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Ranger's Woman

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Warning:

Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated Total-e-burning.

RANGER'S WOMAN

Samantha Winston

Chapter One

Marine wiped sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand and stared at the blinding sparkle on the water. The boat beneath her feet rocked gently and she automatically shifted her balance to stay upright. The sun beat mercilessly on her shoulders and the cleats on the deck burnt her hand when she touched them. No breeze cooled the air, and the only sound came from the steady slapping of the waves on the wooden hull of the twelve-meter sailboat.

"Did you see that shadow?" called Marine's sister Claire from the bow. She pointed to a spot in the water near the front of the boat.

Marine nodded. "I did. It looked like a big mako. It's unusual to see one so far from the reef." She glanced over her shoulder towards a faint green line on the horizon that was the only thing visible of the island. "I wonder what he's doing out here."

Claire watched as a black fin cut through the water. "I wish your photographer would hurry up and finish his picture. I'm baking out here. I'd like to go for a swim, but that shark circling us sure put that idea out of my mind."

"All right, girls." The photographer opened his camera. "As soon as this picture is done we can sail to Hawk's Nest Bay and take a dip. Then I'll get these pictures to my client. They're great, Marine, I can't tell you how much I appreciate you helping me out."

"It's my pleasure, Chris, but I still can't believe you asked me to do this. If my regular clients could see me now they'd laugh at me, I must look ridiculous."

"They would not," Claire said, giving her shoulder a friendly punch. "As your older sister, I have last say, and you are not ridiculous. You're gorgeous, you goofball."

Chris shot the last roll of film, and they all pitched in to raise the sails. The boat glided across the glassy sea with only the slightest breath of wind to fill the sails. Marine smiled proudly and her heart filled with joy as the boat caught the breeze and headed for the island.

"Isn't she wonderful? I just love this boat."

"How close are you to buying her?" asked Chris.

"I could never buy her," sighed Marine. "She's too expensive. I'm lucky I can rent her out. Just think, she took part in the America's cup race nearly seventy years ago. She was a class J racer, and hardly anyone knows about her. She was supposed to have been dismantled during the Second World War, but her owner couldn't bear to part with her, so he smuggled her down to the islands. Unfortunately he died just as the war ended, and many years passed before anyone thought to look for her. Then there was some problem with the inheritance. Finally a man who has remained anonymous bought her. He re-fitted her, and raced her for nearly ten years. Then he decided to rent her out as a pleasure boat. I was just lucky enough to be the first one to sign the lease. I have been begging him for years through letters to let me buy her, but the price is really astronomical."

"And you have no idea who the owner is?" asked Chris.

Marine shook her head. "No. I deal through a lawyer who's in charge of the boat."

"This is a very special sailboat," said Chris. "Just think, *the Ranger!*"

Marine laughed mirthlessly. "Can you imagine what this boat must cost? Well, if you can't I'll tell you, and then you'll see why I have no chance at all of ever buying her, and I cross my fingers and pray that my lease will always be renewed. It's terrible to fall in love with something so far out of reach."

Claire made a face. "You'd be better off falling in love with a man," she said.

"I doubt that," said Marine. "Anyway, we've been through that all before. I am not interested, all right?"

To Marine's relief, Claire changed the subject. "Look! Isn't that a school of flying fish? Aren't they gorgeous?"

Marine watched the silver fish skimming along the tops of the waves. The boat was so low to the water that they could reach their arms down and touch it as they sped along. Marine did, and the foam curled up around her hand like white lace. She was holding the tiller with one hand.

The boat had one mast and only three sails. It was a deceptively simple boat with pure lines. The mainsail was taut, the wind pushing the boat through the water at a fast clip. The two foresails

were rounded out and smooth as bird's wings. When Marine turned the boat towards the wind there was a moment when the sails luffed – the breeze ruffling them and making a clapping sound. Then the sails caught the wind again and the boat glided into a shallow bay.

Marine motioned to Claire to lower the anchor and she and Chris took down the sails. When everything was done, Marine peeled off her white shorts and green shirt, revealing a skimpy, white bikini underneath. She stepped onto the bow and looked into the crystal clear water before raising her arms and diving gracefully into the warm sea.

"Yahoo!" yelled Chris, as he threw his T-shirt onto the deck and cannon-balled into the water. "This is the life! A deserted cove and a white sand beach for us alone!"

Claire carefully took off her dress and folded it neatly before diving into the water. Her dive was so fluid she didn't make the slightest splash. She swam slowly to the beach, pausing now and then to float on her back in the warm water. "This is heaven," she sighed.

"I know." Marine grinned. "I often stop here with my clients. There are no roads leading to this beach, so it's nearly always deserted. The bad news is its national park property, so no fishing. We won't be able to catch lobster for lunch, so I had to bring some cold lobster salad. It's in the cooler."

"Sounds good to me." Chris paddled through the shallows and waded up to the beach. His face was pink from the sun, and split in a huge grin. "I forgot just how clear the water is down here," he said. "The boat looks like it's floating on glass."

Claire peered at it. "Or floating on the sky. It's a perfect day."

Chris cleared his throat. "Uh, Marine?"

"Yes?" Marine stopped and dove underwater, her legs reaching skyward, her toes pointed. Her head popped to the surface and she gave a wide grin. "What is it?" she asked again.

"Marine, I want to talk seriously to you."

"I hope it's not another proposal. I already told you, I'm not the marrying kind." She spoke in a joking voice; she knew that Chris had given up trying to ask her out on a date.

"No silly. It's about coming to New York to work as a model," Chris said. "I'm serious,

Marine. I don't even have to develop the pictures I shot today to know you're a natural. Come to New York, and in a couple years you'll have the money you need to buy your boat."

"I wish I could believe you Chris, I really do. But you're just being nice to me, as usual." In a softer voice she added, "I appreciate all you've done for me, you're a true friend. But you have to stop worrying about me. I'm nearly twenty-one now, and I'm a big girl. I have to learn to take care of myself."

Chris sighed. He scooped up a handful of soft, white sand and let it flow out of his hands. "I'm serious. But I can't force you to do anything you don't want to. Let's just say that the offer is always open, all right? Whenever you want just give me a call, and I'll come and pick you up at the airport. I'll even let you stay in my guestroom, how's that?"

He looked so wistful that Marine felt a pang of regret. How nice it would be if she could fall in love with Chris, and live happily ever after. But he was her best friend, pal, and buddy. When she looked at him she always saw the short, slightly chubby boy he'd been in first grade. He'd grown taller than she since then, and was considered handsome by all the girls who knew him, but to Marine he was the brother she'd never had, and she knew she would always feel the same way about him.

She took a deep breath and dove back under the water. The sea was so clear that it was possible to see right out into the deeper water in the bay. The water started out perfectly clear. Then it passed through all the possible hues of aquamarine, turquoise and blue. Where the sandy seabed sloped downward there were clumps of red and yellow coral. Brightly coloured fish flitted in and out of the stag horn and fan coral. Neon-bright yellow tangs and graceful, black and white angel fish hovered above coral. Marine stayed under until her lungs were bursting and black spots danced before her eyes, but nothing could take away Red's memory.

Why had she fallen in love with Red? Maybe because she'd never seen such a handsome man in her life. He'd been standing on the end of the pier, looking out to sea, with the last of the sun's warm rays lighting up his face. The sunset made his skin look like molten gold, and his hair like bronze. Then he'd turned around and stared at her, with his piercing gaze, and she felt as if she'd never been really looked at before that moment.

He knew how to make all girls feel special, as she found out later. As if he could see into her very soul and find out her deepest wishes and secret desires. Aloof one moment, and warm the next, she never knew what he would say or do.

He told her he wanted to be with her always, that she was the only one who really mattered. And she'd believed him. Marine bit her full, lower lip to keep from crying out in rage and humiliation. To think that after a year she still felt utterly destroyed by Red. Would she never get over it?

She swam as fast as she could towards her boat, but she couldn't out-race her thoughts. She hauled herself up onto the deck and padded over to a bench-chest. She opened it, took out a towel, and dried herself off. Then she went below deck to prepare the lobster salad and get the table set. She looked bleakly at the calendar hanging on the wall above the minuscule stove. Her birthday was in two months, the same day she'd met Red. But last year she'd thought he was a gift from God. She'd found out later that he was a devil—like most men, she thought savagely, and slammed the cooler shut so hard the sound was like a shot.

Preparing the food and setting the table with the fine china and silverware was soothing, and by the time Chris and Claire came aboard Marine had regained her good mood. The lobster salad was delicious. Part of the charm of her charters was the gourmet cooking she learned from her father, a French chef.

When they'd finished eating, Marine and Chris raised the sails and the anchor and set sail for St. John, where Marine kept '*The Ranger*'. Once the boat was locked up, they made their way to the parking lot where they caught a tour bus to the ferry dock. Then it was a fifteen-minute ferryboat ride to St. Thomas, where Claire's car was parked. Marine helped Chris put the cooler in the trunk, then they crawled gingerly into the hot car.

"When will they put some shade in this parking lot?" complained Claire, wincing as she touched the scorching steering wheel. They cranked the windows down and drove to Charlotte Amalie, the capital. The main street was swarming with tourists and taxis, and Claire finally elected to park in the parking lot near the fort.

"I can't believe how crowded it is!" she exclaimed.

"It's normal, it's the first of December and there are five cruise ships in today. On New Year's Day there will be twelve. Look, they've even started putting lights on the palm trees. Soon Main Street will be dressed for the holidays." Marine laughed delightedly as she gazed around her. "Come on, let's go see *maman*, she'll be so happy to see you Chris."

"With pleasure." Chris beamed. "I was dreading eating dinner alone in my hotel room."

Claire and Marine's mother's eyes lit up like candles when the car pulled up in the driveway. She had been pruning her hibiscus bushes, and a wicker basket full of red and white blossoms sat at her feet. A wide smile illuminated her face. She immediately put the clippers down and her hands began to dance in the air.

"Not so fast, not so fast!" begged Chris. "You know how slow I am at sign language." He laughed and tried to match her fluid motions with his own. "I'm glad to see you too. It has been too long." He interrupted her with a bear hug that lifted her right off her feet. Then he signed to her, "You still are the prettiest lady on St. Thomas."

Marine's mother blushed and she signed back, "And you are still the biggest liar."

Claire laughed at that and said, "She knows you too well." While she talked her hands flew. She and Marine had grown up with their deaf mother and it was second nature to them to use sign language as they talked.

They dined on the terrace that evening, with the lights of Charlotte Amalie spread out at their feet like a blanket of stars reflecting the night sky.

Marine looked out over the town. Her eyes stung with unshed tears and her throat knotted tight from trying to laugh and appear happy. But every time she let her guard slip memories of Red assailed her. Red kissing her, Red holding her hand and stroking the inside of her arm. Red diving into the clear turquoise waters of the Caribbean and swimming effortlessly through the sea. She got up abruptly and kissed her mother goodnight.

"I'm very tired," she signed. "I think I'll stay here tonight." Her mother nodded, and gave her a quick hug. Claire raised her eyebrows but said nothing. Chris kissed her on the cheek, and held her tight. But she just patted him fondly on the shoulders and whispered in his ear, "Thanks for coming to see me, Chris." Then she was gone, walking quickly and quietly through the dark

house to the bedroom she'd shared with Claire when they were children.

In her bed Marine tossed and turned. The heat of the night had something to do with it, but there was more. Her face was streaked with tears and her lips were swollen from where she'd bitten them so as not to cry out loud. She closed her eyes, but when she did Red's mocking face came back to her. And when she thought of him her whole body ached. He had awakened something in her, and now whenever she was alone she remembered his kisses as they branded her skin, and his caresses which had driven her to a heated pitch. But then she'd remember the shame, and the heartbreak, and the tears would start anew.

The next morning, she woke up later than usual, still tired after her sleepless night. When she came to breakfast, her mother informed her that Chris had called to leave a message and that Claire would pick her up to drive her to the ferry if she wanted. The telephone was equipped with a message screen which Marine's mother could read. With the help of a keyboard and a special screen attached to the phone, she could communicate with anyone she pleased.

Marine nodded and fixed herself a coffee. She sipped it slowly, sitting on the wicker chair on their balcony, her legs curled up underneath her, her hair in an unruly tangle over her shoulders. She'd just finished her coffee when the phone rang. Her mother answered, but came right back in motioning to Marine that the call was from the agency. She rented her boat out through an exclusive, international travel agency that proposed several different tours, including custom-made ones. This time the client wanted to talk directly to Marine, not with the agent.

Her agent said all this with a tone of regret. He knew how shy Marine was about talking business to anyone, which was the main reason Marine used an agency.

