his daughter, and you gave your word to this, Rafe!*

Only to take her—never to harm her! Never like this! Rafe had shouted back, squaring off against his brother and matching Cristobal's bared fists. *You will not lay your hands on her again, Cristobal, or by God and all that's holy, you will answer to me for it!*

"The crew thinks you turned me out so that you could pluck her English rose," Cristobal remarked,

glancing at his brother and smiling wryly. "They say you may have the makings of a fine pirate captain yet."

Rafe frowned, but pressed his lips together against a sharp reply. To answer Cristobal would have likely started a quarrel, and he had only just settled the last one. He clapped his hand against Cristobal's shoulder and walked away while there was still a scrap of goodwill preserved between them.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Why will you not let me go to London with you, Daddy?”

On the day before she had been abducted, Kitty had sat on the edge of her father’s bed at Rosneath Manor and listened as he packed a traveling trunk.

“Because London is no place for you, Kitten,” John Ransom had replied with an emphatic snap of linen as he folded a shirt over his arm. “It is no place for anyone with a mind to keep their constitution healthy. The air is dirty there, choked with soot and smoke and not fit to breathe. And that is not to mention the stench of the Thames...”

He had gone on, but Kitty had not needed to hear more. *Because you are blind, Kitty*, is what he meant.

“...prostitutes and pickpockets in the streets,” John said. “Poor scoundrels so drunk on gin, you trip over them sleeping shoulder to shoulder along thoroughfares—”

“For heaven’s sake, Daddy, I am talking about staying with Melanie’s aunt, a dowager viscountess in the Mayfair district, not White Chapel,” Kitty said, exasperated. “I have told you. Melanie has already written to her at length, and she said it would be lovely, that I would be more than welcome and she could serve as my

proper chaperone to parties and socials. She could introduce me to London bachelors. It would all be perfectly proprietary.”

“What is wrong with the bachelors here on the Wight?” John asked. “That nice Michael Urry, for example. He would court you properly enough and ask for your hand, if only you would let him.”

Kitty sighed. She did not want to marry a man from the Wight, to spend the breadth of her days on the island, never knowing more than its cragged, cliff-lined boundaries. Why her father—who had spent most of his life sailing to all corners of the known world—could not appreciate or understand this, she did not know.

“I have known Michael Urry since I was hock-high to a pony, Daddy,” she told John. “Marrying him would be like marrying a brother.”

“Well, you are not going to London,” John Ransom said, and another smart snap of linen as he had folded another shirt clearly imparted: *And there will be no further discussion of the matter.*

“You should not be going, either,” Kitty replied, switching tactics and crossing her arms over her bosom. “I should write to Dr. Huddleston straight away, as I am sure he would agree with me.”

“It has been three months,” John said, sounding dismissive. “And I am fine.”

For a man who fretted almost constantly about his daughter’s well-being, it was Kitty’s observation that John Ransom paid remarkably poor attention to his own. “Daddy, you were shot,” she said. “You nearly died from blood loss. You are lucky the pellet missed your lung, or anything else vital, Dr. Huddleston said. That Spanish pirate, what-is-his-name...”

“Evarado Serrano Pelayo.”

“Yes, well, he could still be out there on the seas, and what if you come upon him again?”

John had chuckled at this, a doting and gently patronizing sound. He had at last come to understand the torment to which he had subjected his daughter in her youth, at the hands of some of London’s supposedly finest physicians. He himself had fallen victim to their wretched methods in the aftermath of his injury, until finally, having endured one colonic too many, he had sent them all packing for the mainland once more.

“I shot him back, Kitten,” he told her. “Pelayo is at least as worse for the wear as I am, if not more. If I come upon him again, I think I will simply throw up my hands and call us fair for it.”

Pelayo was the only man to ever have escaped John Ransom. The Spanish privateer’s ship had opened fire on Ransom’s frigate; boarding parties had skirmished all around, and in the end, the two captains had drawn their pistols on one another. Both had taken hits; both had fallen, and somehow, in the ensuing confusion, Pelayo and his crew had avoided capture and escaped.

“Still,” Kitty had said. “You should not be going anywhere yet, much less out to sea.”

She heard him approach, the rustle of his clothes as he had leaned toward her, and she had smelled the soft, familiar fragrance of him. She felt the whisper of his beard stubble tickle against her and he kissed her cheek. “I will be fine, Kitten.”

He will come for me, Kitty thought aboard *El Verdad*, listening as Rafe again unlocked his wardrobe and removed his crate of medicinal supplies. *Daddy will come for me, and then you will be sorry.*

Rafe unwound her bandages. "You get around remarkably well in spite of your...condition," he said, his tone of voice nearly idle.

"My condition?" she repeated, deliberately and sarcastically lending the word the same awkward note he had used.

"I did not realize you were blind when we were on the beach," he said.

She thought about remarking that he had obviously been too busy swinging his quarterstaff about, blocking her path, but instead pressed her lips together in a thin line.

"You ran so quickly," he said. "As if you knew your way. Have you always been blind?"

"Have you always been a pirate?" she replied hotly, trying to jerk her foot away from his grasp. She was tired of his attempts at polite conversation, and abandoned any pretense of courtesy.

He held her ankles gently but firmly. "I am not a pirate. I am a physician."

She wrenched her leg loose and he yelped as she drove her heel at him, striking his forehead, the bridge of his nose from the feel of things. "You are not!"

"Stop that," he said, and when he caught her again, his fingers closed firmly, sharply. "If you kick me again, woman, I will turn you over my knee and take my belt to your backside."

She froze, her mouth dropping. "You would not dare...!" she gasped.

"I most certainly would," he replied. "If you insist on behaving like a malcontent child, I will treat you like one."

She scowled, but offered no further resistance as he tended to her. "How do you expect me to behave, given the circumstances?" she demanded.

"*Despite* the circumstances," he said pointedly, "I would expect you to behave like a lady of some civility and reason. There is no point in fighting me. There is nowhere to go if you try to run, except the sea. And I highly doubt you would be able to swim back to England."

He began to apply ointment to her heels. The cream was as cold and malodorous as ever.

"Why must you keep putting that on my feet?" Kitty complained.

"I told you," he said. "It will keep the wounds from festering."

"Should you not bleed me or something instead?" Kitty asked. "Lop my hair off to my shoulders, or give me something to make me retch anything foul from my form? I have had my fair share of encounters with physicians before. I should know what to expect." She winced as he touched a place of particular tenderness and jerked her foot away. "That is how I know you are not really a one, as you claim."

He caught her leg. "I do not doubt that such barbarous methods pass for medicine in England," he said. "But I assure you that in Spain, I learned differently."

"Oh, yes," Kitty said. "You learned how to jerk blind girls from their beds and take them shipbound to Portugal for ransom. There is bloody damn civility and reason for certain."

Despite her mockery, she was nearly inclined to believe him. He was unlike any pirate captain of whom she had ever heard. He told her he had studied medicine

in Madrid, and she wondered if he had received formal tutelage there as well, the sort that noble sons in England received.

A noble son-turned-pirate wasn't nearly as peculiar as the notion of a physician-turned-pirate. Kitty knew plenty of young noblemen in England suffered the scourge of debt, family fortunes squandered and lost on card tables. Maybe Rafe Beltran was in much the same predicament, and hoped that ransoming off a wealthy English daughter would give him enough gold and silver to remit on his losses.

Some time earlier, he had come to the room with another man in tow. They had set up a table with silverware and plates for her, and Rafe had told her to eat. She had been able to smell the food, but though the aromas were wondrous and tempting, she had not touched much at all. She would be damned if she would be cooperative with this man who had forcibly abducted her from her bed. As he rewrapped her feet, she heard him sigh heavily to realize the relatively untasted food nearby. "You need to eat," he said.

"I did," she replied. When he snorted slightly, not believing her, she frowned. "I ate the oranges."

She had smelled the sweet fragrance and been unable to resist. Oranges were a seasonal luxury in England, and she had gobbled the sweet, succulent slices, rinds and all, licking the sticky juice from her fingers when she had finished.

His hands fell still. "I have seen you brought better a meal than most men aboard this ship will see for months," he said, and now there was tempered irritation edged in his voice.

"That is your failing, not mine," she replied, her brows pinching. "You are the captain of this ship, no

matter what you say to the contrary. You should provide better for your crew.”

He rose to his feet, his breath escaping him in a sharp huff. “I never said I was not the captain,” he said. “I said I was not a *pirate*.”

She had needled the right point sore, and struggled to prevent the corner of her mouth from hooking triumphantly upward as she listened to the sounds of his heavy footsteps stomping toward the door. He muttered under his breath in fervent, furious Spanish. When the door slammed loudly behind him as he left, the sharp report startled her.

Kitty sat perfectly still and silent for a moment, straining her ears. She could hear him tromping down the corridor toward the companionway ladder. She held her breath and continued to listen until she felt sure he was not just going to turn around on his boot heel and come storming back to the room.

He had left her alone with his medicines still out, his wardrobe unlocked. She did not know what might be inside the wardrobe so worth keeping under lock and key, but until that moment, he had paid very careful heed to keep it so, and she meant to find out why.

She reached down, finding the opened box of medicinal supplies. She could feel cork-stopped glass bottles and vials all neatly arranged in small compartments. In a deeper section toward the front, she felt a leather-wrapped bundle, and, curious, she pulled it out. She unfurled the hide and patted her hands against the contents tucked and secured within; it was a set of surgical tools, the shapes and designs unfamiliar to her touch. She found a scalpel among the tools, the blade keen enough to draw blood when she pressed the tip of her thumb tentatively against it. She winced, sucking against the shallow wound, and then slipped the scalpel

from the kit. She would have rather found a dagger or pistol, but if there were none to be had in the wardrobe, the scalpel would prove better weapon than none.

She rolled the remaining surgical tools back in the hide panel and returned it. She abandoned the medicine box for the wardrobe, hoping Rafe kept a gun locked inside. She knelt, running her hands past clothing. She found boots on the floor, two pairs arranged neatly and still smelling faintly of polish. There was a large, empty space where Rafe stowed his medicinal case, and beyond that, as Kitty reached, she frowned to feel a folded heap of heavy wool.

She ran her hands against the fabric and her frown deepened. She did not need sight to realize what it was; she felt the details in the brass buttons. She had touched her father's greatcoat enough to know the uniform of an officer in the English Royal Navy by touch.

Not a pirate, my ass, she thought, wondering which poor lieutenant or captain had lost his life to part so with his coat. *There is no other way Rafe Beltran could have this—that bloody bastard murdered an Englishman to claim it!*

She moved the folded coat, drawing it along the wardrobe floor toward her and heard a peculiar scraping sound, like a heavy piece of metal against the wood. Puzzled, she reached beneath the coat and blinked in surprise to curl her fingers against a short chain. She ran her hands against it curiously, realizing it was a set of manacles, a pair of opened, iron cuffs joined together by eight chain links.

That bastard, she thought, because it did not take much to realize the manacles were meant for her. *If I had put up more of a fight, that is. He must have used them to chain up his captured English officer before murdering him, and next, he thought to put them on me. He anticipated kidnapping a girl who would fight back, who needed to be cuffed into submission, but he*

never anticipated me—a poor, helpless blind girl. That is why these are in his wardrobe and not around my wrists.

Her brows furrowed. “I will show him a bloody helpless blind girl,” she whispered.

She heard footsteps from beyond the chamber door, undoubtedly Rafe returning. She rose hurriedly, taking the manacles with her. She turned, one hand outstretched as she scurried back to the bed. The covers were still turned back and tangled together from where she had struggled with her would-be rapist; now, Kitty tucked both the cuffs and scalpel beneath and among them.

I can clap a cuff on him, and one on the bedpost, she thought, sitting once more at the edge of the bed, within reach of both the manacles and the footboard posts. Hold the scalpel against his neck and demand he turn the ship around for England. I will hear if any of the men try to sneak in here and stop me. I will hold his bloody ass for ransom—for my return home.

She heard the sound of the key turning in the chamber door lock, the hinges squeaking slightly as the door opened.

“I want you to eat, Catherine,” Rafe said, his voice and heavy footsteps coming toward her.

“I do not care what you want,” Kitty replied, slipping her hand beneath the blankets. She felt his hand close against the crook of his elbow; he meant to pull her upright. She sprang into motion, snatching the manacles out from beneath the coverlets. She slapped the cuff against his wrist, snapping it closed. She heard the startled intake of his breath and lunged for the foot of the bed, one hand outstretched and groping, the other holding the remaining cuff out to secure around the bedpost.

“You—!” Rafe exclaimed, the tone of his voice caught somewhere between surprise and outrage. He drew his arm back, jerking against the chain, and Kitty

yelped, trying to grab better hold of the free cuff lest he snatch it from her grasp. He caught her by the arm and she yelped again, frightened, as he hauled her roughly to her feet. She danced on her tiptoes, smacking squarely against him and rammed her knee into his crotch.

His breath drew sharply, startled and pained, and he crumpled against her, sending them both tumbling to the floor. She landed beneath him, pinned by his weight, and struggled, balling her hands into fists and striking wildly. He was still breathless, choked from her blow to his groin, and when she scrambled to her feet, he could only paw feebly, clumsily for her ankle, his fingers slapping harmlessly and without finding purchase as she darted for the door.

She did not know what she meant to do or where she thought to go, but she knew he would be angry with her now—really angry—and his pretense of courtesy on account of her blindness would be gone. She had hurt him. Now he would hurt her, and she was frightened.

She did not make it two full strides from the bed before something jerked mightily against her wrist, snapping her arm behind her and making her slip backward, her feet from beneath her. She fell, her rump smacking loudly, painfully against the floor. She thought he had grabbed her; he had managed to clamber to his feet somehow and seize hold of her wrist, and flapped her arm frantically, trying to shake him loose. She heard a jangling sound, felt the edge of something metal cut into her skin and drew abruptly still.

Oh, no! she thought. She shook her arm again. This time, she felt her arm jerk as Rafe tugged back. *Oh, no, please no!*

“What...what have you done?” Rafe groaned hoarsely from behind her as again, he pulled futilely against the short tether of chains binding them cuff to

cuff, wrist to wrist. “*Madre de Dios*, woman, what have you done?”

CHAPTER FIVE

Rafe stared at the measure of chains that now bound him to Catherine Ransom. At first, what it was, what she had done, did not fully sink in. His groin throbbed with a wrenching, sickening, visceral ache, leaving him scarcely able to breathe without retching, much less think clearly or coherently. “What...what have you done?” he groaned.

He pulled against the chain, watching in mounting realization—and dismay—as the effort tugged her wrist, bound by the opposing cuff, obligingly toward him. *Oh, no*, he thought. *Oh, no, Mother of God, no...!*

He blinked at Catherine, his stunned disbelief already beginning to dissolve into fury. “*Madre de Dios*, woman,” he gasped. “What have you done?”

She was dismayed, as well. He could see it in her face, the ashen cast to her pallor, the stricken expression that left her blue-green eyes flown wide, her mouth slightly agape. She blinked at the anger edged in his voice and her brows narrowed. “No more than you deserve,” she snapped, jerking her hand toward her lap, and hauling his near in the process. “You murderer—we will see who’s helpless now.”

He shook his head slightly, wondering if his ears were failing him. “Murderer?” he asked. He struggled to sit up, but his poor, wretched crotch sent shudders of painful protest through him, crumpling him again. “You...you mad witch...!” he gasped, his eyes flooding with fresh tears. “What are you talking about?”

“You meant these for me!” Catherine shouted, shaking the chain, along with his arm, demonstratively. “You chained up that poor Englishman whose coat you have stowed in your wardrobe and murdered him, you coward rot! Then you meant to use them on me—until you found out I was blind, that is! Is that not right? Poor little Kitty, helpless and blind. I will show you helpless, you bastard pirate!”

She then proceeded to pummel him with her fists, striking at his head and shoulders. Rafe yelped, ducking his face. For someone who was blind, she could land a fairly wicked punch, he had to admit after one well-delivered blow left his right ear ringing and sore.

“Stop it,” he said, risking a peek and trying to catch her by the wrists. She clubbed him in the temple, and his temper flared. “Stop it!” he shouted, jerking against the chain binding them, snatching her arm toward him. He grabbed her wrists roughly, but sitting up to do so sent new pain flaring through his midriff. He groaned and doubled over, falling against her, knocking her back.

He landed atop her, belly to belly, the soft swells of her breasts pressed beneath his chest. She wriggled in protest, and the movement stoked something within his groin again—not pain this time. He looked down at her, eye to eye, and she blinked up at him in a mixture of fright and fury, as plainly as if she could see him.

“Get off of me,” she seethed.

“Stop trying to hit me,” he said.

The crimp between her brows deepened. "I was not trying—I was hitting you squarely."

He sighed heavily, hanging his head somewhat. At least she could not go anywhere or cause any more trouble for the moment while pinned beneath him, and he took advantage of the opportunity to try and reclaim his breath and wits.

"Get off of me," she said again, squirming. When he did not move, her wiggling intensified. "You do not even know who I am, do you? You think I am some helpless blind girl? Some poor, pitiful English rose? I am John Ransom's daughter—Captain John Ransom, the bloody Hawk of the High Seas! You just wait until he lays his hands on you—and he will, by God! He hunts down murdering pirate rots like you for his life's work! He can track a hawk on a cloudy day, set a latitude course on a starless night, follow a frigate in a fog bank on a windless sea! No man has ever escaped him, and you will not, either, *now get off of me!*"

She managed to work her leg between his. He felt her draw her knee up for his crotch again and he shifted his weight swiftly, blocking the proffered blow. She yelped, her eyes widening in reflexive fear as he shifted his weight again, forcing her leg away from him. This left him poised between her thighs, her legs parted by his hips, his weight bearing down to hold her still.

"I am not a pirate," Rafe said. "Or a murderer, either. I have told you—I am a physician."

"You killed that man," she said. "That is an English Naval officer's coat in your closet. You chained him up and killed him, kept his coat as a prize."

"That coat belonged to my father," he said. "These cuffs, too. I have not chained anybody up with them, much less killed them. They were given to my father by a slave trader who had lost the key."

She blinked up at him, caught off guard. He could nearly see the wheels of her mind whirling, processing what he had just said, realization setting in and draining the color from her cheeks. “Lost the key...?” she whispered.

“Yes, Catherine,” he said, doing his best to smile, even though she could not see him, because the reality of their predicament was so awful, it was either smile or throttle her, and he did not much feel like lugging around a dead woman tethered to his wrist. “Lost the key. There is no undoing these chains.”

He released her wrists and rolled off of her. “I know who you are, who your father is. I have known all along.”

He glanced at her over his shoulder. “And you are wrong,” he said. “One man has escaped your father. Mine.”

He is a bastard and a boor, Kitty thought, lying on her back in the bed, her sightless gaze directed up at the ceiling. She could hear the ship creaking and groaning all around them, the stern windowpanes rattling against the brisk push of the wind, the stillness in the room lending the seafaring sounds all the more volume. As if I might have expected more from the son of Evarado Serrano Pelayo.

Now, at least, she understood why she had been taken. John Ransom had been so incapacitated by his wound from Pelayo’s gunshot that he’d been bedridden for weeks, and land-locked even longer. True, he had set sail again under orders from the Crown, but Kitty had not believed for one moment that he was fit enough to resume his duties.

Pelayo must still be recuperating, too, she thought. I guess revenge could not wait, though, so he sent his son in his stead.

Rafe murmured something in soft, incoherent Spanish from beside her in the bed. He had drunk himself into a slurring, sullen stupor that evening over dinner. Kitty had paid him no mind. She had put aside her stubborn resolve and gorged herself on a savory rice casserole with sliced sausages and meaty portions of stewed fish. *Paella*, Rafe had called it, the word rolling from his tongue with comfortable, melodic ease: *pah-EH-yah*.

They had tussled over the meal, each of them jerking at the other, jostling their bound hands back and forth as both struggled for some semblance of control. Rafe would deliberately wait—or at least it seemed so to Kitty—until she had lifted a spoonful of rice nearly to her lips, and then he would tug against the chain, spilling her bite and leaving her to glower. Each time this happened, he would mumble something by way of apology, but Kitty doubted his sincerity. After the fourth such incident, she had begun retaliating. She would listen for the rustle of fabric on his sleeve, the slight jangle of chain links as he would move to drink from his cup. She would then jerk her own arm under some false pretense, such as reaching for her tea or moving to dab at her mouth with her napkin, and smirk in smug satisfaction to hear him yelp or curse, his wine splashing against his cravat.

“Stop it, damn you,” he had said after several such spills. He had jerked against the chain, shaking her arm, sending yet another spoonful of paella raining down onto her thighs, and she had frowned.

“You stop it,” she had snapped, giving a mighty tug against the links that left his cup tumbling to the floor, his wine splattering against the rug. “And do not dare curse

at me, you graceless boor. You claim to be a gentleman. Act like one.”

He had grumbled in irritable Spanish at this, a seeming habit that was beginning to aggravate Kitty immeasurably. She had smiled in wicked triumph and resumed her supper.

She did not think he had revealed what had happened to the crew. With few exceptions, such as the man she heard deliver their food to them, no one came to the quarters all day, and Rafe had offered nothing by way of summons or conversation with them that she could discern. She imagined he was mulling over some way to deal gracefully with the matter of the cuffs, or at least in such a way where his crew would not piss themselves laughing at him.

It would serve him fairly, Kitty thought. What kind of bloody pirate keeps a set of manacles with no keys?

While she had gobbled, he had contented himself to down glass after glass of a heady red wine and it had made him drowsy. He rested beside her in the bed, his breath escaping him in long, slow, heavy huffs. His hand rested limply on the coverlets between them; Kitty had pressed herself as far against the wall as she could, granting as broad a margin of space between them as possible. It occurred to her that his crew might not think anything was peculiar or amiss at all about his keeping below deck. One of them had already tried to rape her. *What if they think that is what has been happening all this while?* she thought. *What if they think he has been down here ravishing me?*

To make matters worse, Rafe had fallen asleep around the spot where she'd hidden the scalpel. *If I could find it, get a hold of it, I might still be able to get him to turn the ship for England,* she thought. *If he will not barter with me, I'm sure his crew will when I hold a blade against his bloody neck.*

Kitty moved slowly, inching across the bed toward Rafe. She scooted until her hand touched his and their shoulders brushed, until she could cant her face toward the sound of his breath and feel it lightly against her brow with each exhalation. She moved her uncuffed hand against the tangled bedclothes between and beneath them, exploring carefully, searching for the scalpel. After a few moments of futile exploration, she gave up.

Damn it, she thought. He must be lying on it.

The next morning, she awoke before Rafe, with her bladder full and nearly aching her with urgent strain. She sat up, shoving her tangled hair out of her face, and wondered how in the world she was going to handle this. “Rafe,” she said, reaching down, patting against his arm. When her soft beckon did little more than elicit a grumbling snort from him, she frowned, closing her hand against his sleeve and shaking more fervently. “Wake up.”

He snorted again and then moved beneath her. “Wh...what...?” he croaked, sucking in a hissing breath that belied a grimace as the bright morning sunshine hit his blearily opened eyes.

“I have to relieve myself,” Kitty said, drawing her shoulders back and hoisting her chin to maintain some modicum of dignity in what could well prove an unseemly situation.

She felt Rafe move beside her, sitting up. The chain between them jerked, nearly throwing her off balance. “What?” he said.

Kitty’s frown deepened, and she gave an angry tug on the chains. “I need to use the chamber pot,” she snapped. “Get out of my way and direct me to it before we are both soaked.”

“*Madre de Dios,*” Rafe muttered, groaning as he swung his legs around and crawled out of bed.

“I am sorry to inconvenience you,” Kitty said dryly, scooting after him.

“Here,” Rafe said, drawing her arm in tow as he momentarily stooped. When he straightened again, he pressed something between her hands; a porcelain bowl. “Relieve away.”

Kitty sat on the edge of the bed, cradling the chamber pot and blinking at the sound of his voice in irritated disbelief. “Well, I am not going to do it in front of you,” she said, astounded that he would think otherwise.

“I do not see that you have much of a choice in the matter,” he replied, giving a demonstrative tug against the chains.

She felt twin patches of bright, mortified color bloom in her cheeks. “You cannot watch,” she said, nearly sputtering. “Turn around. Do not look at me.”

He began to mutter in exasperated, sleepy Spanish, and she fumed. “Stop doing that! I do not understand a word you are saying, and you know it! It is incredibly rude!”

She heard his breath hitch, as if in speechless shock. “You...” he began, and then the chains rattled and her hand pulled away from the chamber pot as he threw his up in frustration. “Woman, you are a marvel, do you know that?” She felt him sit down heavily beside her on the bed. “Fine,” he growled. “I will turn around. I will not look at you. And I will say nothing else in Spanish.”

Kitty stood, listening as he pivoted, presenting his back to her. She reached out, patting against his shoulders just to be certain and then she moved quickly, struggling to drop her pants with one hand. They were too large for her to begin with, so it was not difficult. She squatted over the chamber pot, holding onto the side of the bed to

support herself, and nearly moaned aloud in relief as she emptied her bladder in a swift, loud stream.

Rafe had awakened with what was, without question, the most miserable headache he had ever suffered. His head throbbed as if battalions of miniature men took positions within his skull and proceeded to set against his brain with mallets. His mouth felt dry and wasted, as though he had slept with wads of linen crammed between his cheeks. His eyes felt tacky and sticky, his entire body leaden and stiff.

Why in the name of God did I drink so much? he thought, propped at the table before a plate of poached eggs, orange slices and salted meat. The aroma of the food, which he might have normally found appealing, seemed to keep his stomach turning in lazy circles that morning. There was no escaping the smell, however, or the table. Catherine wanted to eat; she gobbled mouthful after eager, hearty mouthful, in fact, and because he was cuffed to her side, he was fairly well trapped for the moment with breakfast.

He closed his eyes, in part because he hoped that if he did not have to look at the food, his nausea would settle somewhat. He also did not want to look at Catherine anymore. He had made the mistake of glancing over his shoulder at her as she had stood after using the chamber pot. He had caught a glimpse of her drawing the too-large circumference of his breeches' waistband up over her hips—awarding him a fleeting but decidedly worthwhile glance at her thighs and buttocks. He had blinked at her long after her pants were again in place, momentarily befuddled by this tantalizing peek.

“I said not to watch,” Catherine had said, slapping him on the top of his head, snapping him from his reverie.

“I was not watching—stop that,” he had protested.

“Yes, you were. I heard your breathing stop. I am blind, you boor, not oblivious.”

He had also needed to use the chamber pot, the previous night’s wine having settled in an uncomfortable pool in his bladder. He had moved to take his turn, to unfetter the waistcord of his breeches, but Catherine had jerked abruptly against the chains, snatching his hand away from his groin.

“What are you doing?” she had gasped, her eyes flown wide, bright color blazing in her cheeks.

“I need to relieve myself, too,” he had replied. She had simply blinked at him, and he had sighed. “It is my turn to use the chamber pot.”

When he moved his hand toward his pants, she pulled it away again. “Use your other hand!” she exclaimed, breathless with aghast.

“I cannot,” he’d replied. “I need both to untie my breeches. Besides that, I am left-handed.”

The color in her cheeks grew even deeper, her eyes even wider. “Well, you...you cannot do that!” she said. “You will just have to find some other way.”

“We can stand here and argue about it,” he had told her patiently. “Or I can...how did you phrase it? Soak us both?”

She had relented, her face twisted with disgust, her hand held poised and immobilized between them as he had unfettered his pants and went about his business. The length of chain allowed her plenty of space to avoid his exposed manhood, but he had to admit, there was

something tantalizing about her proximity. She could have touched him if she had wished, and he had been somewhat surprised when this notion had caused the stirrings of arousal in him.

Even now, nauseated as he was by the smell of breakfast and with his head pounding, the thought of her hand closing gently but firmly about him, moving with slow, deliberate friction made him begin to stiffen. He shifted his weight uncomfortably in his chair, hoping that fidgeting might somehow relieve the sudden strain against the front of his breeches.

“I would like to know how you propose removing these dreadful things from me,” Kitty said, that cool, annoyingly contemptuous edge to her voice immediately dissolving any fond thoughts he might have harbored of her stroking him to release. She gave the chains a little shake for emphasis, and he opened his eyes, wincing as the light pained him.

“You mean removing them from me,” he replied. “Since you seem so determined to make trouble, I may just have to continue employing them with you in some capacity.”

Her eyes flashed, her brows pinching at his challenge. “I beg your pardon for causing any difficulty for you as you hold me here against my will,” she said. “Do you think I have made this already unpleasant situation any more bearable to me with this?” Again, she gave her arm a demonstrative shake, this time, jostling him in the process. “How was I supposed to know the damn things did not have a key? Who keeps a pair of cuffs without a key aboard their ship, unless he has half a mind to use them? What was I supposed to think?”

His brows furrowed and he jerked his hand back making her knock over her tea cup. “You were not supposed to think anything!” he snapped. “You were not

supposed to find them. Who told you to go snooping through my wardrobe—my personal possessions? These circumstances are not exactly as I would like them, either, but I have tried my best to demonstrate a modicum of courtesy where you are concerned—”

“Courtesy!” Catherine exclaimed hotly, tugging so hard against the chains that his hand swung upward unexpectedly, his knuckles banging loudly, painfully against the edge of the table top. He yelped, and the glasses and flatware all clattered noisily at the impact. “What courtesy have you shown me besides maybe preventing that monstrous crewman of yours from ravaging me? Do you think your little medicines and poultices constitute courtesy? You abducted me, you miserable rot—from my home, my bed, no less! You—”

“Tell me it is untrue!” Cristobal cried as he threw open the door and stormed into the room, startling both Rafe and Catherine. Cristobal’s dark eyes darted sharply from his brother to Catherine—and the measure of chains that had pulled taut between them in their mutual surprise—and his mouth hooked in a broad smile. He laughed out loud. “I will be damned, you stupid bastard. It is true, is it not?”

“Cristobal...” Rafe began, rising to his feet. Catherine recognized Cristobal’s voice; it was apparent from the sudden drain of color in her face, the sharp intake of her breath that she knew him. Her eyes were enormous with bright, sudden fear, and Rafe moved to stand in front of her.

Cristobal tried to march around Rafe to get a good look at Catherine and the chain, but Rafe countered his attempts by moving with him, keeping himself between Catherine and his brother. She caught fast hold of Rafe’s shirt and clung there, her fingers hooked fiercely as she shielded against him.

“You stupid bastard,” Cristobal said again, grabbing hold of Rafe’s arm and trying to get a look at the cuffs. “How did it happen? Let me see, Rafe. Were you drunk? Did you forget Father did not have the key?”

Rafe angrily slapped his hand away from his sleeve and then gave his brother a shove that sent him stumbling backward on his hobbled gait. “Not now, Cristobal.”

“Not now?” Cristobal asked, his eyes wide, his mouth still turned up in a grin. “When, then, Rafe? When were you going to tell me about this? In Lisbon? Do you not think I might notice you keeping below all that while? Do you not think the crew might notice?”

“Who told you?” Rafe asked, his irritation mounting with Cristobal’s teasing. Rafe hadn’t told anyone but Claudio about what had happened; he had called the boatswain to his quarters prior to supper the night before. Claudio had simply shaken his head upon Rafe’s revelation, and crossed himself a number of times, as if he had been faced with the bane of the devil himself. He had sworn himself to silence on the matter, and given the older man’s generally dour consideration of Cristobal, Rafe doubted seriously that Claudio had confided in him.

“Eduardo,” Cristobal said. “He brought you supper last night and breakfast this morrow. He thought it odd that you kept so close to the English woman, near enough to hold hands. I thought it was odd that you kept below the night through. Granted, you’ve never been very interested in sea duties, not since Father shipped you off to the mainland all those years ago, but still—”

“What?” Rafe blinked. “That is not true, Cristobal.”

“Were you drunk? Did you take them out to scare her with them? Threaten her? I told you we should—”

“No, I did not threaten her with them,” Rafe said, clapping his uncuffed hand on Cristobal’s shoulder and doing his best to steer his brother toward the doorway. Poor Catherine was frozen with fright behind Rafe, as rigid as a piece of statuary. It was like trying to lug a millstone toward the threshold as he moved to shove Cristobal out. “Cristobal, please. Just go back topside and find me a good, strong man, the strongest we have. We will need him and a mallet to break through these chains.”

“Break them?” Cristobal asked. He side-stepped around Rafe, clearly determined to stay. “Why would we do that?”

Rafe stared at him. “Are you mad?” he exclaimed, shaking his hand demonstratively, flapping Catherine’s about in the process. “I cannot go around like this!”

“Why not?” Cristobal replied. “It is perfect, Rafe—think about it.” He cut a glance toward Catherine and his smile slid all the wider. “I told you she would cause us trouble, and look, here, now she has.”

“Fair enough,” Rafe said. “You were right and I was wrong, Cristobal. There, I have admitted it. Can we now not—”

“If we turn her loose, she will only cause us more trouble,” Cristobal said.

“No, she will not,” Rafe said. “What more could she possibly find?”

“Who would have thought she would find those cuffs, what with the way she is?” Cristobal said. He waved his hand at Catherine’s face, her unwavering gaze.

He had a point. Again.

“Listen to me,” Cristobal said, stepping close enough to Rafe to place his hand on his brother’s sleeve, to speak

quietly in his ear. "This is perfect. We could not have asked for more."

"Yes, we could have," Rafe assured him dryly.

"What better circumstances could we have found? Who better to make sure she keeps out of mischief than you, Rafe? If we keep the cuffs in place, she is always at your side, and never out of your sight. She can do nothing. She can cause us no more bother."

Rafe glanced over his shoulder at Catherine. This was not an idea that had occurred to him.

"I will tell the crew you are guarding her personally," Cristobal said. "That will spare your honor lest they learn of these ridiculous circumstances."

"Thank you for that," Rafe muttered.

"I will take charge of the ship," Cristobal said. "You have told Claudio about this?" When Rafe nodded, he said, "Good. Then I will go to him and tell him of our arrangement. He and I can handle the crew, while you stay here and handle the girl."

"Arrangement?" Rafe said. "Cristobal, I have not agreed to anything yet. I do not like this. What if word gets out anyway? Already, you said Eduardo is talking. I cannot—"

"If word gets out, you will be infamous, brother," Cristobal told him, grinning broadly. "Who else but a pirate born and bred would think to tether himself to his own captive? You will become a legend—as great as Abdul Aziz bin Malik."

Abdul Aziz bin Malik. The most renowned pirate in all of Spain, a Moorish hero among privateers and sailors worldwide and the man who had introduced their father into the trade.

“Terrific,” Rafe said, clapping his hand over his face and groaning.

“We are agreed, then?” Cristobal asked, tugging on his sleeve.

Rafe glanced at Catherine. *How long a voyage is it to Lisbon?* he thought, struggling to remember. *My God, already I have wanted to throttle her at least twenty times this morning! I cannot last the rest of this day through, much less more to come!*

“Excellent,” Cristobal said, even as Rafe hitched in a breath to protest. Without another word, Cristobal turned and walked away, ducking out the door.

“Cristobal...” Rafe began.

“This is for the best, Rafe,” Cristobal said, closing the door behind him.

“No—wait,” Rafe pleaded. He rested his forehead against the wood, heaving a deep, weary sigh. “Damn it.”

He turned and remembered Catherine was there, her pallor ashen, still cowered near to him, nearly paralyzed with fear. His expression softened and he reached for her. “Catherine...”

“Do not touch me,” she whispered, jerking back as his fingers brushed against her cheek. She swatted her hands blindly to ward off another such attempt, and the chain links between them rattled. She blinked toward Rafe’s face, her large eyes glassy with tears. “That was the man who tried to rape me.”

“Yes,” Rafe said, pierced and shamed by the sharp, accusatory glare in her eyes. “He is my younger brother, Cristobal.”

Her expression grew momentarily shocked, and then her gaze grew icy. “Oh,” she said, nodding, a sarcastic sound to accompany a sardonic gesture. She sniffled

mightily to stave her tears and her brows furrowed. "What a surprise, that a misbegotten pirate like Evarado Serrano Pelayo had two boorish pirates for sons, and not just the one."

"Catherine, I am not a pirate," he said rather helplessly, for at least the hundredth time since their introduction. "I am—"

"I know what you are," she snapped, slapping at him again, striking his arm as he reached for her. "You are the physician, the scholar of the lot, while your brother must be the sailor."