"Marine, I think you should talk to this person. He sounds like he's willing to spend a lot of money, and he wants a custom tour. None of the tours I proposed interest him." Mark, her agent, spoke hopefully. "All you have to do is fix an itinerary with him, and we'll do the rest. You call me afterwards and tell me how much you want for the trip, all right?"

Marine sighed. "Oh, all right. Thanks Mark." She studied the number he'd given her and felt a twinge of curiosity. She wondered where the number was from, and who would answer the phone. The name given her was Mr. Kelsey. There was nothing else. She dialled the number. A

woman answered after two rings.

"Yes?" The voice was carefully neutral, Marine couldn't decide if she was old or young.

"Mr. Kelsey please."

"Whom may I say is calling?"

"Marine Fontaine. I'm calling from the Virgin Islands, long distance," Marine added. She didn't want to run up her parent's phone bill.

"Just a minute." There was the sound of high-heels tapping across a marble floor, and then the Marine heard the woman calling, "Scott! Scott!"

So that's his name, thought Marine. She waited a few moments then a deep voice came on the other end. "I'm Scott Kelsey. Thank you for calling me. As I told your agency, I wanted a special tour on your boat. I hope we can work something out."

"I need some information," said Marine. "How many people will be on the tour?"

"Two." He sounded faintly amused.

"How long did you want to stay?" Marine wrote everything down on her Filofax.

"Two weeks."

At that Marine's eyebrows lifted in surprise, she'd rarely been out more than one week at a time. "That's a long trip," she said. "Have you and your," she hesitated an instant, "friend, ever been on a sail boat?"

"Yes. However, I am not really familiar with the Caribbean. I was hoping to make a tour to several different islands with my friend." He seemed to put emphasis on the word friend.

"That's fine. Perhaps I can work out a good route. From where do you want to start?"

"I'd like to start from St. Thomas."

"Okay, St. Thomas, no problem. How about doing a tour of the Virgin Islands, starting with St. John then heading to the British Virgins, then over to Anguilla, Barbuda and St. Kitts before heading west to the Dominican Republic? Then we can go to Jamaica, through the Windward Passage and go back to St. Thomas by the North, visiting Cuba, the Caicos, and Puerto Rico."

"I've heard about Casa de Campo in the Dominican Republic, I'd like to stop there and play

polo."

Marine pursed her lips. *Polo?* "That's no problem, I think I can work that out. We'll stop in La Romana for a couple nights." She paused. "Why don't I look this over and my agent will get back to you. Then you can talk about the details with him."

"The details." Scott's voice was mocking. "You don't want to talk with me?"

Marine was surprised. "I didn't say that. But my agent handles the financial part of the trip. There are a few other questions such as, would you like separate rooms? Would you like to stay in a hotel anywhere? And what about meals? I will be happy to cook, but if you want to eat out, and if you know of anywhere special, I can organise that too."

"I would like separate rooms."

"Okay, what about meals?"

"We'll see what happens, how's that? Plan on eating out the first night, and we'll take it from there."

Marine nodded. "One more question, I need a crew of three for the boat, myself plus two others. Usually I use Travis and Chapel. They are reliable men. I've worked with them before, and I hire them when I need them."

"This time you'll need nobody. Count me and my friend as part of your crew."

"That's great." Marine tried to put some enthusiasm in her voice. "Um, can I ask you exactly what your experience is? The boat I have is worth a great deal..."

"I sailed across the Atlantic and through the Mediterranean last summer on a seventy foot schooner. There were six of us, and I was the skipper. My friend has raced sailboats for more than thirty years on the East Coast. Does that answer your question?" His curt voice snapped like a whip over the phone.

"I needed to ask." Marine said calmly. "Bring your skipper's license." She opened her Filofax to the calendar pages. "So, what dates would you like? I have my schedule here in front of me."

"I want to be in St. Thomas for Christmas."

"Christmas?" Marine bit her lip. Christmas used to be her favourite time of year, until Red

had spoiled it for her forever.

"Do you have a problem with that?"

"No." Marine took a deep breath. "All right Mr. Kelsey, I think I have enough information. If you'll just give the date and time of your arrival to my agent, I'll arrange to have you and your friend picked up at the airport. I will have the boat ready and waiting for you at the harbour marina. Will that be satisfactory?"

"It sounds good to me."

"Good-bye then." Marine stared at the phone—Mr. Kelsey had already hung up. "Well!" she exclaimed. Her mother was looking at her curiously so Marine signed, "A new client for a two week cruise around the Leeward Islands."

"Two weeks?" Her mother's face showed her surprise.

"I think perhaps it's a honeymoon trip. I don't know though, he wanted separate rooms. The man sounded very sure of himself. He wants to help sail. He said he was the skipper of a schooner that went to Europe last year from the States. Wouldn't I love to do that!" Marine smiled at her mother's expression. "I've always wanted to sail around the world you know."

Her mother nodded. She had such an expressive face that she didn't need to sign half the time. She glanced at her watch and signed to Marine that she had to be going, her hairdresser's appointment was in ten minutes. Like all French women, she always tried to look her best. She never left her room in the morning without first dressing and pinning her hair up in its tight chignon.

Marine waved as her mother left the house then she went to her bedroom to dress and run a comb through her hair. She had just finished when the phone rang.

"Hello?" she picked up a pen, intending to write out a message for her mother, but the call was for her.

"Hello Miss Fontaine." The voice at the other end was that of the lawyer who took care of the boat's lease. "I called your agent and he said you were at your parent's house. I hope you don't mind me calling you there." His voice was warm and deep, and as always Marine found herself trying to imagine what he looked like. She'd never met him, his office was in Boston.

"I'm calling you because I have received a letter from the boat's owner. It seems that the boat might possibly be up for sale."

Marine felt the blood drain from her face and she sat down abruptly on the floor. "Wha...what did you say?"

"I'm sorry if this comes as a shock. The owner wishes to sell the boat to a dear friend of his. He has already made arrangements for that person to contact your agent for a cruise, as he wants to try the boat out first."

"Did he...did he say when?" Marine rubbed her hand over her face. It was wet with tears. "Damn!" she swore silently.

"Yes. He said he wanted a two week trial sail around Christmas time."

So that was it! The owner's friend must be the famous Mr. Kelsey. And he'd said nothing about trying the boat out to buy her! The sneak! Marine was suddenly furious. "I did talk to a certain Mr. Kelsey. Was that him?"

"I regret, the letter I received didn't mention any names." Mr. Sanders sounded sincerely sorry.

"So what should I do?" Marine asked. She had to clench her fist so keep from screaming.

"Your lease is good for another six months, and no sale can annul it. You can try and work out another lease with the new owner perhaps, I think that would be your best bet. I'll call you back as soon as I know anything else, I am also supposed to handle the sale, but I won't have a confirmation until after the cruise."

"Well, thank you very much for letting me know all this, Mr. Sanders."

"You're quite welcome. I hope that if you ever come to Boston you'll stop in and see me, good-bye Miss Fontaine, and good luck."

"Good-bye Mr. Sanders, and thank you for the invitation." Marine hung up the phone gently, then burst in a torrent of tears. She was still sitting on the floor, her head in her arms when her sister came in the house.

"Oh Marine!" Claire rushed over and pulled her to her feet. "Don't cry darling! Is it Red

again? Did he call you? Oh you poor thing!"

"It's not that," said Marine between bouts of hiccups, "It's the boat. The owner wants to sell her, and I wasn't even given a chance to talk to him about it. His friend is coming to take a sail on her in a month and I have to play hostess to the man who's going to buy her! she wailed. It's not fair. Why can't I be rich and buy her myself?"

Claire pursed her lips. "I doubt money can buy everything, and certainly not happiness. You might think you need that boat, but I believe there are more important things in life. You'll see."

"You don't understand! I love that boat!"

"You're right, I don't understand," said Claire gently. "I love my husband Steve. He's a real person. You shouldn't love a boat; you should try to find..."

"Someone like Steve?" Marine finished her phrase for her. "There's only one Steve. All the others are just like Red." She spat his name out. "At least boats are honest; they tell no lies, they don't humiliate you."

"Oh Marine." Claire's soft eyes filled with tears and Marine suddenly felt like an idiot.

"Don't mind me. I'll be fine." She brushed her tears away with the back of her hand and smiled. "Will you take me to the ferry now? I have a bunch of things to do, there's a client coming tomorrow for a three day sail, then I'm booked solid until the first week in January. Now I have to find my crew, Travis and Chapel, to help out until the Christmas cruise.

"Where are Travis and Chapel?"

"Lord only knows. As soon as they get free time, they leave on their own boat and go treasure hunting! I only hope I can raise them on their radio. I left a message in the marina, but they haven't been there for three weeks! The rascals, I bet they've found a new wreck and they won't come to land until they need more money to buy supplies."

"Well, you'll catch them then, you always do. And I can always help you out in a pinch, I'm not such a bad sailor myself." Claire grabbed her sister's hand and pulled her to her feet. "C'mon, you'll miss your ferry, and I have a rehearsal at three. I don't want to be late."

Chapter Two

Marine sat on the ferry deck and watched as the water flowed smoothly by. Every once in a while flying fish would skip like silver disks across the waves. When she got tired of watching the water Marine watched the people on the boat and tried give them all names and stories. It passed the time, and took her mind off herself.

The ferry docked in St. John and Marine leapt lightly onshore. The long cement pier was swarming with people. There was Speedy, who rented out mopeds, and Josh, who had a fruit-stand. Peggy-Mae, a tall, thin lady who sometimes came down to the docks to hand out her religious tracts, stood there today, waving her slips of paper and calling out, "News from the Lord! Come 'n get it! Hot off the press!"

Marine smothered a giggle and took one from her. "Hi Peggy-Mae, how are things going?"

"Bless you child, I ain't got too many complaints. The Lord looks out for his little lambs; that's my saying for today. See, right here! It's written in plain English."

"Thanks Peggy-Mae. See you around!" Marine stuffed the paper in her pocket and waved to Speedy. She bought a pound of fresh papaya and a pineapple from Josh, and then she went down main-street, stopping at a few stores along the way. When she made her way to the tour bus heading to Caneel Bay she was laden down with bags.

"Going on a trip?" asked Jeffrey, the driver.

"Yes, a short one." Marine tucked the bags at her feet. Lots of tourists? she asked.

"The resort's booked solid," confirmed Jeffrey.

The bus followed the winding road up into the mountains, through the bay rum forest and down into the valley to Caneel Bay. Marine waited until everyone disembarked, and then Jeffrey drove her to the docks where her boat was waiting. She waved good-bye and carried her bags to the boat. She stood for a moment in front of it, admiring its sleek lines and pure beauty, then she squared her shoulders and went on board. She had work to do. The boat was hers for six more

months at least, so she would just have to take it one day at a time and try not to think too hard about the future.

On board, she put the groceries into the cooler and checked to see that she had everything she needed. She had a list pinned to the inside of a cupboard, and she made sure that nothing was missing from it. That done, she went to the navigation station and made sure the batteries were freshly charged on the radio and satellite system. She used the most advanced electronic instruments, with a Loren navigator for the boat's exact position, meteorologist readings every ten minutes, or less in case of a depression, and an anemometer to measure the wind strength. She had electronic charts as well as maps, and charts rolled up and stored tightly away. She knew how to use a sextant and a compass, and could find her way around on a clear night with the stars, although after a particularly harrowing night on her catamaran with Chris, she'd decided never to sail at night if she could help it. She knew the currents and the reefs by heart, but she never took anything for granted, because she knew how treacherous the waters of the Caribbean could be.

She cleaned the master bedroom and put fresh sheets on the bed. She had bought flowers in town and she put them in the vase that fit in a special holder near the head of the bed, then she stepped back and admired the room. The bed had a white cotton spread, and the round brass porthole had bleached-muslin curtains. The walls were mahogany and the floorboards were dark teak. Hanging on the wall over the bed were two oil paintings, one was of the "*Reliance*", a 140-foot single-mast racing yacht that won the America's cup in 1903. The other was of the "*Ranger*", in all her glory, as she won the America's cup just before the onset of world war two. Both boats had belonged to the Vanderbilts.

Marine hung towels in the guest bathroom and made sure that there was soap and shampoo in the shower stall. She opened the portholes, let fresh air into the dining room, and put new magazines into the rack near the door. When she was sure that everything was perfect she went into her own bedroom and changed into her bathing suit. Her room was small, but functional with two bunk beds along the wall and a built-in closet at the head of each bed. A tiny bathroom with a minuscule shower stall completed her living quarters. Everything was made of teak, and the dark wood glowed from repeated waxing. The bedspreads were white cotton, and white muslin curtains in front of the round, shiny brass porthole.

She grabbed her flippers and mask from a compartment underneath her bed, then headed for the beach. A nice long swim was just what she needed before dinner. In the evening, the water was flat calm. She drifted over the sandy bottom of the bay, watching a lone barracuda. Then, with gentle movements hardly disturbing the mirror-like surface of the water, she swam back to her dock and climbed the iron ladder. She wrapped her towel around her shoulders and sat on the edge of the dock, her legs crossed, watching the sun dip below the horizon.

She ate on board, sitting at the table in the cockpit with just a single candle in a storm lantern for light. Around her were the soft noises of evening, the steady slapping of the water against the hull, the twang of the ropes on the mast. A night watchman walked slowly down the pier, carrying a torch. He shined it on Marine's face.

"Hey Marine, how's it goin'?" Max spoke in the lilting singsong dialect of the Caribbean.

"Fine Max. Nice night, isn't it?"

"Sure is. See dat old fat moon up dere? It looks jes like he's admirin' heeself in dee water." Max chuckled warmly. "My boys is all out fishin' tonight. Dey say tis a fishin' moon, we're goin' to have ourselves a feast tomorrow."

Marine pricked up her ears. Fresh fish was always welcome. "Will they be selling at the market tomorrow morning?" she asked.

"As always girl, as always. You be dere early an' you can choose dee best ones. I'll tell Randolph to set you aside dee old wife."

Marine nodded. "It's a deal. Set aside two old wives, and a yellow tail if they have one for me, and I'll be down extra early to pick them up."

Max grinned, and his teeth gleamed whitely in the dark. "You have a nice evenin' now Miss. I'll be makin' dee rounds until tree-o'clock, den it's bedtime for Max."

Marine set about cleaning up. She set her alarm for five a.m., then slipped between her cool, white sheets. As always, being on the boat lulled her sleep almost at once. The steady *slap, slap, slap* of the water on the hull was the most calming sound in the world for her. She slept deeply and without dreaming until her alarm rang.

It was still dark the next morning when she stepped out of the minuscule shower and dressed.

She pulled on a sweatshirt and tied her hair back with a green ribbon. Hurrying now, she went to the back of the boat and untied the Zodiac from its mooring. Carefully she stepped in the little boat and then she pulled the rope to start the motor. She was loath to make noise, the early morning was so still, but she had to go buy some fish.

The boat sped over the calm, silver water and Marine arrived at the market pier after a ten-minute ride along the coast. She recognised Max's sons, and eased the boat towards the cement pier where the fish stands were all set up.

"Hi Rudolph, hi Randy! Caught some fish last night?"

The two boys looked behind them and laughed. "Yo, Marine! Can't you come up on dry land like the rest of us mortals?"

"Sorry guys, I'm in a rush. I've got some clients coming at seven, then I'm heading to Redhook to try to find my crew."

Rudolph carefully lowered a package down to Marine in the boat. "Here's dee old wife, two of dem, and dere's a big old yellow fish as well. Dad said you wanted one."

"Sure do. Thanks. How much do I owe you?"

Randy quoted a price and Marine dug around in her belt purse for the money.

She got back to her boat with time to spare and carefully packed the fish in the cooler. There was a hatbox-sized fridge in the kitchen, but Marine always put fish in the huge cooler that was built-in under a bench in the cockpit. The cooler was full of blocks of ice, and nothing would melt for at least five days.

Marine then spent the next hour making sure everything was in perfect order for the cruise. At six-forty five she was up on deck waiting for her clients. The honeymoon couple waved as they made their way down the dock. They were an older couple. The man had a white moustache, and the woman had gray hair and a jewelled purse clutched tightly to her chest.

"Welcome aboard!" Marine called out. "Watch your step getting in. I'll take your bags. I'll take you to your room and get you aquatinted with the boat, and then we'll head for St. Thomas to get the rest of the crew."

Marine managed to locate Travis and Chapel on the radio, and she picked them up on the docks in Redhook. Together, they charted their course. Chapel and Travis knew the boat well, having crewed with Marine for three years now. She'd hooked up with them as soon as she'd graduated high school and had got her captain's license.

"Did you always know you were going to charter boats?" Chapel leaned his elbows on the table as he stared at the map.

"Of course. Boats have fascinated me ever since I can remember."

"Boats and boys," Chapel teased.

"Why don't you take a long walk off a short pier."

"I'm just teasing. Come on, Captain, let's ask the honeymooners where they'd like to go."

Marine looked at the tall, bald black man and nodded. "That's better. Show respect for your captain. Now, go swab the deck. I'll talk to our guests."

The honeymoon couple, Neville and Sue-Ellen from Texas, asked Marine to take them to her own favourite romantic places. Marine took them to the Baths in Virgin Gorda, and they spent the night in Horse-head Bay. Then they sailed around Tortola and went to a tiny island where no one lived. A pristine white beach that one could walk all around surrounded the island. There was a small reef for snorkelling and a few palm trees for shade. They grilled fish on a small fire, and Marine set up a table and chairs for a romantic lunch for two on the island, complete with linen napkins, crystal wine glasses and silverware. That evening they sailed to Tortola and anchored in the calm harbour.

They had lunch at Jost Van Dyke the next day, and sailed to St. Croix to admire the old sugar cane estates. Afterwards they went to Puerto Rico and Marine took everyone to Old San Juan. They sailed around the island, spent the night in a secluded cove, and then sailed back to St. John the next day through the turquoise waters of the Caribbean.

For three idyllic days Marine forgot her worries and relaxed. When they sailed into Caneel Bay at the end of their trip, Sue-Ellen actually cried. "That was the nicest sail anyone could have asked for," she said, hugging Marine. "I think we'll have to do that every year for our anniversary. You reserve us these three days next year now, you hear?"

Marine gave a start. "A year from now," she murmured, and felt her throat tighten. A year from now she might not have the *Ranger* at all. She tried to smile bravely, and managed to hide her tears until everyone had left the boat.

Travis and Chapel helped Marine clean up and carry the laundry to the cleaners, and then they said a reluctant good-bye.

"Will you be all right?" Travis asked kindly.

"You know I will be," said Marine, hugging her friend. "I'll be so busy from now until Easter I won't have time to think about anything. You take care now, I'll leave you a message at the marina for the Christmas cruise."

Travis nodded, and then the two men headed for the tour bus that would drop them off in town. Marine watched them leave then went back to her room. She flung herself on her bed and buried her face in her pillow. "I will not cry," she told herself sternly. "I will not!"

She managed to forget the boat sale, but she couldn't stop herself from remembering Red. She could recall his voice, dry, and slightly mocking. His broad shoulders and narrow hips, his long, well shaped legs and his deceptively delicate bone-structure. His face was that of a Raphaelite angel, with deep brown eyes and a full, sensuous mouth. He had the darkest red hair she'd ever seen. It was auburn, with copper and gold highlights. Every time she thought of him her whole body trembled. She had fallen in love with him so quickly and completely. Why had he let her think he loved her as well? Why? She had no answer to that question, she never would.

No one had ever been cruel to her until Red, so she had no way of defending herself. He had carved up her heart like a Christmas turkey, she thought morosely, and left it in shreds. If Claire heard that analogy, she'd roll her eyes and tell her not to be such a baby. She couldn't help it though. As the adored, youngest daughter, she'd never believed anyone would ever want to hurt her on purpose. Until Red.

She rolled onto her back and stared up at the criss-crossing planks on the ceiling. The sun was shining in the porthole onto her face, making it burn, but she had no wish to go swimming. She'd met Red on the end of the pier. She had been swimming nearby, and as she'd climbed up the ladder onto the pier the last of the sun's rays had illuminated her silhouette. His eyes had widened

appreciatively as she had approached, and he'd asked her, in his deep, ironic voice, if she was a dryad, or another of the water spirits haunting the crystal waters of the bay.

She had fallen under his spell, and they'd walked that evening through the fragrant forest of bay-rum trees holding hands. At the end of the walk he'd kissed her gently on the lips.

Afterwards there were more walks, and he invited her to dine in town. She discovered that he was a diving instructor, working with a team of treasure hunters. From the first, Red had been utterly fascinated by *the Ranger*.

He invited himself along on a sail, and Marine discovered he was a practiced sailor. He knew all about sailboats, and had an uncanny instinct for the currents and the tides. He was sensitive to the boat's smallest movement, and could find the slightest breeze. Marine had loved to watch him, he looked so at home on *The Ranger*. He had been the only person she'd felt completely at ease with letting sail the boat.

When he'd asked her to spend the rest of her life with him it had been the most momentous evening of her life. He'd slid a tiny, sparkling diamond ring onto her finger, and then gazed into her eyes. "Marry me," he'd whispered.

She'd felt her pulse race, and when he'd lifted her dress over her head she'd protested just a moment. He'd silenced her with his lips. His hands ran like tongues of fire over her skin. When he touched her breasts she'd gasped. No one had ever told her how sensitive they were, how electricity seemed to tingle from his touch. His mouth had followed, his lips branding her with his kisses. His mouth had fastened on one of her breasts, and he'd suckled hard, pulling on the nipple until it was stiff and aching. Her body quivered beneath his touch. She hadn't known what to do. When she'd asked him, he told her to lie still. He ordered her not to move, and so she lay there, eyes closed, as he sucked first one nipple, then the other, his hands kneading them, but she wanted more. When she was panting with desire he'd gently spread her legs. She'd raised her hips and said, "Please!" Not sure what she was begging for, but she needed to assuage an unbearable twinge in her cunt.

"Are you sure?" he'd asked her.

"Yes."

He'd lowered his face to her muff and she'd uttered a startled cry and pulled away.

"No, don't move," he'd said sternly. "Now, open your legs wide and don't move, except to press your sweet clit against my teeth." He'd grinned wolfishly.

She bit her lip, but obeyed. When he fingered her, she writhed in embarrassment. She was so wet! His fingers slid over her flesh, and he parted her lips and started to tongue her clit, rubbing the sensitive nub until Marine saw stars. She got even wetter, and he started to ease his fingers into her vagina. It was tight, but she was slick and he slid into her like butter.

"Go slowly," she'd begged, her throat suddenly dry. She'd suddenly caught sight of his erect penis and she hadn't realised how big a man could get. "Are you sure it will fit?" She couldn't hide the waver in her voice.

"Of course." He was breathing hard, his hips seeming to thrust towards her by themselves. He'd quickly nudged her legs apart and lowered himself onto her. Taking his weight onto his arms, he pushed slowly into her, waiting until she relaxed before entering her fully. The sensation astounded her. She could feel his heaviness, his hardness, right into the centre of her being. It took her breath away.

Then he'd bucked and thrust into her, his cock sliding in and out of her virgin cunt, until he suddenly started to convulse. Afterwards, he rested his head on her collarbone, his breath coming in deep gasps.

What a fool she'd been!

She sat up suddenly. She refused to think anymore about it. She took a deep breath and then set about getting ready for the next cruise. She would lose herself in her work. Anything was better than thinking about Red.

The next few weeks went quickly, and then Marine received a message from her agent, telling her that Mr. Kelsey and friend were arriving at the airport that Wednesday, and would expect her to have the boat ready for sailing that evening.

She fought off waves of depression as she scrubbed and cleaned the boat as never before, making the wood glow and the brass gleam. Carefully, she reefed and stowed the sails, coiled the ropes, scrubbed clean the insides of the closets and cabinets. Then she polished the silver, the

crystal, and she carefully inserted the plates into their wooden slats. She put fresh bougainvillea flowers in the vases and made sure the sheets and towels were ready. By the time she got around to checking the food list and making sure the engines were in perfect working order it was Tuesday evening.

She suffered pangs of nervousness all night long. She couldn't sleep, and finally she went to the marina to call Chris. She told him everything, about the boat being up for sale, and the fact that the owner was coming for a cruise with the client.

"I can't bear it," she'd cried over the phone, clutching it tightly against her ear. "I keep thinking that the *Ranger* will be sold and I'll never see her again. It's awful!"

Chris was sympathetic. "I'm sure you'll be able to negotiate a new contract with the new owner," he said reasonably. "Why don't you wait and see before you start to panic?" His voice was low and soothing, as if he was talking to a small child. "Guess what?" he said. "Your picture came out in the press yesterday. It's absolutely everywhere!"

"What picture?" Marine didn't know what he was talking about.

"The one I took of you on the boat, you goose, don't you remember? It's great! The client was so pleased he put the picture in all the big magazines. You're all over the East Coast, and on the billboards in the airports and train stations. It's fantastic, it's too bad you're not here to see your face, it's twenty feet high, in Grand Central Station!"

Marine was taken aback. "What did you say? The picture is out already?"

"Sure! Go buy *Vogue* or something, you'll see it." Chris chuckled. "I bet you'll get a ton of modelling offers after this."

Marine was at loss for words. The thought of her face being twenty feet high in a train station was daunting. She wasn't even sure she liked the idea. However it did take her mind off the boat for a few seconds. She realised this and smiled. "Well, thanks Chris, as usual you've managed to lift my spirits. I'll call you after the cruise and tell you all about it."