Her tears spilled, despite her proud efforts to contain them. "No wonder your father sent you both to do his rotten work in his stead. Your brother is a cripple, and you are incompetent. Perhaps between the two of you, he thought you might see his vengeance through."

Rafe's abashment shifting toward aggravation. "I beg your pardon?"

"Why did your father put you in charge of this ship anyway? If you are a physician, you should be home with him, tending to his wounds."

Aggravation yielded fully to anger, and Rafe caught her by the crook of the elbow, clamping his fingers tightly enough to make her wince.

"You are hurting me!" she hiccupped, wide-eyed with alarm.

"Good," he replied, his brows furrowed as he leaned toward her, drawing nearly nose-to-nose. "You think I want to be in charge of this ship? Do you think I like what I have done?" He shoved her away from him, but there was no place to go now; no escape from her. He was bound to her until Lisbon, whether he liked it or not. He shook his arm mightily, frustrated with the chains, and uttered a hoarse, angry cry. "I would love to be home

with my father, tending to his wounds, but unfortunately, there is no physician alive that can help him now.”

Catherine’s eyes widened in frightened, aghast realization.

“This is not my father’s vengeance,” Rafe told her. “It is Cristobal’s, and mine. Evarado Serrano Pelayo is dead. John Ransom—your father—murdered him.”

CHAPTER SIX

Rafe's words hit Kitty with all of the shocking impact of a physical slap to her face. She blinked in stricken surprise and dismay, her mouth agape.

"My father was not a misbegotten pirate!" Rafe shouted. "He was a good man, an honest man. What do you know of Evarado Serrano Pelayo? Because of my father, the people of Santa Ponca, where I was born, had bread on their table and coins in their purses! Because of my father, the men of my village, who might have otherwise scraped pathetic lives from the sea with their nets, were able to provide for their families without worry! My father served the king of Spain—a sanctioned and certified privateer!"

He slapped his hand across the table, sending dishes flying. Kitty shied, frightened, as the porcelain plates and cups struck the bookshelves and floor, shattering. After this sudden clamor, there was silence; only the hiccupping sounds as she gasped for breath, and the heavy, ragged sound of Rafe's own breathing punctuated the stillness.

"He lived five days after John Ransom shot him," Rafe said at length, and she was startled anew to hear the anguished, choked quality of his voice, as if he struggled against tears. "The pellet did not kill him outright. The wound festered. He was bleeding from within, deep

inside his lung. He lingered like that, with fever setting in, roasting in his own skin, drowning on his own blood for five days before it took him. He had been dead two weeks by the time word reached me in Madrid...another two besides before I returned to Mallorca. They had buried him at sea. I did not even get to tell him good-bye.”

She heard him sit heavily in his seat before the breakfast table again. He drew in a long, deep breath, composing himself. She remained rooted in spot, motionless, her eyes trained towards the sounds of him. When he stood again, the chain between them abruptly drew taut and she stumbled forward in clumsy tow as he marched her toward the bed. She was afraid then, more afraid than she had been yet in his company. She had pushed him too far, beyond even that scarce measure of courtesy he had shown her since her abduction. *He will rape me now*, she thought in terrified dismay. *Oh, God, now he is going to force himself on me!*

“Do not ever mention my father again.” Rafe clapped his hands against her shoulders, startling a quiet yelp from her, and then pushed her unceremoniously onto her rump against the mattress. “You do not know anything about him.”

Kitty cowered, hunching her shoulder toward her face as if flinching from a blow. “Please do not,” she whimpered. Her arm hurt from where he had grabbed her so roughly, and she waited for him to grab her again, to shove her back against the mattress and rip her clothes from her. She understood now. Rafe had no intention of ransoming her at all. She was bait, and no more; a lure in his plot to avenge his father’s death.

He is going to kill Daddy!

Rafe was quiet for a long moment, and then the manacle chain suddenly slackened. She heard the sound

of his clothes rustling as he knelt in front of her, and she flinched. "Please do not hurt me."

She heard Rafe open his wooden box of medical supplies. He clasped her by the foot and began to unwind her bandages with quick, angry tugs. "I am not going to hurt you, Catherine. I keep telling you that."

"Please," she whispered, tears welling in her eyes, tangling in her throat. "Please do not hurt my father, either."

Rafe paused at her tremulous plea, his hands falling still against her.

"My father is a good man, too," Kitty said. "He did not mean to kill yours. He would be devastated to know. Your father shot him, too. He has suffered these past months recuperating from his wound."

Rafe said nothing.

"You said your father served the king of Spain," Kitty pleaded. "Mine serves the crown of England. Both of them did as were their duties, then. My father had no ill-will toward yours. Please..." Her voice warbled, on the verge of breaking. Her bottom lip trembled uncontrollably, and she felt a tear slide down her cheek. She raised her hand, wiping it away, struggling to contain the rest.

"My father is all I have left. My mother died when I was a little girl, and I have no other family to speak of. You still have your brother, at least. Please."

Rafe began to tend to her feet again, the movements of his cuffed hand tugging against hers. He said nothing more, and she blinked at him, stunned by the absolute callousness of his silence. *He is as much a monster as his brother—more so, besides. At least his brother wears his brutality on his sleeve. He does not bother to disguise it with the pretense of manners and compassion.*

The bed was still unmade, and Kitty stiffened in surprise when she draped her hand against the tangled bedclothes and felt something hard tucked among the folds—the scalpel. She strained her ears, trying to ascertain whether or not Rafe had noticed her discovery, but he remained otherwise occupied, applying more of his odious and so-called medicinal paste to the injured soles of her feet.

Kitty moved her hand slowly, inching beneath the covers. She curled her fingers about the slim, wooden handle of the scalpel, tucking it against her palm. Again, she listened carefully to make sure Rafe was preoccupied, and then she moved, sliding the scalpel with deliberate care beneath the pillow on her side of the bed. She did not dare try to use it at that moment; Rafe was awake and alert, strong enough to take it easily from her if she tried.

He got drunk last night, she thought. Maybe he will get drunk again this evening. He will drink himself to sleep, and then I will tell his rot damn brother to turn this ship for England, or I will cut his bloody throat open.

“I am sorry,” Rafe said over his fourth cup of wine.

Neither he nor Catherine had touched a bite of supper. They sat facing one another in the same heavy silence that had shrouded them for much of the afternoon. She did not respond to the sound of his voice, not so much as a flutter of her eyelashes. Rafe sighed unhappily, looking down at his wine glass.

“I...I should not have spoken so harshly to you this morning. I should not have grabbed your arm, hurt you.” He sighed once more. “It will not happen again.”

She pressed her lips together, a minute reaction to his words. Her gaze remained stoically averted.

“I do not want this,” he said helplessly. “I did not mean for this, any of it.”

She cut her eyes toward him. “Then why are you doing it?”

He toyed with the basin of the wine glass. *You do not understand.*

“Is it your brother?” Catherine asked. “Is he making you do this somehow?”

Rafe lifted the glass. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back, not even tasting the wine as it rolled down the back of his throat. “I am making myself do this.”

She looked at him, those large eyes as fixed on his as if she could see. “I do not believe you.”

He refilled his wine glass. “I do not care.” He did not need to explain himself to her. He did not need to plead for her understanding.

How could she understand, anyway? She had no idea, no appreciation for the burdens that came with being the first-born son. He had always shouldered responsibility not only to his father, but to Cristobal, as well—more so for Cristobal, because Evarado had been away from home and out to sea so much during their youth. Rafe had been left in charge during Evarado’s lengthy absences. And when Cristobal had been injured, the responsibility for his recuperation had been left to Rafe, as well. His father had trusted him to it.

And I failed them both, he thought, sighing heavily, his breath ragged. He drained his wine glass dry once more and reached for the decanter.

“You drink too much.”

He frowned at Catherine as he poured himself another cup. "That is none of your concern."

"It most certainly is," she replied, and some of the haughty arrogance had returned to her voice, that annoying note of over-confidence that grated on him like fingernails against a slate. "I am chained to you, and apparently will be so for the duration of this miserable, ill-begotten voyage."

He had told her there was nothing aboard the ship that could cut through the chains binding them, and in her innocent naiveté, she had believed him. They would have to wait, he had told her, until they reached port, and then they would go to a blacksmith to see the cuffs removed. She had accepted this far more easily than he had anticipated. He had rather hoped that she would raise a fuss, arguing and caterwauling enough so that he could have convinced Cristobal of the plan's lunacy. But she hadn't; she was clearly unhappy about their circumstances, but resigned to them nonetheless, and thus, Rafe had proceeded to drink himself witless dinner.

"Are you going to make a habit of drinking so much wine every night?" Catherine asked from across the table.

His brows narrowed. "I might, yes."

She jerked against the bonds under some feigned pretense of reaching for her spoon, and his frown deepened as wine sloshed over the rim of his glass, splattering against his lap. "You are pathetic," she muttered, making no real effort to keep him from hearing.

Claudio had told him that rumor had spread among the crew of his predicament. *Splendid*, Rafe had thought, finding in this yet another reason to get mind-numbing drunk. The men were not willing to believe that the cuffs had no key to begin with, or that any son of Evarado

Serrano Pelayo might have so easily fallen into so ludicrous a trap.

“Some say she is a witch,” Claudio had told him in Spanish, cutting a wary glance at Catherine, as if he, too, lent some credence to this. “That she cursed the chains.”

“Well, that is just rot,” Rafe had said, although he felt like he had indeed been cursed by Catherine Ransom. She was proving she could certainly be a witch when she set her mind to it. *Or something that at least rhymes with ‘witch,’* he thought, scowling as he tried to wipe the spilled wine off his pants.

Later that night, Kitty lay beside Rafe in the bed, listening to the slow, heavy measures of his breathing. He had downed enough wine to again lull himself into a stupor. She knew she had not helped matters any by needling him incessantly. *I have driven him to drunkenness.*

Despite the fact that this had been her intention, she felt a momentary twinge of remorse. He had, after all, offered her clumsy apologies for grabbing her. He had seemed genuinely remorseful, if not sincere in his misery, and—

Kitty shook her head slightly, her brows crimping. *What is the matter with you?* she scolded herself sharply. *The man fairly well admitted this very morning that he means to murder your father, and bloody well likely you, too! Do you truly believe he will just turn loose of you once he reaches Lisbon? Let him drink himself to misery! Do not take pity on him. He has none for you!*

With her resolve once again mustered, Kitty slipped her hand beneath her pillow, careful not to make any sound or motion that would disturb Rafe. She felt the handle of the scalpel and drew the blade out and shifted

her weight, rolling toward Rafe. She had been resting as far away from him as the chain would allow, pressed against the wall of the berth, disgusted by his proximity, but now she scooted toward him, until she was nearly tucked against his side. She shifted her weight, raising up onto her elbow. She leaned forward until she could feel his breath against her face and then drew the scalpel against his neck, pressing the blade beneath the shelf of his chin.

She held it poised there for a long, uncertain moment. Her hand trembled; her breath tangled in her throat. She had never so much as cut a serving of roasted meat before. *It is no better than what he has planned for you,* that stern measure of her mind said. *Do it, Kitty. Cut him.*

She pressed the edge of the scalpel more firmly against Rafe's flesh, and he felt it this time; he murmured something unintelligible and turned his face, stirring but not rousing. She felt his breath against her face and then he said something she did understand; whether in Spanish or English, it did not matter. "Papa..."

Kitty froze, motionless, her eyes flown wide, her body rigid.

He said more, words in Spanish that had no meaning to her, and his voice grew choked. He turned his face away again, falling silent once more, his fluttering, hoarse breaths resuming their previous, rhythmic cadence.

Kitty let the scalpel waver, then drew it away. He shrugged his shoulder at the tickling sensation as if shooing a fly, jangling the chains slightly between them.

He does not want to do this. The realization struck her like a dousing of icy water.

His heart was broken, just as hers would be if she had lost her father and been helpless to prevent it. He

was no monster, and no more of a murderer than she was. He was simply grief-stricken.

If he could weep for his father, he could be reasoned with; he could be made to feel sympathy toward her, and she could convince him to spare her the same pain. *I know I could*, she thought. *Maybe not all at once, or right away, but with time, I could. I can make him see. I can convince him to spare Daddy, to let this go.*

Kitty rolled away from Rafe, lying on her back, her sightless gaze turned up to the ceiling. She slid the scalpel back beneath her pillow. *He is not a bad man. He can be reasoned with. I can reason with him. I know I can.*

I know it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“I would like to propose a truce,” Catherine said to Rafe over breakfast.

He frowned at her suspiciously, bleary from the morning’s early hour, and grumpy from his aching head. “A truce?”

She nodded, munching on an orange slice, eating the rind and all in what he had noticed was an odd, if not somewhat fascinating, habit. “I have been thinking about it, and seeing as how we are to be stuck like this until reaching Lisbon...” She gave a slight tug against the chains, as if he needed reminding of their circumstance. “...at least we could try to make the best of it.”

He raised his brows dubiously.

“I mean, there is hardly any point in us spending day in and day out sniping at one another and bickering,” Catherine said. “Do you not think?”

He studied at her for a long moment. *What is she playing at?* “Well, I suppose not,” he conceded at length.

Catherine nodded, smiling slightly at his agreement. “Precisely!” she declared. “And so I think it would be to our mutual benefits if from now on, we simply behaved as casual acquaintances might around one another, with

neither of speaking about our fathers or anything else that might lead to hard feelings or sharp words.”

She is toying with me, Rafe thought as again, she nibbled at her orange slice, clearly waiting for his response to her proposal. *She is playing at something. But what?* “You want us to be friends?”

She laughed lightly, flapping her hand. “I would not go that far,” she said. “I said casual acquaintances. You know, people who demonstrate a modicum of common courtesy toward one another, and who exchange amiable discourse. Like we have met at a party or something, a dance, or some other sort of social function.”

“A social function where we have been chained together,” he said dryly. There was no way in hell she could be sincere in her proposal. She meant to get something out of it, trick him somehow, even though at the moment, Rafe could see no benefit to her in it.

He expected her to react to his comment; her eyes to flash, her brows to narrow, the angry patches of color he had come to anticipate in her cheeks blooming. Catherine was unlike any woman he had ever met—certainly different from Spanish noblewomen. They were bred to be beautiful, dutiful, if not oblivious wives to their husbands. They did not speak their minds; it was considered unbecoming. They seldom spoke of anything but idle topics with men, and never offered argument or dissention. Catherine did all of these, and more besides, and for the life of him, Rafe could not figure out why it was beginning to appeal to him.

He expected her to react, because already, he had grown accustomed to it, but there was nothing. Only that fluttery, coquettish little laugh again, and another dismissive flip of her hand, much like the sort a typical Spanish noblewoman might employ. “Well, there is

nothing that can be done for that,” she said. “But it could be much worse, could it not?”

Rafe blinked at her, convinced now that he was having some sort of bizarre, wine-induced dream, that his befuddled mind had not yet roused, and he was still in bed asleep. “If you say so, Catherine,” he replied carefully.

Catherine smiled at him wanly as she popped the last bit of orange—rind and all—into her mouth. “Splendid, then,” she said. “We can start with you calling me Kitty. No one calls me Catherine except for my dreadful, old, dowager aunt.”

Rafe did not believe her. Not for one moment, not yet, anyway. But he had agreed to her proposition, and that was as good a place to begin as any, Kitty figured.

To his credit, he was a perfect gentleman after breakfast, summoning freshly heated water for her, and stepping out into the corridor so that she could wash her face with a modicum of privacy. He had closed the door nearly all of the way to, stopped only by the chain links between them. Bathing her face and neck, and then swatting a brush through her disheveled hair to loosen all of the knots and tangles was admittedly a challenge with only one hand, but it felt amazingly good, these simple tasks, and Kitty was grateful.

When she was finished, she sat on the edge of the bed, her arm extended, her hand dangling in midair to allow him the use of both hands as he shaved. That he tended to this task himself surprised her.

“Why?” he asked, sounding amused when she mentioned this.

She listened to the soft splash as he dipped the straight razor into water to rinse it, and then a soft, melodic ping as he tapped the blade dry against the basin. "I do not know," she said. "I have never heard of a nobleman shaving himself before. I thought you had stewards for that sort of thing."

Rafe laughed, and she heard a faint scraping sound as he drew the razor against the thick growth of his beard. "What?" she asked, wanting to frown, but resisting the urge lest he catch her at it.

"Nothing," he replied, tapping the blade again. "It is just that in Spain, we are nowhere near as worldly or proud as you English seem to be. We have never felt the need for ostentatious demonstration of any noble birth. You might be surprised how much larger the world is beyond your little Isle of Wight."

She tucked her tongue between her back teeth and bit back a sharp retort. He was goading her deliberately, still uncertain as to her motives for being so pleasant all of a sudden. He was trying to trip her up, get a rise out of her, and she refused to let him. She used the mention of the Wight to tell him a bit about her life there, and the marriage her father had hopes of arranging for her.

"Michael Urry is a pleasant boy and all," she said, after she had spoken at quite some length. She had nearly forgotten she was talking to Rafe at all, and had chatted openly and freely, her tongue loosened and unguarded. "I mean, if you are one who favors the bookish sort. He is rather short—compared to him, I am sure I must seem positively towering. And he makes this dreadful noise when he is breathing, a sort of sodden sound, like this..." She tried her best to imitate Michael's unfortunate snorting and burst out laughing at her own clumsy attempts. "I cannot imagine marrying him, listening to that every night in bed."

She blushed slightly, remembering that it was Rafe to whom she was confiding, not her handmaids or a female friend. She knew about lovemaking; she had heard plenty of rumors about the messy, malodorous affair that was one of the laborious duties of a good wife. But it was hardly the topic of proper conversation. She had forgotten herself momentarily.

“Are all English women like you?” he asked.

She blinked in bewildered surprise. “I...I do not know what you mean.”

“Do they all talk so much?” he asked, and she bristled. “In my country, it is considered a virtue for a woman to be demure.”

“I am demure,” Kitty protested, her brows narrowing slightly. The crimp deepened when Rafe laughed at this. “What?”

“I think you are the most *un*-demure woman I have ever met,” he said. “You have what we call *despejo*—a decided lack of inhibition.”

“I beg your pardon!” Kitty exclaimed.

“It is not a bad thing,” Rafe said. “At least, not to me. I find it rather refreshing, in fact. Although you do talk about the same sorts of inane gossip Spanish ladies tend to drone on and on about.” The chain jingled softly as he shrugged. “Must be a woman-thing,” he remarked, tapping the razor against the wash basin again.

Kitty’s posture grew rigid as she stiffened indignantly. “Perhaps if women were allowed to enjoy the benefits of a proper education, such as the type you’ve been awarded, we might have more of interest to discuss with you.”

Rafe uttered a soft bark of decidedly humorless laughter. “I would not call my education any sort of award,” he muttered.

“And I will have you know that yes, I do know a fair measure about other things besides gossip,” Kitty said. “*Man*-things, I suppose you would consider them. For example, I am not so ignorant of politics as to think that any so-called privateer who claims to sail under the sanction of the Spanish crown is not lying.”

She heard Rafe’s breath draw still, and she cringed, wishing she would have just kept her damnable mouth shut. He had been deliberately baiting her, and she had finally let him. She had snapped at him out of anger, crossing the tentative lines she herself had drawn in their hesitant, fledgling truce.

“My father sailed with a writ certified by Philip the Fifth,” Rafe said, his voice low and taut, as if he spoke around a clenched jaw.

She had broached the subject; there was no way she could take it back now. She could remain silent and hope to backpedal, repairing the damage her sharp tongue had just meted out, or she could blunder onward, come what may. As per usual, her mouth moved ahead without the necessary consent of her mind. “Ferdinand the Sixth is the King of Spain now,” she said. “King Philip died two years ago. He might have been an adversary of England, but his son is not. Ferdinand denounced his father’s privateering sanctions. He stripped privateers of the crown’s protection.”

Rafe’s breath drew in sharply, and the chains between them rattled softly as he stumbled. “What are you talking about?”

He sounds surprised, like I have caught him off guard, Kitty thought, bewildered. *How could he not have known this?*

“For the last two years, your father sailed deliberately against the English fleet,” she said. “Against the orders of your king.”

“That is not possible,” Rafe said. “You are wrong. Philip is dead, yes, but Ferdinand honors his writs. My father was a good man. He would never have sailed otherwise.”

He did not know, Kitty realized, her eyes wide. She said no more, pressing her lips together to stifle anything else her willful tongue might have offered to add insult to this grievous injury. *Oh, my God, Rafe did not know his father was a pirate!*

“Is it true?” Rafe demanded of Cristobal, speaking sharply in Spanish so that Kitty could not understand. He had called his brother and Claudio both to his quarters, and stood before them now, his brows furrowed, his fists clenched.

Claudio looked down at his feet, his shoulders hunched, his brows lifted sheepishly, but Cristobal hoisted his chin and met Rafe’s gaze evenly. “Father did not want you to know,” he said. “He knew you would not realize if nothing was ever said to you of it, and he did not want to trouble you on the mainland.”

“Trouble me?” Rafe exclaimed. “He was a *pirate*, Cristobal—a bloody damn criminal these past two years, and you knew it! You both knew it! Mother of God, you both sailed right along with him!”

“The King was wrong to revoke the writs!” Cristobal snapped, his own brows narrowing. “The English take and take as they damn well please! It was within our rights to—”

“How could you not tell me?” Rafe said to Claudio, ignoring his brother and grasping the older man by the shoulder to draw his gaze. “Claudio, you let me set sail

thinking we had the sanction of the King! My God, we have taken this girl for no reason! There is nothing to avenge!”

“Nothing?” Cristobal said, the furrow between his brows deepening. He shoved Rafe back a step. “Our father is dead—murdered by John Ransom!”

“Ransom had every right!” Rafe shouted, nearly toe to toe with his brother. The two of them had never come to blows before. Rafe had always been overly mindful of Cristobal’s maimed leg and, like everyone else, had coddled his brother because of his handicap. At the moment, however, he was so furious, so outraged and ashamed, he could have easily pummeled Cristobal where he stood. He forced himself to turn away, to face Claudio again, because that was where the true betrayal lay for him; not with his brother, but with Claudio, a man whose word he had always trusted infallibly, just as he had his father’s.

“How could you do this?” he asked, anguished. “How could you let me do this?”

“It was not his to decide,” Cristobal said. “It was my idea.”

Rafe leveled his seething gaze at his younger brother. “Then you will answer for it, Cristobal. I will see to that personally once we get to La Coruna.”

“La Coruna?” Cristobal and Claudio both asked in near unison, their surprised voices overlapping.

“Yes, La Coruna,” Rafe said. “We will dock there and have the bowsprit fixed, and these manacles removed.” He shook his arm demonstratively, making Kitty’s flap beside him. When Cristobal opened his mouth to protest, he added sharply, “And after that, I am sending Kitty home again to England. It is over. Do you

hear me, Cristobal? This plan of yours for vengeance against Ransom is over.”

Of course, he would not tell Kitty that. She would take it as a victory; that she had triumphed over him with her sharp tongue and aggravating pertness. Let her think her father remained in harm’s way for his pursuit. It might do her some good.

Cristobal’s eyes flew wide in disbelief. “You cannot do that,” he began, limping forward.

Rafe caught him by the front of his shirt, closing his fist against the thin linen. The chains at his wrist drew taut at this sudden motion, and Kitty, who had been sitting quietly, timidly behind him, was jerked to her feet. She yelped in surprise and uncertain fright, her cry overlapping Cristobal’s as he struck the wall with shuddering, forceful impact.

“I can do anything I damn well please,” Rafe seethed, leaning toward Cristobal. “It is my ship, my helm, my rules. Remember? And for the rest of this voyage, I want you below in your quarters. There will be no more pirates holding deck on this ship.”

He turned his furious gaze to Claudio. “Can you to get us into port at La Coruna?” he asked.

Claudio looked at him, his expression solemn. “Not without Cristobal,” he said. “We will need an experienced man to hold the deck if we—”

“Claudio, please,” Rafe said and his voice grew hoarse, pained. He did not understand why Claudio would pick now of all times to side with Cristobal on anything, but he was desperate for the older man’s support. “I’m asking you as my friend, Claudio, not my boatswain, because I cannot take you at your word as that anymore. I need you to promise me as my friend that you will get us to La Coruna.”

Claudio's brows lifted in gentle sympathy to see the hurt in Rafe's eyes. "Yes, Rafe," he said at last, nodding once. "I will see the ship to La Coruna."

Rafe released Cristobal, stepping back as his brother stumbled to reclaim his hobbled footing. "Get out of here," Rafe said to him, as Cristobal glowered, gingerly touching his neck.

"Gladly." Cristobal spat against the floor in front of Rafe. He turned and stormed out of the room.

"Rafe, we will need him," Claudio said quietly. "The shoreline surrounding La Coruna is the most rugged in all of Spain—*la costa de la muerte*, they call it; the coast of death. I have sailed with Cristobal and your father there plenty of times, but it will take a man with Cristobal's experience—his head for the sea—if you hope to navigate it safely." He lay his hand against Rafe's sleeve. "Even if circumstances were not as they are, and you were able to hold the helm, I would not let you for this. We need Cristobal."

Rafe shrugged away. "No," he said. "Not now—not after this." With his brother gone, his furious resolve waned, and he blinked against the sudden sting of tears. "Why?" he asked. "Why did Father leave this to me? You are right. Cristobal has the head for the sea; he sailed with Father all of these years, not me. If Father did not want me to know about this...the truth about him, why did he leave it all to me? He sent me away all of those years ago..." His voice grew choked, and he paused, blinking down at his feet, struggling proudly to compose himself. "He sent me away," he said again, his voice steadier now. "He did not want me to be a part of this life—*his* life—then. Why would he have left it to me?"

"Oh, Rafe," Claudio said quietly, reaching for him again. "Is that what you think? That your father did not want you?"

His calloused palm settled gently against Rafe's face, and Rafe closed his eyes, feeling his tenuous self-control cracking.

"He sent me away," Rafe whispered, and in his mind, he could still hear his father's voice, Evarado's words, as clearly as they had been when he had spoken them almost fourteen years earlier.

You will be leaving in the morrow, Evarado had told him, and his eyes had been stern, his jaw rigidly set, his voice curt. Pack one bag, and no more. You will be sailing for the mainland, for Madrid, with Señor Guevarra Silva.

And oh, how that thought had terrified the then-thirteen-year-old Rafe—Lucio Guevarra Silva, with his angry brows and sharp tongue, a man who had seemed incapable of anything other than gruff dismissiveness where Rafe had been concerned. Rafe had known the elderly physician's temperament wasn't likely to improve before the morrow, either. *Because he had known—just like Father had. They both knew what happened to Cristobal's leg was my fault.*

"Father sent me to Madrid," Rafe said, frowning as he ducked away from Claudio's hand. "That is not what I think—that is a point of fact, Claudio. He sent me away, and then he made this life for himself—the life of a pirate."

"Because he felt he had no choice," Claudio said. "King Ferdinand may not have sanctioned his actions, but he still paid for them nonetheless—and generously, too." Rafe turned in new surprise, and Claudio nodded. "Generously enough that your father could never hope to make as much returning to fishing or simple trading. He had his crewmen to consider, and their families back on Mallorca, the lives that his actions—his money—had made possible."

Rafe shook his head, his brows furrowing more deeply. "What a pity he never considered his *own* bloody damn family."

Rafe got drunk again. He began drinking shortly after his brother and boatswain had left the room, and had not stopped until well after supper. He said little, if anything, the rest of the day, and Kitty had forced herself to keep mute. He was in a terrible humor, and she didn't want to provoke him, especially given the amount of wine he downed over the course of the afternoon. He drank so much, glass after glass, in such rapid succession that she was astonished he was not unconscious or sick by dinnertime. He did not touch his supper that she was able to tell; she had nibbled on stewed chicken and root vegetables and listened in dismay to the soft, melodic ping each time the lip of the wine decanter tapped the mouth of his glass in refill.

"We are sailing for La Coruna," he'd mumbled. "Coastline be damned—Cristobal be damned. We will make it bloody well fine without him."

La Coruna? Kitty thought in dismay. *He told me Lisbon! Since when are we sailing to La Coruna?* They were three days out at sea; there could not be more than three days—four at best, if the weather proved unfavorable—before they reached the northern coast of Spain. She had been counting on at least another week in full, if not ten days, before reaching Portugal—plenty of time, she had thought, for her plan to charm her way into Rafe's sympathies to work. She felt her stomach knot in sudden dismay. *I cannot do this, not in only a few days!*

As he continued to drink more heavily, he lapsed from English into Spanish, and she could no longer

understand him. He kept murmuring to himself, the tone of his voice alternating between fury and despair. *It is all my fault*, Kitty thought, as after supper, he began to stumble around the captain's quarters, pacing clumsily, dragging her along behind him. She staggered with her shoulders hunched, her unbound hand raised before her face, lest he run her headlong into a bulwark or bedpost. *I should not have told him. Why could I not just keep my bloody fool mouth shut? Now he is changed his course, and I will not have any time or hope to help Daddy!*

He hauled her about the cabin as he muttered and mumbled in drunken, slurred Spanish, staggering and reeling, his balance precarious. At last, he crumpled against the bed, sprawled at a diagonal across the mattress, with his head against her pillow nearest the berth wall. His position left her cuffed hand stretched out across him, her arm draped against his buttocks. Kitty held her breath for a long, wide-eyed moment, listening as he began to promptly snore, his breath rattling quietly, moistly.

"Rafe?" she said, reaching up with her free hand, patting his shoulder. "Rafe, you have to roll over. My arm..."

But there was no rousing him. He was out cold. Even her most fervent shakes didn't break his wine-induced slumber. "Damn it," Kitty muttered. His legs were outstretched, practically taking over the breadth of the bed, but she lay down on her side, curling into the narrow margin of space left empty beside him. This left her head tucked near the middle of his back, her feet dangling off the side of the mattress and her arm craned across his body in a clumsy and decidedly uncomfortable embrace.

However, he was marvelously warm, and that part was not so unpleasant. She could feel the heat from his

body radiating through his clothes, pressing against her. She closed her eyes, squirming slightly, trying to settle herself.

She heard him mumble, stirring restlessly, and she gasped in sharp surprise as he moved, rolling onto his side toward her. She tried to jerk her cuffed hand away, to scuttle back from him, but it was too late. As he rolled, and as she moved her hand, her palm settled against the swell of his crotch, outlined in a discernible, palpable bulge. The sensation of this, her inadvertent touch, seemed to please Rafe; he uttered a soft, somewhat breathless murmur. "Isabel..."

Kitty froze, horrified, holding him against her palm. *Isabel?*

She couldn't breathe; her throat, it seemed, had collapsed to the circumference of a pinhole. Her fingers closed reflexively about his measure in her shock, making matters all the worse as he stirred against her, semi-softness yielding unexpectedly to heat and hardening. She had never felt the likes of it; she felt desperate to turn loose of him and yet bizarrely unable to. More disturbing than his reaction to her touch was her own—a heavy, insistent fluttering deep within the core of her gut; her breath hitching, her heart suddenly hammering.

"Isabel..." Rafe murmured again. He added something breathlessly in Spanish and Kitty panicked. *Let go of him*, she thought. *He is going to wake up. Just pull your hand away and leave him alone.*

She tried to listen to that voice of reason, but the part of her that was both curious and excited refused to yield. When she moved her hand against him, he uttered a low moan, a visceral, longing sound that sent heat racing through her and kept her hand firmly in place. She moved her hand again clumsily, and again his voice escaped him.

Stop it, a part of her mind cried out. Are you mad? What are you doing? Stop it!

He rolled abruptly and Kitty gasped sharply in frightened surprise as he forced her back against the mattress, settling atop her. Her eyes snapped shut as his weight settled against her and she could feel the length of his arousal pressing against her with fascinating, terrifying promise.

“What are you doing, Isabel?” he said, an unfamiliar, throaty quality to his voice. She could smell the wine on his breath as it pressed against her face, but did not move. She lay absolutely still, struggling not to tremble with fright.

He is dreaming. He does not realize it is me, and if I just do not move, if I do not make a sound, he will go back to sleep.

Rafe did not move, either, for a long, excruciating moment and then he touched her face, startling her, making her jerk as the pad of his thumb brushed lightly, deliberately against her lower lip. “*Madre de Dios*, woman,” he murmured, sounding dazed and drowsy. “You are so very beautiful, do you know...?”

He does not mean me, she told herself, her inner voice a rambling, chattering mess. *He thinks he is talking to someone else, this woman, Isabel. He does not mean me.*

But there was no preventing the fluttering heat his words stoked throughout her. No one had ever called her beautiful before, except her father. No man had ever offered any words to her like that, and certainly not with such longing infused within them.

Kitty stiffened, her breath hitching in reflexive start as she felt Rafe’s lips press lightly against the corner of her mouth. She had only ever kissed one boy before, Michael Urry, in a fleeting brush of pursed and puckered lips. It had been only brief, and nothing monumental, but

when Rafe's mouth moved, settling gently against hers, Kitty's senses flooded with the sensation of him, frozen in that moment; the warm, spicy musk of his scent filling her nose; the moist heat of his lips, his breath against hers; the texture of his skin, the grating tickle of his beard stubble against her cheek and chin; the gliding friction of his hand against her skin as he touched her, turning her head to him.

Rafe groaned softly against her mouth, as if the kiss pleased him. His lips pressed against hers more firmly, and when they parted, Kitty followed his cue, opening her mouth slightly. Her heart hammered beneath her breast; this frantic cadence only grew as the tip of his tongue delved between her lips, slipping against her own. Again, he murmured in pleasure, and again, his mouth pressed further against hers. His tongue eased more deeply into her mouth, tangling against her own.

He kissed her like this—slowly, deeply—for what seemed like the longest, most wondrous moments of her life, until she could no longer keep her breath strained and caught in her throat, and she had to turn away to draw in air.

His mouth trailed gently along her cheek toward the angle of her jaw. She felt his breath, press against the side of her throat, the tip of his nose brush through her hair. Her body felt electrified and tingling, as if she had lost all control of thought or movement, and she quivered beneath him, trembling at his kiss, his touch. She gasped softly, unable to stifle the sound, as his lips settled against her neck. They lingered here, traveling slowly, warmly down the toward her shoulder, and she reflexively tilted her head back, reveling in the glorious sensation.

Rafe's hand fell against her breast, his fingers toying with her nipple through the thin fabric of her shirt, and she gasped again in unexpected delight as the sensitive

nub hardened at his gentle prodding. He whispered to her in Spanish, melodic words and lilting phrases she didn't understand. He kept murmuring that name to her—*Isabel*—his voice hoarse with mounting need.

Every touch, every kiss, every passing, kneading caress of his tongue and fingers left her trembling, frightened, fascinated and immobilized. When his hand moved from her breast, sliding down her stomach and pressing between her thighs, touching her through her breeches at her innermost, warmest recess, she couldn't contain herself any longer. She moaned helplessly, her heart pounding, her breath hitching in eager delight.

He paused, his lips pulling away from her. He was looking at her. She could feel it. He had heard her and now he was looking at her, trying to decide if she was awake or not. "Catherine?" he said, his voice still tinged with that unfamiliar thickness.

Oh, damn. Kitty did not move. She could feel herself trembling uncontrollably, despite the warmth of his body pressed against hers.

She did not move, and suddenly, Rafe drew away from her, shifting his weight and rolling back against his side of the bed. Kitty felt unexpected—and inexplicable—disappointment, a heavy coldness in the air around her when he was gone. "What am I doing?" he whispered. "God above...I have lost my wits..."

She lay absolutely still, her breath still bated, her body still shivering from his touch, his kisses. After a few long, agonizing moments, she heard a soft snuffling sound, and realized Rafe slept again; his quiet, wine-prompted snoring had resumed.

Oh, my God, she thought, still unwilling to move, uncertain if she dared to risk waking him again—kissing her again. She didn't know who this woman, Isabel, might

be, but if Rafe had tended to her with such passion, Kitty could not help but envy her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning, neither Kitty nor Rafe had much to say to one another. They each took turns at the chamber pot and wash basin, and then they had sat down across from one another for breakfast, all with little more than mumbled courtesies exchanged. Kitty tapped her fingertips against her plate until she found orange slices and nibbled on them quietly, trying to listen for any hint of reaction from Rafe. He had not mentioned what had happened, and she certainly had not, but she suspected from his uncharacteristic silence, that he remembered only too well.

Who is Isabel? she wanted to ask him. She had lain awake long after he had returned to sleep, still reveling in his impassioned advances and wondering for whom he had really intended them. Was Isabel his betrothed, a fiancée awaiting him in Madrid? A long-lost love who yet held sway over his heart? It had nagged at her, in part out of curiosity, in part out of something more. Was she jealous of this woman, resentful of the fact that Rafe still harbored some apparently passionate feelings for her?

Do not be ridiculous, she told herself firmly. I do not give a whit about Rafe Serrano Beltran. Why should I bloody even care who he is in love with, if anyone?

"I am sorry," Rafe said, his quiet words offered in a hoarse voice drawing her attention. He paused, but she knew from the way he had left the last syllable hanging somewhat that he wanted to say more. She said nothing, directing her eyes toward the sound of him, waiting.

"I drank too much last night," he said at length, and sighed heavily. "You were right before when you said I make a habit of it, and I am sorry. I hope that I..." His voice faded and he hesitated again before continuing. "If I behaved in any fashion that might have offended or...disrespected you, then I apologize deeply, sincerely. I give you my word it will not happen again."

"I...I do not know what you mean, Rafe," she said, once she had managed to choke down a mouthful of orange. "You did nothing last night except take my side of the bed and then snore somewhat."

He did not say anything. He was looking at her; she could feel his gaze as he studied her, trying to decide whether or not she was telling him the truth. Whether he believed her or not, he seemed relieved for her proffered escape, and seized upon it. "Oh," he said. "I...well, then, I am sorry for that."

Kitty flapped her hand and managed a nonchalant laugh. "Nothing for it."

He remembers, she thought. He remembers everything. He is just hoping it is a dream. I am sure it seemed that way to him—some horrid, drunken nightmare, to come to his senses and realize it was me he was kissing last night, not his precious bloody Isabel—my body he had his hands all over, not hers.

She felt inexplicably insulted and stuffed an entire wedge of orange in her mouth, sinking her back teeth

deeply into the spongy rind lest she snap out some inappropriate retort. *Gather your wits about you, Kitty*, she scolded herself. *You are behaving like some scorned ninny. This is not some eligible noble son shunning you for another. He is the bloody pirate who kidnapped you—the man who has sworn to kill your father!*

Never mind how wondrous it all seemed last night...

Rafe watched Kitty for any hint—a bloom of blush in her cheeks, however so slight, or a hunkering of her shoulders, a minute shift in her expression—that might suggest she was lying to him. He had vague memories of what had seemed a wine-induced delirium; that he had imagined kissing Isabel Aniceto Zuniga, only to come somewhat to his bleary, still-drunken senses to find himself poised atop Kitty, his hands and mouth against her instead.

It seemed like memories, at least, but he had been too abashed to broach the subject with her. At first, he had taken her unusual silence, her atypical complacency that morning as a sure indication that it had really happened. *Mother of God, what have I done?* he thought in dismay, as they had first sat down to breakfast together. *I have broken my word that I wouldn't show her any discourtesy, that she would be safe from harm with me. I have terrorized her.*

But then she had told him he had not. She had spoken with such nonchalance and seeming honesty, he was completely befuddled. Had nothing happened, after all? Had it been just a dream? Why would Kitty lie to him, if it had not been?

She would not, he told himself, watching her mouth, her lips pursed together as she chewed a large bite of

orange. *If I had touched her—if what I had imagined had really happened, she would be railing me right now, and probably swinging at me, too. She would be tearing into me like a dog on a ham bone.*

His head hurt, but nowhere near as badly as he deserved, considering the amount of wine he had downed the day before. He felt badly that Kitty had seen him in such a state. *What she must think of me*, he thought. He had told her it wouldn't happen again, and he meant it. *No more wine, at least until we reach La Coruna and I get these chains off of us. God only knows what might happen otherwise.*

Dream or not, somewhere in the recesses of his mind, Rafe had known it was not Isabel he kissed or caressed last night. He had touched Isabel enough to have memorized every generous curve and voluptuous contour on her petite form. The woman he had imagined exploring with his mouth and hands the night before had been far too long and much too lean to have been Isabel. He had dreamed of Kitty; of her long legs pressed against him, her modest but shapely breasts beneath his hands, the caps of her nipples hardening at the gentle prodding of his fingertips. It had not been Isabel's full mouth he had imagined kissing, but Kitty's. In his dream, it had not been the promise of making love to Isabel that had stoked a ferocious heat within him, stirring him to a maddeningly acute arousal. He had wanted to make love to Kitty.

Madness, he thought at the breakfast table. *Mad, mad, mad.* But even as he chastised himself in his mind, he could not help but let his eyes travel down the slope of Kitty's throat and to the inner sideswell of her left breast, just visible in a tantalizing peek through the V-shaped opening at the collar of her shirt. He felt himself hardening at this glimpse, and remembered a fragment of his dream that had not yet occurred to him—Kitty touching him, closing her hand with firm promise against

him and moving against him with exquisite, excruciating friction.

Mad, mad, mad, he thought again, forcing the thought from his mind. He pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingertips and shifted his weight in his seat, readjusting himself and trying to discourage the swelling that suddenly tugged the crotch of his breeches out of comfortable place. *As if Kitty would ever let me make love to her*, he thought, a rueful hook turning up the corner of his mouth. *She would as soon scratch my eyes out.*

That afternoon, Rafe invited Kitty to sit beside him on a small, upholstered bench near the stern windows. She was puzzled, but took a seat as he had requested. The chains between them rattled as he reached behind them; she heard unfamiliar rustling sounds as he hefted something that had been stowed behind the bench. “What is that?” she asked, somewhat apprehensive.

“It is a guitar,” Rafe replied, drawing her cuffed hand toward him. “Here...”

He pressed her hand against the neck of the instrument, letting her fumble curiously against the strings and frets. “Have you ever heard one played?” he asked.

“No,” Kitty said, shaking her head. She loved music, but there had never been much occasion for it on the Wight, only the infrequent—and often excruciatingly awful—performance by a friend or acquaintance on a harpsichord, lute or pipe. She had always longed to go to London to visit Vauxhall and thrill to the operatic season, but her father had never allowed it.

Her roving hand traveled toward Rafe, finding the polished belly of the instrument. “Can you play?” she asked him, excited by the notion.

“Yes,” he said, the warm tone in his voice lending itself to a smile. “I thought you might enjoy to hear, to while away some hours, at least.”

“Oh, yes, please,” Kitty said, smiling broadly.

He began to play, and she sat with her cuffed hand draped against his sleeve to leave enough slack in the chains to accommodate his efforts. The guitar stirred to life at the stroking of Rafe’s fingertips, and the sounds that emanated forth—rich and resonant chords, deep-throated undertones and delicate trills—left her breathless with amazed delight. She could hear his fingers sliding against the guitar strings; the friction of his skin against the cords. She could feel the visceral vibrations rising from the belly of the instrument, thrumming throughout Rafe’s form and into her own. He tapped his foot against the floor, and after a long moment of painstakingly intricate melody, he began to sing.

Kitty sat immobilized, listening. He had a wonderful voice; a rich tenor with gentle timbre. He sang in Spanish, a lulling, forlorn lament, his tone alternating between tremulous despair and passionate fervency. It was quite possibly the most beautiful thing Kitty had ever heard, and when he finished, when his voice had quieted, and the thrum of the guitar through her body had subsided, she gasped softly, moved.

“Did you like it?” he asked.

She blinked, as if emerging from a reverie and smiled. “Oh, yes,” she said, nodding, tightening her grasp against his sleeve. “It was beautiful, Rafe.”

She didn’t realize he was so near to her, that he had canted his face down to look at her as he had spoken. She

looked up, and drew back in start as her nose brushed against his mouth, the tip of his own. His unexpected proximity immediately sent warmth fluttering through her, and she blushed. "It...it was beautiful," she said again. "What did it mean?"

"It is a *cante*, a traditional song of lamentation," Rafe said. "It is meant to express what the Spanish call *pena negra*—black sorrow. That *cante* in particular is about a man who mourns for his one true love, a woman he can never have."

Again, Kitty thought of Isabel. *Were you playing it for her, Rafe? Is that why you dream of her, because she can never be yours?*

"There is a dance that accompanies the *cante*," he said. "I could teach it to you later, if you would like."

"Oh...oh, no," Kitty stammered, blushing again, more brightly this time. "I do not know how to dance." It had been one of those things John Ransom had always promised to show her, but with his duties at sea, that day had never come.

"It is easy. I will show you," Rafe said, and she blinked, startled.

"I...well...that is very kind of you to offer, but I..." she began.

"You will enjoy yourself," he said. "It will be perfectly amiable." He said this last with a mischievous edge, as if making half-hearted effort to goad her, and she laughed.

"Would you like to hear another?" Rafe asked. Already, she could hear him moving his fingertips against the cords, settling them into place to play once more. She remembered the wondrous sensation of his touch against her, how those fingers had explored and caressed her body with the same practiced ease.

“Yes, please,” she said, nodding, and even though she was loathe to admit it, a part of her wished he had played the *cante* lamenting lost love for her, just as she wished he had dreamed of touching her the night before, not Isabel.

Just as he had with his musical talents, Rafe thoroughly surprised her by teaching her some simple box-step dances. He summoned a sailor to the room, the young, quiet crewman named Eduardo who delivered them their food each meal. Eduardo was the oldest son of Rafe’s boatswain, Claudio, Rafe had explained. Rafe had known him since he had been born. Eduardo would play the guitar for them while Rafe and Kitty danced.

Kitty shrank behind Rafe, mortified, as she heard the other man come into the room. “Rafe, no,” she said, clutching at his sleeve. “Please...I have not had a bath in days. I must look affright.”

Rafe pivoted to reach for her, and when he stroked the cuff of his fingers against her face, she found herself frozen by the nearly tender gesture. “You look beautiful.”

He did not sound like he was teasing her; there was a warm and unexpected sincerity in his voice, and she found this even more unnerving than she would have a sharp-edged taunt. *He nearly sounds as if he believes it*, she thought, and this notion stirred up that little nest of butterflies that had seemed to take up residence in her belly since the night before.

“I think my blindness must be contagious,” she managed to remark, giving him a light slap across the arm. He chuckled with what sounded like earnest good humor, which only left her wondering if she had really

heard the previous warmth in his tone or not. *I must have imagined it. Surely I did. His heart is all caught up in this Isabel woman, while I'm just a bloody nuisance to him.*

Rafe had her step atop his feet, drawing her so closely against him, she was immediately embarrassed of what Eduardo would think of this wholly improper proximity—not to mention what Rafe might think if he felt the sudden, eager hammering of her heart beneath her breasts. She tried to hedge away, blushing brightly, but Rafe hooked his hand against her waist, slipping their cuffed palms together, and she was held fast.

“This cannot possibly work...” she protested weakly, as Eduardo began to play.

“It will be fine,” Rafe told her, laughing gently again. He offered her a slight, playful shake. “You are as stiff as a pine board, Kitty. Relax. Trust me.”

He leaned forward to offer her this last, his breath and voice brushing lightly against her ear. The butterflies fluttered again at this, and a dim but not unpleasant sort of heat stoked deeply within her.

She could not relax for the first few songs, but then she forgot herself and her awkwardness and actually began to enjoy the dancing. Rafe turned her about in slow, sweeping circles. He held her gently, his hand against the small of her back, keeping her poised against him, and his fingers slid between hers.

She enjoyed the warmth of him seeping through his clothes; the firm press of the muscles in his thighs against her, the gentle motions of his hips as he led her through the simple moves. She liked the feel of his breath against her skin, and the way he kept speaking in intimate proximity to her ear to be sure she could hear him above the strumming of the guitar.

"I understand that in Spain, you enjoy to watch bulls being killed for sport," she said as they danced. She felt like a true lady, a proper prospective daughter of English high society, enjoying a ball in the company of an elegant gentleman bachelor.

Rafe chuckled. "*La tauromaquia*," he said, the Spanish term rolling off his tongue in nearly sensual articulation. "Bullfighting, you English call it. To us, it is *la fiesta brava*, the brave party."

Kitty raised a dubious brow. "What a splendid party," she remarked. "I am sure the bulls would agree."

When Rafe laughed, Kitty could feel it rumbling through his chest and into hers. "*La tauromaquia* is less of a sport, and more of an art form. There are few animals as noble and steadfast in the world as bulls, who would as soon stand their ground and fight to the death as flee for their lives."

"And few as foolhardy enough to attack them in spite of this as man," Kitty said.

Rafe chuckled. "Actually, *la tauromaquia* is not so much an attack," he said, his breath rustling her hair, tickling her ear—and sending shivers down her spine.

"Have...have you ever seen one?" she asked, drawing away from him.

"Oh, yes," he replied. "I have been to *la Plaza Mayor*, the arena square in Madrid, many times. You see, when you fight or pursue a sport, your intention is to win. That is not how it is done with *la tauromaquia*."

"Killing a bull is not considered winning?"

"No—the success of the *matador* is. Death is not the ultimate goal; the demonstration of prowess and skill, of grace and poise are. It is very sensual."

Kitty laughed. "Yes, I imagine it must be."

Rafe pulled her close again so that he could speak against her ear. "Think of *la tauromaquia* as a dance," he breathed. "The *matador* and bull do not fight as much as they move together, either in tandem..." His hips moved against her, leaving her to hiccup for breath.

"...or in opposition." Kitty gasped as he leaned her back, lowering her head toward the floor, supporting her with his hand against her spine and keeping his torso folded toward her, pressed against her, belly to belly.

Before she could blush or stammer out some manner of objection, he drew her upright once more. "The key to *la tauromaquia* is space," Rafe said. "How much a *matador* must allow between him and the bull, and how little, as well. A bull's nature is to charge anything that moves. The *matador* draws the beast to attack him not with his own motions, but with that of his cape. He remains still despite its charge; he moves the cape to let it pass, while he himself is unmoving."

Kitty shook her head. "He is an idiot."

Rafe laughed. "No, he is brave."

"Only a man would think another man standing still while an enraged bull attacks him constitutes courage," Kitty said, making Rafe laugh all the more.

"Each time, the *matador* draws the bull to him is a moment he could strike," he said. "The true measure of his courage comes from biding his time and bringing the bull to him again and again, exhausting it. Only then does he deliver the death blow."

Kitty shivered, imagining such a brutal scene. "It sounds positive beastly."

Rafe simply laughed again. "It is beautiful," he said. "Trust me."

“Are you close to your father, Kitty?”

Evening had fallen, bringing an end to what Kitty had to admit was an enjoyable afternoon.

Rafe had not touched any wine all day, even now, over supper, as had been customary for him. She had enjoyed him sober, finding him to be well-mannered, well-read and even graced with a clever sense of humor that had left her snorting in definitively unladylike fashion on more than one occasion that afternoon. She blinked at the sound of his voice, his unexpected question. They had both been minding that condition of their truce since her earlier, disastrous mention of his father. That he would broach the subject now—something that had repeatedly ended up as an argument between them—and after such a pleasant day left her surprised.

“Yes, Rafe,” she replied carefully, seeing an opportunity to appeal to him, a chance for her to continue her plan. “I’m very close to my father.”

“Even though he travels out to sea often?”

Kitty nodded. “He keeps journals for me when he is away, and during his leaves in between voyages, he reads them aloud to me. He says for him, it is like having me aboard ship with him, and he writes each entry as if he was talking to me, telling me of his day aloud. And for me, it is like I get to leave the Wight for awhile each time he reads to me. I get to sail away with him.”

Rafe was quiet for a long moment, giving no indication she could discern that he would continue the conversation. She was unwilling to let it lie, however; she had only a few precious days left if she hoped to soften his heart, get him to abandon his plans and spare her father.

“He brings me stones from each of the places he visits,” she said. “Nothing fancy or large, just small little pebbles, usually from beaches, and worn smooth from the waves. I even have one from the colonies that he brought back for me.”

She smiled, remembering when John Ransom had given that one to her. She had been fifteen years old, and he had presented it to her upon his return from a nearly year-long voyage overseas.

“It is sharp at the tip, kitten. Have a care,” John had said, pressing the slender, relatively flat stone against her outstretched palm.

She remembered the cool feel of it against her skin, the way the smooth blade of rock had been repeatedly cleaved into sharp-edged planes, shaped broadly with flared edges at the base and tapered to a crude point at the tip.

“It is an arrow head,” her father had told her as she had cradled the stone with wide-eyed amazement. “Native savages made it. There are places in the colonies as civilized any any here in England, with storefronts and houses, rutted streets and horsedrawn carriages, where the people have manners and the gentry are well-served.”

His voice had lowered when next he spoke, offering his words in a low, ominous tone. “But there are places beyond these—wild places, wholly untamed, where man and beast live side by side and nigh indistinguishable from one another.”

Kitty had gasped in appropriate horror. “It is a savage country, with natives who run about unclothed and immoral,” John had told her. “Sometimes they attack colony villages or frontier forts, or they lie in wait to pounce against unsuspecting travelers. My man, Godfrey Hamblenden from Boston, picked that out of a wagon slat

after a venture into the wilds. He said the savages fired at him from all sides, but he managed to outpace them.”

“Did you see any, Daddy?” she had whispered in awe. “Did you see any savages?”

John had chuckled, brushing his hand fondly against her hair. “None outside of Boston’s social circles, I am afraid, kitten.”

Kitty smiled at the fond recall; the arrow head was one of her most treasured possessions. “I keep them all in a box tucked beneath my bed, and whenever he is away and I get lonely for him, I take them out and I feel them, one at time. I try to imagine Daddy picking each one out for me, what he was doing, what the air smelled like, what it felt like when he found them. It is almost as if he is there, in the room with me.”

Again, Rafe said nothing, and Kitty grew somewhat uncomfortable. It was the first time all day that it had felt awkward between them, and she was not sure what she had said or done to make it so. “And you?” she asked, forcing a smile onto her face, a note of brightness into her voice. “Are you...were you close to your father?”

She gritted her teeth and struggled not to grimace or groan aloud at that blunder. *Nicely done, Catherine*, she told herself. *Brilliantly played.*

“No,” Rafe said, and she heard the soft scraping of his fork tines against his plate as he pushed it about absently. He offered a quiet, decidedly humorless laugh. “As it turns out, I knew my father even less than I thought.”

She thought he meant to end it there, and after this near-miss of yet another heated argument between them, Kitty was perfectly willing to let it lie.

“I was always a bit of a disappointment to my father,” Rafe said, surprising her. His voice was quiet,

nearly distant, filled with a sort of forlorn candor. “My mother died when Cristobal was born, and he was away at sea so often, I don’t really remember much of him from my childhood. He worked very hard. When I was a boy, there was no grand ships like this one. There were only three small fishing boats that he had scrimped and saved to purchase. He worked from sunrise to sunset, day after day, gone sometimes weeks at a time, just to pay his crew and have enough coins to keep me and Cristobal clothed and fed. I minded my brother and home while he was gone. He worked very hard.”

Rafe said this with an almost childlike sort of pride, the way a young boy who admired and wished to emulate his father might have. She heard his fingertips pat against his empty wine glass as he took it in hand. She felt disappointed, waiting for the inevitable tinkling sound as he touched the decanter to the lip of the cup, filling it for the first of likely countless drinks. He had promised her he wouldn’t drink anymore, and even though she had not expected to hold him to his word, she had enjoyed so much of his company today when he had not been under the wine’s influence.

“My training as a physician was not a reward, a benefit of my father’s wealth or status,” Rafe said. “He was a poor man when I left my home. He knew a man, a physician named Lucio Guevarra Silva who lived in Madrid. He did a favor for my father, and because my father could not afford to pay Lucio, he sent me away to the mainland to study with him. I was thirteen years old. He did it to punish me.”

Kitty blinked, her breath stilled. “Punish you?” What crime could a young boy have committed that would be horrendous enough to warrant banishment?

“Yes,” Rafe replied. “And I went without protest because I wanted to please him. All of my life, I wanted

that.” He was still toying with the cup. She could hear him, even though he had yet to pour any wine into it. He wanted to; she could tell by the anxious cadence of his fingertips against the glass as he turned it this way and that. He very much wanted to drink.

“While I was away, my father grew to be very successful,” he said. “He ventured into the shipping business just before I was sent to Madrid. That was when he began to make more than just a pittance. He became the wealthiest man in our village, Santa Ponca, in fact, and one of the richest in all of Mallorca. He was what is called *hidalgo de carta* in the Spanish gentry, meaning he received his title from King Philip. *Hidalgo* is the lowest form of peerage, but to my father, it was as great a title as any Count or Duke. Nearly every man in Santa Ponca worked for my father, either here aboard *El Verdad*, or aboard his other frigate, *La Venganza*. That meant he was responsible for the income and well-being of almost everyone in Santa Ponca. He took his responsibilities to them very seriously.”

But what about to you, Rafe—his own son? Kitty thought. She did not understand how anyone could barter away their son, no matter how poor, and under the cruel pretense of punishment.

After a long moment of tapping and turning the glass in his hand, she heard him set it against the table, abandoning it. “He sent money regularly to Lucio to take care of me,” he said, as if he had read Kitty’s mind and heard her plaintive question. “And I learned a great deal from Lucio. He came from a long line of physicians. His grandfather had taught his father, and his father, in turn, had taught him. Because Lucio had no sons of his own, he taught me.”

His voice softened, the sorrow lifting, and she thought he might have smiled. “That is his box in the

wardrobe, his medicinal crate. He left it to me when he died. It is all his recipes, the poultices and elixirs, his bottles and vials. I like to think of him when I touch them—like you, with your pebbles, I suppose.”

Kitty smiled.

“They are his surgical tools, too,” Rafe said. “Including that scalpel you had hidden under your pillow.”

Kitty’s smile faltered. She felt her face grow ashen as all of the blood drained in a startled, horrified rush.

“I found it this morning,” Rafe said. “But I had noticed it missing before that. It is alright. I suppose I deserve whatever you had intended for me with it.”

Kitty gulped for breath. “I...I did not intend anything with it,” she stammered. “I just...I was keeping it just in case. As leverage.”

“It is alright,” Rafe said again. “I do not blame you.”

Silence fell between them. Kitty did not know what to say. She was too aghast; she could hardly breathe. She strained to listen for any hint of movement or reaction from Rafe. No matter what he had said, surely he was angry with her for hiding the blade. Surely he would say more on the matter.

“Your father sounds like a good man,” Rafe said at last. Of all the things she had been anticipating to come out of his mouth, this was not among them. She blinked at him, startled anew.

“I...yes,” she said. “He is, yes. He is a very good man.”

“Mine was, too,” Rafe said, but all at once, Kitty could not decide who he was trying more to convince—her, or himself.

“What about Lucio?”

Rafe blinked, drawn from his forlorn thoughts of Evarado, and a long moment’s unintentional silence, by Kitty’s soft, hesitant voice.

“The man you said taught you medicine in Madrid,” Kitty said. “What was he like?”

Rafe raised his brow thoughtfully. “I never really knew him, to be honest,” he said. He had to smile to remember Lucio, however; with his customary, stern demeanor and grim, grisled expression, Lucio had looked and acted very much the part of the gruff curmudgeon. Beneath this brusque exterior, however, there had been a gentleness about the elderly physician, a compassion that had been evident to Rafe in observing his bedside manner, and the way in which he treated not only his patients, but their families.

“These people are poor,” Lucio had told Rafe once, as they’d walked together through the muddy, narrow, rutted streets of Fatima, a village in Portugal. They had just received their third live chicken in payment for their services; for the entire month that they had been in the village, they had collected almost no coins in remittance whatsoever. Although Lucio kept a small, two-room home in the city of Madrid, his work seldom saw him there for long, and in the three years Rafe spent in his near-constant tutelage, Lucio brought him to countless small villages and impoverished parishes throughout Spain and Portugal.

“They have little enough as it is, and then the king takes even that meager allowance from them in taxes,” Lucio had said, leaning heavily on a wooden staff as he trudged through the muck. His ‘thinking stick,’ he liked to

call the staff, as he was fond to rap Rafe with it if the boy took too long in pondering an answer or diagnosis. He never struck Rafe's head or hands, however; these, he had told Rafe, were priceless to physicians, above any other portions of their anatomies.

"Including your *miembro*," the older man had growled, sparing a pointed glance at Rafe's crotch in clear indication.

He had never hit Rafe's head or hands, but he had taken to the boy's buttocks and back aplenty with his 'thinking stick.' "A physician has no need of his ass—there is too much work for sitting or reclining," Lucio had said. "Nor has he much use for his back, as he has trained the wits within his skull to earn his living, not his spine."

"He was sick," Rafe said to Kitty, even though his mind was a thousand leagues hence, remembering his former mentor. "He was dying. I think he knew it even when he came to Mallorca at my father's summon. He had some kind of lung infection. It lingered with him for years, growing worse with every passing day."

In the end, Lucio had died in Barcelona, his lungs too seized with fluids, his body too wracked with fever for Rafe to even attempt to bring him home. He died in a letted bed, his face flushed as he'd wheezed for labored breath. Even to the end, Lucio had been a physician, dictating instructions to his young pupil.

"Señora Manzano Cadena will try and tell you she needs more of the rosemary tonic," he had said, watching with sternly set brows to make sure Rafe wrote down each and every instruction. "Do not give it to her until she has finished the last, no matter her insistence."

"Yes, sir," Rafe had said. It had continued on like this until Lucio had at last grown too exhausted from the effort to speak to continue. He had slumped back against

his pillows, his face glistening with a sheen of sweat, and Rafe had dabbed a cool, wet linen against him in comfort.

“You are a good boy, Rafe,” Lucio had said, closing his eyes. They were the only kind words he had ever offered Rafe, and Rafe had paused in bathing his face, profoundly touched.

“Thank you, sir,” he said.

Lucio had nodded once and then he had died. It had been no more dramatic than that simple, fleeting moment.

“I spent three years in his company, but never learned much about him,” Rafe told Kitty. “I do not think he wanted to waste the time he had left in cordialities or sentiment. He wanted me to learn everything he knew, as much as he could teach me. He took me with him all over the peninsula. A physician’s life means never seeing dust settle on your shadow, that is what he told me.”

Rafe smiled slightly, sadly. “He told me that in Fatima—in Portugal—the year before he died. We spent almost three months there. The people had nothing. They were so poor, but so grateful. I have returned there many, many times in the years since, and it has always been the same.”

He eyed his empty glass, wishing he could pour even a small allotment of wine, but he resisted the urge. He had promised and he was a man of his word, if no more could be said of him.

“Lucio taught me well,” Rafe said. “He made sure I was well-versed in literature and mathematics, as well as science. He taught me Portugese and Arabic, French, Italian and English.”

“All of that in three years?” Kitty asked, her eyes round with incredulity.

Rafe thought of Lucio's 'thinking stick,' remembering the sharp sting of it across his buttocks when he would conjugate his verbs incorrectly. "He had a way of imparting his lessons rather emphatically," he said, with a somewhat rueful smile. "I learned all of that and more besides. He made sure I was properly instructed in the cultured ways of the gentry. I am afraid he considered me rather uncivilized. He sent me for several months to a gentleman's academy in Madrid, where I learned proper manners, etiquette and the like. And how to use a quarterstaff."

That is what Lucio's "thinking stick" had really been, not so much a device for aiding the older man's gait as for his defense. Lucio might have been aged and somewhat feeble, but on the few occasions Rafe had seen for him to have to wield the stave for its true purpose—as a weapon—he had proven remarkably spry and agile.

"What? You mean that ninny pole you used to keep tripping me back on the Wight?" Kitty asked. She was playing; there was a mischievous cock to her brows and a wry upturn of her lips. "My father would never carry such a thing. A quarterstaff is a poor man's weapon, he says—that a proper gentleman prefers his saber or pistol."

"It is a poor man's weapon, yes," Rafe replied, unoffended. "That does not make it ineffective."

"You mean you actually had to go to school and learn how to swing that thing around?" Kitty asked. "I could bloody show you how to do that."

Rafe chuckled. He had nearly forgotten about how he had used his stave to prevent her from fleeing on the Isle of Wight. "There is more to it than just swinging it about," he said. "There is quite a lot to the technique, in fact. Lucio and I carried them to defend ourselves against any would-be bandits we might meet on our travels."

“A fair match indeed against an unarmed thief,” Kitty remarked. “Although I dare say, that is a dim-witted sort, if you have them in Spain. In England, our bandits generally wield pistols or swords.”

“A man well-skilled with a quarterstaff could more than handle any opponent,” Rafe said. “Lucio found pistols too expensive and swords too impractical.”

“I will be certain to tell my father that,” Kitty said, making him laugh.

“Please do,” he replied. “A quarterstaff, at least, can serve some additional functions, if need be.”

“Like tripping up poor, defenseless blind girls on the beach,” Kitty said.

Rafe laughed again. “Yes, exactly,” he said. His quarterstaff had been stowed ever since leaving England in the back corner of his wardrobe, and it occurred to him that he should be grateful that Kitty had found the manacles and not this, instead, or she could well have bashed his wits from his skull with the iron-capped tip. Being chained to her side was a pleasant alternative to death, all things considered.

A far more pleasant alternative, he thought as Kitty laughed, too, her entire face aglow with radiant, if not impish, delight.

CHAPTER NINE

The next morning, Rafe called for a bath to be drawn for Kitty, a tub delivered to his quarters and filled with heated water. He surprised her with it after breakfast, when crewmen hefted the heavy metal tub and kettle after kettle of warm water down the companionway. She had been abashed by her appearance, and the misnotion that she had somehow grown malodorous over the course of their trip, despite the fact she meticulously bathed herself at the wash basin and groomed her hair daily.

The racket as the bath had been prepared at startled and frightened her until he had explained, and then it had been like a sunbeam spilling against her; her face had grown radiant, her eyes widening in anticipation and delight, and her mouth had unfurled in a bright, wide grin.

“You do not mind for it, then?” he’d asked her.

“Mind?” Kitty had exclaimed, still beaming as she had dipped her fingertips experimentally into the tub. She had uttered a low, happy moan at the warmth of the water, and the sound had unintentionally stirred pleasant sensations of Rafe’s own in the pit of his stomach. “Rafe, I could nearly kiss you for it!”

She had not, of course, although Rafe realized he would not have minded for that at all. He had taken his place as a dutiful gentleman in the companionway corridor, with his left arm extended into the room beyond, the door closed just above the crook of his elbow. This allowed Kitty both a modicum of modesty and enough slack in the chain to allow her to use both hands somewhat as she bathed and washed her hair.

As he sat in the hallway, his back against the wall, his head deliberately turned away from the door lest he entertain the temptation to peek—which he suffered nonetheless—he thought about his left hand, only inches at best away from Kitty’s naked form as she soaked in her tub. It was a pleasant distraction, and he tilted his head back to rest, closing his eyes, imagining what she might look like unclothed and soaking wet.

Footsteps coming heavily and hurriedly down the companionway ladder drew his gaze, and he watched Claudio approach. The boatswain paused, momentarily puzzled to find Rafe sitting in the hall with the door closed against his arm, then shook his head, crossed himself and continued.

“She is bathing,” Rafe said, addressing him in Spanish. “I thought she might enjoy a soak in a tub, and you would be crossing yourself a lot more if I had stayed in there with her, now would you not?”

“That I would,” Claudio replied in Spanish. He squatted, folding his legs beneath him and resting his hands on his knees. “I need to speak with you.”

“What, Rafe?” Kitty called from beyond the threshold, and there was a light splash of water as she moved in the tub.

“Nothing,” Rafe called back in English. “Claudio has come. He is speaking to me.”

“Oh.” Another slap of water as Kitty resettled herself comfortably. “Alright, then.”

Rafe looked toward his boatswain again. “What is it?”

“We have tacked fully east,” Claudio said. “We are approaching the coast of Spain now.”

“So we should reach La Coruna by lunchtime?” Rafe asked. Once they reached La Coruna, it would be no time at all before they found a blacksmith able to cut through the chains. It was only a matter of hours, then, before he would have to release Kitty and send her home to England. For reasons he did not quite understand, this notion left him somewhat dismayed.

Claudio arched his brow. “Yes,” he said. “If we are not dragged into the rocks by the high tide.” Rafe blinked at him, startled from his forlorn thoughts about losing Kitty, and found the older man regarding him sternly. “Do you know what the ancient Romans called this coastline? The end of the world. Sailors call it the shores of death. It is the most inhospitable and nonnegotiable stretch of coast in all of Spain—and I would dare say, in the world. And you have us sailing headlong for it with no one at the helm.”

“You are at the helm,” Rafe said.

The furrow between Claudio’s brows deepened. “I cannot call orders aloft and hold the deck all at the same time. I need to watch the sails. That is what I do. You need Cristobal to pilot the ship. That is what he does.”

“No,” Rafe said, frowning. “Damn it, Claudio, I am not—”

“You are going to kill us all,” Claudio snapped, his sharp tone drawing Rafe to an immediate, surprised silence. He had never heard the boatswain speak like that

to him, and he had known Claudio practically his entire life.

“I am sorry I did not tell you the truth about your father,” Claudio said. “Cristobal was right—Evarado did not want you to know. Do you think your father enjoyed this life? Do you think it brought him pride to know he was a pirate? It shamed him beyond measure, but it was his lot, and he had seen no other recourse. Cristobal, on the other hand, enjoys all of this—the power, the infamy, the money. Perhaps Evarado hoped by leaving all of this to you, that you could find an escape for Cristobal and the crew that he never could, and that he knew Cristobal would never seek, had it come to him.”

He reached out, laying his hand against Rafe’s sleeve. “Or perhaps Evarado simply left it to you because it is your birthright as his eldest son. Only he knew his reasons. I am sorry you feel remorse for this now—for taking the girl, seeking revenge against John Ransom. I think your father would have wanted that. But I tried to talk you out of it, and you did not listen. Cristobal was wrong—it was not his decision to make, Rafe, or mine. It was yours. Just as it is yours now.”

Rafe blinked at him, wounded. “Claudio, I—”

“Listen to me,” Claudio said firmly. “Put Cristobal at the helm. Put aside your anger, your disappointment, whatever else you might be feeling. You are the captain of this ship, whether you like it or not. The crew is your responsibility. Your heart and mind have to lie in what is best for them—and right now, that is giving Cristobal the deck. He has navigated this coast before, hundreds of times. He can get us to La Coruna. Anyone else—anything less—and we are all dead.”

The older man stood with a soft, nearly inaudible groan. Rafe looked up at him, remembering the day that he had left for Madrid with Lucio. He had stood on the

dock with his knapsack, awaiting a skiff that would take him out to the ship bound for the Spanish mainland. His father had not come; Claudio had taken the boy by horse-drawn cart to the beach. He had stood beside Rafe and had not missed the way Rafe had struggled not to weep, keeping his lips pressed tightly together, blinking fervently, furiously against the sting of tears.

“You be a good boy for Señor Guevarra Silva, *hijo*,” Claudio had said, calling him *son*.

Rafe had nodded. “Yes, sir. I will.”

He remembered how Claudio had smiled gently down at him, and had reached out, draping his hand briefly but fondly against Rafe’s shoulder—things Rafe had wished Evarado had done. “I know you will, Rafe,” Claudio had told him—words he had wished his own father had said.

Rafe looked up at Claudio in the companionway corridor. He sighed, forking his fingers through his hair, hunching his shoulders in weary resignation. “Alright, Claudio,” he said, nodding. “Go and get Cristobal.”

“Were you born blind?”

Kitty had been so relaxed and comfortable in the tub, she had nearly dozed off, her head resting against the curved metal rim, her long legs dangling past the knees out from the other side. Her right arm had gone relatively numb, extended outward and in midair as it was, and as she opened her eyes, blinking sleepily at the sound of Rafe’s voice, she wondered how long she had been reclining there. Judging by the coolness of the water, it had been quite awhile, and she sat up, shivering.

Rafe remained in the corridor with the door closed against his arm, and Kitty winced. If her own arm was nearly leaden by now, she could not imagine the discomfort to him.

“Kitty?” Rafe called.

“I...I am here,” she said, leaning over the edge of the tub and reaching with her unbound hand for a linen to dry herself. “Forgive me, Rafe. I did not mean to take so long. I must have drifted off.”

“It is alright,” he replied, the tone of his voice lending itself to a smile.