Chapter Three

"Miss Fontaine? I'm Scott Kelsey."

Marine spun around and dropped the car keys that she'd been clutching in her hand. She'd come to the airport to meet the owner. The private jet had landed a few minutes earlier, and Marine had peered nervously through the window to try and get a glimpse of the man she was to meet. She had given up when a commercial airliner pulled in front of the tiny white jet, hiding it completely, and she'd had gone back to the lounge intending to wait there.

"Yes, that's me." She bent down to pick up her keys. She stood back up and started to speak but the words died in her throat. She found herself staring up at the most imposing man she'd ever seen. He towered over her. His jet black hair with unruly curls hung to his shoulders. His eyes were as green as bottle-glass and had the same piercing stare as a cat's. He had broad shoulders and long legs. A black suitcase hung from his left hand. A sudden picture of a pirate flashed in her mind. All that she took in a flash, but her mind couldn't process the sheer presence of the man. She felt as small and helpless as a child in front of him. It must be the same sensation, she thought faintly, as being in front of a dangerous animal. She cleared her throat and managed to stammer a few words of welcome.

The man staring back at her seemed as at a loss for words as she, and his eyes narrowed as he looked at her. Suddenly Marine realised that someone was missing. "Where is the boat's owner?" she asked, looking around.

"Oh, so you know that I'm with the owner?" the voice was sardonic.

Marine felt herself blushing, though she didn't know why. She shook herself mentally and straightened her shoulders. She sensed his dislike and it irritated her. She was always so careful never to make instant judgments about people, even if she did like to imagine stories to fit the strangers she saw on the ferry or docks to pass time. "I was contacted by the lawyer just after our conversation," she said evenly. "He told me that you might be interested in buying *the Ranger*."

"Perhaps you feel I wasn't totally honest with you," he said.

"I didn't say that." Marine bit her lip. He put her on the defensive so easily! She glanced at her watch. "I hope he won't be long."

"No, as a matter of fact he's right here. Miss Fontaine, may I introduce you to the boat's owner, Edgar Madison."

A white-haired man about sixty years old came forward to shake her hand. His grip was warm and firm, and his gray eyes twinkled in a friendly fashion. "How do you do, Miss Fontaine? I am so looking forward to sailing on *the Ranger* again. I haven't sailed her since she won the Rolex race here in the islands nearly fifteen years ago."

He looked like a sailor, with brown, wind-burned skin and blue eyes that were pale and squinting from the sun. His hands were surprisingly strong and his forearms were muscular. He was dressed in gray pants and had on a white cotton, short-sleeve shirt with a small anchor embroidered on the pocket over his initials; E.M. Marine found herself liking the owner very much.

"I'm so pleased to meet you," she said warmly. "I've often wondered who owned *the Ranger*."

"Well, now you know." Scott's voice was curt. "Let's go shall we? I want to see the boat."

Edgar Madison looked a bit surprised at his tone, but said nothing. Marine took them through the airport out to her car parked in the shade. She opened the trunk and Scott deposited their suitcases into it. Marine noticed that they travelled lightly, only one small suitcase each. They climbed into the car, Scott taking up nearly the whole back seat with his size and presence, Edgar Madison sitting up front with Marine.

He leaned back and sighed deeply. "It's nice to be in the islands again," he said. "You've never been here Scott, but I think you'll find the Caribbean a fascinating place. Did you grow up here Miss Fontaine?"

"Yes, I did." Marine smiled. "It was a lot of fun. I spent more time at the beach than at school."

"I bet you did." Scott said dryly. "So tell me, how's the modelling business?"

Marine felt her cheeks flame. "I'm not a model," she said. "After I graduated I got my

skipper's license and I've been sailing ever since."

"Oh? I rather thought otherwise. I saw your picture just before we left. Very interesting." Scott said. "I suppose that you have lots of free time with your job on the boat."

"Actually I don't. The boat keeps me busy."

"That's too bad, we wouldn't want to keep you away from your modelling," said Scott sarcastically.

Marine felt her temper slip, but caught it just in time. She was going to try her best to get on with this insufferable person, at least until she knew what he wanted with the *Ranger*. "Actually I only modelled that one time, and that was as a favour to a friend. I have no intention of becoming a model. I love my job on the boat." Marine managed to keep her voice light.

Edgar looked at her with a smile. "That's the spirit, girl!" he said. "Don't let that uncivilised barbarian in the back seat throw you. He's just bent out of shape because his latest fiancée was a model and she threw him out last week. He'll calm down in a few days."

Marine felt the temperature in the car go up by at least ten degrees after Edgar's statement, but Scott too managed to hang onto his temper and all he said was "Mmmph," which could have meant any number of things. When Marine caught his smouldering gaze in the rear-view mirror she thought her eyeballs would scorch.

The rest of the drive was silent. Edgar dozed a bit, but Marine felt Scott's animosity like a living thing, and it made her horribly nervous. She clashed the gears a few times going uphill, and then spent ten miserable minutes behind a slow truck spitting black smoke out its exhaust pipe because the road was too sinuous to pass on. She breathed a sigh of relief and fresh air when the truck pulled off onto a side road, and she drove a bit faster that she liked to make up the lost time. All in all, the hour-long trip was nerve-wracking and Marine was glad to pull into the marina at last.

Scott's whole expression changed when he saw *the Ranger* and Marine gave up all hope of him not buying her. The fierce scowl he had worn since he'd met Marine faded and was replaced by a wondrous smile. His eyes lost their crystal hardness and became a deep, forest green. Even his bearing changed, and he seemed almost humbled by the pure lines of the boat tied to the dock.

"What a beauty," he exclaimed. "And to think, nobody even knows she's survived the war. What an incredible boat." He fell silent and just stood for a moment, taking her in. Then he took a deep breath and stepped on board.

Marine followed Edgar. He'd taken the suitcases out of the car and was carrying them to the boat, refusing her offers to help with them. She showed the men their rooms. Then she went to the marina and checked for messages. There was one from her parents wishing her a good sail and one from Claire as well. Chris had sent her a telegram with his love.

She found Travis and Chapel in the marina bar playing pool. They looked up as she walked in and started bantering.

"Oh, if it isn't *Ranger's* gal, coming to mingle with the commoners," said Travis. He pushed a lock of blond, sun-bleached hair out of his bright blue eyes and squinted down the line of the stick. He shot and neatly sank the twelve ball. "Eight ball in the side pocket," he announced. "So Marine, you're sailing solo this time out?"

"Nope, I'm sailing with real yachtsmen this time, not just rent-a-sailors like you guys." Marine grinned and then said, "I would like to know where I can reach you for the next two weeks, in case something happens. I'd like to think I could count on one of you coming help out on the boat."

"No problem, we'll be around," said Chapel, pinching his lips tightly as Travis sunk the eight ball in the side pocket. "Shoot, now I owe that guy ten bucks." He sighed. "One more game then, double or nothing!"

Travis looked up and grinned widely. "We're stuck here for at least a week, our boat's up on dry-dock since yesterday, she needs some work on her hull."

"Yeah, an overhull," joked Chapel and waved as Marine left.

Marine felt a bit better now. If anything happened, or if she saw that the two men couldn't sail, she could raise Travis and Chapel on the radio and they'd come right away.

Not that she was counting on that. From what she'd seen as the men had moved around the boat they knew exactly what they were doing. And she wasn't wrong. When she got back the boat was all ready to sail.

Marine quickly inspected everything, under the ironic gaze of Scott Kelsey. "Find anything amiss?" he asked

"No, nothing," she said shortly. Feeling his eyes upon her, she untied the ropes and cast off.

The boat moved like a dream. For her size, she was surprisingly agile and would respond to the slightest movement of the rudder. Marine sat back at the tiller and relaxed. Scott and Edgar Madison were sitting in the cockpit, Edgar was drinking a dakari that Marine had fixed before they'd left, and Scott was sipping a beer. He had changed out of the business suit he'd been wearing at the airport and was wearing a pair of faded shorts and a green polo shirt. Marine couldn't help looking at him now and then. He looked like a pirate she finally decided. A black-haired, savage pirate.

Marine had changed too into the outfit she usually wore on a cruise, white jeans and a white windbreaker. Her hair was tied back with a red bandanna, and she had her dark glasses on. They made her feel secure, hiding her eyes. They spoke little as they sailed down the coast of St. Thomas, then across the channel to St. John. The boat ate up the miles and they arrived before the sun set in Caneel Bay.

Marine docked the boat while Scott and Edgar dressed for dinner. They had decided to eat at the resort. That meant black tie and dinner jackets. Edgar came upstairs first. His white hair was still wet from the shower and slicked back behind his ears. He brushed an imaginary speck of lint from his sleeve and gratefully accepted the cool drink Marine handed him.

"Ah, I forgot how hot it was down here," he said as he sipped his drink. "Mmm, this is good, what is it?"

"Chilled sparkling wine with a touch of white grape juice and a twist of lime."

"Very nice." Edgar peered at her in amazement. "But where's your dress? You can't come to the restaurant like that!"

"My dress? she was surprised, "I'm not coming with you, I don't eat with the clients. You go and have a nice dinner, don't worry about me!"

"Nonsense! I'm not going out with just a great, hulking Scott for company. Not when I have a very attractive lady to take along. Hurry up now, get dressed, that's an order!"

Marine smiled and raised her eyebrows in mock astonishment. "You can't order me around, I'm the skipper."

"Well, it's a polite request then. Hurry now, it's nearly time to go." He tapped his watch and waved her towards the ladder.

She went below deck and into her cubby-hole of a room and opened the closet. She had several dinner gowns, Claire had given her one, and there were two or three of her mother's dresses. She wore the new gown. It was red silk, very simple, with one bare shoulder and a straight skirt with a slit up the thigh. She quickly pinned up her hair in a loose chignon and dabbed a bit of lipstick on her mouth.

She looked at herself in the little mirror hanging over her bed and muttered, "I wish my mouth wasn't so wide, it takes up so much room on my face! And my eyes, much too small!" They were slanted, and she'd outlined them with black eyeliner. They glowed in a deep gold. Marine smiled, and all she could see were white teeth. "Bother!" she grumbled, and resolved not to smile too widely. Why couldn't she have had Claire's pretty mouth and big, brown eyes, instead of a wide mouth and small, honey-coloured eyes?

She picked up her high-heeled sandals and carried them, walking barefoot on the wooden deck.

Scott looked positively forbidding in his black jacket and starched white shirt. His hair was still an untamed mane about his face, the black curls defying any attempts to brush them down. Marine wondered if he also berated his reflection in the mirror, wishing for straight, disciplined hair. She had the urge to giggle when she thought that, and had to bite her lip. He saw her then and frowned.

"It took you long enough," he said. But it was said in a tone of resignation, and he even offered her his hand as they stepped off the boat onto the dock. She took it, and noticed how hard the muscles were in his arm. He smelled good too, like musk and citrus at the same time.

"One minute," she said, slipping her sandals on. She glanced up at Edgar, who wore an amused expression. "One doesn't wear high heels on a boat," she explained.

"I know, dear." Edgar took her arm. "Here, let me help you. Those shoes look dangerous."

Dinner was delicious. Marine ordered grouper, and so did Edgar. Scott had the lobster. They exchanged banalities during dinner. Edgar wanted to know about Marine's childhood on the islands, and Scott even started to look interested when she told them about sailing the hobicat.

Dinner was a truce, Marine thought. They were all civilized, dressed in evening clothes and on their best behaviour, but Marine realised that it was just a thin veneer on Scott. He seemed ready to burst out of his jacket like Conan, but when that thought hit her she had to bite her lip again to stop a nervous laugh. She looked over at him, and he smiled though his smile never made it to his eyes.

"What time should we cast off tomorrow morning?" he asked.

"About eight," she said. "I thought we could sail to a deserted island I know of and snorkel a bit, then eat lunch. Then we can sail to Tortola and spend the night in the Roadtown marina."

"I'd rather got to the Dominican Republic first, if that's possible," said Scott. "There's a polo tournament starting in two days, and I'd like to play."

"Well," Marine hesitated, "I wasn't planning on heading that way..."

"I didn't think it would be any trouble," interrupted Scott. "And then we can turn around and go east afterwards, can't we?"

Edgar was listening with a slight frown. "You didn't tell me the polo started so early" he said.

"I just found out." Scott shrugged. "So? Can we? I'm leaving the decision up to Marine here."

Marine smiled. "There's no problem. That's the nice thing about my cruise, you can change everything last minute. I'm very flexible. So tomorrow we go to La Romana, and we watch Scott play his polo game, we stay a few days in Casa de Campo, and then we head back to Tortola. All right?"