“What did you ask me?” Kitty asked. She remained in the tub, toweling her long, tangled ringlets dry first. It was an awkward task with just one hand, and she rose onto her knees, leaning further over the edge that she might make at least a modicum of use out of her cuffed hand.

“Were you born blind?” Rafe repeated. “You seem to do very well for yourself, in spite of it. I assume you have been this way awhile...?”

Kitty laughed. “I am blind, not incapable, Rafe,” she said, although she was more than well-accustomed to being mistaken for both, and not simply the former. “But no, I was not born this way. I had a terrible fever when I was very small, four years old or so. When it broke, it left me like this. Sometimes I dream I can still see. I remember little things...like the wardrobe in my father’s room, this large window in his study with heavy velvet drapes. I remember a rug that he told me he had brought back from the Indies, this wildly wrought tapestry we keep in the middle of the foyer.”

She smiled, pausing in her efforts, letting her hair droop against her shoulders in cold, damp tendrils. “I remember my father’s face. At least, I think I do. He has

a very large nose—that struck me for some reason as a child. I used to fancy that was why people called him ‘the Hawk of the High Seas.’” She shook her head, laughing. “I hope I do not share his nose. Sometimes I will spend a good moment or two pinching it mightily, just to be certain.”

She thought discussing her father might upset Rafe, but the chain between them rattled as he chuckled. “No, you have a fine nose,” he said. “Rather petite and well-formed.”

Kitty smiled, blushing slightly, pleased by the idea that he would have noticed. “Thank you, Rafe,” she said. She rose to her feet, stepping carefully out of the tub, and began to rub the linen against the front of her torso, massaging water from her belly and breasts. “Sometimes, I think I can yet see things,” she said. “Flashes of light, little patches of glow here and there. My doctors in London say it is rubbish, though. They say it is a trick my mind plays on me, like it has forgotten I am blind.”

“It is not a trick,” Rafe said. “They are called vestigial images. They are likely caused by random activity in portions of your eyes that are still remotely light-aware.”

He continued on, something about how it could be akin to a person with their leg amputated still feeling phantom sensations, like pain or tickling, in the absent limb, but Kitty was too excited all at once to pay attention. She had nearly forgotten that Rafe was a physician, that such things as her diagnosis would be quite familiar to him. “So my eyes still work?” she asked, interrupting him in midsentence. “My sight, it might return to me?”

“I do not know,” Rafe said. “I have not examined your eyes.”

The pretentious surgeons in London had scoffed at her propositions to this effect often enough for her father

to cease in humoring her, and bringing her to them for explanations whenever she would experience such unusual phenomenon.

It is nothing but your fancying, kitten, John would tell her in his best efforts to be gentle. *Doctors Huddlestone and Rumboll both agree—these visions are nothing but products of an overwrought imagination.*

Kitty held the linen against her with her bound hand, and opened the door with the other. “Examine them,” she said, standing on the threshold, still dripping.

“Kitty, *madre de Dios*...!” Rafe exclaimed, sucking in a hissing breath between his teeth. She heard the clap of his hand over his eyes. “Are you mad? Put your clothes on!”

“Rafe, please,” she said, tugging against the chain. She did not want to hope, did not dare to hope, and yet she suddenly felt tremulous within, her heart racing at the mere prospect of being able to see once more. For all of her accomplishments, all of the independence that had come so hard-fought to her, she still longed to have her sight restored. The slivers of images, fading memories lingering yet within her mind, haunted her, taunted her.

“Would you examine my eyes?” she asked, her voice tremulous, strained with sudden tears. She blinked, feeling them sting her eyes, and struggled to compose herself. “Please, Rafe. I...my father has exhausted all of his resources in London. I would very much like to hear what you think of my condition.”

She felt the chain tug as he rose to his feet. He stepped against her, drawing the linen towel securely about her, and for the first time, she remembered that he had stationed crewmen in the companionway to guard entrance to the chamber—sentries who had in all likelihood, just enjoyed a lengthy view of her scarcely clad. “Put your clothes on first,” Rafe said, spinning her about and pushing her unceremoniously across the

threshold and back into the room. He immediately closed the door between them, stopped only by the chain. “And then, yes, I will examine your eyes.”

“Well?” Kitty asked. She sat on the bench before the stern windows while Rafe spent a great deal of time in silence, studying her, peering into her eyes. He asked her several times if she had been able to see any hint of light, and she had heard a soft clinking of glass, smelled the pungent warmth of oil and felt dim, sudden heat as he had drawn a lamp near her face. There had been nothing, however, and she found herself disappointed and irritable.

“Well, I do not think it is your imagination,” Rafe said.

Again, Kitty felt a little flutter of excitement. “So I have seen things, then? My eyes still work, at least somewhat?”

“I did not say that,” Rafe said, and even his gentle tone struck her like a slap, crumpling her enthusiasm. “I think it is like I said earlier, perhaps what you have experienced is simply random activity in portions of your eye that have not completely withered yet—like a muscle spasm, if you will. I cannot see anything physically wrong with your eyes. There is no malformation or scars from injury apparent, but there would probably not be, if the fever you described was indeed the cause of your blindness. Your pupils do not react to light stimuli as is ordinary—they do not contract when directly exposed. That would indicate some sensory deficit to me.”

She felt the pad of his thumb drape lightly against her upper eyelid, easing it open, and felt the soft press of his breath as he leaned closer, peering at her eye.

“As much as I would enjoy the chance to prove English doctors wrong, I do not think there is much I can tell you that is different than what they have already said,” he said. “The eye is an extremely delicate instrument, and it does not take much trauma to damage it irreparably. Your fever could well have been enough to cause nerve atrophy—”

“Fine, then,” Kitty said, swatting his hand away. It was ridiculous, finding herself on the verge of tears again, and all of the matter of her blindness—something she had accepted a long time ago, and a condition she had been told repeatedly was irreversible. She pressed her lips together in a thin, stubborn line and turned her face away from him. “I do not feel like being prodded anymore.”

He was quiet for a long moment, on his knees against the floor before her. “Kitty, I am sorry,” he said at length, draping his hand against hers.

She pulled her hand away, rattling the chains between them. “Nothing for it,” she said, and damned her voice for cracking uncontrollably. She did not want to weep in front of Rafe; not over this, especially. *I was a fool to think he would find anything different than anyone else who has examined me, or say anything otherwise.*

“I know what it must be like...” Rafe began, and she cut him short with a sharp bark of mirthless laughter.

“No, you do not,” she said. “You do not know what it is like at all, to hear the whispers and murmurs when I pass through a room—people remarking on what a shame it is, and I am such a pretty girl, too.” Her eyes flooded and she tried to wipe at them with her fingertips, to prevent the tears from falling. “As if I am deaf as well as blind, and my looks are ruined simply because I am not

privy to see them. People treat me as if I am an invalid or a child. My own father will not let me travel far beyond my own bloody front yard for fear I will stumble headlong into something, or become lost, or...or God only knows." She laughed again unhappily. "You do not know what it is like, Rafe, so kindly spare me any sympathy."

Her bottom lip trembled, despite her best efforts to steel her jaw. Her breath hitched once, twice, and then a tear escaped, trailing slowly down her cheek. Just as she reached for it, meaning to rub it fervently away, Rafe's fingers caught it first.

"I am sorry, Kitty," he said, and she had no defense against his gentle tone, his earnest words. She gasped softly, her tears spilling unabated, and she did not resist as he drew her against his shoulder, holding her. "I am sorry," he whispered to her, over and over, stroking her hair as she clutched his sleeve and wept.

Damn, Kitty thought. They had weighed anchor in the port of La Coruna, and now she sat beside Rafe, a heavy wool greatcoat draped about her shoulders as they rowed for the city's piers.

The voyage into port had been like nothing Kitty had ever known. The seas beneath them had been rough with the influx of tide, and the ship had made the most of a powerful tail wind as well to drive them along their course. *El Verdad* had rocked on her streamlined keel, pitching violently from side to side as she tacked and skirted around treacherous shoals and cragged rock protrusions that ravaged the coastline. Kitty had been frightened, even though she had said nothing, and she suspected that, in spite of a cool exterior, Rafe had been

anxious, as well. They had sat together on the bench by the stern windows, and he had done his best to distract her by playing his guitar, but the heaving motion of the ship often left his fingers stumbling over chords, his voice cut short in mid-stanza of song.

They had arrived safely, and at last, the ship had settled around them as they had anchored in the deep waters of the port. Both Kitty and Rafe had heaved audible sighs of relief as they heard the heavy clatter of the anchor chains being released, and as the ship finally grew still beneath them.

But now they were on their way ashore, and from there, to a blacksmith. *Damn*, Kitty thought again. *How can I prevent this?*

The chains binding her to Rafe were the only hope she had of saving her father. Without them, Rafe would not be forced into her company. He would be able to resume his rightful duties as the ship's captain once they were underway for Lisbon once more.

And then he will still try to kill my father, she thought. *His horrible brother will not let him abandon it.*

"La Coruna is an ancient city," Rafe remarked from beside her on the skiff bench. "It was an important shipping port in the Roman Empire. There is a lighthouse still standing here that the Romans built called *la torre de Hercules*—the Tower of Hercules."

"It sounds like you know it well," Kitty said. "Have you been here before?"

Rafe was quiet for a moment. "A time or two," he said at length, and Kitty had no accounting for the somewhat uncomfortable edge to his voice.

They reached the docks, and Rafe held Kitty's hands in his own, helping her clamber from the boat and onto the pier. He drew his arm around her and held her

closely, ushering her in swift tow. One of his crewmen—Claudio, the older boatswain with whom Rafe seemed very close—hired a hansom for them, and they were off.

The smithy smelled terribly; a foul and acrid mix of coal soot, smoke, metal and sweat that assaulted Kitty's nose when they drew within a block of it. It was loud; a cacophonous din of banging, clattering, hissing, grunting and shouting that came at her from all directions, leaving her disoriented and shied fiercely against Rafe's side as he led her inside. The air beneath the smithy eaves felt thick and choked with heat.

What am I going to do? she thought desperately, as she listened to Rafe speaking with his boatswain, Claudio and the blacksmith in rapid Spanish. *Once the chains are cut, it is over. Rafe is going to go after Daddy, and I do not think I will be able to prevent him.*

Her only hope was to remain chained to his side, and she knew it. He had begun to soften toward her in the few brief days of their predicament; she knew he had. And maybe it had only been her imagination, but she felt certain that there had been more to it than even this. She thought of his kisses, his caresses; these had never been repeated, but there had been yesterday, when he had touched her face with seeming tenderness and told her she looked beautiful. Maybe she had imagined it, and maybe she had not, but she thought maybe Rafe was growing fond of her.

And maybe I do not mind for that.

"He says he can make short work of it," Rafe told Kitty, leaning close, his nose brushing against her ear as he tried to make himself heard over the smithy's clamor. "He will have to heat the chain in the coals, and then he can batter the links apart. The cuffs will have to keep for

now, I'm afraid, but a good locksmith can surely make short work of it for you back in England."

I have to stop this, Kitty thought. I have to stop you, Rafe.

Rafe led her toward the blacksmith's coal bed. She could feel the blazing heat pressing against her, and she shied anxiously. "It is alright," Rafe said to her, again leaning near to speak almost directly against her ear. "I will not let any harm come to you, Kitty."

"I know you will not," she whispered, and in that moment's realization, a plan flew together in her mind.

She extended her hand at Rafe's guiding tug, but as she felt the tremendous heat of the red-hot coals beneath her as the blacksmith positioned the chain where it would heat the best in the least amount of time, she tried to draw back. "It is too hot."

"It will only be for a few moments," Rafe said gently, trying to ease her hand forward. She let him until the heat of the coals again stung her skin.

"Rafe, stop," she whimpered, pulling her hand away. "It is too hot. It is burning me."

She felt his hand against hers, the chain between them slackening. "Kitty," he began, trying once more to coax her hand over the coals. "The chains have to be heated. There is no other way to break them."

"It burns!" she cried, tugging against him. "It is burning my arm, Rafe! I am sorry, but it is too hot. It is burning me and I...I am sorry...!"

She clapped her free hand over her eyes. She uttered a loud gasp and pretended to burst into tears. Immediately, she felt Rafe draw her away from the heat of the coal bank. He stepped against her, drawing her near, embracing her.

“Please, Rafe,” she cried against his sleeve. “I...I know it is the only way, but I...I just cannot...!”

“It is alright,” he whispered, sounding anguished. Kitty felt ashamed of herself, but pleased all at the same time. It had worked, then, or so she hoped. When the blacksmith said something in exasperated Spanish and Rafe answered him sharply enough to stave any further comment, she knew indeed that her plan had worked.

“We will find another way,” Rafe told her, his breath and voice soft against her ear. He began to lead her away, holding her tucked against him as he turned to leave the smithy. He called out to his boatswain to follow, and within moments, Kitty felt the blessed coolness of fresh air beyond the humid confines of the smithy.

“I am sorry,” she said again.

“I am the one who is sorry, Kitty,” Rafe said, and he sighed heavily. “What was I thinking to bring you here?”

What began as a long, weary exhalation drew abruptly short, and Kitty came to an obliging and unexpected standstill as Rafe stopped in midstride, his posture stiffening, his entire body growing rigid.

“Rafe?” she said.

“*Madre de Dios*,” he whispered. He said this often enough that she didn’t need a translation. *Mother of God*.

“What?” she asked, knowing he had seen something in the crowd ahead of them, something that had filled his voice with sudden, apparent dread. “What is it?”

“Here you are at last!” she heard his brother, Cristobal, exclaim. She had neither seen nor heard him since the heated argument he had had with Rafe, and had not realized that he had come ashore with them. Yet there he was, his voice inexplicably infused with unflappable good cheer. “Rafe, look who I have found! What a surprise!”

“Rafe Serrano Beltran, hello,” she heard a woman say, a deep, sultry, melodic voice that rose above the din of the crowd around them in a distinctive, resonant purr. It was a beautiful voice, the audible equivalent of silk, as rich to Kitty’s ears as fresh cream, as delicate and lovely as dew-dappled rose petals in a pre-dawn garden.

“It has been far too long, my darling,” the woman said, and there was a rustle of fabric immediately in front of Kitty and the sudden, sweet fragrance of floral sachet as the woman pressed herself against Rafe in a fond, lingering embrace. Kitty heard the soft brush of the woman’s lips against Rafe’s skin as she offered him a buss. “I have missed you so.”

It did not take a scholar to know who the woman was, but still the same, Kitty felt her heart sink in dismay when Rafe spoke.

“Isabel,” he said, sounding strained and somewhat at a loss for breath. “Why, I...I just...it is lovely to see you again, too.”

CHAPTER TEN

Kitty heard Rafe's heavy footsteps in the corridor beyond the room moments before he entered. It was not much time, but it was enough for her to scuttle into a cushioned chair and assume a non-chalant posture as she pretended to brush her hair. She did not want to rouse his suspicions, make him think she had been listening in to his conversation in the garden moments earlier—which, of course, she had. It had not been intentional; Rafe and Isabel had been almost directly beneath Kitty's balcony and they had been speaking in English. It would have been nigh impossible for Kitty's keen ears to miss them.

Rafe and Isabel were in love. She had her worst dreads confirmed now. *That has always belonged to you*, Isabel had said of her heart, while Rafe had admitted that he had pleaded with Isabel in the past to marry him. *On my knees—here in this garden, even after you had given your vows, I begged you.*

Something had happened, another man had come between them, this Guillermo they had mentioned, the *Conde* or count, Isabel's husband. From the sounds of things, she had married him for his stature, a circumstance with which Kitty could fully sympathize. English women were often forced into similar situations, and most likely at the arrangement of their parents. That

was precisely her own father's intentions as he gently but repeatedly pressed her to wed Michael Urry back on the Wight.

She married the count, Kitty had thought. *But she had still loved Rafe*. Now her husband was apparently dead and Isabel wanted to resume matters with Rafe as they had left off.

Kitty had heard soft sounds, rustling noises, and Rafe murmuring to Isabel. *He is kissing her*, she had realized with a shock. She had stumbled back from the balcony, her eyes wide and stricken, even though she knew she had neither cause nor right to feel stunned and pained by this notion. Of course he would kiss her; he loved her. He had no reason not to want the same things as Isabel—to continue their relationship, to be with her again.

The door opened, swinging wide with enough force to strike the wall, and Kitty jumped, startled by the sharp report. She heard heavy footsteps and then the door slammed closed once more. She heard ragged breathing, as if someone was out of breath or struggled against tears, and since she could not fathom why Rafe would be one or the other at the moment—much less why he would be in her room in the first place, and not downstairs making love to Isabel—she was immediately bewildered and alarmed.

“Who is there?” she asked, rising to her feet, edging backwards uneasily. She had changed into a linen nightgown that had been left for her; it was sleeveless, the neckline low and scalloped with lace, the hem too short for her and falling only to mid-calf, rather than ankles, as was customary. She was all-too aware of her state of undress, and shrank, trying to keep her arms crossed before her in some semblance of clumsy modesty.

“It is me, Kitty,” Rafe said, but her sudden relief was only momentary. He sounded hoarse, his voice strained and choked.

“What is it?” she asked quietly, hesitantly. *Why are you here?* she wanted to add. The last she had heard of his progress in the garden, things had been rekindling well with Isabel. “Rafe, what is wrong?”

“Nothing,” he replied, but his footsteps, rapid and anxious, told another story. She listened to him cross the room, and heard the rattle of his chains, the rustle of the coverlet and the creak of the mattress as he sat down on the bed.

Did Isabel change her mind and reject him? she wondered with a thrill that left her immediately ashamed of herself. “Rafe,” she said, following and sitting hesitantly beside him. “What has happened? You are upset.”

He was quiet for a long moment, and she thought he meant not to answer. It would only be fair. It was none of her concern, what did or did not happen between him and Isabel. She was nothing to him, his prisoner and no more.

That is not true, she told herself. *Maybe it was once, but not anymore.* She thought of him playing the guitar, singing to entertain her; of how he had drawn her against him, letting her stand atop his feet as he had led her clumsily in a dance. She thought of how he had ordered a bath prepared for her and how she had heard nothing—not so much as a quiet intake of breath—to indicate he had broken his word to her and peeped in on her unawares from the corridor. She remembered how he had held her, his voice quiet and his touch gentle, as she had wept over her blindness.

They might not have been friends, but they were something more than enemies now; something more cordial, if not compassionate.

She reached for him, draping her hand against his, and his fingers tightened against her as if he gratefully seized upon the comfort she offered.

“When I was thirteen years old, Cristobal broke his leg,” Rafe said. She had been expecting him to say nothing, or at best, something about Isabel, and blinked in surprise at his chosen topic.

“Father only had his fishing boats then,” he continued. “Three of them in all, and none even a third of the size of *El Verdad*. He fished the southern Mediterranean and was often gone for days, if not weeks at a time. He would sell his catches all over the Balearic Islands—Mallorca, where we lived; Ibiza, Menorca. It was my responsibility to look after Cristobal and our home while he was away.”

His hand tightened briefly but noticeably against hers. “It was my fault,” he said, his voice pained. “When Father brought fish to Santa Ponca, it was my responsibility to see it to the market. I would deliver fish to the houses of each of his crewmen, and bring the rest to the village market to be sold. Father and his crew would load up a donkey cart and I would drive it into town. It was very heavy. Father always brought the best catch home to us.”

He paused for a long moment, then sighed wearily. “Cristobal liked to play tricks on me. One day, he hid beneath the cart after it had been loaded. I called and called for him, but he did not come out. I did not know he was there.” Rafe offered this last with a plaintive, pleading note in his voice, as if he felt he had to defend himself to Kitty.

“I did not know he was there,” he said again, helplessly. “I was angry at him for hiding and I decided to leave without him, to make him walk home from the beach. I whipped the donkey to make her go, and as she

started forward, Cristobal must have realized what I was doing. He called out my name and ran out from underneath the cart, but the donkey was moving, the wheels were already turning. He got caught.”

Rafe’s voice grew choked. “His leg was crushed beneath the wheel. He screamed...Mother of God, how he shrieked. Father heard him from the docks and came running. Two days later, fever had set in the leg, and everyone said that Cristobal would die. Father never said anything to me—not one word for two days, he was so angry. It was all my fault.

“Father had heard of a man, a physician from Madrid named Lucio Guevarra Silva. People called him *el mago bendito*, the blessed magician—a miracle-worker. Father sent word to him, pleading for him to come, even though he knew he could never afford his services. That was when he first agreed to begin shipping cargo from the mainland...cargo that had been stolen from English ships by privateers. His smaller boats could escape the notice of the British fleet in Gibraltar, and the privateers offered him handsome rewards if he was successful. He agreed to it because he needed to pay for Lucio’s travel from Madrid, as well as for his services. It is my fault, too, then, that Father ever became involved in pirating.”

He pulled his hand away from hers, and she heard the chain jangle as he brought both hands to his face. “Father got his miracle,” he said quietly. “Lucio came to Mallorca and he saved Cristobal from the fever. He even spared him from losing his leg. He told Father there was no need to pay him, but Father...he was proud. He was ashamed to accept charity, and so he offered Lucio the only payment he could—the meager coins he possessed, and me.

“Lucio had no sons of his own. He had told my father this. There was no one for him to teach his healing

secrets to—secrets that he said had been passed from generation to generation in his family for ages. And so Father sent me away with him, back to Madrid, so that he could teach those secrets to me.”

Kitty said nothing. She did not understand what had prompted this conversation, what had happened to make Rafe upset enough to tell her of it, but she sat quietly beside him, heartbroken still the same. His pain, his confusion and loss were still apparent and poignant in his voice. In that moment, he had lowered all of his defenses and she knew it; his arrogance and pride were cast aside, and all that remained for that moment was the young boy from Santa Ponca, still filled with anguished culpability at what had happened to his brother, and yet suffering the shameful hurt his father had caused because of it.

“I have tried,” Rafe whispered. “Tried to make amends with Cristobal, all of these years, but especially now, with Father gone. I agreed to take you, to all of this, because Cristobal begged it of me, for vengeance, he said, for Father. I thought it would make him forgive me. I thought...”

His voice faded, growing strained and choked once more. He cleared his throat, and she heard him draw in a long, steadying breath as he composed himself. “I am sorry, Kitty,” he said, draping his hand against hers once more. “Forgive me. This is all my fault. All of it is because of me.”

“No,” she said gently. “It is not. You were only a boy when your brother was hurt. It was an accident. No one was to blame, and your father was wrong to punish you. And for this...for what happened with my father, it is not your fault, either. Cristobal is your brother, all you have left. Of course, you would want to try and please him.”

She thought of using the moment to plead with him to let her go, to spare her father, but cast aside the idea

immediately. Rafe had just confided something genuine and poignant to her and it had touched her profoundly. She could not bear the idea of ruining that, or the trust he had just placed in her by trying to manipulate him in his vulnerable state.

And I do not want him to let me go anymore, she thought. *God help me, I do not want to leave Rafe.*

He touched her face, his fingertips dancing through her unfettered, unruly hair, brushing it back from her brow. His palm settled against her cheek and remained there, stirring a fluttering maelstrom of heat within her. She felt the pad of his thumb run lightly against her bottom lip; the gesture sent her heart racing with sudden, inexplicable excitement.

“I am so very grateful for you, Kitty,” he said softly. He had leaned toward her without her notice. She had been too fascinated by his touch. His breath brushed her mouth and then, unexpectedly, wondrously, his lips settled against hers.

Kitty could not breathe. The kiss lingered, and when Rafe’s lips parted slightly, the tip of his tongue prodding lightly against her, she whimpered, opening her mouth, letting him delve more deeply. Rafe took her face between his hands and drew her closer, his kiss growing more fervent. His tongue tangled against hers, tasting her, and as she relaxed in full against him, surrendering herself, he uttered a low, guttural sound of pleasure from somewhere deep in his throat.

She felt his hand slip from her cheek, trailing down the slope of her throat. His fingers caresses her breasts, outlined through the thin material of her shift. Her nipples hardened through the flimsy fabric, and he toyed with them lightly, rolling each in turn between his forefingers and thumb, sending electric thrills shivering down her spine.

At last, his hands moved away and he reached down, tugging at the hem of her nightgown. She shifted her weight and he drew it up over her head. She felt a moment of bright shame, her body nude and exposed, and tried to draw her hands over her breasts demurely. Rafe caught her by the wrists.

“You have nothing to hide,” he murmured, kissing her again. “Nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to fear from me. You are beautiful, Kitty.” He drew her hands aside, and leaned down, his lips brushing against her nipples both in turn, sending shivers of delight through Kitty.

His hand moved with slow and deliberate purpose along her inner thigh, sliding up toward her hips. Her breath hiccuped with a frantic new thrill of anticipation, and when his fingertips brushed against the apex of her body, through the soft nest of curls at her groin, she gasped.

Rafe’s hand began to move between her legs, delving gently between the soft folds of her flesh, exploring her. Kitty tilted her head back, clutching at his shoulders as he began to stroke her, his fingers settling against some wondrous, sensitive place tucked deeply within her. His hand moved faster, and her pleasure increased; she parted her legs further, pleading soundlessly.

She felt one of his fingers slide into her, even as his thumb maintained the strident rhythm he’d set. He moved simultaneously within her and without, and Kitty couldn’t breathe for the exquisite pleasure. He moved faster yet, and deeper within, and when she moaned, he caught the sound against his tongue, kissing her again. She felt something enormous and powerful growing at his touch; she tried to move with him, undulating her hips to meet and match the pace of his hand in eager, nearly desperate anticipation. She clutched at him, whimpering

and moaning, moving against him, matching the rhythm of his hand with her hips.

All at once, he drew away from her, leaving her shuddering with need against the coverlets of the bed. "Please..." Kitty gasped, reaching up for him, touching his stomach. "Please do not stop, Rafe."

She felt his own need, his arousal straining against the confines of his breeches, pressing against her inner thigh, and she heard seams ripping loose as he wrenched open the front of his shirt. She heard the rustle of fabric as he unfettered the waistcord of his breeches and let them fall away from his hips, and she trembled in anticipation.

Rafe lowered himself against her, and she touched his face, raising her head and shoulders to kiss him. She felt the warmth and weight of his body settling against hers, the taut muscles stacked in his abdomen pressing against the soft plain of her own belly, her breasts and nipples pressed beneath his chest.

He shifted his weight without releasing himself from her kiss; his hand fell against her hip and he canted her toward him, lifting her leg slightly as his hips settled against hers. Kitty felt him brush against her threshold, and then moaned as he slid into her.

It was her first time, and Rafe was large; he moved slowly, pausing when she tightened against him, tensing at unexpected pain.

"Tell me to stop," he whispered.

She shook her head, clasping his face between his hands and pulling him down into a kiss. "Don't stop."

As their kiss deepened, she relaxed beneath him. He lifted her thigh, giving him more access as he eased himself inside with deliberate care. The pain was gone this time, replaced by a delicious friction as he palpated

something deep within her. Kitty moaned again softly, moving in tandem to draw him into her depths. As she grew accustomed to his pace, Rafe quickened against her, each thrust delving more deeply, more powerfully into her.

The pounding rhythm of his hips drew her to the same dizzying brink his fingertips had coaxed, and this time, as she clutched at his buttocks, he pushed her over its wondrous edge. She cried out, arching her back, tightening her thighs against him as her fingertips splayed against his flesh. She writhed beneath him in the shuddering, heaving throes of pleasure, and he stiffened against her in his own release, his voice escaping him in a breathless, hoarse cry.

When it was over, he folded himself atop her and trembled, gasping for breath. He shifted his weight, rolling away. He settled himself against the bed and drew her against him in a gentle embrace, holding her spooned against him.

Kitty lay motionless, enveloped by his warmth. She could feel the thrumming of his heart against her as it slowed from its near-frantic pace. His breath pressed against her shoulder, warm and comforting, and his fingers slid between hers.

I want to stay here, Rafe, she thought. *I want to be with you*. She did not feel the dismay she would have expected at this realization, just as she felt none of the shame she might have anticipated following their lovemaking. She had lost her virginity to him; no man on the whole of England—much less the Isle of Wight—would want her now. She would be considered sullied goods at best, and yet, she felt no remorse or disgrace.

Rafe will not send me back. He cannot—not now. Isabel had not rejected him in the garden. *He* had rejected *her*. He wanted Kitty. She knew he would not kill her; it was not

within his nature. Rafe would not let any harm come to her, and now he had made love to her. He had claimed her virtues and as a gentleman, he would do honorably by her. He would relinquish his claims to vengeance against her father and want to make her his bride.

I will write to Daddy, she thought. I will make him understand. Circumstances were beyond Rafe's power to control, and he felt helpless against them—but now, he will make amends.

John Ransom would be shocked. She imagined the whole of the Wight would heave on its rocky foundation to learn she had succumbed to the charms of a Spanish pirate. She knew she would likely never see her home again.

It does not matter. This is where I want to be—here, in Rafe's arms. This is my home now.

Kitty smiled, closing her eyes and snuggling against Rafe as she drifted to sleep. *My God, I have fallen in love with Rafe Serrano Beltran. My father is going to kill me.*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

My God, I have fallen in love with Catherine Ransom, Rafe thought as he opened his eyes, squinting blearily against the light of a new dawn, to discover that the night before had not been some wondrous, impossible dream. Kitty lay nestled beside him, her naked body lying in warm and wondrous complement to his own, the smooth curves of her buttocks against his groin, the length of her spine resting against his chest.

Her father is going to kill me, he realized as he closed his eyes, nuzzling the tumble of auburn curls near his nose. He kissed the curve of her shoulder, and when she stirred slightly, murmuring in her sleep, moving her body against him, he felt a stirring of his own.

He had roused her repeatedly throughout the night to make love. Each time, she'd welcomed him eagerly, and it seemed his body had grown insatiable when it came to her. It was as if a dam of self-restraint and control within him had crumbled. No woman had ever held such effect on him; none before had ever driven him so near to the brink of madness with such overwhelming need.

He had never been with a woman who could manage him fully. Even with Isabel, there had always been some measure of restraint lest he thrust too hard and too deeply and mete forth some irreparable damage. Kitty had been

different, amazingly so. She had drawn him inside of her completely, readily and he had met no resistance in her warm, wonderful depths. For the first time in his life, Rafe had been able to make love with abandon, to fully indulge not only his lover's pleasures, but his own, as well. Kitty had writhed beneath him, as by his hands, mouth and hips each in turn, he'd driven her repeatedly to powerful, shuddering climaxes, and each time, he had found incredible ones of his own.

After one such session, when he had been crumpled against her, winded and spent, he had thought he heard a noise, the scuffle of footsteps out on the nearby balcony. He had looked, and thought he saw a momentary glimpse of a shadowy movement out by the balustrades. He had tried to peer more closely, but the movement had not been repeated, and Kitty had been tugging at him, drawing him down to kiss her. He had lost interest and nearly forgotten about it. Until now, that was, in the bright light of a new day, and he climbed out of bed, careful not to disturb her.

He walked toward the balcony, nude. He did not know what Isabel would do if she learned that he had taken Kitty as his lover beneath her roof. However, he had a strong suspicion as to what Cristobal might do, and he had no intention of his brother discovering. A quick glance about the terrace revealed nothing out of the ordinary, and he frowned, forking his fingers through his disheveled hair, pushing it back from his face.

"Rafe?" he heard Kitty call from behind him, her voice hesitant.

"I am here," he said, turning and going back to the bed. He watched her expression, uncertain and somewhat anxious to have roused to find him gone, suddenly bloom with bright color, her mouth unfurling in a smile that left him breathless.

“Is everything alright?” she asked. She held the sheet up to cover herself and he found her coy attempts at modesty charming.

“No, but this is better,” he replied, grasping the sheet and whipping it back, leaving her naked and uncovered. She squealed with laughter, the blush in her cheeks deepening. Just the sight of her, all lean lines and soft curves, her hair askew and her face bright with color, stirred immediate arousal within him, making him grow suddenly, unexpectedly rigid.

“And this is better still,” Rafe said, taking hold of her ankles and pulling her toward the edge of the bed.

She laughed again as he grasped her hips, rolling her onto her stomach. “What are you...?” she began, and then her voice dissolved in a moan as he entered her from behind, pulling her back against the full, hardened measure of him. She caught the bedclothes in her hands, knotting them in her fists, as he plunged deeply into her, his hands against her hips. She gasped at every heavy, rhythmic thrust, as the flat plain of his groin slapped against her buttocks. He groaned her name, delving deeply and grinding against her. He leaned over, one hand leaving her hips to cup against her breast. With the other, he reached between her legs, finding the sensitive place with his fingers that brought her pleasure, and stroking against her until she moaned, moving eagerly with him.

He kissed her shoulder, her throat, her ear through her tangled hair. He moved his hand faster and faster against her until she gasped for breath, shuddering with climax. He felt her warmth tighten about him suddenly, sweetly, and he uttered a breathless cry, shuddering powerfully against her with his own massive release.

When they were finished, he leaned against her, holding her beneath him with his arms about her. “Better

now?” Kitty asked, turning her face somewhat so that her cheek rested against his.

He smiled forlornly. “Much,” he whispered, kissing her bare shoulder.

He wished so desperately that he could have this—have her—for always. He could not, of course. It was impossible, and he knew it. *She is John Ransom’s daughter—a proper English woman—and I am only the son of a hidalgo, no better than a pirate.*

It was time for her to go home.

“Kitty, I want to talk to you,” he said, rolling away from her and sitting against the bed.

He could postpone the truth no longer, even though the thought of losing her tore at his heart. *I have only just found her*, he thought, dismayed. *I have waited my life through for her. It is not fair.*

She smiled brightly, drawing her long legs beneath her as she sat up. Again, she drew the sheets around her to cover her nudity. Her auburn hair hung in a disheveled, lovely corona about her face, and her sea-foam green eyes locked in on his face, following the sound of his voice.

“I am sending you back to England today,” Rafe said.

Kitty’s bright expression faltered. Whatever she had been hoping he would say, this obviously was not it. “I...I do not understand.”

He took her by the hand. “I am going to send Claudio to make the arrangements,” he said. “I am going to send him with you to make sure you arrive safely back at the Wight. And you do not have to worry for your father any longer. It is over. I have already told Cristobal. This has been foolish from the start, and I am letting it go.”

Kitty blinked at him, looking bewildered and stricken. "Foolish?"

Rafe leaned toward her, cupping his palm against her face. "You belong with your father, in your home, back on the Wight. It is where you should be—where you need to be. It is what right by you, Kitty, and I want to see it done."

He had no accounting for the hurt in her eyes. He had expected she'd be at least somewhat pleased by the news; it was what she had wanted, what she had pestered him so incessantly about nearly from the first.

"I do not want to go back to England," she said. "I want...please, I want to stay with you, Rafe."

He blinked at her, surprised and moved, but then shook his head. "That is madness. You cannot mean that, Kitty."

"But I..." she began, and she shrugged away from him. "I do not understand. What was this, then? Last night...and this morning? Just now?"

"Is that why you don't want to go home?" he asked, and he reached for her again. "No one has to know the truth. Tell your father that I raped you. You fought me with all that was in you, but I held you down and forced you. No one will condemn you for that. I am the son of a pirate—I am the man who abducted you. No one will know otherwise. You can still marry with honor."

Kitty stared at him. "I do not want to tell anyone that," she said. "You did not force me. I chose it freely." She blinked, the bewildered pain in her eyes growing suddenly cool. "You were using me."

"No," Rafe said, shaking his head, his eyes widening. "No, Kitty, no, that is not what I—"

"You used me!" Kitty exclaimed, and she kicked at him, punting him in the shoulder and driving him back.

“You bastard rot! What—did your precious bloody Isabel reject you out in the garden, so you took what you could get? You have plucked your little English rose—plus a time or two besides—and now you have had your fill?”

“Kitty, no,” he said, stricken, reaching for her again. He recoiled as again, she kicked at him, this time swinging punches, too.

“Don’t touch me!” she cried, and to his dismay, he saw tears flooding her eyes. “Get away from me! Leave me alone!”

“Kitty, please,” Rafe said, but she scuttled away from him, tangling her legs in the bedclothes as she scrambled back, pressing herself against the headboard. For the first time, Rafe could see that the sheets were spotted with blood; her maiden’s blood—the innocence he had taken from her.

Her tears spilled. She clapped her hands over her face and uttered a hoarse, anguished cry. “Leave me alone!” she wept, breaking his will, his soul, ravaging his heart. “I...I hate you! God, I hate you, Rafe Serrano Beltran!”

CHAPTER TWELVE

I am such a fool, Kitty thought.

Rafe had left the room. She had remained huddled against the headboard, weeping, refusing any of his proffered words, caresses or other empty sentiments, and at last, he had given up and retreated. She had heard his footfalls on the floor, the creak of the door hinges, and the soft click as the door had closed behind him.

Gather your wits about you, Kitty, she snapped at herself when he was gone. She sniffled mightily, miserably, and dragged the edge of the sheet across her cheeks to dry her tears. She cocked her head and held her hitching breath, listening for any hint that Rafe might have tricked her and remained in the chamber. When she'd satisfied herself that he had not, she crawled out of bed and limped across the room, her hands outstretched. She felt stiff and somewhat sore, and she clutched the sheet about her, holding it in a makeshift sarong around her narrow frame.

She reached the door and patted against it, finding a locking latch. She turned it to bolt the door and then returned to the bed. She knelt, pawing against the floor among the tangled bedclothes and fallen coverlets until she found the linen nightgown she had been wearing the night before. Rafe had removed it from her, drawing it over her head, and then he had said such sweet things to her when she had felt ashamed of her nakedness; he had told her she was beautiful. *And I believed him*, she thought. *I am such a fool.*

She pulled the gown on, wishing she had more—fifteen layers at least—to cover her. *Something with a high neckline and floor-length hem. Something loose-fitting and shapeless to swallow me whole.*

She sat down against the edge of the bed, feeling the urge to weep again. How could she have possibly believed that Rafe would find her beautiful—much less want to make her his bride? *How could I have thought I could love him?* Her own foolish naiveté left her abashed.

He is a bastard, she thought, her tears spilling. *He is a bastard and a boor and I hate him. I hate him!*

She covered her face with her hands. She did not hate Rafe; that was the worst part, her greatest shame. Even as she railed against herself for her own stupidity, her mind wanted to return to their lovemaking, to the sensation of him within her, filling her, to the unbelievable, overwhelming pleasures he had brought to her again and again. She had never imagined such wonder; it had been nothing like the messy, painful act that had been described to her by matronly sorts for so long.

She did not hate him. A part of her had fallen in love with him, and to her shame, that part still loved him.

“What am I going to do?” she whispered.

She heard a soft clack, and lowered her hands, turning her ear toward the door. It had sounded like the door had just come unlatched, like someone beyond the threshold with a key had unlocked it.

She heard the hinges squall as the door swung open, and she rose, her heart aflutter with sudden, damnable anticipation. *He has come back for me!* It had all been a mistake, some horrible misunderstanding, and now Rafe had returned to beg her forgiveness.

She heard footsteps crossing toward her, and she struggled to wipe the bright, eager expression from her face. She could not let him escape so readily. She steeled herself by crossing her arms, narrowing her brows and willing her mouth to downturn into a thin, grim line.

“Did you forget something?” she asked. “Because I do not believe I left anything unsaid that you might have mis—”

Her voice cut off in a sharp, startled yelp as his hand closed about her arm, crushing just above the crook of

her elbow. “Rafe...!” she whimpered as he jerked her forward and she stumbled against him. “You are hurting me!”

And then she realized. *It is not Rafe.*

She drew in an unfamiliar scent—saltwater and sweat—and felt an unfamiliar height and strapping build. Frightened, she tried to shy back, but the grip against her arm tightened all the more, drawing a wince from her. “Who are you?” she gasped. She heard more footsteps now, another set, and then another, and her face whipped about, following the sounds.

“Who are you?” she cried out again, struggling to pull herself free, frightened now. “Let me go! Rafe, help!”

A wad of cloth was shoved into her mouth, muffling her. She shrugged her shoulders and tried to fight them as the gag was tied in place. Someone grabbed her free arm, and she was turned briskly, smartly about. She felt a hank of rope drawn about her wrists to bind them.

“Rafe!” she tried to shriek around the gag, as she was forced to move, shoved in stumbling toward for the chamber door. “Rafe, help me!”

Rafe could not find Claudio. Distraught, he had left Kitty and immediately headed downstairs for the servants’ quarters, where Claudio was staying. He found the boatswain’s chamber door ajar, the small room empty. Strangely, the bed clothes were in disarray, pulled loose from the mattress and left in a tangled pile on the floor. The empty chamber pot had been overturned, and Claudio’s shirt lay in a heap in the middle of the room. Rafe frowned, kneeling to retrieve it, and his frown

deepened as he saw what looked like spatters of drying blood staining the bone-colored linen.

When he lifted the shirt from the floor, Rafe's puzzlement turned to concern. Claudio's medal of Saint Telmo, a small pendant featuring the embossed image of the patron saint of mariners, lay beneath. Claudio always wore the medal affixed to a slender chain; in all of his life, Rafe doubted he had ever seen the older man without it. Rafe glanced about until he saw a wink of sunlight creeping in through the narrow slit of the room's window against metal, and found the necklace's chain just beneath the bed. It had been broken, the links yanked violently enough to shear them, sending the chain tumbling in one direction apparently, and the medallion in the other.

Rafe rose to his feet, frowning again. He tucked the St. Telmo's medal into his pocket and left the room.

"Good morrow, Rafe," Isabel called to him as he walked across the foyer, and passed the threshold to her parlor. Her voice was remarkably pleasant and bright for a woman who had been scorned only the night before, and Rafe paused, feeling decidedly uncomfortable.

"Good...good morrow, Isabel." He did not want to see her that morning. He had wanted simply to rouse Claudio and see him off with Kitty for the wharfs. He had wanted to collect his things and be gone from the *hacienda* before Isabel had even risen.

She was sitting in a high-backed wooden chair before a small table that had been set with a tea service. She cradled a delicately wrought cup in her hand and blew over the rim before taking a tentative sip. "Would you care for some tea?"

She was being far too nice. Rafe's brows narrowed slightly, warily. "No," he said. "Thank you. I...I was looking for Claudio."

“Your boatswain? I believe Maria told me he left sometime very early, before dawn. He said something about going to the docks.”

An awkward moment of silence fell, and Rafe struggled to find an escape. This was the last circumstance in the world he wanted to be in; he wanted to turn, rush back up the stairs, and return to Kitty. He wanted to hold her, plead with her, make her understand. He had not wanted to hurt her—he would as soon run himself through as see harm come to her, much less by his own hand. *I love you*, he wanted to cry to her. *Madre de Dios, woman, can you not see that? Do you not understand that is why I have to send you away?*

“Rafe, please,” Isabel said, setting her tea cup aside and rising to her feet. “Will you join me? I would like to speak with you. I...I would like to apologize.”

He blinked at her in surprise. She looked down at the hem of her black dress, her brows lifted, her eyes downcast and pained. “It is not an easy thing for me,” she said quietly. “And I...I would as soon do it in closer quarters than to shout it across the room to you.”

“Of course,” Rafe said, shocked momentarily witless. Here was a side to Isabel he had never seen in all of the time he had known her. The humble, nearly sheepish woman before him was an absolute stranger.

“Would you like some brandy?” she asked as he approached. “It is early, yet, but...”

“Yes, thank you,” he said with a nod. He was heartbroken, bewildered and still somewhat wary of this seemingly new, penitent Isabel. All at once, a deep snifter of brandy was just what he needed.

He watched her cross the room to a small brandy service. She stood with her back to him, and he listened to the soft clink of the decanter as it tapped a cup while

she poured. It was funny how he had come to pay attention to the sounds of things now; the way he would unconsciously try to appreciate the world the way Kitty did. *Everything has a sound*, she had told him aboard the ship, while they had been chained together. *Even when most people think it is absolutely silent, I can hear things—so many wonderful things. Just the rustle of fabric, or the whisper your hand makes when you run your fingers through your hair...the soft sounds most people never pay any mind to at all, they all paint the world for me.*

He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose with his fingertips. *I do not want to think about Kitty.*

The chain around his wrist jangled as he moved his hand, and he felt the slight weight of the empty manacle that dangled and swung beneath his arm. “When will the man from Barrañan arrive?” he asked. He was ready to be rid of that damnable thing—the sooner it, and Kitty Ransom were behind him, the better.

Isabel walked toward him, holding a tumbler of brandy between her hands. She looked puzzled. “Who?”

“The man from Barrañan,” Rafe said again, accepting the glass. He pressed the rim to his lips and tilted his head back. She had filled it generously, but he still drained it in a single swallow. “You said you would send for him today, to get this cuff off of me.”

“Oh,” Isabel said, smiling. “Yes. I have already sent word. It should not be long. Would you like another? I know you have always fancied your drink.”

Suddenly, the idea of drowning his sorrows in liquor—as was his customary habit—appealed greatly to Rafe. “Yes, please, Isabel,” he said, letting her draw the cup from his hand. “I would fancy that indeed.”

“I am sorry for last evening,” she said as she returned to the decanter. “It was wrong of me to think

you might still have feelings for me. It has been so long, and you have been gone all of this while, and I..."

"Isabel," he said, pained. Already, he could feel the warmth of the brandy, which had pooled comfortably in his stomach, spreading throughout his body, loosening his tongue, relaxing his mind. "I do still have feelings for you. I care for you very much."

"But you do not love me," she said quietly, unhappily. She brought the snifter to him, filled anew and watched as again, he downed it.

"You broke my heart." He set aside the cup and reached for her, cradling her face between his hands. "Isabel, there was a time when I would have died for you. I loved you so much, I felt as though I could not breathe to be apart from you. I would have given everything I had—anything I would ever have—to be with you, but you married Guillermo. Maybe I do not blame you for that...maybe, in your position, I would have done no differently. I do not know."

He walked away from her, bringing his glass to the brandy and refilling it again. He canted his head back and swallowed the liquor. The heat had filled him now, and he could feel it dulling his senses, bringing the soothing, expected relief and release for which he had been longing.

"But it is different now," he said quietly, standing with his back to her. *I am different now. And I am in love with someone else.*

He felt a sudden, sharp pain in his gut and he winced. Puzzled, he pressed his hand against his stomach and felt the pang subside. He should have known better than to fill his stomach with brandy without eating first; he'd foregone lunch the day before, and supper after that, so it had been a good twenty-four hours, if not more, since he had last eaten.

He turned toward Isabel, wanting to ask if he could beg some breakfast from her, but then another stabbing pain wrenched through him, and he buckled, doubling over at the waist and crying out hoarsely. The brandy snifter fell from his hand and shattered against the floor. Rafe collapsed to his knees, catching himself with one hand lest he pitch face-first against the tiles. He shoved his other hand against his midriff, his face twisted with pain as he gasped for breath. All at once, his lungs felt thick and heavy, as if some enormous weight had been pressed against his chest, and when a third spasm seared through him, he could not even summon the wind to cry out. He crumpled to the floor, wracked with agony, drawing his knees to his chest in a vain effort to stave the crippling, paralyzing pain.

“Rafe?” Isabel walked toward him. He could hear the soft, swift rustle of her skirt, sounds he might never have paid attention to before had he not met Kitty. “Rafe, what is the matter?”

He struggled to get his hands beneath him, to push himself up. He gasped for labored breath, managing to lift his head, but then another shudder of pain seized him and he collapsed once more, his voice escaping him in an agonized, strangled cry.

“Rafe, are you alright?” Isabel asked, and the rustling of fabric fell immediately beside him as she knelt, touching his shoulder. “Are you in pain, lover?”

At her words, as her voice shifted from sweet concern to something colder and more calculating, Rafe understood. He remembered what her housekeeper, Maria, had told him.

Others still say she poisoned him to be rid of him, to clear her bed for an absent lover.

He had thought the woman was only joking, making a pointed barb meant to chastise him for his past

dalliances with Isabel. He lifted his head. His vision was swimming, his mind reeling, but he saw Isabel beside him, watching him with an impassive expression, the sort of cool detachment she might have reserved for watching an insect impaled on a sewing needle as it struggled in its feeble death throes.

“You...” he gasped, struggling to reach for her, to clap his hand against her throat. “You...bitch...”

Another spear of pain lanced through him, the strongest yet, and he jerked, his arms wrapping about his midriff, his body folded over as he writhed in agony. “G-God...!” he screamed, his voice choked and strained. “What have you done to me, you bitch?”

“Now, now, Rafe, there is no way to speak to *la Condesa*,” he heard a familiar voice say—just as he heard a familiar, shuffling set of footsteps.

“No,” he whimpered, shaking his head in stunned disbelief as Cristobal walked into the room. “No...oh...oh, God, no...!” Cristobal was smiling; the veritable cat that has just swallowed the hapless songbird. “Cristobal...wh-why...?”

“Why?” Cristobal asked, and he drew his foot back, kicking Rafe mightily in the gut. Rafe twisted, crying out hoarsely at the brutal, painful impact.

“Because I hate you, Rafe,” Cristobal said, kicking Rafe again. “You ruined my leg.” Again, he punted Rafe’s stomach. “You ruined my life.”

Rafe lay in a heap against the floor, shuddering, gagging. When another spasm of pain wrenched through his middle, he was helpless against it; he cried out softly, breathlessly, feeling his mind fading, abandoning him.

“It was not supposed to be like this,” Cristobal told him, his voice nearly gentle. “You were not supposed to die, Rafe. You were just supposed to stay here—chained,

if need be—in Isabel’s company.” He laughed, kicking Rafe one last time. “But I think I like this way much better.”

“You turned me away and then slept with that *espantapájaros*—that English whore—in my house, you misbegotten bastard,” Isabel seethed, closing her fist in Rafe’s hair and forcing him to look up at her. She spat in his face, her brows furrowed, her eyes alight with murderous ferocity. “Did you think I would not find out? Did you think I would not realize?”

She shoved his head away and then slapped him again and again, driving the heel of her hand against his cheek.

“I saw you with my own eyes, sullyng yourself with that blind, horse-faced bitch,” Cristobal said, and when Isabel finished striking him, he resumed his furious kicking again in earnest, driving his boot repeatedly into Rafe’s gut. “Did you enjoy yourself, Rafe? Was she a suitable lover?”

He leaned over, grabbing Rafe’s hair and wrenching his head back. “I will find out for myself very shortly, brother,” he hissed against Rafe’s ear. “I will take my own turn and see how she fares. She will not be able to walk when I am through with her.”

“No!” Rafe gasped, struggling not to faint, to succumb to the shadows that threatened to swallow him whole. “No, you...bastard...leave her alone...!”

Cristobal laughed, turning loose of his hair, letting him crumple to the ground again. “Why, here is your little English rose now. Maybe I will start right in front of you, let you watch us for a bit.”

Rafe heard Kitty’s voice, muffled, crying out his name, and his heart seized in despair. *No, please! Mother of God, do not let them hurt her. Please...!*

Kitty fell beside him, either pushed there or stumbling of her own accord. Her hands were bound behind her back, but she folded herself atop him, shuddering against him, weeping. She had been gagged, but she mewled at him in frightened, inarticulate panic around the wad of cloth lashed between her lips.

Cristobal grabbed her hair, jerking her backwards, and she screamed as he forced her to her feet. “No...!” Rafe gasped, forcing himself to raise his head, to fight the swelling crescendo of pain that tore through his midriff. He could hardly see; the room was spinning, his fragile consciousness waning.

“Do...do not hurt her,” he seethed at Cristobal, even as his eyes rolled back in his skull and his eyelids fluttered closed. “Do not...touch her...”

He did not remember collapsing to the floor. The world had gone dark, and even the silence had been unbroken.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“You wretched bastard,” Kitty cried out as the gag was removed from her mouth. “What have you done to Rafe?”

“You would be wise to keep your tongue still and between your teeth, you stinking bitch, or I will cut it out of your skull,” Cristobal seethed, and she felt his hand close fiercely against her jaw, forcing her head back.

She said no more, her eyes wide, her breath caught in her throat. She had been taken from Isabel’s house, manhandled and hauled like a sack of grain, tossed into the back of a cart and delivered back to the docks, from the sounds and smells of it. Here, Cristobal had ordered her taken aboard a skiff, and they had rowed out to the ship. There had been no more captain’s quarters or comfortable accommodations for Kitty; she had been dragged below deck and tossed into the hold, a narrow circumference of a cell, framed on all sides by heavy iron bars.

She was terrified, despite her fierce words and defiant façade. Rafe was gone and she was alone now with Cristobal—a man who had no qualms apparently about hurting his own brother. She did not harbor any doubts that he would not hesitate to do the same to her. That he had not raped her yet astonished Kitty.

She did not know what Cristobal and Isabel had done to Rafe, but it had been cruel. She understood that with certainty. The men who had trussed her hands in her room had delivered her down the stairs of Isabel's *hacienda*, and even from the foyer, Kitty had heard the sounds of Rafe's strangled, agonized cries. By the time she had been shoved to her knees beside his fallen, shuddering form, his cries had been reduced to hurting groans and feeble whimpers. He had sounded fragile, broken by whatever pain they had brought upon him. She did not know if he was alive still, or dead; her heart seized with dismay to even remotely consider the latter.

"He loves you," she whimpered at Cristobal, even as his hand crushed even more tightly against her face, hurting her. "How...how could you do this? You are his brother—all he has. He loves you."

Cristobal shoved her, ramming the back of her head firmly against the iron bars of her cell. "English witch," he said, and she felt his frothy, hot saliva spatter against her cheek. "What do you know about anything? Although..." His hand fell heavily against her breast, his fingers squeezing her nipple painfully through the thin fabric of her gown. "I do know something you know about."

Isabel had launched herself at Kitty before Cristobal had ordered her taken from the house. She'd screamed at Kitty in a torrent of furious Spanish, raking her nails against Kitty's face, slapping and punching at her, ripping at her nightgown and tearing at her hair. The flimsy linen shift was now torn, hanging loosely and with her hands bound behind her, Kitty was helpless to try and cover those portions of her form that were vulnerably exposed. She turned her face away as she felt Cristobal's breath against her. The wet, thick blade of his tongue slid across her cheek and she winced. His hand moved from her

breast, groping between her thighs, bunching the gown up as he forked his fingers against her.

“Do it, you rot,” she hissed, closing her eyes, trembling with bright terror. “Go ahead. What are you waiting for?”

Cristobal chuckled, his breath and voice falling intimately against her ear. “I have promised you to someone else,” he said, and he pushed her away from him, making her stumble back against the wall. “Someone who is looking very forward to taking his time with you, breaking you slowly, exquisitely.”

The tone of his voice, the sinister promise in his low, nearly purring tone, made her skin crawl, and she immediately shrank, drawing her arms about herself to try and hide her state of undress. “Rafe’s crew will never follow you!” she gasped, struggling to force some courage into her voice. “They will know what you have done! They will never let you take *El Verdad* out of port!”

“*El Verdad* can rot in port,” Cristobal replied. “We are aboard *La Venganza* now—my ship, my helm...” She mewled as he seized her hair unexpectedly, wrenching her head back so that he could breathe against her ear. “...my rules, you rotted bitch. My crew would sail with me to hell and back again, if I give the word.”

He laughed, turning loose of her again and leaving her to shudder, huddled against the wall. She listened to his footsteps, the squall of the cell gate closing as he took his leave. “Rafe Serrano Beltran is dead,” he told her.

His words hit Kitty as brutally as any physical blow, and she sank to her knees, trembling, her eyes flooding with dismayed tears.

“And by the time I am finished with you and your father, you will both beg to join him.” She heard Cristobal limp away, leaving her to weep.

Rafe's eyelids fluttered open. His mind was dazed, still mostly submerged in unconsciousness, and he struggled to remain awake. *If I faint, I am dead. Please, God, just let me keep awake.*

Pain wrenched his gut, and he twisted feebly, too weak to even cry out. The poison was wracking his form. The sensation of heaviness against his chest was nearly overpowering now, and every effort at breath seemed excruciating and laborious.

He moved his hand slowly, weakly, his fingertips scrabbling against the soft, earthen ground. He had been dragged, lifeless and limp, to the cellar of Isabel's house. Here, he had been locked in a store room and left to die.

"The poison is not quick, nor is it kind," Isabel had murmured to him, her lips brushing against his ear in a cruel mockery of a farewell kiss. "But then again, neither is love, is it, my darling?"

He had no idea what kind of poison he had ingested, or how much of it remained in his stomach. He knew that if his body had not already absorbed a lethal dosage, however, there was only one way to prevent it.

He opened his mouth, slipping his forefingers between his lips, reaching toward the back of his palate. He felt his throat constrict in a reflexive heave, and then he jerked as he retched, the frothy contents of his stomach spewing out of his mouth. He lacked the strength to lift his head, and he choked. He spat violently, and again, shoved his fingers down his throat. He managed to get his arm beneath him, to prop himself somewhat upright as he vomited, but the effort drained him, leaving him nearly swooning.

I cannot faint, he thought, shuddering, the thick flavor of regurgitated brandy vile against his tongue. *If I faint, I will die. My only hope is to sick enough of the poison out of me.*

Again, he slipped his fingers into his mouth; again, his stomach knotted in a painful, stabbing heave. Again, thin, foamy bile retched out him, and again, he crumpled, exhausted and trembling from the effort.

He forced himself to vomit until there was nothing left to come up, until he collapsed to the floor in a shivering, gasping heap. He had no idea if he had acted quickly enough, or if it was too little, too late. He closed his eyes, too weak to even turn his face away from the splattered pool of his own mess.

He dreamed of Kitty, of the afternoon aboard *El Verdad* when Eduardo had played the guitar, and he had taught Kitty how to dance while discussing *la tauromaquia*, the bullfights in Spain. He imagined her slight, delicate weight, her feet poised atop his, her body in such close, pleasing proximity that he could feel the promising swell of her breasts press against his chest. He remembered draping his uncuffed hand lightly against the inner curve of her waist, and cradling her bound hand in the other. They had moved together, stiffly at first, because they had both felt somewhat awkward, but as the music had progressed, they had both relaxed. Before long, he had been gazing into Kitty's sea-foam green eyes, into the broad measure of her delighted smile as he had turned her about and the melody from Eduardo's guitar had been complemented by the harmony of Kitty's laughter.

He dreamed of that afternoon, his exhausted, hurting mind drawing him back to a fonder place and a far better time. He dreamed of her fragrance, and the way sunlight had spilled through the stern windows and infused in her hair. Someone was knocking at the door in his dream, a firm and insistent rapping, but Rafe paid it no mind.

Whoever was there could wait. He wanted to enjoy this moment; he wanted to savor it. He imagined closing his eyes and drawing Kitty near as she tilted her face slightly and spoke against his ear: "Rafe, are you in there?"

Rafe opened his eyes, blinking blearily. The captain's quarters aboard *El Verdad* were gone; the sweet refrains of Eduardo's music, and the even sweeter sensation of Kitty's warmth against him were all gone. He lay face-down on the dirt floor of Isabel's store room, next to a drying puddle of vomited brandy.

The dream was over, but the heavy knocking persisted, each fervent pound reverberating inside Rafe's aching head.

"Rafe, can you hear me?" someone shouted through the wood. *Claudio*, Rafe thought dimly. *It is Claudio...*

He groaned, moving his hand feebly, struggling to lift his head. "I...I am here..." he tried to call out. His voice came out as little more than a croak, and the effort to speak left him slumped against the ground again. The knocking abruptly ended, and Rafe lay in the dark silence, trembling in the dirt. *He is gone. He thinks I am not here, and he has gone away. Oh, God, Claudio, come back! Please come back!*

"Come...back..." Rafe whispered, his mind abandoning him again. He only dimly heard the door to the storage room unlock and the rapid stomping of Claudio's footfalls as he rushed to the younger man's side.

"Rafe!" Claudio cried, falling to his knees and getting his arm beneath Rafe's shoulders. As he forced Rafe to sit up, Rafe opened his eyes again, twisting at the pain the sudden movement brought him, and choking for breath.

"Easy, lad," Claudio whispered, drawing Rafe against him. Despite his age, there was still an imposing and impressive strength in Claudio's lean, sinewy form, and

Rafe found comfort against him, the sort of solace a son might find from the throes of illness or injury in his father's firm embrace.

"Poison," Rafe croaked, shivering. "Isabel...she..."

Claudio nodded, turning his face down toward Rafe's. "I know, *hijo*," he said, stroking his hand against Rafe's hair, calling him *son*. He glanced over his shoulder and Rafe followed his gaze to see Isabel, her hands bound behind her back, being shoved into the room by Eduardo and two other strapping crewmen from *El Verdad*. She'd been tussling with them, apparently; her hair was askew, her dress rumpled, and she shrugged her shoulders mightily to wrench loose of their grasps as she stumbled in unwilling tow. She opened her mouth, drawing a sharp breath to rail at them and then saw Rafe—alive and conscious. Her eyes widened in stunned surprise.

"Rafe...!" she exclaimed, her pallor drained ashen in that shocked moment. "H-how...?"

"I...I sicked it up," Rafe whispered, feeling his tenuous grasp on consciousness waning. "As much as I...I could...I..."

Isabel's brows narrowed. Again, she struggled against the sailors as they caught her by the arms. "It does not matter," she snapped, spitting at Rafe. "You are too late, anyway. All of you—too late!"

"Can you walk?" Claudio asked. "Lean on me, *hijo*. Come on now, try."

Rafe rested heavily against Claudio as the boatswain helped him stagger clumsily to his feet. His head was swimming, his stomach cramping at the effort, and he groaned, his knees buckling. Claudio's strong arm was there to catch him, to keep him upright and help ease his unsteady feet beneath him once more as they limped together to the door.

“He...he took her,” Rafe whispered. “Cristobal...he took Kitty...”

“I know,” Claudio said.

“Please...Claudio, please, I...I love her...”

“I know, *hijo*,” Claudio told him gently. “We will get her back.”

Isabel had heard him, to judge by her expression—a cross between murderous fury and despair. As Claudio helped lead Rafe toward the door, she thrashed against the crewmen restraining her, her face flushed with rage, spittle flying from her lips. “You will never catch Cristobal!” she screamed. “He means to deliver her to the great Abdul Aziz in Lisbon and then your English whore will beg for death!”

Claudio bristled at this, his entire body stiffening. He turned, leaving Rafe to support himself against the storeroom doorway and walked toward Isabel, closing his hands slowly, deliberately.

“I took him to my bed, Rafe—your own brother between my thighs!” Isabel screeched. “He brought me pleasures I have never known before—a better lover ten-thousand fold than you will ever be! He will let Abdul Aziz take that *espantapájaros*—your scarecrow bitch—over and over until she is broken and—”

Claudio swung his fist around and punched her mightily in the face, with all of the force he would have offered a man. Isabel’s voice cut abruptly short. There was a soft, moist crunch as her nose broke and then she crumpled in a lifeless heap to the floor.

Claudio turned around, crossing himself. “May the holy Father show more gracious restraint than I could muster, *Señora*,” he muttered, returning to Rafe’s side.

“Abdul Aziz...” Rafe gasped, his eyes widening in horror. He knew the name, had heard it before—over and

over from Cristobal since their plot against John Ransom had hatched, in fact. Abdul Aziz bin Malik had indoctrinated Rafe's father into the world of high-seas piracy. He was the most notorious pirate in the world. "Cristobal, he...he means..."

Claudio shook his head, slipping his arm around Rafe's waist once more. "Later, Rafe," he said. "Let us leave here."

Rafe noticed for the first time that Claudio's face was bruised. Dried blood crusted on the corner of his lip, and his eye was swollen and blackened. "*Madre de Dios*," he said. "What happened to you?"

Claudio only shook his head again. "It is a long story," he said. "And they have a good hour's lead on us. I will tell you once *El Verdad* is underway."

"What about...?" Rafe glanced over his shoulder as Claudio led him from the room. Isabel remained where she had fallen, face-down in the dirt, motionless against the storeroom floor.

"*La Condesa*?" Claudio said, and he snorted. "We will lock the door behind us and trust that no one else holds a key."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Rafe dreamed that he was home in Santa Ponca. Not the sprawling *hacienda* nestled against a landscaped hillside overlooking the sea that his father had eventually purchased with the money he had earned from privateering, but the small, three-roomed cottage in which he had been born.

He and Cristobal had shared one cramped bedroom between them, each with their own, straw-filled mattresses set against the floor. After Cristobal's injury, however, and when Lucio had come from Madrid to tend to him, Rafe had been made to sleep in his father's room, while Evarado had kept a pained and near-constant vigil at Cristobal's side.

The dream was a memory; one in which Rafe stirred from sleep at the sound of voices coming from the adjacent room as his father and Lucio shared cups of wine by the fire. It was the tone of their conversation more so than the words that had drawn Rafe from his restless slumber. They had been negotiating; Lucio speaking in low, almost gentle tones, and Evarado responding more sharply.

Lucio was trying to tell Father he did not need to worry for payment, Rafe recalled. He remembered rising to his feet and shuffling sleepily toward the doorway, curious and

somewhat frightened by his father's tone. *Lucio was leaving that very next morning to return to Spain. The worst with Cristobal was behind us, he said, and he needed to get back to Madrid.*

He heard the jangle of coins as he stood, shied in the doorway of his father's room, his eyes round and glistening with reflected firelight as he watched Lucio close his hands against Evarado's, pushing them back. His father held a coin purse; he had tried to offer the money to Lucio.

Rafe remembered that Claudio had been there, too, the three men sitting in a comfortable circumference, all with their backs to him as they'd faced the stone hearth.

"You keep your coins," Lucio said to Evarado. "Give them to your crewmen, their families. They are the ones in need of it, not me."

This had apparently been the culmination of a lengthy debate, because Evarado—a man not renowned for surrendering readily or easily—sat back in his chair with a heavy sigh, his shoulders hunching in defeat.

"Let me take the boy, Evarado," Lucio said gently, patting his hand against the other man's leg. "He is of no use to you now, and he will only bring more trouble for you later."

Rafe hedged back even further in the doorway, his eyes widening. He had no formal education, but it did not take a scholar to realize the physician was speaking of him. *Because I am the one who caused all of this trouble. It is my fault. He is right—I am of no use to Father now.*

"He will learn from me," Lucio said. "I will care for him as my own."

At this, the older man had glanced in Rafe's direction and spied him in the doorway. His expression shifted from the softened care he had awarded to Evarado to something more stern. Evarado and Claudio both

followed his gaze, and Rafe hunched his shoulders, dropping his eyes toward the floor at his father's visible disapproval.

"Rafe," Evarado said sharply. "Come here."

"Yes, sir," Rafe replied quietly, reluctantly drawing away from the shelter of the shadow-draped doorway and approaching the three men.

Evarado caught him by the crook of his arm when he tried to stay somewhat behind his chair. He pulled Rafe forward in stumbling tow, as if presenting him to Lucio. "He is a strong boy," he said.

"Evarado..." Lucio began.

Rafe looked to Claudio for some hope of rescue. Claudio looked stricken, but remained mute.

"He can be lazy," Evarado said sharply, making Rafe lower his eyes in shame. "But it is nothing a firm hand and some steady discipline will not fix. I have let him get by with too much, I know, but it is hard when I am out at sea."

I am sorry, Papa! Rafe wanted to cry. He wanted to crumple to his knees and press himself against his father's legs, pleading for his forgiveness, begging for Evarado to love him again. *Please don't send me away! I will be better, Papa! I will be good! Please, I am sorry!*

Lucio said nothing, and Evarado turned Rafe smartly about. "Lift your eyes," he said, and Rafe obeyed. He was blinking against the sting of tears, and it didn't escape his father's notice. Evarado turned his own face away, his brows knit, his lips pressed together in a thin, grim line.

"You will be leaving in the morrow," he said without looking at Rafe. "Pack one bag, and no more. You will be sailing for the mainland, for Madrid, with Señor Guevarra Silva."

Later that night, after Lucio and Claudio had left the house, Rafe lay against his bedding and listened to his father weeping. Evarado had gone to sit at Cristobal's bedside, as was his habit, and Rafe could look through the doorway and see his shadow against the wall. He watched his father clap his hands over his face, his shoulders shuddering, his back bowed with the weight of terrible, overwhelming grief as he wept.

I am sorry, Papa, Rafe thought, closing his eyes, his own tears spilling as he trembled beneath his blankets. *I am sorry I hurt Cristobal. I will be better, Papa. I will be good. Please do not...*

"I am sorry, Papa," Rafe murmured aloud, opening his eyes. He was dazed, nearly delirious, and did not realize that he was no longer in the small house in Santa Ponca, that he was no longer the frightened boy listening to his heartsick father weep. "I...I will be better. I will be good...please...please do not make me go..."

"Hush now, *hijo*," he heard Claudio say gently. He felt Claudio's hand drape against his brow, comforting and soothing.

He must not have left after all, Rafe thought, dimly. *He must still be sitting by the fire.*

"I did not mean it," he whispered, his eyelids fluttering closed, his mind fading again. "Please, Claudio...I...I did not mean to make Papa weep..."

When he woke again, it was with a start. His eyes flew wide and he gasped as he sat up in bed. "Kitty—!"

He looked around, momentarily disoriented. He forked his fingers through his hair, shoving it back from his face. He was in alone the captain's quarters of *El Verdad*. Beyond the stern windows to his left, it was dark, and the room was lit with the soft, faint glow of two oil lamps. He could feel the ship in motion beneath him,

rocking gently on her keel, and he could hear the churning trough of the wake below the windows.

Rafe shoved the blankets aside and swung his legs around, sitting up slowly. He winced at the effort, as a deep, visceral ache tightened through his midriff. He sat against the bedside, listening to the faint jangle as the empty cuff drooped from the mattress and fell, spared from hitting the floor by the eight links of chain holding it fast to his wrist. He drew up the hem of his clean linen shirt, and grimaced at the bands of dark, angry bruising that marred his belly. He remembered now; Cristobal had taken Kitty. He had kicked Rafe repeatedly, driving his boot with brutal force into Rafe's belly and groin.

Isabel had poisoned him, and he had tried to save himself, employing the only rescue he could think of. He had forced himself to vomit and had hoped it would prove enough to see him past the worst of the toxin's effects. *It would seem to have worked*, Rafe thought as he rose slowly, unsteadily to his feet.

He limped toward the chamber door and opened it. He shied back in surprise to find a woman in the corridor, a stack of neatly folded linens in one hand and the other outstretched, ready to open his door. She yelped, sharing in his start, and the linens fell as she recoiled in wide-eyed fright.

"I am sorry," Rafe said, his voice cracked and hoarse. While the woman forked the sign of the cross at herself and muttered some rapid, nearly inarticulate prayer to the Blessed Virgin to spare her any further such fright, Rafe bent over to pick up the fallen linens. It proved a grievous error in judgment. The movement left his head spinning, and he groaned, stumbling sideways into the wall.

"What are you doing out of bed, Captain?" the woman asked, reaching for him.

Captain. Rafe leaned heavily against the doorframe, feeling as weak as a newborn kitten, as if all of the merits promised by his lean, muscular frame were no more than illusions. *I am no captain. I cannot even bloody keep my feet beneath me.*

He blinked at the woman, and recognized her face. He drew back in new surprise, his head swimming, his vision growing murky. “Maria...?” he gasped to Isabel’s housekeeper.

He groaned, his knees buckling. He nearly collapsed upon the threshold, but felt a strong arm clamp firmly about his middle, helping to support him. He glanced to his right and found Claudio beside him; the boatswain had been just behind Maria in the companionway corridor, and now he helped to draw Rafe to his feet.

“You should not be up yet, Rafe,” Claudio said, leading Rafe in staggering tow for the bed.

“What...what is she doing here?” Rafe asked, craning his head, trying to see Maria behind them.

“She is with me,” Claudio said, and Rafe blinked at him in bewildered surprise. “It is a long story.”

“Where are we?” Rafe asked.

“Almost a full day out to sea,” Claudio replied. “We are marking a course along shore, heading south-southwest past Porto toward the fortieth parallel.”

Rafe blinked at him again; had he been at his mental best, and not the dazed, bewildered stare he currently suffered, he still would have been confused by Claudio’s answer.

“Portugal,” Claudio said by means of translation. “We have reached Portugal, Rafe, and we are following the coast. We are a day out from Lisbon.” His expression grew grim. “There is no sign of *La Venganza* yet, but we are running slow because of our bowsprit. There was not

time to see her properly refitted back in La Coruna. And Cristobal will likely gain a bigger lead on us overnight, too.”

“Why?” Rafe asked. The room seemed darker to him now, he realized, and the shadows seemed to be closing in with every step he took.