"Sounds good to me," said Edgar jovially. "Shall we head back to the boat? I'm exhausted, I think I'll hit the sack. You two youngsters can stay and get acquainted. Good night."

He left, leaving Marine staring a bit panic stricken at his back. She wasn't sure she really wanted to "get acquainted" with Scott. She had begun to think of him as "*Scott the Barbarian*", if only to make her hands stop sweating when he got too near.

"So, uh, where did you grow up?" Marine asked, fiddling nervously with her napkin.

"All over the United States," he said. His eyes seemed to grow darker as he said that, and his face tightened imperceptibly.

"Were you an army brat?" she asked lightly.

"You could say that," he said shortly. Then he gave a sigh and looked at her. "I grew up on ten different Air Force bases. My father was a mechanic working for the Air Force. My mother died when I was two, so I have no memories of her at all."

"Oh! I'm sorry," she said softly. "That must have been hard."

"It was."

"Did your father remarry?" she asked. She was curious.

He was silent for a minute, staring at the candle flame in the middle of the table. "My father remarried when I was five. My stepmother and I never really got along."

"I'm sorry." Marine grimaced. She sounded like a broken record. "Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

He looked over at her and a trace of a smile tugged at his lips. "Edgar said to get acquainted and you certainly took him at his word. No, I have no brothers or sisters. I finished high school because I was a stubborn son of a bitch and wanted to prove my stepmother wrong when she told me I'd never amount to anything in my life. I went to college on a scholarship, I majored in economics, I graduated with honours and I met Edgar when I became engaged to his daughter. Does that satisfy your curiosity?" His eyes were narrowed, daring her to ask him anything else.

Marine decided she'd heard enough. The rest could wait, although she was dying to ask him about Edgar's daughter. "That's fine," she said, dredging up an icy voice. "So very interesting." She took a sip of wine and then dabbed at her lips. She was damned if she would be the first one to start talking again.

The minutes dragged by. Marine was used to silence, being alone on the boat so much, but she wasn't used to sitting across from someone and not having a conversation. Scott seemed completely at ease, he finished his meal and sat back with a contented sigh.

"That was good," he said, and for once his voice was devoid of sarcasm.

Marine decided to try again. "Would you like to take a walk through the bay-rum tree grove?" she asked. "It's not far, and it's a lovely place."

He nodded, and after he'd motioned the waiter over to give him the dinner check they wandered through the resort towards the forest. The sidewalks inside the resort were lit with small, mushroom-shaped lights, but once they crossed the road and took the path into the forest there were no more lights. It made no difference, the path was made of crushed, white shells and it glowed with a ghostly light under the full moon. The trees were tall and their leaves rustled overhead, spreading the distinctive bay-rum scent through the air. Marine stopped and took a deep breath.

"That's a wonderful scent," she said, "Don't you love it?"

Scott didn't answer at first. He simply looked up at the moon and let its silvery light play over his sharp features. The moonlight softened them, making him look younger, and somehow more vulnerable. He picked a leaf off the tree and crushed it, releasing its spicy fragrance. "Very nice," he said softly.

Marine looked at him sharply. She hadn't heard that tone of voice from him before. Somehow Scott seemed more human, more approachable all of a sudden. Unexpectedly she didn't feel as nervous around him any more.

"It's one of my favourite places," she admitted. "During the day it's even nicer, you can see the bay from here, and the boats in the harbour."

"Can you see *the Ranger* from here?" he asked.

"Of course." Her voice took on a wistful tone.

"You really love that boat, don't you? I saw you today, as you sailed her. You seemed so at ease with her." Scott stopped and she wondered what had possessed him to say that.

"I do love her." Marine's voice was vibrant with passion.

"Well, you certainly have taken good care of her."

"Can I ask you what you want to do with her?" Marine tried to keep her voice even.

"I want to take her up the East Coast to Block Island Sound. Back to her original home."

"Oh." Marine's voice sounded small. She took a deep breath, but lacked the courage to go on. She felt as if she'd received a blow to the stomach. Scott seemed to be waiting for a comment, but she said nothing.

They were walking in silence when Marine stumbled. She wasn't really used to walking through the forest with high-heels. She caught herself and stood up with a little laugh. "It's getting darker, the moon is hiding behind the clouds. I hope the weather will be good tomorrow for our sail." She wasn't really worried, the weather reports had all been excellent, but now that she knew it would be one of her last sails she wanted everything to be perfect.

Scott shrugged, "I suppose we should be getting back. Here, let me take your arm so you won't fall again."

Marine shied away from his touch, but as she did she caught her heel on a stone and her foot twisted violently to the side. She gave a cry.

"Whoa!" he said, "you need hiking boots, not those silly high-heels. Why don't you take them off before you really hurt yourself?"

"I'm afraid it's too late." Marine spoke between clenched teeth. Her ankle was hurting terribly. She limped for one or two steps, then stopped with a muffled sob. "Damn, I think I sprained it!" She hopped over to a fallen log and sat on it.

"Here, let me see." Scott reached down and his hand touched the bare skin of her leg.

Marine drew in her breath with a hiss. His hand was hot and dry. When he touched her, she felt the heat right up to her belly. She closed her eyes. It had been too long since she'd made love. Red had been her first lover, and her only lover. Why couldn't she be wanton for once? It might even make the sail more durable. Scott wasn't as bad as she first thought, and he was tall, handsome and sexy. Damn, he was sexy. She had the sudden urge to open her legs and pull Scott right into her.

Scott hesitated, then continued his caress. But it wasn't toward her ankle. It was upwards, towards her thigh. His hand slid under her silk dress and gently stroked her inner thigh. He was kneeling between her legs now, and somehow her knees were apart. She hadn't remembered

spreading them. But it didn't matter. What mattered was that there was a terrible urgency in her belly. She didn't stop him when his hand slipped under her silk panties and his fingers found her swollen labia and probed between them. She felt strong, sexual longing stab her, and she leaned back on her elbows on the smooth log, offering herself to Scott.

He lifted her dress. Slowly at first, then, when she said nothing, he pushed it up around her waist and pulled her underwear off. Naked from the waist down, Marine felt a sudden rush of liquid between her legs. Her need was so strong it was making her nipples stand up, pushing against the thin silk of her dress.

Scott's mouth came down on her nipples, sucking them through the smooth silk. His hand delved into her soft bush, parted her labia, and he fingered her clit, his hand slipping on her wetness, sliding back and forth.

Mindful of Red's orders not to move, Marine lay still, even if she wanted to reach out and touch Scott. She had no idea what to do, really. When he reared back and fumbled at his fly, letting loose an enormous cock, she gave a little cry.

"I have a rubber," Scott said. "I always have one or two in my wallet." True to his word, he soon had a foil packet in his hand.

Marine stared, fascinated. Red had never done that. She watched as Scott slid it on his engorged member, and as his hands smoothed it over his cock, she felt her mouth go dry. He was much bigger than Red. He approached her, and then, holding her open with his fingers, he sheathed himself within her. She was so tight, he couldn't penetrate at first, and he had to thrust several times. It hurt, but at the same time, it felt so good she thought she would die of pleasure. Her cunt throbbed in time to his thrusts, and she felt his chest rubbing against her nipples. His hands found her breasts and he squeezed them. Marine groaned with pleasure. He thrust a few more times, then, with a groan he shuddered against her. She didn't realise what had happened until he withdrew.

"Sorry, it's been a while," he said.

She nodded, but didn't know what he meant.

"Here, I'll help you come," he told her. He reached down, and then his hand was reaching

between her legs. She didn't know what he was up to, until he slid his finger into her cunt. She shivered as a wave of passion rushed over her. She'd thought that lovemaking ended when the man came. She had no idea what Scott was about to do. She only knew that his fingers sliding into her body were giving her intense pleasure. He ducked his head and tongued and fingered her clit until she felt an enormous rush of heat, and a frantic pulsing began in her cunt. She felt her whole body shake, as her stomach convulsed and her legs wrapped themselves around Scott's head, holding him tightly against her until the feeling had ebbed.

"Was that better?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered. She pulled her panties back on and smoothed her dress over her hips. Her whole body was tingling, but her ankle was still sprained. When she stood, she nearly fell.

Scott picked up Marine in his arms and carried her back down the path to the boat as if she weighed no more than a child did. Marine felt ridiculous. She tried to joke about it, but her foot hurt abominably. As soon as she reached the boat Scott put her gently on the deck. She took off her sandals and sank down on a deck chair.

"Well, it isn't broken," Scott said, touching her ankle professionally. His hands stayed near her foot, this time. "It's a bit swollen though, do you have ice?"

"Yes, in the cooler underneath the bench over there. You lift up the seat, it's built-in."

"Clever," Scott admitted. "This boat is amazing." He packed her ankle in ice then sat back on the deck, leaning on the mast. He heaved a sigh and then said to her teasingly, "I think I deserve a drink after all that effort. Do you want some wine?"

"No thanks," Marine said. "I'd rather have a drink of water, if you don't mind. The cold drinks are in the kitchen, just open the fridge."

Scott nodded and went below deck. Marine touched her ankle gingerly and decided it would be better in the morning. The ice was already helping the swelling, and the pain was rapidly diminishing.

Marine didn't feel any better though. Knowing that *the Ranger* would soon be far away from her was like a knife in her heart.

However she couldn't help remembering Scott's lovemaking and she was grateful of the

darkness that hid her blush. He had such a huge cock! Luckily he'd come so quickly. If he'd kept ploughing into her for a long time, she would have been so sore she couldn't walk. The idea made her nipples stand up again, and she tried to think of something else. She thought back on his conversation that evening and wondered what it must have been like to grow up with a stepmother who didn't love him, and a father who beat him. She toyed with the idea of feeling sorry for him, it was clear to her that he was wounded in some way deep inside, and perhaps that was why he was so aggressive with her.

Plus the fact his fiancée had just broken up with him. What kind of girl had she been? Was she Edgar's daughter? Was his heart broken? Would they make love again? Would he buy *the Ranger*? All those questions tumbled around in her mind as she sat there in the dark. The noises from below told her that Scott had found the drinks and the glasses and was putting ice into them. She tried to calm her thoughts as they flitted like so many butterflies through her head. Scott was a mystery to her. Feelings that she'd buried deep inside herself after the fiasco with Red were coming to the surface, and they were painful. She tightened her lips firmly and took a deep breath. She would not show the least bit of interest in the man who was about to take away the only thing she really cared about. She would not.



Down below deck, Scott finished putting ice into tall glasses and carefully poured cold water into them. His face wore a frown of concentration as he worked. He was thinking about Marine. Why had she been so nervous when they'd met? He'd been so sure she was nothing but an empty-headed model, especially after seeing her picture splashed across the pages of the fashion magazines. He picked up a lime out of the wicker basket hung over the sink and took a gleaming knife out of the wooden block. With a practiced movement he sliced the lime in two and squeezed the juice into the water. Then he carefully peeled off a corkscrew of zest and placed it in the glasses.

And why had she been so intent on showing him the bay-rum tree grove? He recalled the feel

of her firm thighs, her soft, full breasts in his hands and her tight, tight cunt. Just thinking about it made his penis stir with desire again. He had thought for a minute she might be a virgin, but what virgin would have offered herself on a fallen log? No, she was just tight, that's all. He paused thoughtfully. Was her ankle just a ploy to get him to make love to her? But no, he'd seen how swollen it was. Girls who pretended to be soft, helpless creatures only to show their true selves later had tricked him before. They'd turned out to be gold digging, conniving women, and he had no doubt that Marine was the same. Why should she be any different? And if she really loved the boat, as she professed, she would probably be willing to do anything to keep *the Ranger*. The thought made his lips thin to a harsh line. Well, let her. Let her try and soften him up, maybe he could even turn the situation to his advantage. Yes, why didn't he see just how far she'd go to keep her precious boat? She had no interest in him at all. No more than the others had. They only wanted his money. Marine was only interested in his boat. He could probably fuck her every which way he wanted, and she'd let him if she believed she'd get to keep the boat.

He handed the glass to Marine then went to sit on the bench in front of her. They sat in silence, listening to the sound of the water and the whisper of the night breeze. Each was alone with their thoughts.

Marine swirled the water in her glass and stared despondently at the wooden deck. She shivered, though the air was sultry. How long until *the Ranger* left the warm Caribbean bound for the cold waters of Cape Cod? Bound for the stormy waters the boat had been made for, the deep, slate blue Atlantic.

Scott eyed the tall girl in front of him. Her face was in shadow; the moonlight made her hair gleam like silver. She didn't speak, and that alone made her different from the chattering bunch of magpies he normally went out with. She made him think of Ellen, and that surprised him. He'd tried to forget how much he missed Ellen. She had been Edgar's daughter and his fiancée. Had been, that is, until she'd died suddenly in an airplane accident. He closed his eyes and wrenched his thoughts away from what must have been a terrifying death. He tried to concentrate on the

movement of the boat beneath his feet, and listen to the sound of the waves steadily slapping the hull. After a moment his breathing steadied and he opened his eyes to find Marine staring at him.