“Because around the fortieth parallel, we may start hitting heavy fog banks,” Claudio replied. “The warm waters from the Mediterranean coming up from the Gibraltar Strait mix with the colder Atlantic. Makes for bad weather. We will have to brail up some canvas and run more slowly, especially if we keep in with the land.”

Rafe shook his head, the movement leaving him suddenly dizzy. He stumbled to a halt, leaning against Claudio, pressing his hand against his brow. “We...we cannot,” he said, his voice strained. “Cristobal will not slow down...”

“Cristobal has probably tacked further west, out to sea, to avoid any fog,” Claudio said.

“Then should we not do the same?” Rafe murmured.

“We cannot, Rafe—not with our bowsprit as weak as she is,” Claudio said firmly. “If she snaps, we could lose the foremast, too, and we want to be as close to land as we can get in case we are crippled.”

The room was spinning. Rafe’s knees folded and he groaned, collapsing to the floor. As Claudio cried out his name and clutched at him, struggling to support his dead weight, it occurred to Rafe’s fading mind:

You should be the captain, Claudio, not me...

“So are you going to tell me?” Rafe asked Claudio. It was several hours later, and he had roused again, feeling somewhat less groggy and feeble, but still keeping to his bed to be careful. He sat up, propped against the headboard with pillows, and nursed a bowl of thin, but savory broth that Maria had brought for him. When he had complimented her on the flavor of the soup, her prim façade had softened, her solemn expression growing nearly girlish as she had lowered her eyes.

“Thank you, Captain,” she’d said. “It was my mother’s recipe.”

“Tell you what?” Claudio asked. Maria had left them, but Rafe hadn’t missed the way she and the boatswain had paused abreast of one another in the doorway, or the way Maria had smiled when Claudio had offered her something in murmured tones Rafe had been unable to distinguish.

Rafe glanced up as he blew against a spoonful of the still-steaming broth. “Tell me a long story, Claudio,” he said. “I do believe you owe me a couple—such as what Maria is doing here, and what happened to your face.” He leaned forward, forgetting his own frailties and shifting fully into his physician’s frame of mind. “That eye looks bad,” he murmured.

“It is fine,” Claudio said, shrugging away when Rafe tried to touch his face. “Leave it now, Rafe, I—”

“Can you open it?” Rafe asked. He set the soup bowl on a beside table and scooted toward Claudio. “Did you put a cool compress against it? I have some herbs in my box that could help take down that swelling. Let me get up. I will mix you a—”

“Rafe, it is fine,” Claudio said again, catching Rafe’s hands gently but firmly as he reached for him. “You need to worry after yourself and keep in this bed.”

Rafe sighed, relenting unwillingly. He rested back against the pillows, and raised his brows expectantly at the older man. "Talk, then," he said. "If you will not let me tend to you, then you will have to say a lot to distract me. Tell me about Maria."

Claudio smiled. "What is there to say? Maria showed me to my room at *la hacienda de la Torre* when I returned from the docks. We spoke somewhat and later, she brought me supper. We shared common interests and talked about them at some length. And then..." He shrugged. "She is a beautiful woman and I have appetites and needs, just as you do."

Rafe's brows raised again in surprise. When Claudio said nothing further on the matter, he laughed, shaking his head. "Should you not cross yourself or something?" he asked. "I mean, is that not considered a sin?"

Claudio dropped him a wink. "Not at my age."

Rafe laughed until his still-tender midriff protested, making him wince.

"I saw Diego Gil Barreiro at the docks in La Coruna," Claudio said, all pretense of lightheartedness gone, his expression growing solemn. "He is the boatswain of *La Venganza*, under Cristobal's command. I thought I had seen him when we first arrived, and after we left the smithy, I returned to try and find him again. I did not see him, but I did check with the harbor-master. *La Venganza* was indeed in port at La Coruna. It had been there for more than a week."

Rafe blinked at him, bewildered.

"I think Cristobal had this planned from the moment of Evarado's death, when he learned that Evarado left everything to your charge," Claudio said gently, reaching out and slipping his hand against Rafe's. "I think he meant for us to go to La Coruna all along."

Rafe remembered the day they had discovered the bowsprit of *El Verdad* had been damaged. *If it was my ship, I would put her into port at La Coruna, on the Spanish peninsula, Cristobal had told Rafe. Have her re-rigged, the whole thing replaced.*

Rafe jerked as if he had been slapped. “The bowsprit...” he whispered.

Claudio nodded grimly. “He must have sabotaged us before we left. He knew it would not cripple us, that we would be able to fix it. But he also knew it would not hold us long, and that we would have to stop and fix it if we hoped to keep ahead of Ransom. I think he sent word to your lady, *la Condesa*, and told her he would deliver you to her in La Coruna. All she had to do was keep you occupied while he and his crew set sail with Kitty. Then he dispatched *La Venganza* from Mallorca, probably the same day we left. He meant to leave La Coruna on his own.”

“Not on his own,” Rafe said quietly. “He is going to sail south to Lisbon and meet Abdul Aziz. He is going to give Kitty to him. That is what Isabel said.” He did not miss the way Claudio flinched in reaction, his eyes widening slightly in surprise, clearly uncomfortable that Rafe recalled this. “I know who Abdul Aziz is. I know he is the one who drew my father into pirating.”

“Abdul Aziz bin Malik is a very dangerous man,” Claudio said. “Your father used to tell me he was the sort best left at arm’s length, lest he take a notion to bite—that way you would lose no more than a hand. He never trusted the man.”

There was more; Rafe could tell by the tone of Claudio’s voice. To his dismay and dread, he thought he knew what it was. “But Cristobal trusts him,” he whispered.

“Cristobal wants to *be* Abdul Aziz,” Claudio said. “If Lucio Guevarra Silva was your mentor in the ways of healing, Abdul Aziz has been Cristobal’s in those of a pirate. They have only grown tighter since your father’s death. I would not be surprised if this entire voyage has not been of Abdul Aziz’s original devising.”

Rafe looked down at his lap, pained at the thought of Kitty turned over to such a man. “If he touches Kitty...” he said. He pressed his hand against his brow, torn between anger and dismay as he remembered Isabel’s words, shrieked at him in outrage in the storeroom.

He will let Abdul Aziz take that espantapájaros—your scarecrow bitch—over and over until she is broken

He could not bear to think of such things; they tore at his heart like knifepoints. “We will get her back,” he said, his brows furrowing, his hands folding into determined fists.

“Yes, *hijo*, we will,” Claudio said gently. “When I came back from the docks, I wanted to find you, tell you right away about what I had learned, but Maria was under Isabel’s directive to keep us apart. It was not until later, after Maria and I had made more...intimate acquaintances of one another, that she told me of this. And by then, it was too late. She left my bed to go and summon you, but while she was gone, more of Cristobal’s crew showed up. They held me down, took to my face with their fists.” He shook his head. “Some of them I have known since they were lads from Santa Ponca.

“They locked me in the cellar—in the storeroom where I found you, but Maria saw what had happened. She was frightened and hid until the morning. She saw what had happened to you—and to the girl. She came downstairs and unlocked the door, helped me hide in the stables until Cristobal and his fellows were gone. I

imagine if she had not, it would have been the both of us choked to death together on Isabel's poison."

Rafe closed his eyes, closing his fingers tightly against Claudio's. "You saved my life."

Claudio smiled, leaning forward and stroking his hand against Rafe's hair to draw his gaze. "You saved yourself, *hijo*," he said gently. "I would not have known to sick up the brandy. I just helped you walk away."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The first time Kitty had ever ventured out of Rosneath Manor alone, she was five years old. Nearly a year in full had passed since she had lost her sight to fever, and she had long-since grown restless at her veritable imprisonment in the house. Her bedroom had been moved to the first floor, as John had not wanted her trying to go up and down the stairs, handicapped as she was. Thus, it had not taken much for Kitty to plot and execute her escape. She had waited until she was left alone, away from the prying eyes of the manor staff under the pretense of taking a nap, and then she had simply opened the window and climbed outside.

It had not taken her long to realize the grievous error in her judgment. She had tried counting her footsteps; that much by means of navigation, she had already learned, but she had stumbled and fallen, and in the process, had lost her sense of direction. She had been as helpless as a ship with a maimed rudder, her hands outstretched, her breath hiccuping in frightened dismay as no matter which direction she tried to follow, or how many steps she took, she could not find the outer walls of Rosneath again. Her fear had only increased as she had remembered that the house had been built near the cliffs to award a striking view of the Solent. Every clumsy step she offered brought her potentially closer to these

cliffs—and a very steep plummet to a very rough-hewn and rock-lined beach below.

It felt as though she blundered about for hours, even though she knew in retrospect it had likely been less than fifteen full minutes. She had struggled not to cry out or weep; the fear of John Ransom's scolding had been stronger than any of her predicament. At last, her outstretched, groping hands had settled against the stone exterior of the house, and she had been safe. She had patted about the perimeter until finding her opened window, and she had ducked back inside, none the worse for the adventure, and not missed in the slightest during her absence.

The experience had taught her a number of lessons. First, she had never ventured off on her own again without taking one of her father's walking sticks with her, that she might tap it against the ground and guide herself around potential obstacles. Second, and most importantly, Kitty had learned that she was not nearly as helpless as her father and so many others had come to believe.

She had come to believe that, to have faith in herself despite her handicap for a long time. But now, as she sat against the floor of her cell in the hold aboard *La Venganza*, drawing the thin, wool blanket from her bunk about her shoulders, she found herself utterly without confidence or hope. She huddled there, rocking back and forth, in a state of terror-stricken shock.

I am in terrible trouble now, she thought. God help me, I do not know how I am going to get out of this one.

She felt as helpless as when she had first stumbled on the grounds of Rosneath and realized she was lost; as much on the brink of raw panic now as she had been on that afternoon in her youth. She struggled not to weep, to collect her thoughts and calm herself somehow, but the effort was futile.

Her mind drew her back to a comforting time, the afternoon in which Rafe had examined her eyes, when she had harbored the idiotic and fleeting hope that perhaps his Spanish methods of medicine would be able to conclude something more than English physicians had ever prescribed. When he had been unable to, she had felt foolish for her own childish expectations, and disappointed to yet again realize that the world of darkness that encompassed her would never be broken.

She wept and he held her; Kitty remembered the gentle strength in his arms, the press of his fingers against her, the warmth and fragrance of his skin, the soft tangle of his hair against her cheek. He felt wonderful to her, and she felt sheltered against him as he held her near and stroked his hand against her hair, murmuring softly to her in comfort.

"I am sorry," she said at last, trying to control herself. She leaned back from him, swatting at her tear-stained cheeks with her hands. She sniffled loudly and forced a smile. "It...it was foolish for me to have hoped."

"Do not say that," Rafe said, touching her face, pressing his palm against her cheek. "It is never foolish—only a coward never knows hope, Kitty, and you are likely the most courageous person I have ever met."

She laughed again. "Oh, yes," she said, pleased and embarrassed all at the same time by his words. "I am quite the brave one indeed as I sit here sniveling all over your shirt on account of a diagnosis I have had fourteen years to grow accustomed to..."

His other palm had cradled her opposite cheek and she had heard the soft jangling of the chains binding them—a sound she missed now, because it had meant he was always near to her, just within her reach.

"You are braver for it than I could ever be," he said, his quiet, earnest tone drawing her silent. "Some people

grow bitter and angry for their handicaps, like my brother Cristobal. But rather than try to punish the world for what happened to you, as he has done, Kitty, you found a new place for yourself in it—you did not let your blindness prevent you. You opened the window and crawled outside, and even though you were lost for a time, and frightened, it did not keep you from doing it again.”

“And again,” Kitty remarked, thinking of the countless childhood misadventures spent floundering around the grounds of Rosneath. “And again, and again...” She shook her head, laughing quietly. “I did not have the sense to quit.”

“You did not have the heart to quit,” Rafe told her.

She felt him draw near to her, his breath against her lips, and thought he meant to kiss her. At the time, she had dismissed this idea as readily as she had entertained it; she thought Rafe was in love with Isabel. But his sudden proximity, the soft hush of his voice, the delicate friction as he drew his thumb against her cheek in a glancing caress, it had all stirred a fluttering, pleasant sensation within Kitty, and for that moment, she had wanted him.

“I would never have climbed outside in the first place,” he said at last, instead of kissing her. He leaned back from her; she felt his breath against her no longer. “I would have been too afraid because I had been told not to.”

“You have your own kind of courage, Rafe,” she said, disappointed, but trying to disguise it with a forced note of light cheer. “For a man who claims to know little or nothing about the sea, you captained this ship from Mallorca to England.”

She touched his face. She had memories of how people had looked to her as a child, the physical appearance of facial features and structures, and how each

and all complemented the others. Although she could never glean a mental impression of what someone's appearance might be simply by touch, she had grown to appreciate beauty as she had redefined it from her tactile perspective.

Rafe had a perfectly symmetrical face, with arching cheeks, a strong jawline and tapered chin, a high brow and long, narrow nose. His lips were thin, and he smiled as she touched them, his mouth unfurling beneath her fingertips.

He was the most handsome man she had ever met.

"No, I let Claudio sail this ship from Mallorca to England," he countered with a laugh. He ducked away from her caress, as if it disconcerted him. "At least I possessed that modicum of wits about me—and if I had a touch more, I would simply give my father's ships and estate to him. He could drop me off in Lisbon so that I could make my way north to Fatima and spend the remainder of my days there as a *el mago bendito*, a miracle-worker like Lucio."

Rafe was gone now. Cristobal had told her he was dead, and she had heard enough of his choked cries of inarticulate anguish in La Coruna to believe it was true. He was gone, and Kitty's father was somewhere out in the big, wide, open expanse of the sea, possibly days from rescuing her—or maybe even weeks.

Or maybe he will never come, she thought, hiccuping on her tears, feeling them slide down her face one by one, in rapid succession. *Rafe was wrong. It is foolish to hope. I have been a fool all along—not courageous but a fool, and now Rafe is dead for it. Daddy may be next, and as for me...*

"I am all alone," she whispered. *God have mercy, and I am so very frightened*. She pressed her hand over her mouth to muffle the sounds as she began to weep. She drew her legs up and tucked her forehead against her knees,

shuddering beneath her blanket as sobs wracked her narrow form.

Rafe stood at the stern end of the quarter deck, near the taffrails overlooking the sea. The bottom edge of the sun had just eased out above the horizon, leaving a molton backwash of brilliant color stained against the new morning sky. He held the smooth shaft of his quarterstaff between his hands, his feet settled lightly against the deck floor. He drew in a deep breath and stepped forward, sweeping the left end of the stave around in a sharp, precise arc. Another step, another swing; again and again, Rafe moved, seemingly dancing with the staff, drawing it swiftly, deftly through the air.

The morrow was crisp, the air chilled, but he wore only a lightweight linen shirt with a doublet fastened atop. A coat would have impeded his movements, and he needed full range of motion to loosen his tired, aching limbs and joints, and to reacquaint himself with those quarterstaff techniques he had not employed in some time.

Rafe had been forced to use the stave to defend himself from would-be thieves in Spain on several occasions. Each time, he had walked away from the encounter with his life, for which he was profoundly grateful, and in only one instance had he actually been bested and lost his coin purse. When he had been a boy traveling with Lucio, bandits had never fared as well. Although they often went after Rafe first, perceiving him in his lean, strong youth to be the greater threat, none had ever proven a match for Lucio.

Rafe remembered the first such occasion. A band of three strapping men, one armed with a quarterstaff,

another, a dagger and the other with a pistol had approached them on a narrow, deserted stretch of road in rural Spain. Rafe had been too terrified to even recall any of his tutelage with the stave; one blow from the bandit's staff had knocked the shaft from his hands, and another to the side of his head had left him witless, crumpled against the ground.

He had not fallen immediately unconscious, however, and remembered opening his eyes, watching in dazed amazement as Lucio had soundly dispatched the thieves.

"Give us your money, old man," the man with the pistol had said, leveling the gun at Lucio's face. "Or you shall have a taste of the same we have given your boy."

Lucio said nothing. He simply stepped forward, whipping the left end of his stave about sharply. The iron tip slammed into the barrel of the pistol, battering it from the man's hand before he even had time to react, and sending it flying. Lucio's right hand swung out, bringing the opposite side of the quarterstaff around, smashing into the thief's face. He cried out, his nose shattering with a moist, audible crunch, and he collapsed to the dirt, even as Lucio pivoted to greet the bandit charging him with a dagger. Two swift blows from the staff—one to dislodge the knife from the man's grasp, and the other to plow the wits from his skull—and this one, too, hit the ground. The third man, armed with a staff of his own, had advanced, but within only moments and no more than a dozen exchanged swings, he, too, had fallen.

Rafe remembered Lucio coming to him, kneeling beside him. His mind had been fading at this point, but he knew that the older man must have been terribly disappointed in him; all of his money spent on Rafe's training seemingly wasted. "I...I am sorry, sir..." he had murmured, as Lucio gathered him in his arms, hoisting

him over his shoulder, hefting him as a man might a sack of grain.

“Quiet now, lad,” Lucio had told him, and Rafe knew that the gentle tone he seemed to recall must surely be nothing more than delusion.

He heard Claudio walking across the deck toward him, recognizing the boatswain by his gait even though his back was currently turned in that direction. Again, it momentarily amazed him how much more attention he paid to such things—the sounds of them—now that he had come to know Kitty.

Even thinking of her name brought his heart a heavy ache, and Rafe’s brows furrowed. He swung the stave sharply, imagining that he drove it into Abdul Aziz ben Malik’s face. He had no idea what the man looked like, but it did not matter. His face would be a battered and broken pulp when Rafe was finished with him if he had as much as laid a finger against Kitty.

“What are you doing, Rafe?” Claudio asked.

Rafe turned, drawing the quarterstaff still between his hands. “I am practicing,” he replied, somewhat out of breath with exertion.

“You should not be up like this yet,” Claudio said. “It is too soon and you are too weak. Come back down below.”

“No,” Rafe replied, even though he knew Claudio was right. Now that he was motionless, the adrenaline that had surged through him, invigorating him, began to wane, and he could feel the tremulous, damnable weakness in his limbs. He stumbled slightly, catching himself against the taffrail. Claudio moved to help him, but Rafe glowered at him, giving him pause. “No,” he said again.

He did not want to return to his room. There were too many distractions there; everywhere he looked, he saw reminders of Kitty. It was too painful to think of her too long, to consider what horrors she might be enduring. Rafe wanted to keep topside, on the deck, with his eyes out on the sea.

“Any sign of them this morning?” he asked, turning his gaze south, straining to spy even a fleeting glimpse of *La Venganza* ahead of them. “Have the lookouts reported anything?”

“No,” Claudio said. He stepped toward the younger man, his brows lifted sympathetically. “Rafe, listen to me. If Cristobal did not brail canvas last night, he could have almost a half-day’s lead upon us by now.”

“He brailed his sails,” Rafe said. “You told me every good captain does it—it is a standard precaution. Cristobal may be many things, but he is a good captain and he loves that ship more than anything.”

More than me, he added in his mind, with a momentary sorrow.

“Even if he did, we are still not drawing enough wind to catch up to him,” Claudio said. “I had hoped that by leaving La Coruna as soon as we did, we might have a hope, even with our bowsprit to slow us down. But we lost time last night, and Cristobal is too far ahead of us.”

“No,” Rafe said, shaking his head.

“Even if his lead was only by hours yesterday, it has stretched beyond this by today,” Claudio said quietly, gently. “And continues to grow even now. We do not have the sails to prevent it.”

“Then give us the sails,” Rafe said, his brows narrowed.

“That would tax the bowsprit,” Claudio said. “If she snaps, we will lose the rigging to the foremast—even the

mast itself. Let us hold steady and get to port in Lisbon. Forget catching Cristobal—we know where he is going. We can find *La Venganza* in Lisbon. We—”

“I said give us the rot damn sails, Claudio!” Rafe snapped, drawing the boatswain to a startled, abrupt halt. He brushed past Claudio, storming toward the binnacle. “We are not going to hold steady or forget about anything. Keep our stem pointed south and rig me enough canvas to catch *La Venganza*. I do not care how you do it. Just do it.”

“You could cripple this ship, Rafe,” Claudio said.

Rafe paused in midstride, turning to meet Claudio’s stern gaze with his own. “That is a risk I am willing to take,” he said. “I am the captain of this ship. It is my helm, my rules, and I damn well say to do it. I am not abandoning this—I am not abandoning Kitty. I have done that too often in my life, and it stops here and now. I will not fail Kitty, too.”

He turned on his heel and walked away. He ducked down the companionway ladder and headed for his quarters. He would stow his quarterstaff and shrug on his overcoat. Then he would return topside and hold the helm of his ship.

“Is that what this is about?” Claudio asked, following him down the hallway toward his room. “I have heard you say as much before—Rafe, stop and listen to me.”

His hand closed firmly against Rafe’s sleeve, drawing him to a halt in the corridor. “Do you think you failed your father?” Claudio asked.

Rafe frowned, shrugging himself loose. “I do not think it, Claudio—I know it. This is all because of me, all of it from the start. I am the one who hurt Cristobal. That is why Father began working with the privateers, to help pay for Lucio to come from the mainland and tend to

him. That is why Father sent me away—because it was my fault.”

Claudio stared at him, stricken. “Rafe, Evarado loved you...” he began, his brows lifting as he reached for Rafe.

Rafe did not want his proffered comfort, his empty words of compassion. He drew away from Cristobal, shaking his head. He was still frail from the poison, his mind and body exhausted and weak, and he did not want to confront his memories and feelings for Evarado; his ordinarily stalwart defenses would too readily crumble. “I do not want to talk about my father, Claudio,” he said with a frown, turning for his door again. “Leave me alone and tend to the ship. I—”

“Do not speak to me as if I am nothing more to you than a crewman, Rafe,” Claudio said, his voice edged with anger now as he again caught Rafe’s sleeve. “I have known you since you were in swaddling, and your father long before that.”

“Yes, and you let him send me away!” Rafe snapped, whirling to face the older man. Again, he wrenched himself away from Claudio’s grasp, his brows furrowed deeply. “You never said anything to prevent it because you knew it then and you damn well know it now—I failed Papa!”

At this word, the term he had not used in reference to Evarado since his boyhood so long ago, Rafe felt his resolve completely crack. His voice choked with sudden tears; he felt nearly fifteen years of grief, shame and anger suddenly well upon within him, shuddering through his form. “I failed Papa,” he whispered again, tangling his fingers in his hair. “He sent me away. Lucio asked for me in remittance—he said I was of no use to Papa anymore, and that I would only bring more trouble for him, and he was right.”

Claudio blinked at him. “You heard that, *hijo*?” he whispered, looking pained.

Rafe nodded. “And later that night, I heard Papa weeping in Cristobal’s room. I know he blamed me, and rightly so.”

Claudio stepped toward Rafe, reaching for him. “Oh, Rafe,” he said gently. “Evarado wept because he had just given away his most precious possession.”

Rafe looked at him, bewildered.

“Lucio did not offer to take you in remittance, Rafe,” Claudio said. “He wanted to bring Cristobal back to Madrid with him.” Rafe recoiled, his eyes flown wide in stunned disbelief, and Claudio nodded. “Lucio felt your brother’s injury would leave him unable to help your father, that his life would be ruined for it, and he would always be dependent upon Evarado. He thought it would ease the burden on your father to take Cristobal away, to offer him a proper education, training as a physician in Madrid. He had offered his services to your father at no charge, but Evarado was too proud to accept charity. Lucio had hoped this might be a suitable barter, but again, your father’s pride would not let him accept. He had no coins, no jewels, nothing of worth to offer Lucio...save for the one thing he knew that Lucio would value as greatly as he did.”

Claudio touched Rafe’s face, his palm pressing gently against his cheek. “His first-born son, Rafe. The one thing Lucio could never have of his own—the one thing your father treasured more than any other, and that money could never replace. You, *hijo*.”

Rafe shook his head. “That is not possible,” he said, his voice strained.

“He never blamed you for Cristobal’s leg, Rafe,” Claudio said. “He only ever blamed himself—for that, his

pirating, sending you away, everything. He hated himself for it, Rafe. He never forgave himself.” He smiled gently. “He was proud of you, *hijo*. Lucio would write to him, tell him of your accomplishments, and he would swell with such pride. He felt that Lucio had given you all of the things that he never could have—that you became a much better man than you ever might have had you never left.”

“I...but I thought Cristobal was his favorite,” Rafe said, stricken.

“He had no favorites,” Claudio said. “No father ever loves one son more than any other, Rafe. But Evarado knew Cristobal. He saw which direction Cristobal’s life would head, just as he saw yours. I think he always worried for Cristobal, but never for you. He always trusted in you.”

Rafe said nothing. He stared at Claudio, all of the beliefs that had filled and sustained him for so long seemingly shattered. He stumbled back until his shoulders hit the wall. Evarado had loved him. Evarado had been proud of him; he had sent Rafe away with Lucio, not out of punishment, but because he had been precious to his father.

The strength in his knees waned, and Rafe slid toward the floor, his legs folding beneath him. He sat down hard, his eyes flooded with tears, his throat choked with the strain of trying to suppress them. When Claudio squatted before him, his expression filled with gentle sympathy, he did not need to say another word. Rafe pressed his hand over his face and began to weep. Claudio’s hand, as strong and kind now as it had ever been in Rafe’s youth, hooked against the back of his neck, drawing the younger man into an embrace.

“It is alright,” he said quietly, as Rafe wept against his shoulder. “Hush, now, *hijo*. It is alright.”

When his tears had waned, Rafe rose to his feet, shrugging away from Claudio and struggling pridefully to compose himself. "I...I am sorry, Claudio," he said, clearing his throat loudly. "For my disrespect earlier, and for this—my dismay. I appreciate what you have told me about my father...about everything."

He could not look at Claudio as he spoke. He was ashamed that he had broken so easily, humiliated by his tears. He brushed past the boatswain and headed for his quarters, not wanting any more of the pity he could yet sense in Claudio.

Claudio followed him to the room, but did not cross the threshold behind him. He remained in the doorway, watching wordlessly as Rafe opened his wardrobe and leaned inside, returning the quarterstaff to its customary rear corner.

"We will keep on course," Rafe said. "I want full sails running from the bowsprit, and this ship into the wind, as fast as she can go. Dump her ballast, if you have to."

"Rafe..." Claudio began.

"I am not leaving Kitty, Claudio," Rafe said, his brows furrowed. "You may be right. I may not have failed my father, but I will fail Kitty if I abandon her to that bastard Malik."

"And if you catch Cristobal?" Claudio asked. "If we find *La Venganza*, what then? You are not a pirate, Rafe. No matter your rage or determination, or how rightly each is due, that is not within your heart—and you are charting a course that will see you face two of the most ruthless pirates I have ever known. It takes a cold heart to try and murder one's only brother—and Cristobal has learned all that he knows from Abdul Aziz ben Malik."

Rafe did not face his friend. He stared into the wardrobe for a long moment, the gravity of Claudio's words—the truth within them—settling brutally against his heart. He was a physician, not a pirate. How many times had he insisted that to Kitty?

“Can you stand against that, Rafe?” Claudio said. “Can you save the girl from men like these?”

Rafe closed his eyes. “No,” he said at last, shaking his head. “I can't, Claudio.” He glanced at the boatswain over his shoulder. “But I know someone who can.”

Kitty dreamed of Rafe, and the afternoon in which he had taught her to dance. She imagined standing atop his feet, feeling awkward and self-conscious in both the position and proximity to him. She had felt the most unnerved by the fact that she had liked being so near to him, and had liked the gentle press of his hand against the small of her back, keeping her against him, and the drape of his opposite hand against her own.

He murmured to her in instruction while behind them, the young crewman, Eduardo, strummed the guitar. Rafe would sometimes tap his hand lightly against her back, as if unconsciously marking time, his feet guiding her in rhythmic step. “And forward...” he said softly, tilting his head down slightly to speak near her ear. “And left once...”

She stumbled, missing the cue and stepping off his foot as she moved to the side. Rafe laughed, but she grew flustered, aggravated that she kept misstepping in such fashion. “I meant my left,” Rafe said.

“Well, you should have said ‘my left,’ then,” Kitty said with a frown. “Or rather, ‘your left.’ Or...” She

uttered an exasperated little exclamation. “Just bloody well forget it! I will never take to this anyway.”

He stepped against her again, slipping his hand about her waist and easing her hips against his. It was an innocent enough gesture, meant simply to draw her back into the dance, but it had warmed something immediately within Kitty, drawing her to breathless silence.

Rafe took her cuffed hand against his own. “Try once more,” he said quietly, the tone of his voice lending itself to a smile. He shook his arm slightly, making the chains binding them rattle. “Have you someplace else to be today?”

She had laughed at this, helpless but to be charmed by him. She stepped against his feet again, acutely aware of every measure of her body that suddenly pressed once more against his, from her thighs to her hips, to the swells of her breasts against his chest.

“And one...two...three...” Rafe murmured, and he began to step again, sweeping her in tow. “Forward once...and now *my* left.”

Kitty laughed again. That had become their little jest of the day, a joke shared between them.

I love you, Rafe, she thought in her dream, as she felt him against her, his fingers laced through her own. But even in sleep, she knew the dream was impossible, that it could never be again; that Rafe was gone forever. Even in sleep, her throat choked with tears and her eyes burned insistently, and in her dream, she clutched his hand fiercely, relishing in his warmth, his strength, his *presence*, unwilling to face the brutal truth; refusing to let him go.

She jerked awake, her eyes flown wide, her breath tangled, at the slamming report of a door flying wide somewhere. She heard the thunder of heavy footfalls—several men in a hurry, from the

sounds—rushing down the companionway toward the hold. She heard the overlapping, fervent chatter of voices in Spanish, loudest and foremost among them being Cristobal's. He sounded sharp and angry, and more than slightly rattled, as if he teetered on the brink of outright panic.

"What is it?" Kitty asked, sitting up. She was disoriented and confused, a part of her mind still pleasantly distracted by the dream of lying next to Rafe. "What has happened?"

She heard the rattle of the cell gate unlocking, the whine of its hinges as it opened. "Get up," Cristobal said, shuffling quickly toward her and grabbing her roughly by the elbow. He jerked at her, forcing her to her feet, and she stumbled as he hauled her toward the gate.

"What is it?" she asked, frightened.

He paused, drawing her to a halt, then shoved her back against the wall. He pressed himself so near, she could smell brandy lightly on his breath, and feel the warm moisture of his harried exhalation against her mouth. "Someone is coming," he hissed, the fear, so readily apparent in his voice, making the downy hairs along the nape of her neck stir uneasily. "My watch caught sight of a ship against the horizon at dusk last evening. We ran the night through with all sails. We should have outpaced them—no man would have done the same overnight unless he meant to keep with us. But this morning they remain—closer still."

His hand crushed against her arm, even as her heart trilled with sudden, desperate hope. "I think it is your father's ship," Cristobal said, uttering aloud the words that Kitty had not yet dared to think. "I think the Hawk of the High Seas has found us at last."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The ship had already drifted deeply into a fog bank by the time Cristobal hauled Kitty topside. Whatever wind had drawn them into it had apparently faded, and the ship held relatively motionless and aimlessly adrift beneath them. Kitty could feel the heavy, still moisture of the fog, thick in the air around her; she could smell it like something distant and stale, and hear it dampening sounds around them, as thoroughly and effectively as a woolen cowl draped about her head.

“Ransom!” Cristobal shrieked, keeping one hand closed fiercely against Kitty’s hair, and wielding his pistol with the other, shoving it against her head as he dragged her toward the stern of the ship, beyond the mizzen mast. “I have your daughter, Ransom! Come and claim her, if you dare!”

“You are mad,” Kitty hissed, sucking in a sharp, hurting breath as he jerked against her hair. “He will not follow you blindly into a fog! He will skirt around it and come at you headlong from the other side!”

“He will follow me,” Cristobal said, sounding wholly convinced. “For his daughter, he would follow me through the very gates of Hell itself.” He turned his face away, calling out over the taffrail again. “Ransom! Come and claim her!”

Kitty frowned, trying vainly to pull away from him. “You are mad!” she cried again. “How can it be my father? We were laid up in La Coruna—he could not have known that! He is surely past us now and in Lisbon, waiting for you! He—!”

“He is there!” Cristobal snapped, wrenching against her hair, forcing a pained cry from her. “The man can track a ship through a driving gale or on a moonless night! He reads the sea as a Benedictine monk tends to his Bible! He knows her every current and undulation, every trough and furrow as some men only know their wives!”

“Those are stories!” Kitty cried. “Those are just stories—he is a man, the same as you!”

“He is the devil!” Cristobal exclaimed. “He is the devil and you are his whore-spawn! He cursed my father, just like you bewitched my brother! He has made a pact with Hell, and by God and my breath, I will send him there to claim it—just like I delivered Rafe to claim his!”

He dragged her forward, shoving her forcefully against the taffrail. Kitty gulped for breath as the railing slammed into her midriff, and then gasped in breathless terror as Cristobal shoved her recklessly forward, forcing her to bend over the railing. She could hear the sea beneath her somewhere distant and far below; the slap of water against the hull with nothing between it and her but Cristobal’s hand and the open air.

“I will kill her, Ransom!” he screamed into the fog. “I will scatter her brains to the seas, you son of a bitch, now *show yourself!*”

Kitty heard a sudden, peculiar sound rising above the slow, distinctive churn of the ocean in *La Venganza*’s wake. The ship had drawn almost to a complete standstill, but all at once, she heard a hissing sound—the surface of the sea sliced by the sharp line of a prow. She heard a slap

of water, and then, from behind her, Cristobal's crew erupted into startled panic, their voices fluttering and flying in a sudden, frightened din.

A ship cut out of the fog, somehow making the most of precious little wind and charting a course so viciously precise, that she drew sharply and abruptly alongside *La Venganza*, darting like a phantom from the thick, unyielding drape of the fog.

Kitty heard the carving of its wake against the bowline, heard the sudden creaking of its joists and riggings as it drew near, and even had a moment where she felt the fine spray cutting from its keel against her face before Cristobal jerked her back, pulling her roughly against him, pushing the gun to her temple.

"Daddy!" Kitty screamed, unable to prevent herself.

"Fire the cannons—!" Cristobal began to shriek, but it was too late. From the moment the ship had pulled alongside of them, her guns had been at the ready, and Kitty cried out in fright at the thunderous, rolling din of twenty-six cannons launching volatile rounds in simultaneous succession. The artillery ripped into *La Venganza's* portside hull, rocking the ship to starboard on her keel and sending Cristobal and Kitty staggering across the quarterdeck. A round from one of the smaller-gauge, topside cannons smashed into the taffrail to Kitty's immediate left. She and Cristobal floundered away from the point of impact as a large section of the railing exploded into splinters, leaving the rest of its balustrade and beams cracked and broken. Kitty smelled the sudden, acrid stink of gunfire, felt it sting her eyes and choke her nose and throat, and she gulped for helpless breath.

"Fire the cannons!" Cristobal screamed, his voice strained and hoarse. "Fire them now—!"

There was more, but his shriek was obliterated beneath the new thunder of cannonfire, as the guns

aboard the *La Venganza* left unaffected by the assault returned fire toward the port. Again, the ship rocked beneath them, pummeled by the force, and when Kitty tried to take advantage of the moment and scramble away from Cristobal, he caught her fast and furious by the hair, wrenching her backward and making her cry out.

The English sailors began to board *La Venganza*, launching grappling lines from the decks and yards and swinging aboard, and dropping planks between the neighboring decks to surge forward en masse. Kitty could tell by the sudden sounds of battle from the main deck below them, the clattering of sword against sword, the overlapping grunts and cries of men engaged, the clapping and popping of pistol fire punctuating throughout.

“Ready the cannons again!” Cristobal shrieked, although surely it was useless; surely no one could hear him above such a din. “Ready the cannons and fire into them again! I said fire—!”

His voice abruptly faded, growing strained and then choked into sudden, unexpected silence. He danced clumsily backward, pulling Kitty smartly against his chest, immediately in front of him, as if he meant to use her as a shield. The pistol, which had wavered in its aim as he had tried vainly to shout out orders to his crew, pressed with new fervency against her brow, drawing her to immediate, frightened immobility.

“Oh, God,” Cristobal whispered against her ear, his voice small and frightened, like that of a little boy. “Swooping down off a rope from the boom...his coat flapping about...*Madre de Dios*, just like with Papa...!”