"Are you all right?" she asked softly.

"I'm fine." his voice was harsh and he saw her flinch. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to snap at you. I guess I'm just in a bad mood," he added defensively.

Marine stared at him, her eyes huge in her face. "That's all right," she said after a pause, "although I can't imagine anyone being in a bad mood on this boat."

Scott's mouth curled in a snarl. "That's all you think about, isn't it? The boat is all that matters to you."

Marine flushed. She didn't appreciate him telling her what her feelings were, even if he did come dangerously close to the truth. Perhaps it was his tone of voice, more than the words though that pricked her into replying heatedly, "That's not so!" Her eyes blazed. "You don't know the first thing about me," she cried.

Scott shrugged. "I know enough," he said lazily. "You're all alike aren't you?"

Marine stood up and started limping towards the hatch. "I'm going to bed," she said with as much dignity as she could manage. "I hope you'll be in a better mood tomorrow morning." She turned her back to him and climbed awkwardly down the ladder. It wasn't easy moving with her sore ankle, but she'd be damned before she asked that insufferable barbarian to help her to her room.

Scott watched her go with something like regret. She'd been so convincing there for a moment. Too bad he couldn't believe her. He finished his drink and sat a while in the darkness before finally giving in to his exhaustion and going down to his room. Ever since Ellen's accident his nights had been disturbed by nightmares. He hardly slept a whole night through now, the flames and the screams would assault him, and he'd waken covered with cold sweat. He eyed the bottles of rum tucked into the beautifully crafted wooden bar, but walked by without touching them. There had been a time when he'd needed something to numb him, to deaden the pain. But not now, not any more. And never again, he swore silently to himself as he made his way down the narrow corridor to his bedroom.

Chapter Four

The morning sun shining through the porthole onto his face woke Scott. He lay still for a minute, trying to remember where he was. Sometimes, when the night had passed peacefully with no bad dreams to wake him and ice his blood, he would wake up believing that Ellen was still alive. In the first glimmers of wakefulness his mind sometimes played tricks like that, which was why he threw the covers off himself with a muffled curse and sat up quickly, running his fingers through his unruly curls. But the feeling of empty longing was dimmed today. He felt the sun hot on his bare back now, and for a second he sat quite still, revelling in the warmth of it. And then he thought he heard the sound of water streaming past just inches from his bed. He turned with a fluid motion and stared out the porthole. No, he hadn't imagined it; the boat was slicing through the lapis-blue water. He leapt out of bed, forgetting how small the room was and banged his head on the ceiling. "Ouch!" He bent over the tiny sink in the bathroom hardly big enough to contain a shower, toilet and sink, and splashed water on his face. His reflection glared back at him as he tried to brush his curls down, but he gave up with an oath and flung his dress shirt on over his swimming trunks before storming above-board.

"Good morning Scott!" It was Edgar, sitting cheerfully on deck and balancing a steaming cup of tea in one hand as he held the wheel in the other. "Have a good sleep?"

Scott stared at Edgar, then at Marine, busy hauling in the mainsail and hitching the rope around a cleat.

"Hi!" she said breathlessly. "Whew, there's quite a breeze today. I hope you don't mind, we decided to leave at eight sharp, and Edgar told me not to wake you up."

"He did what?" Scott glared at Edgar. But his glare lacked conviction and he laughed sheepishly. "I suppose I was pretty tired," he said. "Where can I get some hot coffee?"

"In the thermos," said Marine, jerking her chin towards the cockpit. "It's under the seat there. And the mugs are in the kitchen in the cabinet over the sink. I'd get it for you, but I'd like to raise the jib soon. Now that there are three of us I'll show you how fast this baby can really go." Her

voice rang with excitement, and her hair was whipping in the wind like a dark cloud around her shoulders. Her eyes glowed, and Scott realised with a pang that she was beautiful. He stared at her.

“Cat got your tongue?” Edgar’s mocking voice floated over the wind.

Scott looked daggers at him, and went to fetch a mug. He drank his coffee quickly; then he and Marine set about raising the jibs. Edgar stayed at the helm, holding the wheel steady, while the boat seemed to skim over the waves. Her hull was nearly flush with the water at times, and Scott and Marine found themselves sitting high on the side of the boat leaning outwards as she slanted towards the water, her sails taut in the wind, her rigging singing to the sky.

Marine held onto the rope and leaned backwards so far her hair brushed the water. Her face was illuminated with a fierce joy. Scott knew how she felt. The boat had him captivated as well. Her sleek lines and sheer beauty amazed and humbled him. The feeling of the water sliced in two by the sharp keel as she cleaved through the waves was exhilarating. The boat, the wind and the shimmering water all merged into one under the vast, blue sky.

They docked in the bay next to Casa de Campo, and Marine took their passports to the immigration office near the tiny airport of La Romano while Scott and Edgar tidied the boat and squared away the sails. Marine had been to the Dominican Republic many times on her cruises. Casa de Campo was a popular spot for people who liked to golf, ride horseback, or even go clay pigeon shooting.

Marine and Edgar went to town of La Romano while Scott took a bus to the stables to see about getting on a polo team. Then they were all to meet near the church at Altos de Chavon, the beautiful village built on the mountaintop overlooking a river.

Marine wanted to buy some groceries at the supermarket, and Edgar confessed he’d left his razor at home and needed to buy a new one. Marine found she got along well with Edgar. He told her that he was happy with the way she’d kept *the Ranger* looking so good. He praised her so much she ended up protesting.

“Stop it! I’m getting a big head!” she laughed.

“That’s all right. You deserve it.”

Marine blushed. "Well, thank you very much."

They deposited their shopping at the boat and then went to the village. It was built to imitate the famous French Provincial village "*Les Baux de Provence*." An eccentric millionaire had imagined a stone village sitting on top of the mountain, and he'd had whole thing built to suit his fancy. Cars were forbidden in the village, and tourists wandered around it, hand in hand. It had lovely stone buildings, cobblestone streets, and everything looked centuries old, although it was quite recent. It was built high on a cliff overlooking a river and had an incredible view. Marine leaned over the parapet and stared down to the winding river and the palm tree grove along its banks. Flocks of white egrets flew among the trees and over the emerald-green river. From up on the mountain the birds were just tiny white spots.

"I love this place," said Marine. "It's so romantic."

"I think it's pretty too, but it's sort of like a fantasy town. It only exists for the tourists." Edgar said.

They wandered around a bit more, looking at the jewellery in the gallery, and perusing the menus of the various restaurants of the town.

"Where do you want to eat?" asked Marine. "Italian? Mexican? French?"

"How about Dominican? I used to know a little place down in the town that serves authentic Dominican food. It seems a shame to come all the way here to eat Italian food, doesn't it?" Edgar said wisely.

"It does," agreed Marine. "Oh look, here comes Scott."

He had spotted them and was striding over. He wore a big grin. "Guess what? I play tomorrow morning. I was lucky to get on a team. There are a lot of players right now here on vacation."

"Do you really play polo?" Marine asked.

"What did you think? That I was just showing off?" Scott growled.

"No, no! It's just that polo is a very, well, exclusive sport, isn't it? I mean, not everyone plays polo." she finished weakly.

"Scott plays very well," said Edgar proudly. "He plays in Myopia, our polo club in Massachusetts. He started with the college team at Yale."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound rude," said Marine. "I never even rode a horse, so I imagined it as being horribly dangerous."

"It is," said Scott shortly. "I've seen some bad falls. But I've never had a serious accident."

Marine had the feeling that everything she said annoyed Scott, so she just nodded, and resolved to talk to him as little as possible. She found herself wondering what would happen if Scott fell off his horse tomorrow and killed himself. Would Edgar still want to sell *the Ranger*? Had *the Ranger* been for sale for a long time? Was Scott the only buyer?

"What are you thinking about?" asked Edgar, jokingly. "You look a million miles away."

"Nothing," said Marine feeling her cheeks redden. "I...I was just wondering about the polo, that's all. I never saw a game."

They had dinner in the town of Romana. Marine had fried chicken served with red beans and rice. Edgar had marinated fish, and Scott had grilled yellowtail. Scott was very polite to Marine that evening, and offered to teach her to ride if she wanted.

Marine felt her heart start to pound. She didn't want to admit it, but she was terrified at the idea of finding herself on top of a horse.

"No thanks," she said lightly. "I think I'm allergic to horses anyway."

"Really?" Scott sounded sceptical.

"Well, every time I get near one I start to sneeze." Marine had never been allergic to anything in her life, but she was fairly sure allergies included sneezing.

"I'll find you a nice, gentle pony and we will go riding in the sugar cane fields, wouldn't you like that?"

"A pony? Well, that sounds all right." Marine had an image of a small shaggy animal that she could straddle and still touch the ground with her feet. "Yes, I think I'd like that. Ponies are small, aren't they?"

"Polo ponies are the same size as horses," said Edgar.

"Oh!" Marine glared at Scott. "What are you trying to do? Kill me?"

Scott laughed, "You're being ridiculous! Anyone can ride, I'll show you."

"I really don't want to," Marine tried to keep her voice steady.

"Leave her alone," said Edgar. "If she doesn't want to ride, don't force her!"

"What is it? You're scared?" Scott sounded incredulous.

"As a matter of fact, I'm terrified," admitted Marine.

Scott snorted. "I thought women now a days were a bit braver, ready to try new things, and prove how capable they are."

"This woman is brave enough, but I happen to have a fear of horses. All right? Now, leave me alone!" Marine lost her temper.

"Leave you alone?" Scott snorted. "Of course I'll leave you alone. I offer to teach you to ride, an extremely nice thing to do, and you act as if I were going to rape you or something."

"Scott!" Edgar's voice held a warning note. "You're stepping out of line."

Marine and Scott glared at each other for the rest of the evening. Marine half wished Scott would fall off his horse and get killed, ending all her problems once and for all, but when she did think that she felt guilty and angry with herself. She could still hear Claire's voice saying sternly, "People are more important than boats."

That evening, Edgar went to bed early, leaving Scott and Marine on deck. The boat was docked at a slip at the end of a long pier. Next to them, other boats bobbed tranquilly in the dark water. A radio was playing somewhere. It was a calm night, with a wisp of cloud hiding the moon. Onshore someone laughed, the sound floating over the water.

Marine felt as if her body was hyper-sensitive whenever she was alone with Scott. His slightest movement sent tremors down her spine. For a while they sat on deck, not speaking. Then Scott came over, and without a word, took her face in his hands and kissed her.

As soon as his warm lips touched hers, Marine was lost. She knew she would be incapable of pushing him away. When he touched her, her muscles turned to water. She trembled, but didn't protest when he put his hands beneath her shirt and unfastened her bra. He lifted her bra and her

shirt off at the same time, and then he bent over and took one nipple in his mouth. She'd never stood outside topless. The feeling of the night air against her skin was like a caress. And then Scott unfastened her pants and pushed them down to her ankles. Her underwear followed, and by the time she stepped out of them, her labia were so swollen with desire she could feel them between her legs when she moved.

Scott pushed her down to her knees, and then opened his pants, taking his cock out and putting it in front of her face.

"Suck it," he said in a soft voice. "Go on, take it in your mouth." He took a handful of her hair and pressed her head to his loins.

Marine had never done anything like this before. She opened her lips and slid them over the tip of his penis. To her surprise, it was as smooth as satin. The skin was much softer than she'd imagined.

"Take me in your hands," he said.

She reached up and shyly stroked his cock. Then she reached behind it. His testicles were so soft, she loved to feel them, feel their weight in her hand. His cock quivered, and he pressed it to her lips.

"Quickly," he moaned.

She opened her mouth and tried to take it in, but he was too big. He pushed, thrusting into her throat. She opened her mouth wider, letting her tongue slide over the smooth shaft. She tried not to scrape his flesh with her teeth, so she covered them with her lips. The thrusting was getting more urgent. She could feel his thighs trembling. Then he was spurting into her mouth, and she pulled backwards, surprised. He held her firmly by the head, keeping his cock in her mouth until he was through. Then he zipped up his jeans. He helped her to her feet and kissed her. His hands cupped her buttocks, and she pressed herself to him, trying to ease the burning she felt in her cunt. Her mouth salty with his cum and her lips felt swollen. He kissed her gently. She moaned and wrapped one leg around his hip, trying to draw him closer.