There was more, but he offered it in breathless, whimpering Spanish, and then Kitty heard a sudden sound—a heavy thud like something landed abruptly against the quarterdeck before them. She heard a rustling

of fabric, impossible over the din of battle, but still it remained; the flap of woolen folds, a familiar sound she knew from countless homecomings to Rosneath Manor on the Wight. *The sound an overcoat makes—the woolen greatcoat of a Naval officer*, she thought, her heart trilling in sudden, urgent measure.

“Daddy...!” she cried, holding out her hands. “Daddy!”

“Keep your distance, Ransom!” Cristobal shrieked, his voice filled with bright, shrill panic. He backpedaled, hauling Kitty in tow, keeping the pistol leveled fiercely against her. “Do not come any closer, you bastard, or I will kill her! I will kill her—do you hear me?”

John Ransom said nothing, but Kitty heard his footsteps as he approached, his gait smooth, following Cristobal’s, his weight settling easily, confidently against the floor beams of the deck. She heard another sound as he walked, an unfamiliar whistling, like something swinging sharply through the air.

“Throw it down!” Cristobal cried out, shoving the pistol barrel against Kitty’s head in crude emphasis. “Throw down your staff and hold your hands up, empty and in surrender! Do it, Ransom! Do it now!”

Kitty gasped, her eyes flown wide in bewilderment. *Throw down your staff*, Cristobal had cried, but John Ransom had never wielded a quarterstaff in his life. He was an expert swordsman, and an unrivaled shot with a pistol. He had known no need for any other weapon but these in his Navy career.

My father would never carry such a thing, she had told Rafe. *A quarterstaff is a poor man’s weapon, he says—that a proper gentleman prefers his saber or pistol.*

It is a poor man’s weapon, Rafe had concurred, and she remembered how easily he had used the staff to catch her

on the beach at the Wight. No matter in which direction she had cut and run, Rafe had swung the shaft about to give her gentle, but firm pause. *That does not make them ineffective...Lucio and I carried them to defend ourselves against any would-be bandits we might meet on our travels.*

“Throw down your staff!” Cristobal roared, and Kitty choked for breath, her eyes flown wide.

It cannot be, she thought. It is impossible. I heard him dying—his choked cries of pain. I heard him, and besides, he could never captain a ship to catch us. He is a physician, not a pirate!

It was impossible, and yet when she heard the whip of wind as a quarterstaff swung sharply, demonstratively against a well-trained palm, she heard something else—something faint and indistinctive, and undoubtedly lost to Cristobal’s unfamiliar ear. Kitty heard it, however, the muffled rattle of metal against metal, chain links tucked beneath the broad panel of a greatcoat cuff to keep them hidden from view. Eight chain links, to be exact—fettered to two manacles, one of which stood open and empty.

“Rafe!” she gasped.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Rafe spun the quarterstaff against his hand and approached his brother. Cristobal had not recognized him yet; in the dark blue, English naval coat their father had stowed in the wardrobe aboard *El Verdad*, with a tricorne pulled low on his brow, Rafe knew that he must have struck the same, terrifying figure swooping aboard the quarterdeck as John Ransom had the day he had killed their father.

Cristobal backpedaled, his eyes flown wide, a pistol shoved against Kitty's temple. Kitty had cried out to her father when he had first leapt aboard, but in the fleeting moments since, Rafe had watched swift changes cross her face, apparent in her wide, green eyes. *She knows*, he thought. *Somehow, she realizes.*

He was weak yet. The act of swinging aboard *La Venganza* had left him nearly reeling, and he struggled to keep his feet beneath him, his gait steady and certain. If he wavered, if even for one flickering, fleeting moment, Cristobal sensed his weakness—his deception—it was over. Kitty was dead. *By my life*, Rafe thought, letting the quarterstaff complete its swift, sharp arc, coming to a comfortable, ready rest between his hands. *I will not let that happen.*

“I will kill her!” Cristobal screeched, jerking Kitty closer to him. “Drop your staff now, or I will see her dead, Ransom! By God and all that is holy, I will!”

Despite this shrill threat, he moved the pistol’s aim, training it in wavering, panicked fashion toward Rafe. It was more fortune than Rafe could have hoped for, and he seized upon it, shifting the quarterstaff in his grasp. “Kitty,” he said loudly, knowing that while it might take Cristobal a startled moment to recognize his voice, she would know it immediately. “Kitty—*my left*.”

He hoped that she would remember; on the afternoon aboard *El Verdad* when he had taught her to dance, it had been a sort of joke between them, one he hoped remained in her mind. Apparently, it did, because as soon as the words were out of his mouth, she moved, cutting to the side, shoving her elbow back into Cristobal’s midriff for good measure to loosen his grasp against her hair.

Cristobal *whoofed* for breath at the impact, caught off-guard, and Kitty staggered away from him, stumbling against the broken taffrail. Rafe did not grant him even a fleeting moment for recovery. He planted the end of the quarterstaff against the deck floor and used it as a fulcrum as he launched himself at his brother. He swung his legs up and out, punting Cristobal in the face with one boot heel, driving him back, and kicking the pistol loose of his grasp with the other. The gun went flying, skittering across the deck toward the mizzen mast, and Cristobal crashed onto his ass, stunned from the blow.

Rafe lost his hat as his feet dropped to the ground again, but it no longer mattered. He turned, abandoning Cristobal and darting to Kitty. “Come with me,” he said, catching her by the hand. He would have to lead her down to the main deck, where planks had been lowered to bridge the narrow margin of space separating *El*

Verdad and *La Venganza*. The crewmen were fighting furiously here, and he would likely need to forge a path for them through the fracas.

Kitty, however, was too stunned to immediately move. At his touch, his beckon, she darted against him, throwing her arms around his neck in a sudden stranglehold, staggering him. "Rafe!" she cried, her voice choked and muffled against the lapel of his greatcoat. "Rafe...I...I cannot...! *How?*"

She lifted her face, loosening her grasp around his neck long enough to seize his face between her hands and kiss him deeply, fiercely. "Oh, God, you are alive," she gasped, her voice tremulous with disbelief. "I thought you were dead. He...he told me..."

She kissed him again. There was no time for this, and he knew it, but for a moment, forgot himself, losing himself in her kiss. He moaned softly against her mouth, tangling his fingers in her auburn curls. "Kitty," he breathed. "Kitty, we...we have to go..."

He kissed her again, one last, fierce time and then stepped back, catching her by the hand. "We have to go," he said again, and she nodded. "We have to move."

They ran together for the stairs leading down to the main deck, but Rafe skittered to an abrupt halt, with Kitty shied behind him, as three of Cristobal's brawny crewman rushed up to the quarterdeck. The men may not have recognized Rafe's face, but they recognized the blue greatcoat of an Englishman, and they spread out, each with swords in hand, squaring off against Rafe.

"What is it?" Kitty whispered in breathless fright, clutching at Rafe's coat sleeve. She could hear the footsteps as the men flanked them; her face darted toward each scuffling sound, her eyes flown wide.

“Wait here for me,” Rafe said to her, stepping forward and gently dislodging himself from her grasp. He heard her frightened intake of breath in protest, but did not hesitate. He moved toward the men, drawing the quarterstaff to the ready between his hands.

Two of the men charged Rafe at once, swords in hand. One swung his blade and Rafe blocked the blow with the length of his stave, kicking the sailor mightily in the belly to drive him back. He swung the quarterstaff toward the right, battering aside the other’s proffered sword thrust. He hooked his right arm forward, smashing the stave into the man’s jaw and sending him staggering back. When both reeled but refused to fall, Rafe again thrust the staff against the deck floor and swung his legs up, kicking each in turn squarely in the chin, toppling them.

He turned to the crewmen remaining, and this time the man recognized his face. The sailor shrank back, his eyes enormous with sudden horror, and his sword dropped from his hand, clattering to the deck. “*Madre de Dios!*” he whispered, crossing himself over and over with a shaking hand. “*Madre de Dios habe misericordia! Visito un aparición!*” *Mother of God have mercy! I see a ghost!*

Rafe did not need to take another step toward him; the crewman whirled and rushed back down the stairs toward the main deck, spilling ass over elbows in his frightened, frantic haste. “*Es un aparición!*” he shrieked in shocked, breathless terror. *It is a ghost!*

“Rafe, behind you—!” Kitty cried out in sharp warning. Rafe heard the same heavy, rapid footsteps behind him that had alarmed her and started to turn, startled. Cristobal plowed into him, knocking him off of his feet and sending him crashing to the deck.

Cristobal landed heavily atop him, crushing the breath from Rafe, and smashing against the bruised ribs

caused by his brutal, repeated kicks in La Coruna. Rafe twisted beneath his brother's weight, crying out hoarsely in pain, and Cristobal paused, straddling Rafe's waist, his fist drawn back to punch him. Rafe watched as realization at last occurred to his brother, as Cristobal saw his face finally and in full. His eyes flew wide, his pallor draining abruptly ashen.

"Madre de Dios!" he whispered. "It...it is not possible!"

Rafe bucked his hips violently, sending new pain spearing through his injured ribs, but forcing Cristobal off balance, sending him crashing sideways to the floor. Rafe rolled, getting his knees beneath him and scrambling to his feet. He reached for his fallen quarterstaff, but just as his fingers settled against the shaft, Cristobal kicked it away from his reach. Rafe watched the stave skitter across the deck, smack against the broken taffrail and then disappear overboard between the missing sections of shattering railing.

"I...I saw you die," Cristobal seethed, limping to his feet. Blood poured from his nose, smeared against his lips and teeth from where Rafe had kicked him in the face. He turned his head, spitting blood against the ground, and his brows furrowed deeply. "I saw you die!" he screamed at Rafe.

He launched himself at Rafe, his voice dissolving into furious, inarticulate howls. Weaponless, Rafe sidestepped him, waiting until Cristobal was almost immediately upon him and then gracefully pivoting, dancing out of his path. Cristobal stumbled, caught by surprise, and then wheeled about to face him again, his face twisted with murderous rage. He jerked a dagger loose from his belt and shoved it forward, pointing the tip at Rafe's face.

“I do not know how you survived Isabel’s poison, brother,” he hissed, his tone mocking and harsh at the word *brother*. “But I promise that you will not survive me.”

“Cristobal, please...” Rafe said, holding out his hands. He did not want to fight his brother. Despite everything that had happened, he still had some fragile hope that he could reason with Cristobal, that somehow, he might salvage some scrap of love left between them.

Cristobal ignored his plea, rushing him once more. Again, Rafe danced back from his approach, and again, Cristobal floundered past him. This time, he caught himself against the taffrail. He dropped the dagger overboard at the impact and scuttled back in wide-eyed alarm as the splintered beams yielded at his weight. Just as he jerked away, the section of railing upon which he’d just leaned broke loose of its moorings and fell into the sea. Cristobal whirled toward Rafe, baring his fists.

“Cristobal, stop—” Rafe began, but his brother plowed at him yet again, nearly crazed with fury now.

Rafe sidestepped from his path. Cristobal stumbled, toppling to his knees, catching himself against the base of the mizzen mast. His shoulders shuddered and he heaved for breath.

“Cristobal, please!” Rafe cried. “Please, whatever has happened, we can put it behind us! Just stop this, I beg you! Come home with me, please! Just come home with me, and we can—”

Cristobal uttered a hoarse, piercing shriek, and wheeled about to face Rafe. He had found his fallen pistol on the floor by the mast and had taken it in hand again. This time, as he charged Rafe, he swung the pistol out ahead of him, aiming wildly for Rafe’s head. Before his finger could fully close against the trigger, Rafe grabbed his wrist, wrenching the barrel of the gun skyward. The

two brothers danced clumsily together, grappling and struggling to claim the pistol.

“I will see you dead!” Cristobal screamed, ramming his knee up into Rafe’s crotch, doubling him over in sudden, breathless agony. Rafe immediately stopped fighting and collapsed to his knees, gagging for air, clutching at his midriff. Cristobal shoved the barrel of the gun against Rafe’s ear, and Rafe was helpless to prevent him; he could not even summon enough breath to plead.

“I will see you—” Cristobal began, and then Kitty launched herself at him from behind, pouncing against his back, locking her arms around his neck.

“Leave him alone!” she cried, as Cristobal staggered backward and began shambling about in wild, clumsy circles. He struck at her with the pistol, clubbing her in the head, and tried desperately with his free hand to push, pull or pummel her from his back.

“Get off of me, you bloody damn bitch!” he screamed, and then he stumbled against the remaining length of taffrail. It immediately yielded beneath his weight, cracking and splintering, and Cristobal and Kitty both cried out, their voices overlapping as the railing gave way, sending them tumbling overboard.

Rafe watched in horror as both pitched over the stern and disappeared. “Kitty!” he shrieked, summoning some inner strength and resolve, forcing himself to his feet despite the crippling pain that wracked his groin. “Kitty! No!”

He staggered to the broken taffrail. The railing had not fallen completely—not yet. It held to the deck by three slender, strained banisters. Rafe could hear the taxed wood groaning in protest; Kitty clung to the far end of the dangling section of railing, her hands wrapped tightly about the broken wood, her eyes wide with terror. Cristobal had caught her by the ankle and hung there, his

feet pedaling wildly over the dark expanse of fog and sea beneath them.

“Rafe!” Kitty screamed. “Rafe! Help me!”

Rafe threw himself against the deck, leaning out as far as he could over the broken stern, stretching his arms out. “Kitty!” he cried. It was no use; she was too far to reach, and he did not dare ask her to try, not with her supporting both Cristobal’s weight and her own.

“Rafe, help me!” she cried. “I...I am slipping! I cannot hold on!”

The banisters creaked; one snapped in half, sending the broken section of railing to which Kitty desperately clung dropping another terrifying measure closer to the sea. Kitty wailed at this, and below her, Cristobal screamed.

Rafe looked around desperately for something, anything he could use to reach them, but there was nothing. He shifted his weight, and as he did, he felt the open manacle he had tried to hide beneath the wide cuff of his greatcoat sleeve slip free. The chains rattled as the cuff dropped down toward Kitty, and Rafe’s eyes widened.

“Kitty!” he cried, leaning out over the brink again. He inched forward, as far as he dared, holding his hand out to her, lowering the cuff toward her hand. He shook his arm mightily to make the chains rattle so that she could hear them and realize what—and where—it was. “Kitty, reach out with one hand! Take hold of the manacle cuff!”

“I cannot!” she screamed, her voice shrill with fright. “Rafe, please! I cannot!”

“Yes, you can,” he said, and he struggled to sound calm, to force the panic from his tone. She was drawing much of hers from him; he had to calm her enough to try

and reason with her. "It will only be for the moment, and it is right here in front of you. Can you hear it? It is right here—just turn loose with one hand and reach for it."

He watched her fingers slip against the railing as she thought about letting go, but then her fright got the better of her, and she retightened her grip, blanching her knuckles white with the force of her effort. "I cannot!"

Another rail snapped in twain, and again she mewled as the railing dropped another treacherous measure overboard. There was no time left; Rafe could hear the final beam groaning in strained protest. At any moment, it would yield.

"Kitty, I will not let you fall," he said. "With all that I have, I swear to you—I will not. Trust me. Please, Kitty."

She turned her face up to the sound of his voice. She hiccupped for frightened breath, but nodded, blinking against her tears. "A-alright," she said. He shook the chains again to guide her, and she opened her left hand. Her face twisted as her right suddenly bore the tremendous strain of her weight, combined with Cristobal's, and then she reached up, groping wildly, seizing the manacle cuff in hand. Her fingers wrapped fiercely about it, and then she turned loose of the railing in full and clasping both hands about the dangling manacle.

Rafe felt the full and immediate pull of her weight, compounded by Cristobal's, wrench against his arm, threatening to haul him overboard. He reached out blindly with his right hand, pawing the open air until he hooked a section of railing nearby that had yet to collapse. He felt it tremble beneath his desperate grasp, fragile and uncertain, but it held for the moment.

"Kitty...!" he grunted, struggling unsuccessfully to pull against her, to draw her up to the deck. His tenuous

grasp on the railing did not award him enough leverage. "Use your feet...kick against the ship...!"

"What?" Kitty cried. He leaned forward, looking down into her upturned, frightened face.

"Can you kick against the ship?" he said. "Kick the stern windows, the molding, anything! I...I cannot pull you up, not alone!" He looked past her, toward Cristobal. "Cristobal, for the love of God! Help us, or we will all fall!"

Cristobal met his gaze, his face blood-smeared, his brows still furrowed. Somehow, he found it within himself to smile, a cold and cruel hook to his mouth, and Rafe felt his breath draw still in sudden, absolute horror.

"Good," Cristobal seethed. He clung to Kitty's leg with one hand, but had managed to keep a desperate grasp on his pistol with the other. He raised this hand now, leveling the barrel of the gun at Rafe's face. "At least I will take the both of you with me."

His hand slipped from Kitty's ankle and his finger folded against the trigger, just as from Rafe's right, the railing he had caught hold of splintered in his grasp. Rafe had a fleeting second to watch Cristobal fall away from them, plummeting toward the fog-draped sea below, and then he fell forward as the gun fired, the barrel of the pistol seeming to explode in a sudden, stinking cloud of smoke and sparks. Kitty screamed, her shrill voice rising above the resounding thunder of the gunshot, and Rafe felt tremendous pain sear through his right hand as the pellet—meant for his head—punched instead through the delta where his thumb and wrist met, and punched outward again through nearly the dead-center of his hand.

He screamed as he fell, knowing the molten agony in his hand would be short-lived; he would either drown or die of hyperthermia in the dark Atlantic depths. *I am sorry,*

Kitty, he thought as he fell. *Oh, God, I am so sorry. I failed you anyway. I—*

He felt a strong hand catch him smartly by the back of his coat, snatching him abruptly backwards. More hands fell against him as several of his crewmen—Claudio first and foremost among them—hailed him back up onto the deck. He shuddered as he felt floorboards once more beneath his knees, and struggled to shove away from the men. “Kitty...!” he gasped. “Someone...please...!”

He heard her cry out in hoarse relief, the chains between them slackening as she, too, was pulled to safety. He sat up and she fell against him, her arms flung about him. She cried out his name, bursting into tears, and he clung to her, clutching her near.

“Are you hurt?” she said, her hands fluttering against his face in panic. “I heard a gunshot! Are you hurt?”

“I am alright,” he whispered, pulling her against him, kissing her. He looked up at Claudio, into the smiling face of the man who had just saved his life again. “I am alright,” he said, closing his eyes and holding her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Rafe's hand felt as if he had thrust it deeply into a well-tended bank of coals. He sat against the side of his bed aboard *El Verdad* and struggled not to cry out as Claudio meticulously followed his instructions, bathing and dressing the gruesome wounds.

The entry gunshot had nearly severed his thumb, leaving it attached by only scraps of sinew and exposing a broad, bloody gouge of raw meat at the juncture of his wrist. The exit wound looked less severe, but Rafe suspected it had meted forth the worst of the damage, severing tendons and ligaments, crippling at least the last three fingers, if not his forefinger as well. He could not move them much to be certain; every attempt left him breathless with shocking pain. Between the two wounds, he knew he would be damn lucky if fever did not settle in and ultimately cost him the hand altogether—if not his life; at best, he might hope to retain at least a modicum of mobility and function.

Either way, it did not matter. His hand was ruined, and so was his life as a physician. He knew it, and Claudio apparently knew it, too. Rafe could tell by the gentle sympathy in his eyes, the abashed way he dared not look Rafe in the face for too long.

Claudio paused as Rafe hitched in a whimpering breath, despite his best efforts not to. He had not wanted to alarm Claudio, or upset Kitty any further, as she sat within ready ear shot on the bench by the stern windows. “I am sorry, *hijo*,” Claudio said softly. He had bathed Rafe’s hand with an herbal preparation at Rafe’s direction, and had begun to carefully stitch the gaping maw beneath Rafe’s right thumb.

“It is fairly well like darning a sock,” Rafe had tried to offer, as Claudio had looked apprehensive and somewhat intimidated by the notion.

“It is alright, Claudio,” Rafe said, his voice ragged and somewhat breathless. He nodded once, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Kitty remained unaware of his distress. “Do...do not stop. You are doing wonderfully.” He forced a weak smile. “You should be a surgeon.”

There were some significant blood vessels underlying the immediate area where he had been shot, and Rafe had bled profusely. He had known that direct pressure alone would not suffice, and Claudio and the crew had watched in helpless, horrified fascination as he had drawn the strap of a belt around his arm, cinching it tightly between his teeth above the crook of his elbow to staunch the blood flow. He felt weary and lightheaded yet for the loss, and it took all of his resolve not to swoon with each swell of pain as Claudio prodded against the edges of his wounds with a needle.

“I will stop awhile,” Claudio said. “Let you rest. You need—”

“No.” Rafe shook his head. “It...it must be immediately done, Claudio. As soon as possible, or not at all.” Again, he tried to smile. “It is alright.”

In the end, he had been unable to bear the persistent pain. By the time Claudio had closed the wounds as best as he was able, Rafe had slumped sideways against the

bed, his mind reeling. He was dimly aware of Claudio settling him against his back, drawing a blanket about him, and when he tried to murmur in protest, to insist that he was fine, the older man stroked his hand gently against his face. "Sleep, Rafe," he said.

He had dozed fitfully until Kitty came to him. He stirred as he felt her slight weight settle against the bed, and the delicate friction as her fingertips danced against his chest. His shirt had been soaked in blood, and he had removed it, sleeping in nothing but his breeches. She touched him, her fingers trailing against the muscles of his abdomen, lighting against the bruised places where Cristobal had pummeled him.

He opened his eyes and found her sitting beside him. She had been wearing the tattered remnants of a nightgown upon her rescue, but she had removed it before coming to him, and sat before him, nude and breathtaking. He reached for her with his uninjured hand, the one still cuffed, and drew her face down to his own.

He kissed her, opening his mouth and pressing his tongue against hers, drawing her in deeply. He forgot his pain momentarily as heat stirred within his groin. Kitty leaned over him, kissing him, and shifted her weight as he eased her against him. Her leg slipped over his hips and she straddled him, pressing against his mounting arousal and stirring him even more. He reached between them, pushing the blankets away, fumbling with the ties of his breeches. She kissed his mouth, then let her lips trail along the line of his jaw toward his throat. She helped him unfetter his waistcord, and he raised his hips slightly as she pushed the breeches down, releasing the hardened length of him from their tight confines.

He moved his right hand without thinking; it lay beneath layers of swaddling beside him, and he raised his arm, wanting to touch her. The effort sent a spear of pain

shuddering through him and he gasped sharply. Kitty kissed him, catching his whimper of pain against her tongue, and when she lowered her hips against him, drawing her into her warm depths, he whimpered anew, the pain forgotten.

He cupped his uninjured hand against her breast as she began to move against him, undulating her hips and marking a gentle but insistent rhythm. He moaned, moving with her, matching her pace as she quickened against him. He stroked her body, sliding his hand from her breast to her waist, to the curve of her hip and the length of her thigh, and upward again, at last splaying his fingers against the firm swell of her buttock, clutching at her as she drove him to a powerful, shuddering climax.

She lay beside him afterwards, tucked against him, her cheek resting against his shoulder. He closed his eyes, exhausted, holding her near to him and breathing in the soft, sweet fragrance of her hair. *"Te amo,"* he whispered to her, kissing her pate. *"Con todo de mi corazón."* *I love you with all of my heart.*

They did not sleep long. Claudio burst into the room, startling them awake as the door flew open wide. Kitty jerked the covers up to cover herself as she yelped in frightened surprise, and Rafe grimaced, sucking in a sharp, hurting breath as he inadvertently pressed both hands against the mattress to sit up.

"Rafe, you must come," Claudio exclaimed, breathless and wide-eyed, his expression alarmed. Rafe had left him in charge of *El Verdad*; his son, Eduardo, had taken over duties at the helm of *La Venganza*, and the two ships sailed side by side along the coast of Portugal.

“What?” Rafe asked, drawing his bound, injured hand against his belly, cradling it as he swung his legs around out of bed. He was still weak and groggy, his mind clouded with pain. “What...what is it, Claudio?”

“The fog has burned off,” Claudio said, either not minding Rafe’s nudity, or not caring about it, as the younger man stood, drawing one of the sheets around his hips. “It is gone now, and we can see to move well again.”

Rafe blinked at him, bewildered, as the boatswain reached into his wardrobe, pulling out two shirts. He tossed them to Rafe. “Get dressed, *hijo*,” he said, sparing a polite nod toward Kitty. “Both of you. There is a ship behind us, coming in fast, flying the banners of England.”

Kitty sat up straight at this, her breath drawing in a sharp, startled gasp. “Daddy...!” she whispered.

Claudio nodded, his expression grim. “We are about to have company,” he said.

“I want you to take the crew—all of them—aboard *La Venganza* and make south for Lisbon,” Rafe told Claudio. “Furl all of the sails on *El Verdad* before you go. I want her dead in the water so that Ransom will come after me while the rest of you escape.”

“No,” Claudio said, shaking his head. “Absolutely not, Rafe. I am not leaving you alone to face—”

“I am not asking you, Claudio,” Rafe said, his voice abrupt and sharp, drawing the boatswain to immediate silence. Rafe met the older man’s gaze evenly. “I am telling you. It is my ship, my helm—my rules.”

Claudio glanced sideways at Kitty. They were speaking in Spanish, and she did not understand their exchange, but he lowered his tone nonetheless as he cut his gaze back to Rafe. "You do not want to face this alone, *hijo*," he said.

"It is mine to face, Claudio," Rafe said, and when Claudio drew in breath to protest, Rafe pressed his fingertips against his mouth. "You reminded me once that I am the captain of this ship, and with Cristobal gone, that makes me in charge of *La Venganza*'s helm, too. The crew is my responsibility; my heart and mind have to lie in what is best for them. That is what you told me."

Again, Claudio opened his mouth to object, but this time, Rafe kept him silent with only the uplift of his brows, the implore in his eyes. "Call all of the sails furled," he said. "Take the crew and board *La Venganza*. Leave me here with Kitty and head south. That is what is best, Claudio. Those are my orders."

"He will kill you, Rafe," Claudio whispered, visibly stricken. "If not here, on the main deck, then he will deliver you to England to be hanged."

"It does not matter," Rafe said, shaking his head.

"Does not matter?" Claudio said, his eyes widening. "Rafe, listen to me. You—"

"It is Ransom's right to do with me as he wishes," Rafe said. "I stole his daughter. Whatever my reasons—no matter the cause, that remains. I will tell him what happened. I will tell him why. And if he decides to kill me, I will not cower or beg. There is nothing left for me anyway."

Claudio blinked at him, stricken. "I am ruined," Rafe said, leaning toward him, holding his swaddling-bound hand up between them. "I am ruined," he said again, his

voice suddenly choked and strained. "There is nothing left for me, Claudio—nothing except my responsibility to this crew. Now do as I say."

He walked toward the stern windows, unable to bear the wounded bewilderment in Claudio's face. "*Hijo...*" Claudio began gently.

"Do as I say, damn it!" Rafe snapped over his shoulder. Claudio said nothing for a long moment, and then Rafe heard him murmur softly to Kitty. He then turned, sighing heavily, and walked toward the chamber door.

"Yes, sir," he said quietly, his voice hardened. "As you wish, *el Capitan*."

"He is sending us away."

Claudio's hushed voice fell almost directly against Kitty's ear as the older man leaned across the bed, just before taking his leave.

"He thinks he is ruined now. He means to risk it all, to stand alone against your father—and your father will see him dead for it, child," Claudio whispered. "There is no one left to reason with him, none to protect him but you."

She listened to his footsteps as he walked away, and heard the door shut quietly in his wake. She sat against the bed, with the coverlets drawn up in her hand to cover herself, and listened for any sounds from Rafe. He was quiet; he had moved toward the stern windows and remained there in silence. She had not understood the conversation he had just held with Claudio, but it had ended sharply, that much she knew.

“What are you doing, Rafe?” she whispered.

“I am standing at the windows,” he replied, his tone flat and distracted. Whatever had troubled Claudio then, whatever had infused such despair in his voice had affected Rafe as well, then.

“No, I mean, what are you doing?” Kitty said, easing her feet to the floor and standing. She drew the blankets about herself and followed the direction of his voice. “Claudio said you are sending them away? Who?”

“The crew,” Rafe said. “I am sending the crew south aboard *La Venganza*. I am having them furl all of our sails, and bring *El Verdad* dead in the water.”

“Why?” she asked, even though she knew.

“So that your father will come after me,” Rafe said. “And leave my crew alone.”

Kitty shook her head, stepping toward him, holding out her hand until she brushed against his shoulder. “Rafe, go with them,” she said. “My father is on his way. Leave me alone on the ship. He will find me and I will tell him what happened. I will tell him the truth—that you have saved me. He will not follow you then. He will leave you alone. He...”

Rafe turned, pressing his hand against her face. “I cannot, Kitty,” he whispered, leaning over to kiss her gently.

She felt her heart tremble with sudden dismay. Either he did not understand what he was risking by remaining aboard with her, or he did not care, and it frightened her no matter which. “Rafe, if my father finds you, he...he...”

“He will kill me, I know,” Rafe said. “Or deliver me to London to stand trial for piracy. It is alright.”

She blinked at his words, stricken and shocked. “It is not alright,” she said. “They hang pirates in London, Rafe—from the Tyburn tree. I do not know if I can stop him, reason with him, not with you standing there in front of him and on hand, but if you are gone—if you go with Claudio and the crew on *La Venganza*, he will listen to me. I know he will.” She clutched at his sleeve, pleading. “I know he will.”

“Kitty, I must answer for what I have done,” Rafe said quietly. “I cannot run, not from this. I chose it freely. Cristobal did not force me to it. Now it is over. It is finished and done, and all I have left is to answer for it.”

That is not all you have left! she wanted to cry at him. *You have your life—and as long as you have that, I have hope, Rafe! Hope to be with you!*

“Why?” she asked. She knew why he was doing this; Claudio had fairly well told her, but the realization of it shocked and angered her. Rafe tried to walk past her, and she frowned, reaching after him, grasping his sleeve again. “Why, Rafe?” she said again, more sharply this time. “Because of your hand? Claudio told me you think you are ruined—is that because of your hand?”

“Kitty, you do not understand—” he began, and the furrow between her brows deepened.

“I understand perfectly, Rafe,” she said. “I understand that when you told me it was brave of me not to grow bitter or angry for my handicap, like Cristobal—to find a new place in the world in spite of my blindness—that you offered nothing but hollow words and false sentiments.”

“Kitty...” he said, sounding wounded. She felt his fingers brush her cheek and she swatted his hand away, angry now.

“Was it easier for you to fake sympathy for the maimed when you were not faced with such a prospect yourself, Rafe? Tell me, would you rather meet the gallows than try to figure out how to make your way in the world with only your left hand to guide you?”

“My hands were my life’s work!” he cried at her, his voice ragged and pained. “Both of them—they were more than limbs, more than conveniences, Kitty! I am a physician. My life is built around the abilities and functions of my hands. Without them, I am nothing! I...I am...”

“What?” Kitty challenged, balling her hands into fists. “Say it, Rafe! Say it—you are ruined! You are as good as blind, and no better off than I am! Say it!” She swung at him furiously, striking him, making him stumble back from her. “You are more to me than your hands, Rafe! My God, I would gladly surrender even the chance to see again if it would mean staying with you. After everything that has happened, you still do not know that? You cannot see how much I love you?”

She had never said it aloud before, not to him, and at this blunt and earnest admittance, he fell still. “You truly are as good as blind, Rafe,” she said, her voice strained with sudden tears. Her blankets had fallen to the floor, and she realized she stood before him, naked and a fool. She gasped softly, struggling not to weep as she crouched, her hands outstretched, fumbling for the fallen sheets. “Go on, then,” she told him. “Face my father. Swing from the gallows, Rafe. May God help your crippled heart, and never mind your hand.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Rafe felt seized with leaden fright as Ransom's ship drew alongside *El Verdad's* portside. He could see its name—*H.M.S. Precipice*—emblazoned in bright gold lettering against its polished hull, and that is exactly what he felt as though he stood poised against—a precipice overlooking an abrupt and lengthy plummet.

He and Kitty were alone on the ship, with the flags lowered in surrender and *La Venganza* gone, nearly to the horizon. Kitty had said no more to him after her furious rebuke, and he had not tried to coax anything further from her.

It is better this way, he thought as he watched Ransom and his crew come aboard, crossing broad measures of planks to bridge the main decks to one another. *It is better that she hates me. It will only spare her pain later.*

She loved him. Her words echoed in his mind, cleaving into his heart. *You cannot see how much I love you?*

She loved him, and he loved her, too, with a helpless, poignant, wrenching despair that left him breathless, aching, bewildered and forlorn. He had no hope of making her understand. There was nothing for them, not without his hands. If he could depend at least upon his limbs, then he might have fled with Claudio and the

others; he might have taken Kitty with them aboard *La Venganza* and built a life together with her someplace new and far away, where Ransom would never find them. Rafe could have made it possible; a physician could find work anywhere. But without his hands...

Without my hands, I am nothing, he thought. *I have nothing to give her, no means to build a life, not for me, and certainly not for her. Cristobal would have fared just as well to shoot me in the head. At least it would have been quicker that way—by far more merciful.*

Even though Rafe's ships had surrendered, the English sailors were accompanied by armed marines, soldiers in bright red justicoats and tricornes, wielding rifles in their hands. Ransom strode boldly across the deck, striking such a magnificent figure that Rafe stumbled backward, shied and breathless with awe.

Ransom's uniform was immaculate and the gold details of his greatcoat flashed in the midday sun. His tricorne sat low on his long brow, draping his sharply etched face in shadows, cleaving his angular features with light and darkness. He was flanked by his officers on either side, a contingent of armed marines immediately behind them. His stride was long and swift and unflinchingly self-assured. He marched with one hand closed in a tight fist, and the other curled about the grip of a brass-adorned pistol.

"Daddy!" Kitty cried, understandably eager to hear his footsteps, to recognize him. Her mouth unfurled in a radiant grin, her cheeks flushed with excited color. She broke away from Rafe's side, and he made no move to prevent or restrain her. She was gone to him now; it was finally over, and he had lost her.

It is better this way, he told himself again.

"Daddy!" Kitty ventured forward, her hands outstretched, and Rafe watched John Ransom's hardened

exterior soften, his brows lifting, the stern line of his mouth spreading in a smile of abject, joyous relief.

“Kitten!” he gasped as he rushed toward her, catching her in his arms and crushing her against him. His tricorne tumbled from his head as he lifted her off her feet in a fierce embrace, and Rafe saw from whom she had inherited her golden-red curls.

Kitty clung to him, and Rafe’s heart ached to hear her weeping. John set her feet on the ground again, but did not release her from his embrace. He clutched at her, his broad shoulders shuddering. “My girl,” he whispered, kissing her hair. “My kitten.”

John looked over Kitty’s shoulder, his gaze finding Rafe, impaling him. Rafe could not move, pinned by that stern, unflinching gaze, and when John broke away from Kitty, marching toward him, his brows furrowed again, his smile faded in full, Rafe hung his head, ashamed.

“Who is the captain here?” John asked, swinging the pistol up in his hand as he approached. He shoved the barrel against Rafe’s temple, his thumb drawing the doghead back with an audible click. “I said who is the captain of this ship?” he seethed.

“Daddy, no!” Kitty pleaded, turning and following her father, reaching for him. “Daddy, please, wait—!”

“I am, sir,” Rafe said, his shoulders hunched, his entire body rigid as he awaited the booming report of the pistol, the momentary pain before his brains scattered against the deck planks.

“Where is your crew?” Ransom asked. “There was a second ship with you. Where have they gone?”

“South, sir,” Rafe replied. “With every man aboard, sir, save me. You do not need them. It is me you want—me who should be made to answer.”

“Daddy, please!” Kitty begged, groping at John’s arm now. “Please do not hurt him! He saved me, Daddy! He has kept me safe all of this while!”

One glance told Rafe that her pleas had no discernable effect on John Ransom. He glared at the younger man, his brows furrowed so deeply, the blue measures of his eyes were nearly hidden beneath them. The pistol remained against Rafe’s brow, shoved firmly into his flesh.

“What is your name, boy?” John asked him.

“Rafe Serrano Beltran, sir.”