He chuckled and then reached between her legs. He found how wet she was, and gave a low whistle. "Here, let me take care of that," he said, and then it was his turn to kneel before her. He

spread her thighs apart with his hands, so that she was practically sitting on his face, and then he dove his fingers into her, thrusting first one, then two fingers into her slippery vagina. With his tongue, he licked her clit, pressing first with his finger, then with his tongue, and all the while driving into her with two fingers. He stopped, and then wiggled them, so it felt as if there was something live inside of her. She arched her back, pressing harder against his mouth. She could feel herself cresting, gasping for breath, and she started to grind her cunt into his face and hands, searching for release. When it came, she staggered and nearly fell. Her vagina pulsed and she could feel Scott's tongue tickling her as she came, his teeth rubbing on her clit, his fingers shoved far up her cunt.

Then Scott kissed her once more, her juices still sticky on his lips. He kissed her long and hard, then went below with just a whispered, "Good night."

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The next day they all went to the polo field. Scott introduced his team-mates to Edgar and Marine, and he even introduced Marine to one of his ponies.

"This is P  p  , he's very gentle. Do you want to ride on him?" he asked.

Marine shrank away from the huge creature. "Are you insane? He's so big! If he started to run I'd fall off and kill myself." She felt a momentary pang when she remembered that she had half wanted Scott to do that very thing. "Thanks anyway."

"Go ahead, try!"

"No thank you." Marine stared in fascination at the line of horses tied along the side of the field. "Do you need all those horses?"

"Well, the team does. There are four periods of play, called "chukkas", and each player plays one horse per chukka. That way they don't get too tired. The chukkas last seven minutes, so a game isn't that long. I'll sit with you during the second game and explain some more if you want."

Scott looked at Marine and wondered why he'd insisted so much that she ride. Was it because

Ellen, his fiancée, had loved to gallop with him across the rolling fields in Myopia? Ellen had introduced him to horses, and to polo. She'd taken him to the club to watch a game, and he'd been captivated. The virility and violence of the sport attracted him. Going to the polo club had been so natural for her. He never wanted to admit how intimidated he was. He came from a very modest background, but the people at the club had made him feel welcome. Was it because he'd been with Ellen? Everyone had loved her. She had been so kind and friendly. His face tightened as he thought of her. Ellen hadn't been afraid of horses, not like Marine. Perhaps she was one of those fragile, model types, like the girl he'd dated recently. She had been afraid of everything, going into screaming fits if she even thought she saw a spider. At first it had amused him, but he soon got tired of her hysterics. Was Marine like that?

He glanced at the tall, slender girl standing near him and wondered. The tropical breeze lifted a lock of her shiny, dark brown hair and she made a slight moue of annoyance as she brushed it out of her eyes. She certainly looked like a model; he was sure that she would just turn out to be a timorous, faint-hearted woman. He snorted and Marine turned her amber eyes towards him questioningly.

"Did you say something?" she asked.

"If you want to see the game you better go sit in the stands," he said, a bit coldly. "The bell is about to ring."

"Oh! All right." Marine bit her lip, then, taking a deep breath, reached over and quickly patted Scott's horse on its velvety nose. "There!" she cried triumphantly. "I touched it!"

Scott looked at her with an ironic grin. "Bravo, and it didn't even try to eat you." His voice dripped with sarcasm.

Marine blushed. "I've never pet a horse before, I never even got near one. I suppose that you've been around them all your life, but I haven't. I think I was brave. So there!" She tossed her head and went to join Edgar.

She and Edgar sat in the wooden stands and they cheered as Scott's team cantered onto the field. The sun was bright overhead, and the ponies' coats gleamed all different colours. Marine especially liked the reddish ones with the flaxen tails. Edgar told her they were called chestnuts.

Scott played well. He wasn't the best player on his team, but when he hit the ball it went far. He was bumped a few times by opposing players, causing Marine to cry out, but Edgar told her that it was just a ride-off, and that the players did that to get to the ball. Then Scott took a fall; the horse he was riding stumbled when another horse rode into him and both horses and riders went down in a cloud of dust. Marine grabbed Edgar's arm, but the horses clambered right back up onto their feet, and the two players got up too, dusting themselves off and gingerly touching their bruises.

Scott's team lost, eight to six, which meant that Scott was out of the tournament. He shrugged good-naturedly when he told Marine that they could set sail the next day if she wanted. "The polo," he said, "is over for me."

"I should hope so!" cried Marine. "It looks far too dangerous. You had a terrible fall, I thought you had been hurt!"

Scott looked amused. "It was a little fall. I landed on my shoulder, but it's fine." He winced as he swung his arm around. "See? Anyway, I'm never going to stop playing. I love it too much. If I couldn't play polo anymore I don't know what I'd do." He looked at Marine challengingly. "I suppose after seeing me fall you won't want to try and ride."

"You're right about that," said Marine.

"Chicken," Scott said, but it was without malice.

"That's all right, you can show me your bruises when we go swimming this afternoon, but right now I'm off to the boat, I have to chart our course to Tortola. Shall we leave tonight or tomorrow morning?"

"Tomorrow." Scott was curt. "I have some important phone calls to make to the office in Boston this afternoon, and I think I'll eat dinner at the club with Edgar tonight, if you can bear to be left alone for a while that is."

Marine was stung but tried not to show it. "Of course I don't mind," she said. "I'm used to staying alone on *the Ranger*."

"Well, there's no television, you can't watch soap operas on the boat."

"I've never owned a television, so I don't miss it a bit," snapped Marine. "Now, if you can

bear to be left alone a minute, I have some work to do aboard. I'll see you tomorrow morning when we set sail."

Marine went to the beach after checking in at the boat and spent the rest of the afternoon lying lazily in the sun. She tried to sort out her feelings about Scott and *the Ranger*.

Scott was a spoiled brat, she decided finally. He was used to getting his own way about everything, which made him bossy. He was big and coordinated, which made him good at sports, but he looked down on anyone weaker than him. She rolled over and put more sunscreen on her shoulders. She couldn't decide if she was feeling depressed or if she was just exhausted. Thinking about *the Ranger* made her unhappy, but when she stopped her mind switched to Red and that was no better. "Men!" she muttered angrily, getting up and striding into the sea for a swim. Maybe the clear, turquoise water would relax her and put her in a better mood.

She put on the snorkel and mask she'd taken with her from the boat and started out towards the reef. The coral was mostly broken up and dead from all the construction done in the bay and Marine was disappointed to see that there had been no attempt to try and preserve the fragile reef. It was a pity, she reflected as she drifted over the bits and pieces of broken coral, that the reef had been destroyed. A million years had gone into its making and barely a decade had ruined it. Here and there a stray bit of coral had survived. A red stag horn coral, an orange sea fan. There was a sea horse bobbing along, and peeking out of an overhanging ledge was a moray eel. Sea urchins prickled along the seabed, and colourful fish darted about. The reef was making an attempt to heal itself, but how many hundreds of years before it was back to its former glory?

Marine left the water even more depressed than before. "Men," she muttered angrily. "Can't they build something without destroying something else?"

## Chapter Five

"Which island is that?" Edgar called out, pointing to the right.

"That's where we're heading," said Marine with satisfaction. "Tortola, a British Virgin Island. We'll sail around her and have lunch on a desert island before heading to Roadtown this evening." She shaded her eyes and pointed to a swath of white froth on the water's surface about a quarter mile away. "There's a reef. It's great scuba diving, but it's best to keep the boat away from it. We'll just keep this tack a while, then head north around that spit of land sticking out there."

"Sounds good," said Edgar, looking at the reef through his binoculars. "The reef looks dangerous," he added.

"Countless ships sunk in these waters," said Marine. "Treasure hunters love to explore the Caribbean."

"Pirates, sailing captured Spanish galleons, running aground on a reef; it does sound rather fascinating," Edgar said. "If I were thirty years younger I think I'd like to search for a sunken treasure."

Scott looked up at them. For a second the light caught his eyes and made them glow like emeralds in the sun. Marine felt a queer sensation in the back of her throat. He looked exactly like one of those pirates of old, she thought. His white shirt was rolled up at the sleeves and his hair was a riot of black curls in the wind. Even the set of his mouth, a hard, thin line, added to the resemblance. Then they tacked and the great sail cast the deck in shadow. As Scott sat down and grabbed a soda out of the cooler, Marine shook her head. The illusion faded. He was just a bad-tempered, sexy young man sipping a drink on the deck of a fabulous racing yacht.

They anchored just off a tiny, round island made almost entirely of white sand. The water around it was all the shades imaginable of blue and turquoise. Scott stared at the mini-paradise with his mouth open.

"Quite a sight, isn't it?" asked Marine smugly. Before he could answer she peeled off her tee

shirt revealing a ruby-red bikini. She stood for a minute watching the water carefully, then satisfied there were no dangerous creatures, dove into the water. Scott could see her under the transparent water, swimming easily along the sandy seabed. She kicked once and shot to the surface. "Come on in, the water's fine!" she said happily.

Scott and Edgar donned swimsuits, masks and snorkels and swam in lazy circles around the small reef on the far side of the island while Marine built a fire on the sand. When the coals were just right she adjusted the grill over them and laid on the fish filets that she'd marinated overnight. The odour of grilled fish lured Scott and Edgar out of the water.

"I see you've thought of everything," said Edgar with satisfaction, as he dried off with a large fluffy towel and sat down on the folding chair Marine had set up under the tiny island's unique palm tree.

"What I'd like to know is, how did you get everything from the boat to here?" asked Scott as he eyed the grill, chairs, and table set for three with amazement.

Marine laughed. "It's easy, everything folds. The table doubles as a raft, if you peek underneath it you'll see the coiled rope. I simply lower everything down and tow it to shore. My father built the table for me, and the grill is old, as you can see. It's pretty ingenious though, there's the stand with pegs in it, and the grill has a long handle that fits between the pegs. You can adjust the height." She deftly turned the fish and sat back on her haunches in front of the fire with a wide grin.

Scott found himself grinning back, and for a moment he felt absurdly young and carefree.

This trip was doing him a world of good. He hadn't felt like this for years. When Ellen died nearly four years ago he had been shattered. Edgar had tried everything to raise his spirits, yet nothing had worked.



Then Edgar's wife had died, and Scott had been there for him. He'd been the one to hold Edgar up, remembering the kindness and support Edgar had shown him. Scott looked at Edgar and

smiled. Edgar was the father he'd never had, and he felt eternally lucky to know him.

After Michelle broke up with Scott, Edgar decided the time was right to show Scott *the Ranger*. He told him that he thought that the beautiful, mystical boat would be just what Scott needed. *Edgar was right*, thought Scott, looking at the boat.

They had lunch and then Scott insisted on helping as Marine cleaned up. She explained that she always left the beach as she'd found it, the only thing she left in place was the circle of heavy stones that served as a fireplace so that other people could use it.

Edgar took a nap in the scanty shade of the single palm tree, while Marine and Scott donned snorkels and set off to explore the reef. Marine took the rest of the fish they'd had for lunch, and held it in front of a large coral boulder. Soon a moray eel snaked its head out and took the scraps.

Tiny, jewel-like fish darted about, waving sea fans of every pastel colour lined the sandy seabed. In the reef, parrotfish and angle fish swam about. Marine swam in front of Scott, and she could feel his presence behind her. When they stopped to see something, he would drift next to her, his thighs brushing hers, his hands sometimes touching her arms or shoulders. It made swimming difficult, as she was soon so aroused she thought her nipples would pop through her bikini top. She didn't want him to touch her shoulders. She wanted him to grab her breasts, to rip her bathing suit bottom off, and plunge into her body. But she didn't dare make the slightest sign she needed him. Instead, she waited until he had rounded a coral outcropping and was out of sight before plunging her own hand into her bathing suit bottom and rubbing her clit frantically. Holding onto a smooth rock, she tried to assuage her need. But it only made things worse, and Scott, wondering where she was, turned back to find her.

Uttering a silent oath, she withdrew her hand from her aching cunt and swam through the clear water back towards the boat. Maybe in the privacy of her own room she could ease her intense arousal. Scott swam next to her, pointing at different fish, his green eyes glowing behind his facemask. Marine tried to look interested, but she could hardly wait to get back to her room. Thinking about it was making her buttocks clench. Finally the ship's ladder came in view, and she took a hold of it in one hand while taking off her scuba mask with the other. Just as she was about to mount the ladder, a firm hand grasped her waist from behind. Scott took his own mask off, and

leaned over Marine's shoulder. "I've been watching you, and you sure look good from behind," he said in a sultry voice.

Marine was already at a fever pitch. As soon as Scott slid her bathing suit bottom off, she opened her legs wide, hanging onto the ladder with her hands, letting her body float in the water.

Scott undid his own bathing suit, standing naked behind her. She could feel his erection pressed to her thigh. "Are you on the pill?" he asked.

"No." Marine blushed. She hadn't even thought about that.