John reached into his coat pocket without lowering or loosening his aim. He pulled out a scrap of parchment and flapped it in front of Rafe’s face. It was the ransom note Cristobal had left pinned with a dagger to Kitty’s bed at the Isle of Wight, telling Ransom to sail for Lisbon if he hoped for her safe return.

“You left this for me?” John asked. “Why?”

“Yes, sir,” Rafe said. He looked up, meeting John’s gaze. “My father is Evarado Serrano Pelayo.” At this mention, John’s eyes grew wide in start. “Please, sir. I can explain. Everything and in full.”

John looked dubious, and still somewhat surprised. “Daddy, listen to him,” Kitty said, hooking her fingers against his sleeve and at last, drawing his gaze. “Please,” she whispered, her eyes flooding with tears. “Please.”

John’s expression softened again at her plea. The pistol slipped away from Rafe’s head. “Alright,” he said quietly, but his gaze was still sharp and stern toward the younger man. “I am listening.”

“Did you touch her?” John asked. He had ordered Rafe delivered to his quarters aboard the *Precipice*. Here, he had stood alone with the younger man, his expression twisted with murderous outrage. He had not yet allowed Rafe as much as a breath or word in edgewise and Rafe knew that, at least in Ransom’s eyes, he had already been tried and found guilty of any countless number of grievous charges.

“Did you touch my daughter?” John seethed again. “Because I promise if you did, if your hands have been upon her—or any other part of you—then I shall draw my blade against those most offending parts and rend them henceforth from your form. Do you understand me, boy?”

“I did not touch her, sir,” Rafe said. He did not lie to spare himself; he lied to protect Kitty, to grant her those virtues once more, at least in the telling, that he had taken from her in form.

John stood next to him, so close that Rafe could feel his breath against his cheek. His face was still flushed, his jaw tightened and tense with fury, his hands balled tightly into fists. Rafe kept his shoulders hunched, his eyes on the narrow margin of rug visible between his feet. His throat had constricted and his heart hammered in an anxious cadence beneath his shirt breast.

“I am ordering your ship secured,” John told him. “And once that is done, we are following your fellows. If your father thinks that I will be impressed by his sacrifice—leaving his son in his stead—he is sorely mistaken. I am going to follow him. I am going to capture him. And when I am finished, the two of you will throttle together from the gallows, side by side. You can mark me at—”

“My father is not aboard that ship, sir,” Rafe said, drawing John’s voice to a surprised halt. Rafe looked up

from his shoes, meeting the older man's gaze for the first time. Kitty had her father's eyes, the same striking hue of sea-foam green. Ransom's eyes were as cool as marble in Rafe's regard, as flat and emotionless as if he no more than watched a beetle caught against his clothing.

"Please, sir," Rafe said. "My father is not aboard that ship. He is dead, sir."

At this, a hint of emotion passed across Ransom's stoic gaze, a fleeting softening.

"This was not his campaign, sir," Rafe said. "It was mine, undertaken with my brother, sir, in vengeance for that loss." He looked down at the ground again. "And it is over now, sir. I give you my word that it is."

John's hand closed firmly against his chin, wrenching his gaze from the floor and forcing him to look up. "And what makes you think I lend one measure of merit to your word, boy?"

"You have no reason to, sir," Rafe said, sucking in a hurting, hissing breath as John's grasp tightened against his jaw. "But, please, I offer it to you just the same. My father was many things, sir, but a liar was not among them. He never demanded anything otherwise from me."

John shoved Rafe away from him, sending him stumbling back a step. "I shot your father in self-defense," he said.

Rafe nodded. "Yes, sir. I know."

"He drew upon me," John said. "I nearly died myself—and have a scar on my breast that pains me yet, thanks to your father's aim."

Rafe nodded again. "I know, sir."

"There was no malice in it, boy. It is the way of things. Your father knew the risks he took in his pursuits."

“Yes, sir.”

John had obviously expected an argument from Rafe, some manner of protest—anything but this quiet, humble resignation. He stood there for a moment, nearly sputtering in frustrated bewilderment and then he reached forward, catching hold of the loose manacle dangling from Rafe’s arm and giving it a demonstrative shake. “Why is this chain around your wrist?”

Rafe looked down at the offending cuff. John Ransom had not killed him yet, but here was the portion of the story in which the man would most likely shoot him where he planted his feet unless he treaded very carefully and selected his words even more so. “Your daughter put it there, sir.”

John blinked in surprise. “My daughter?”

Rafe nodded. “Yes, sir, during an attempt to escape. She found these among my things and tried to clap them on me, to hold me hostage and see my ship turned for England again.”

John’s brows raised. “My daughter?”

“She drove her knee into my groin, too, sir. Took the wind right out of me.”

“My daughter?” John asked again, and Rafe could not decide if he looked more startled or pleased. “She told me outside that you saved her—you kept her safe all of this while.”

“If I may say, sir, she proved quite capable of that herself,” Rafe said.

John’s expression shifted again, hardening once more, as if Rafe had offered some untoward comment, instead of a compliment. “What happened to your hand?”

“My brother shot me,” Rafe replied, lowering his gaze unhappily to the floor.

He felt John's fingertips hook beneath the shelf of his chin, turning his face to him again. "Why would he do that?"

"Because I wanted to let Kitty go, sir," Rafe said. "I wanted to let all of this go. My heart was not in it any longer. It...it has never been in it from the first." *My heart was with your daughter*, he wanted to say, but choked back the words. *And there it remains, sir, helplessly bound.*

"My brother is dead, sir," Rafe told John. "He shot me and fell overboard, lost at sea. You have no need to worry or fear any longer. I do not want revenge, and there is no one left to seek it in my stead."

Ransom caught his right wrist, drawing Rafe's bandaged hand up. "Take off the bandages," he said.

He did not believe Rafe, not in full, not yet. Rafe did not blame him; he had offered the man a story that surely sounded ridiculous to his consideration. For all Ransom knew, Kitty could have bitten him to fend off a rape attempt, or worse, he might have feigned injury altogether to play upon John's sympathies. He began to unfetter the swaddling wrapped around his wounds. When at last, the thin fabric drew away from the tender, newly stitched injuries, he gasped softly at the startling pain, and stumbled slightly.

"Mother of God," John murmured in aghast, catching Rafe by the wrist, his grasp less rough this time. Even though sutured, the wounds had lost none of their gruesome impact. Blood still seeped from between the carefully fashioned stitches, and there was no mistaking or denying the inevitable, crippling potential the injuries would surely bear. "Sit against the bed, boy. What have you done to yourself? I will summon my shipboard physician. He—"

“I am a physician, sir,” Rafe said, startling John anew. “I have overseen my own treatment, and I...I would as soon trust no other.”

He folded his legs beneath him, dropping to his knees. He hung his head, the crown of his hair brushing against Ransom’s legs. “Please let the other ship go, sir. It is filled with good men, none of whom committed any crime more grievous than to follow the orders of their captain. They will cause no more trouble to you, sir. I have left them in the charge of a good man, sir—a good Christian, sir, and an even better captain—and he will see to that. I give you my word that he will.”

Jerking and tugging against the bandages, no matter how gingerly, had stoked pain anew in his hand, sending it in throbbing, wretched waves up his arm and through his entire form. His head swam and he groaned softly.

“I beg you,” he whispered. “Have mercy on my crew. Let them go. Whatever you want, whatever punishment England deems just for my offenses, I will take without complaint. Please, sir. I beg you.”

Kitty did not get to tell Rafe good-bye. Her father had let him go—an act of mercy that had astonished Kitty. As part of the arrangement the two men had struck, in exchange for letting him and his crew go free, Rafe was never to let his ships pass north of the Bay of Biscay’s edge again, or past the Straits of Gibraltar. Rafe’s pirating days, as short-lived as they were, had come to an end.

She did not know what would become of Rafe now. He had likely counted on Ransom’s arrest, as Kitty had. He had been so seized with despair at the crippling of his hand, the abrupt and unexpected end to his livelihood as

a physician, that he had neither sought nor cared for any other recourse. She could not imagine his despondency at being set free; that he might look beyond his injuries to still find some potential in himself, and in life, had not occurred to him.

Kitty had been whisked aboard the *Precipice* during Rafe's tense negotiations with John, and it was not until later—when the ship weighed anchor, reset her sails and was underway once again—that she learned of the rest of their agreement; that Rafe would never see Kitty again. He would not as much as send her a letter.

"It is for the best, Kitten," John told her as evening settled upon them. She sat before the stern windows in his quarters, feeling strangled with the urge to weep, her heart leaden with dismay.

Rafe agreed to this, she thought. He let me go. Of course, she could not blame him, no matter her own selfish heartache. No matter his own personal despair, he had also been acting in what he felt was the best interest of his crew. He had put their lives before his own, both in his words and actions. He had proven himself a true ship's captain.

They had left him alone aboard the abandoned *El Verdad*. Because *La Venganza* had remained in view along the horizon all the while—as Claudio had apparently proven unwilling to desert Rafe completely—John had ordered his men to restore the Spanish flags that had been lowered in surrender.

"His crew will see them, and watch us leave," John had told Kitty. "They will know what it means—that we have released him—and they will come for him."

Kitty could not blame Rafe for his despair over his hand, and worried now as to what would become of him. How many times had she herself held out futile hope that her sight might restore, only to resign herself to the

inevitability of her handicap in the end? She had enjoyed nearly her lifetime in full to grow accustomed to her blindness, to find her place in the world in spite of it, and with the courage for which Rafe had commended her. He had suffered only a matter of hours with such realization. It was only reasonable that he had been despondent. She had spoken too harshly to him aboard *El Verdad*, judged him too severely.

And now I will never have the chance to apologize to him, she thought, her throat tightened and strained, her eyes stinging with tears. *Now I cannot comfort him, or show him that his life is not ruined. Claudio told me I was the only one left to protect him—and I failed.*

“I know you have been through a lot, and you believe you should be grateful to Serrano Beltran for it,” John said gently. “But you are safe now, and homeward bound, and with the new morrow, I think you will feel better.”

She had not told him all of her misadventures with Rafe, including having been manacled to his side for a time. Because Rafe had walked away from his encounter with John unscathed, she assumed he had not told him, either. She realized that for once, she understood why John was often so reluctant to tell her about his sea voyages, no matter how persistently she might press him for details. He would tell her about good things, pleasant moments, but no others, not even after he had been shot. It was a habit that had once annoyed her, but she found herself softened by his reasons now. Some things were best left unsaid, if only to save loved ones from undue concern.

She heard the rustle of John’s clothes as he knelt before her, and struggled to smile for him as he pressed his hand against her face. “When we are home once more at Rosneath, I will have a proper party for you,” he said.

"I will hire musicians from London, buy you the most exquisite gowns money can afford—whatever you wish. We can invite the entire island, if you like."

Her smile was forced for his benefit. "I imagine Michael Urry would be delighted to attend," he said. "I could use the occasion to discuss your proper courtship with him. Perhaps we might use it to announce an engagement."

The thought of Michael Urry's mouth and hands touching those places once kissed and caressed by Rafe left her stomach in an aching, forlorn knot. "Yes," she said, her voice strained. "Yes, perhaps."

John had ordered a bath drawn for her, and had presented her with a lace-trimmed dress, complete with crinolines and underpinnings, everything a proper lady needed. She had bathed with lavender-scented soaps, brushed her hair and bundled it against the nape of her neck with tortoise-shell combs. She was a proper English girl again from head to toe, all pristine and pure, at least as far as her father was concerned.

"Are you hungry?" John asked. "I have told my officers I will not be joining them this evening, that you and I would partake our dinner here in—"

"Oh, no, Daddy, I am fine," Kitty said. "You go ahead and go. I...I do not have much of an appetite, and I think I will retire early to bed."

It is for the best this way, she thought. Rafe is a wealthy man now. He has his inheritance from his father, the estate in Mallorca, both of the ships. He might have been a physician, but there is pirate in him still the same—he proved that today, beyond any measure or doubt.

She tried not to think about Rafe turning to drink to comfort himself in her absence, that he would find no more purpose in life now than what could be measured

from a decanter. These thoughts and fears crept repeatedly to mind, and each time, she would shake her head and force them away. Rafe would be alright, she tried to tell herself. *He will be alright without me.*

John was quiet for a long moment, and she could feel the weight of his gentle gaze as he studied her. At last, he sighed, brushing the cuff of his fingers against her cheek. "Alright, Kitten," he murmured, rising to his feet. "Do you need me to put out a dressing gown...?"

"No, I will be fine," she replied. Because he was worried for her, and she realized it plainly, she smiled again, more genuine this time. "I am blind, not incapable," she said, managing a hint of her customary pluck to put him more at ease.

John chuckled as he leaned down to kiss her. "I know, Kitty," he said. "I love you."

Kitty looked up, closing her eyes as his lips brushed against the corner of her mouth. "I love you, too, Daddy."

CHAPTER TWENTY

“How long has it been since he last had a movement?” Rafe asked as he pressed his hand against the belly of the eight-year-old boy before him. He was on his knees, with his medicinal box open beside him, and Claudio’s youngest son, Felipe, standing nearby.

“Three days, sir,” the boy’s mother, a waif of a woman named Carla, replied. Rafe had suspected as much, given the taut firmness of the child’s abdomen to his touch, and the obvious tenderness his palpating caused.

Rafe smiled, meeting the boy’s gaze. “It will be alright,” he told the boy, speaking in Portuguese. He glanced over his shoulder at Felipe and spoke again, this time in Spanish. “In the left side, the rear compartment, there are some herb packets already...yes, thank you.”

He smiled again as Felipe found one of the herbal treatments, wrapped in a thin square of cheesecloth. Six months earlier, Rafe would have been able to sift through the box and find the preparation himself, not to mention fold his fingers against it, holding it fast. But his right hand was lame now, his fingers loosely but permanently curled toward his palm, his thumb useless and flaccid. He could not scratch his own ass with it, much less

accomplish any feats of dexterity, and had come to rely upon Felipe in place of the maimed appendage.

He nodded once in encouragement as Felipe handed the packet to Carla. "Tell her what it is for," he said gently. "In Portuguese, lad. She does not speak Castilian."

The two dialects were similar in many ways, and yet strikingly different in others, and Felipe had been having a difficult time wrapping his tongue around the native language of Fatima, where they had been staying. Forced into conversing in it, however, the boy had shown remarkable improvement over the last several weeks, and Rafe listened, pleased, as Felipe offered Carla halting but grammatically correct instructions for using the herbs to prepare a medicinal tea.

Felipe had done more than take the place of Rafe's crippled hand. Thanks to the boy, who now served as his apprentice, Rafe had been able to continue his work as a physician. Claudio had insisted, and there had been nothing Rafe could say, no protest he could offer that would convince his friend otherwise.

"It is the least I can do, *hijo*," Claudio had told him, and Rafe made a regular and committed point to remind Felipe that his father loved him; that he had been sent away to help Rafe because Claudio had known he could depend on the boy.

Rafe had given *La Venganza* and *El Verdad* the Claudio. He had accepted no objection or argument on the matter. He had also given Evarado's large, spacious home to the newly appointed captain, and divided up a grand majority of his father's money among the crewmen of his ships—even those who had followed Cristobal's command. He did his best to harbor no ill will toward any of them, and asked of them only in return that they bury a casket for Cristobal next to Evarado, and that they say Cristobal had died with honor at sea. He wanted the truth

to be buried along with the casket, that in death, Cristobal might find the peace that had so eluded him in life.

The manacle had at last been forced from his wrist by a skilled blacksmith in Santa Ponca and several hours spent in the wretched, stinking heat of a muggy smithy. Rafe had kept the cuffs, even though it was ridiculous—if not daft—to do so. He carried them in his traveling bag, as a matter of fact, a fond reminder of Kitty, and sometimes, when it would not pain his heart too terribly to do so, he would take them out and close his eyes. He would rattle them slightly, listening to the disharmonic melody of the chains, and he would lose himself, if only for a little while, in bittersweet memories.

His hand ached him without end, a nearly constant reminder of what had happened to him, and what his foolish pride had cost him. The wounds had healed, but the pain remained; some nights, he would wake up drenched in sweat, his hand burning, his fingers jerking in knotted, agonizing spasms. He would clutch his hand against his stomach and curl onto his side, clenching his teeth to keep from crying out in pain and alarming Felipe.

The villagers of Fatima remembered Rafe from his past visits, both with and without Lucio, and although they had been curious about his decision to stay among them, they were grateful nonetheless. Already, several women in the village had come to pay call at his rented room, bringing eligible daughters in tow for his consideration. He had politely and gently refused them all, making for fervent gossip at the village well. Surely he was a widower, a beloved bride lost to him, his heart broken; there could be no other accounting for such a handsome young man in his relative prime, to show such disinterest.

Kitty may not have been his bride, but she was lost to him still the same, and his heart remained broken for

it. A day did not pass when he did not call her fondly to his mind, or when such recollection left him feeling forlorn and distraught. On more than one occasion, he had considered finding consolation in wine, in drinking himself to a numb stupor, as had once been his habit. He had not succumbed, no matter how insistent the urge. He had promised Kitty, and even if she never knew it, if they both lived out their remaining days with her wholly unaware, he meant to abide by his word to her.

Felipe finished offering instructions and glanced hesitantly at Rafe, his brows raised. Rafe smiled and nodded. "*Muy bueno*, Felipe," he told the boy. *Very good*.

He rose to his feet, tousling his young patient's hair fondly. "You be good for your mother, and drink your medicine without complaint."

The boy looked up at him, all wide and adulating eyes. "Yes, sir," he said, nodding. Most villages the size of Fatima hosted trained physicians once every few years or so, if even then. Being one who lived among them had elevated Rafe to nearly heroic status to his neighbors.

Carla stepped toward him while Felipe collected their things, closing up the medicine box. "*Obrigado*," she said in Portuguese, clutching Rafe's good hand, her mouth spread in a smile. *Thank you*.

She paid Rafe in fresh fish; called *espada*, they resembled eels, and Rafe had earned more of them in remittance for his services than he had in coins the past few months. He neither minded nor complained. He smiled, accepting the fish as graciously as if she had just offered him a prized coffer of gold, and when he left, Carla blushed in his wake, charmed and flustered by the striking young physician.

"Now we will have something to go with the bread and eggs for supper," Felipe said glumly as they walked together along the narrow street toward the inn where

they shared a room. They had been making the rounds of Fatima and several neighboring villages since well before sunrise. Now it was nearly dusk, and they had only several cakes of flatbread, three goose eggs, a skin of goat's milk and the fish to show for their efforts. Having had *espada* boiled, fried or braised almost every night without fail for weeks, Felipe had lost any lingering enthusiasm he might have harbored for the fish.

Rafe laughed. "You did well today," he said. "I am proud of you." He forgot himself and reached out, brushing his maimed hand against the boy's shoulder. It sent a shiver of pain through his arm, lancing toward his shoulder, and Rafe paused, sucking in a sharp, startled breath, cursing himself.

Felipe paused, as well, and looked up at Rafe, his brown eyes round with worry. Rafe smiled; the pain faded as quickly as it had shot through him. "It is nothing," he said. "Just a twinge. Come on. It is nearly dark."

After supper, Rafe went and stood outside in the shadow-draped courtyard at the inn. It was a mild evening, comfortable and cool, and he enjoyed the refreshing press of the breeze against him as it fluttered through the thin linen of his shirt. He had written a long letter to Claudio before stepping out of the room. He had described all of Felipe's recent accomplishments, and praised the boy for how readily and quickly he was learning his trade. He had wondered then—as he did now, while looking skyward and admiring the pale glow of the swollen, gibbous moon—if Lucio had ever harbored such fond thoughts toward him as he had written to Evarado.

Like Evarado, Lucio had been a man of closely guarded emotions. On his deathbed, he had called Rafe a

good boy, and now, in retrospect, Rafe could remember plenty of occasions in which Lucio had been kind to him, nearly fatherly in fashion. As a youth, Rafe had always been too filled with insecurity and self-doubt to see what seemed apparent to him now—that, like Evarado, Lucio had loved him; that he, too, had been proud of Rafe.

“Rafe?”

Felipe’s hesitant voice startled him from distant thoughts and pleasant recollections, and he turned to find the boy in the doorway to their room, silhouetted at the threshold by the dim, golden lamplight from within.

“I thought you were sleeping, lad,” Rafe said with a smile. “I am sorry. I did not wake you, did I?”

“No, sir,” the boy said, shaking his head, and as Rafe drew near, he could see that Felipe was wide-eyed, his expression apprehensive and somewhat afraid.

“What is it, Felipe?” Rafe asked, concerned.

Felipe glanced over his shoulder, into the room. “There is someone at the door, sir,” he said quietly. “Someone asking for you. A woman.”

The villagers knew better than to disturb him at the inn unless it was some matter of extreme urgency. Rafe never failed to make himself available to them during the daytime, but barring emergencies, had insisted on maintaining this modicum of privacy. For the most part, his wishes were observed.

“Who?” Rafe asked, slipping past Felipe and crossing the room to the main door. He wondered if it was Carla; if her boy had suffered some sort of reaction to the herbal remedy he had prescribed. “Did she say what she wanted?”

“She said she was looking for *el mago bendito*,” Felipe said, drawing Rafe to an abrupt halt, his left hand

extended, outstretched for the door knob. “A blessed magician, sir. A miracle worker, she said.”

Rafe had never told Felipe that his own teacher, Lucio, had once been called this. It was a title never extended by the people of Fatima, whose gratefulness for healing intervention had been more practical than mystic. No one would have known to look for Rafe in Fatima by that name. *No one*, he thought. *Except...*

“She speaks funny, sir,” Felipe said. “Her Spanish is *muy malo*—very bad, like my Portuguese. Like she has only just learned it.”

Rafe felt the hairs along the back of his neck stir all at once against the point where he had caught his shoulder-length locks back in a haphazard tail. *It cannot be.*

“I think she is English,” Felipe said.

It cannot be! Rafe thought, and he could not breathe. He opened the door and staggered against the doorframe, his eyes flown wide. “Kitty!” he gasped.

She smiled at him, her auburn hair piled loosely atop her head, spilling about her face in wayward ringlets. She was dressed in a floral-print dress trimmed in lace, the sort a woman wore a corset beneath to cinch her waist to tantalizingly miniscule proportions, and thrust her breasts together and upward in equally provocative fashion. She held a man’s walking stick in her hands, and as she directed her sea-green eyes at the sound of his voice, however feeble it had been in the utterance, he watched blush bloom lightly in her cheeks.

“I see you decided to climb out the window after all,” she said, and it took him a moment to realize what she meant—the story of her own youth, and how she had overcome her fear of blindness by sneaking out of her father’s manor house alone. She had stripped him of his

breath, his senses, and his casual recollect of his own bloody name.

“I...yes,” he said, looking down momentarily at his crippled hand. “Yes, I suppose I did. Someone rather wise once reminded me to have courage, and not let my injuries make me bitter or angry.”

The color in her cheeks blossomed all the more deeply, and her smile widened. “I am glad for that,” she said. “As I have need of a physician tonight.”

He shook his head once, struggling to force coherence back into his brain. “How...?” he asked, finding his voice. “How did you find me?”

“You told me once that you would come here, if you had half a head of sense,” she replied. “You said you would give the ships to Claudio and move to Fatima. It took me awhile to arrange for correspondence with Claudio in Mallorca to find out for sure. I have never held much confidence in which half of sense your head possessed.”

He blinked at her, and the lovely measure of her smile widened mischievously.

“But I...you...” he stammered helplessly. “I promised your father...”

“There was never any agreement as to whether or not I could write to Claudio, or if he, in turn, could write to me,” Kitty said, hoisting her chin somewhat defiantly. “You and my father need to learn how to negotiate more thoroughly.”

After another moment spent with him simply sputtering, she laughed. “Are you going to invite me inside?”

He blinked, shaking his head again. “What? Yes. Yes, of course.” He sidestepped to allow her access. “Please come in.”

She walked past him, leaving a delicate fragrance of lavender trailing in her wake. It nearly stripped the strength from his legs; he closed his eyes, inhaling the sweet scent deeply.

He watched her tap the walking stick back and forth in front of her to guide her passage into the unfamiliar room. He glanced toward Felipe, who sat on his bed, watching Kitty—or more specifically, the wondrous swell of her bosom straining against the confines of her dress. When the boy met his gaze momentarily, Rafe cut his eyes at the still-open door in mute directive: *Get hence*.

The boy grinned broadly and scampered to his feet, fully understanding the unspoken message. He darted past Kitty, mumbling farewells to her in Spanish, and then ducked outside. Rafe closed the door behind him, and then closed the distance between himself and Kitty. Already, his groin was stoked with urgent heat; already, he could feel himself hardening beneath his breeches. He caught her waist and turned her about, pressing her back against the wall. He immediately kissed her, delving his tongue deeply into her mouth, and letting his uninjured hand fall firmly against her breast.

“I love you, Rafe,” Kitty moaned softly, twining her fingers in his hair, pulling him fiercely against her. She gasped, leaning her head back as he kissed her throat, her ear, his hand moving in sweeping, heavy circles against her breast. “I love you,” she said again.

Madre de Dios, I could never tire of hearing that, he thought, and he smiled, lifting his head to look up at her. “I love you, too,” he whispered.

He kissed her again, meaning to take her in his arms and pull her onto the bed with him. He wanted to shove her skirts aside and take her suddenly, sweetly, and then it occurred to him that this was impossible; no matter how wondrous or vivid it seemed, it could not be real. Surely

he was dreaming—some marvelous yet cruel invention of his mind. There was no way Kitty could be in Fatima; no way in the bloody wide world her father would have let her out of his sight long enough.

Her father! At the thought of John Ransom, Rafe's blood ran frigid, his throat constricting, his pallor abruptly draining. He had promised John—given his sworn oath—that he would never see Kitty again; never contact her, never draw near to her. He had told John that Kitty's virtues remained intact, that he had never violated her, but whether or not John had believed him, Rafe did not know. Whatever his assurances, they had not been convincing enough to keep John from forcing that promise from Rafe; on some level, he must have suspected the truth, whether he had wanted to admit it or not.

"Kitty," Rafe whispered, stricken. If this was real, and she was there, then John Ransom would be fast upon her heels—and this time, Rafe doubted he would show any mercy, much less benefit of the doubt, when he shoved his pistol against Rafe's head. "Kitty, how did you get here? Where is your father?"

"He is here, at the inn," Kitty replied, and Rafe choked for breath, feeling as though she had just punted him in the groin. "We have taken a room of our own, and he would like you to join us for supper. Felipe, too, of course."

Rafe did not speak; he could not. He gasped for breath, his eyes flown wide, and Kitty laughed. "Did you think I bloody well walked here all by myself from England, Rafe?" she asked, grinning broadly. "I am blind, in case you have not noticed. There would have been quite the feat."

She laughed again at his shock, and pressed her hand against his face. "It is alright," she said, smiling, leaning

forward to kiss him. "I have had many occasions to speak with my father at both some length and in depth these past months, and while he may not like it, I have brought him around to my way of thinking."

"Your way...?" Rafe asked.

"I love you, Rafe Serrano Beltran," Kitty said, her smile softening, growing tender. Her eyes filled with tears, glistening in the lamplight. "I want to be with you—for the rest of my days, wherever you are, whatever you choose to do. I want to be with you."

He blinked at her, moved. "Kitty," he said, reaching up and caressing her face.

"Tell me you want that, too," she breathed. "Please say that you do, Rafe, or...or else I have just made the greatest fool of myself, and will likely never live long enough to even begin to make amends by—"

"I want that, too," he said, pressing his mouth against hers in a sudden kiss that cut her voice abruptly short. "I want that, too," he said again, laughing against her mouth. "I want that, too—*Madre de Dios*, Kitty, I want that more than anything."

Her fingers tangled in his hair again, clutching him near, and again, he felt himself stirring, his arousal mounting with sudden, straining insistence. She felt it, too, and moved her hands to touch his waist, to pull him against her. "Kitty," he murmured, as she continued to kiss him, tugging against him.

She pulled him in stumbling tow until they staggered against the side of the bed, and then she sat against the mattress. She hooked her hands against the waistband of his breeches and pulled him down toward her. "Kitty, wait," he said, even as he settled against her, as the frame of her skirt creaked and groaned beneath his weight and her legs parted beneath her skirts to envelop her thighs.

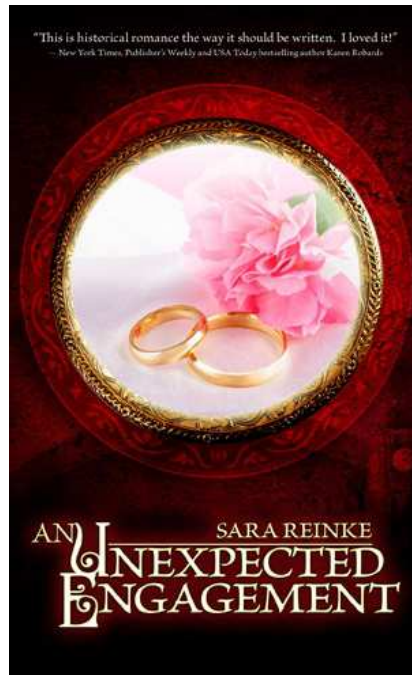
“Wait,” he said again as she caught his face between her hands and pulled him near, kissing him fiercely. “We cannot...not now...your father...”

“He will wait,” Kitty whispered. She reached between them, jerking at her skirts to pull them up. “I told you—I have need for a physician tonight.”

Rafe arched his brow as her hands moved busily to the waistcord of his breeches, loosening them from about his hips. “Have you now?” he whispered. He shifted his weight, letting her shove his pants down. He felt the warm strength of her thighs pressing against him, drawing him near, and as he lowered himself against her, sliding into her warmth, Kitty moaned softly, clutching at him, whimpering his name.

It was all of the reply he would ever need.

ALSO FROM AUTHOR SARA REINKE:
AN UNEXPECTED ENGAGEMENT



If you enjoyed *Heart's Ransom*, I hope you'll check out *An Unexpected Engagement*, my mass-market paperback debut from Medallion Press, which is now available for purchase. You can check at your local bookseller to see if it's in stock, or have them order a copy for you (ISBN # 1932815910; ISBN # 9781932815917) or you'll find handy purchase-links to Barnes & Noble, Books-A-Million and Amazon through the "Books" page at my website: www.sarareinke.com.

An Unexpected Engagement welcomes you to England, 1748, a time when romance was irrelevant and adventure was

thoroughly unladylike. Free-spirited, outspoken Charlotte Engle finds herself torn between the daring highwayman who steals her jewels—and her heart; a dashing young rake her mother despises and the insufferable boor to whom her parents have arranged an engagement. Murder, mayhem, meddling mothers...can true love really conquer all?

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**ENJOY THIS EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT FROM
*AN UNEXPECTED ENGAGEMENT***

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Thus began what turned out to be an afternoon spent in likely the most engaging conversation Charlotte had ever enjoyed with anyone, much less a man. She and Kenley walked for hours, marking a leisurely pace as they followed the winding footpaths of Chapford Manor's garden and grounds. They walked abreast of one another, nearly shoulder to shoulder, and when Charlotte would speak, Kenley would lower his face, canting his head to listen. He did not simply let her words pass in one ear and out the other, as James and the other men would by nature. He listened to her, his brows lifted in interest, his gaze attentive as he granted her the same consideration he would have any of his fellows.

"When I was a little girl, my father used to let me sit in the gentlemen's parlor while he and his friends would have brandies," she said. "I loved to listen to them talking about politics, economics, agriculture. In the mornings, when he would take to his library to read his gazette, he would always hoist me up into his lap and let me read aloud with him, all of the news from Parliament." She laughed. "I used to tell him I wanted to be a barrister someday, and he would say what a fine one I would make. Mother says it is his fault, the way I am."

Kenley paused in his stride, looking at her with his brow raised. "What?" Charlotte asked, laughing slightly, momentarily flustered by this gentle but unwavering scrutiny.

"You really are remarkable," he said, making her blush all the more.

"Do not flatter me," she said, drawing her hand from her muff and slapping his arm. "I have nearly enjoyed your company today. Do not dare prove you are no less a cad than any other man with witless attempts at charm."

He caught her hand before she could slip it back inside her muff. "Forgive me," he said. "You are right."

That was a shameless and horrid attempt to endear myself in your regard.”

He smiled, and she laughed. When he stepped toward her, the margin of space between them closing beyond what was considered proper, she did not mind. When he continued to hold her hand, she offered no resistance. When he lifted his free hand and drew his fingers gently against her cheek, brushing aside a wayward strand of flaxen hair that had worked loose from her bundle, she felt her heart flutter, her breath tangle against the back of her throat.

“I should try again,” Kenley said quietly, his hand lingering against her face, the basin of his palm pressing against her cheek. “In earnest sincerity.”

He leaned toward her, and Charlotte could not breathe. Her heart hammered out a frantic rhythm, caught between alarm and eager anticipation. Her eyes closed as the tip of his nose brushed against hers, and she felt the soft, delicate intake of his breath against her lips.

“You are remarkable, Charlotte,” Kenley breathed, his mouth dancing against hers before settling softly. They stood alongside the house, on their way back toward the front entrance, but Charlotte forgot their proximity and the fact that they were well within plain view of the westward facing windows. She forgot about propriety—and the fact that this was anything but. The world around her faded completely, as if God Himself had drawn it all to an obliging standstill to mark the tender occasion of her first kiss, and her wits, breath, and voice abandoned her in a solitary, helpless whimper.

She opened her eyes and blinked dazedly as he drew away from her. Breathing seemed unnecessary and momentarily forgotten, and the cold, damp air had yielded to some incredible, comfortable warmth from deep within her.

“You ... you kissed me,” she whispered.

He smiled. “I did, yes.”

She blinked again. “Why?”

He laughed. “Because I wanted to,” he said. “I would be daft not to. Did you mind?”

Charlotte shook her head. “No,” she said. “I mean ... yes. I ... I do not ... I am not sure.”

He chuckled, and she met his gaze. “I should slap you,” she said.

“I would prefer if you did not,” Kenley said.

A loud rattling, the sudden, heavy falling of hoofbeats startled her, and Charlotte turned, her eyes flown wide as grooms drove a carriage toward them, heading for the front of the house. Two more followed almost immediately, and for the first time, Charlotte took notice of the quality of daylight, and the hour this surely indicated.

“Oh!” she gasped, as the first carriage rolled past. She turned to Kenley, wide-eyed with alarm. “What time is it?”

He opened the front flap of his greatcoat and reached beneath, finding the fob pocket of his breeches and retrieving his watch. He snapped back the gold lid and glanced at her. “Nearly twenty past five.”

Charlotte’s eyes widened even more. She and Kenley had been wandering the grounds of Chapford Manor for three hours, surely, if not more. Lady Epping had undoubtedly taken notice of her absence—the entire bloody gathering likely had—and she groaned aloud.

“What?” he asked, his brows lifting in concern.

“Nothing,” she said, closing her eyes and shaking her head. “My mother is going to throw a fit, that is all. I must ... I have to get back inside.”

“It is my fault,” he said. “I lost track of time.” He looked toward the house. “I will speak with her. Let me explain. I will tell her—”

“No,” Charlotte said, shaking her head again in new horror. She remembered all too well Lady Epping’s cold dismissal of Kenley the day before. She could only imagine her reception if Kenley was standing right in front of her, offering excuses for Charlotte. “No, no, that ... truly, that is not necessary.”

“I do not want to see you in trouble on my account,” he said. “I did not mean for that, Charlotte. It was an honest oversight. Please, I insist. Let me—”

“No,” Charlotte said firmly, shoving her hand into her muff. “No, thank you, Kenley, but you do not want to do that. Trust me.”

She turned. “I have to go,” she said, walking again, hurrying toward the front corner of the house. “I am sorry. It was lovely, but I must!”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sara Reinke is the author of several books, including her debut fantasy, *Book of Days*, from Double Dragon Publishing, which was named one of the Top 10 Science Fiction/Fantasy Novels of 2005 in the annual Preditors & Editors Readers poll and a Finalist in the 2005 Dream Realm Awards competition. Other available or upcoming titles include *Book of Thieves*, the sequel to the award-winning *Book of Days*; *Tethers*, a science-fiction thriller; the historical romance, *An Unexpected Engagement* and the paranormal romance, *Dark Thirst*. She is a member of the Louisville Romance Writers chapter of Romance Writers of America.

To learn more about Sara, read excerpts from her books, sign up for her newsletter or check out her blog, visit online at www.sarareinke.com.