"That's all right. I have another idea. What do you think about this?" Scott reached one hand in front of her, slid down her belly and plunged a finger into her cunt. The other hand parted her buttocks and gently massaged her anus. He introduced a finger, pushing until she uttered a soft cry and pushed hard against him, her cunt throbbing around his finger. His cock slid into her ass. Not all the way—just the tip, and he waited until she was writhing with pleasure, little cries coming from her throat, before slowly pushing it all the way inside her.

Now Marine was frantic. She grabbed the ladder with both hands and arched her back, moving her hips back and forth, the feeling of her ass full of his cock, his fingers still thrust into her cunt was too much. She stifled a scream and came, her whole body convulsing with her release.

The feeling pushed Scott over the edge. His control shattered and he gave a strangled cry and shot his seed into her round buttocks, his cock pumping into her until he thought he'd turn inside-out. He could hardly catch his breath. They floated in the water, still holding on to the ladder.

"Did you ever do that before?" he asked Marine.

"Make love in the water?" Marine asked.

"No, I mean, anal sex."

She blushed. "No. Did you?"

"Once or twice." Scott was silent. "I hope I didn't hurt you."

"I'll probably be a bit sore, but it was worth it," said Marine, with a mischievous grin.

Scott swallowed. He was getting hard again. Marine was floating in the water in front of him, naked from the waist down, he'd unfastened her bikini top, letting her magnificent breasts free. As

he watched, she rubbed her hand between her legs. The sight made his penis stand straight up. Marine caught sight of that and her heart fluttered. "It's hard again." she whispered. Red had never been able to get a hard-on after coming. He'd explained that men could only come once, while women could come many times. She looked at Scott and raised her eyebrows. "Didn't you come already?"

His look of amusement rankled and excited her at the same time. He also seemed able to read her like a book. "What, your ex boyfriend couldn't do it twice in a row? Honey, I can do it three or four times. Now, how about it?" "

"Maybe later," said Marine, biting her lip. "I think my butt is a bit sore." She reached behind her back and massaged herself.

That did it. Scott barely had time to grab her body and press himself to her before he was ejaculating again—this time his cum shot into the clear blue waters of the Caribbean like a faint, white cloud.

Marine held him while he came, her breasts against his mouth, and he took advantage of that to take a nipple in his mouth and suck hard. The feeling made Marine wish he'd plunge his huge cock into her ass again, but when she mentioned this, he shook his head.

"No, we'd better go slow. We'll see how you feel in a few days, all right?"

"What about...?" Marine hesitated.

"Your sweet cunt?" Scott leered. "I'll take that anytime, anywhere you offer it. Just make sure we have some rubbers handy, or go on the pill."

"All right," Marine said. She sighed. "I think we'd better get dressed, Edgar will be waking up soon and we have to go."

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An hour later, they set sail for Tortola. As the great, green island came into view Marine stood up and cleared her throat. "Ahem," she said, looking a bit sheepish. "I usually recite a short poem

here." She drew a deep breath then quoted,

"Tortola, proud Queen,
I see you reclining,
Half wild, half tamed, with the sea
Froth shining.
Waves ring your body
While the sun on the mountaintop
Crowns you in gold and emerald.
Tortola, rough Queen,
The wind sings your lay
Old as the sea,
Green as the day."

As she spoke, her hands wove in the air, and Scott realised she was also signing the poem in the language of the deaf. Marine stopped and grinned self-consciously. "One of the native writers here on the island wrote that poem. He hands out his poems on the docks every once in a while, and you can buy one of his books in the local shops. Maybe we'll get to see him tonight. He's quite a character."

"Why did you use the sign language?" asked Scott.

"Because the poet is deaf. He recites his poems silently." Marine said.

"Do you quote poetry for each of the islands we come to?" asked Edgar.

"Well, I suppose I could." Marine sounded doubtful. "I'll have to work on memorizing them though. I remember "Tortola" because it's short and sort of rhymes. The other ones don't and it's a bit harder to memorize stuff that doesn't rhyme, don't you think?" she turned to Scott.

"Don't look at me!" Scott spread his hands. "I never could remember any poetry. Come to

think about it, I don't even remember reading any." He looked through lowered lashes at Marine.

When he did that he looked a bit like a lazy tiger, thought Marine. She turned her back on him to hide her blush and made much of examining the rigging. She couldn't help it, whenever he looked at her she felt a strong tingling sensation in her stomach. She took a couple deep breaths and when she was sure her face was back to its normal colour she turned around again. "Well, we're just about there. Let's take down the sails and motor in. I reserved a space for us at the far dock. If you'll tie her up I'll just go sign in at the marina."

She jumped lightly off the boat as she docked and walked quickly away. Scott followed her with his eyes. She waved to a couple men in a boat tied up nearby, and Scott was surprised to feel a little jab of jealousy when one of them blew her a kiss. Marine laughed and then turned the corner and disappeared into the office.

"Penny for your thoughts," said Edgar, giving Scott a tap on the shoulder.

"Oh, nothing, nothing." Scott said, and shrugged.

"She is rather a fascinating girl, isn't she?" Edgar said with a grin.

"So, you've become a matchmaker?" Scott's voice came out rough. "Did you know about her before we came down here?"

Edgar shook his head. "I'd never seen her before. And to tell you the truth, I thought she'd be a lot older."

"Oh." Scott was silent for a minute. "Well, she is pretty." He spoke grudgingly.

"Oh, not half as pretty as Michelle though." Edgar sounded bland.

Scott swung around and said hotly, "What? Are you crazy? She's much prettier than Michelle, Michelle's so empty-headed she probably thinks poetry is a foreign language."

"And she gets sea-sick," Edgar said. "Do you remember when you took her to Martha's Vineyard for the weekend?"

Scott shuddered. "She threw up on her Pekingese."

"And her Pekingese threw up on your shoes. It was a memorable trip." Edgar

laughed. "Actually it was about the only time I liked the girl."

"You never told me you disliked her." Scott said.

"I wasn't about to tell you I disliked her. It's much more effective when you find out for yourself." Edgar finished coiling the rope and he laid it on the deck. "This is a Flemish flake," he said, pointing to the rope. "It's a spiral coil of one layer only, laid on the deck, so it may be walked on if necessary." He looked satisfied. "I learned that when I was an itty-bitty lad."

Scott snorted. "You learned everything when you were itty-bitty."

"A walking proof that old dogs can't learn new tricks," Edgar agreed. "Well, I'm taking my shower then a nap before dinner. See you later." He nodded to Scott and went down the hatch.

Scott went to the cooler and took out a can of soda. He sat on a deck chair and sipped the cold, sweet liquid. The sight of the can reminded him of the picture he'd seen of Marine, and he wondered if she was like Michelle; a silly twit. He was beginning to doubt it. She had the looks, but thankfully not the brains of a top model. Well, maybe not all models were as idiotic as Michelle. He'd have to revise his way of thinking.

A few people drifted past the dock, coming closer to get a look at the old wooden sailboat.

"Nice yacht," said one man. "Looks like a racer."

"She was." said Scott easily. "But that was a long time ago."

"She yours?" the man was curious.

Scott shook his head. "Nope, I'm just cruising on her. She belongs to a friend of mine."

The man nodded and walked on down the wooden dock. Scott sighed and tipped his head back to the sky. He loved the sounds the boat made: the soft clapping of the water on the hull, the gentle twang of rope on the aluminium mast, the creak of wooden beams settling. He felt peace drift over him and he closed his eyes. His face relaxed and lost its haunted, fierce look.

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When Marine came back to the boat he was sleeping, his head tilted to the side, the can of soda

cradled in his lap. She watched him for a while, not making a sound. A strange sort of protective feeling came over her. He was unarmed before her. Sleep changed his features. He no longer wore the sardonic scowl that Marine had seen since she'd known him. She felt the urge to run her fingers over his high forehead, down his sharp nose, over the curve of his lips and strong chin, and then down his neck to his broad chest.

She reached to him, and then pulled back when he stirred. With a sigh, she turned and made her way to her cabin. Inside, she opened her porthole to let in some air. A soft breeze lifted the curtains. She undressed, quickly showered and changed, and then she made reservations in a good restaurant for dinner.

While in the shower she made a few mental notes for things to buy before they left the island, then she dressed and went to join Scott and Edgar for a drink.

"I made reservations for us to eat at a nice pub on Main Street," she announced. "I hope everyone is hungry?"

"Starving," said Edgar jocularly.

"Good, well, let's go." Marine glanced at Scott, but he was back to his barbarian act again, she decided. He hardly looked at her, and strode off down the dock ahead of her and Edgar. "What's with him?" she whispered to Edgar.

"I have no idea," he said, narrowing his eyes a bit.

Edgar took her arm and they chatted easily as they walked.

Every once in a while Scott would glance back at them. To him it seemed as if Marine was flirting outrageously with his old friend, leading him on. He narrowed his eyes angrily. She certainly gave her body to him easily enough. She probably screwed with every one of her clients, he thought. Then he reconsidered. She was so inexperienced, she was so tight, and she was practically a virgin. Or was she just a consummate actress? Was she going to try to seduce Edgar to get her boat? Maybe she would stoop to anything to get the boat.

Marine and Edgar strolled down main-street and then up the hill a ways to a restaurant. It had a splendid view of the harbour. There was a short line of people waiting to be seated, and Marine

led the way to the bar after giving the hostess their names.

At the bar Scott noticed a tall man with long brown hair tied back in a ponytail. He was noticeable for his height, and for his face which could have been a model for one of the classic Grecian statues. He had a long, straight nose and a broad, high forehead. His eyes were an uncanny shade of turquoise. When he saw Marine his face lost its sternness and broke into a wide grin.

He opened his arms and Marine threw herself into them. He kissed her soundly on the lips and then hugged her tightly.

Scott looked over at Edgar, who shrugged. He watched Marine in the other man's arms and his brows drew together.

Marine and the other man began a long conversation in sign language. Marine's hands flew and her face became animated. To Scott the fact that she was so fluent in sign language meant only one thing. She had lived with this man and was certainly his lover. His face became as dark as a thundercloud. Marine came over with the man in tow and introduced him.

"Edgar, Scott, we're so lucky tonight. You'll never guess who this is! His name is Keith, and he..."

Scott let her get no further. "So, this is your lover. Is that it? You ran into him here, and you want to know if he can sail the rest of the way with us. Is that what you want?"

Marine gaped at Scott.

"Um, Scott," Edgar said, "I think you better apologise."

"Apologise?" Scott looked at Edgar. "Why should I? This girl obviously led us on. Perhaps she thought you'd change your mind about selling the boat."

Edgar was getting very red and Marine looked as if she were carved out of a block of ice.

"I think you are a beast," she finally hissed. "You are worse than a barbarian. You have a heart of stone and no, absolutely no..." Her breasts were heaving and eyes were flashing. "No sense at all!" she finished. "This is Keith, the poet who writes such lovely poems about the islands." She turned and her hands flew as she told Keith what Scott had said. The tall man threw his head back

and laughed silently. He and Marine talked with sign language for a few minutes then he turned and motioned behind him. A beautiful woman walked gracefully over.

"This is Keith's wife," Marine said. "Edgar and Scott, I'd like you to meet Tahia. She is a dress designer here on Tortola." She looked at Scott and he could tell she was still furious. Her eyes hadn't lost their hardness. Scott wished he could disappear. Only Edgar looked cheerful. He took Tahia's hand and kissed it.

"My dear, I am so pleased to meet you. Can you tell your husband that Marine recited one of his poems today and I really enjoyed it? Perhaps you can tell me where I can procure some more?"

He and Keith spoke together using Tahia as their translator, while Marine stood at the bar stonily staring out at the winking lights in the bay. Scott touched her arm tentatively.

"I'm sorry," he said softly.

She spun around, her golden eyes blazing. "I certainly hope so," she spat. "I have rarely been more embarrassed. I'm so glad that Keith couldn't hear what you said. It was uncalled for, and, and cruel," she added. Her face fell. "It's true I wish Edgar would change his mind about selling *the Ranger*. But he won't. And I certainly wouldn't do the slightest thing with him to change his mind," she said angrily.

"I said I was sorry. I saw you using sign language and I thought it was because you'd lived with him."

"My mother's deaf. I've used sign language at home since I was born," she said flatly.

"I'm sorry."

"A lot of people say they're sorry but they don't mean it. It's just words to them, words to smooth things over, to make people forget. But I don't think you're sorry at all."

Marine brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes and Scott saw that her hand was shaking. On impulse he took it. Her hand was small in his. He turned it over and traced her lifeline with his finger.

"This is the lifeline. It's very long, and very straight." He paused. The feeling of her hand in his was almost electric. There was a current between them that he could actually feel. He drew a

sharp breath then went on. "There is your love line. I can see that it's been broken. But it is very deep. There is only one man for you. There are no loops or crosses on it. Over here is your headline. It goes towards your index. It means you chose your own destiny. It also means you're headstrong and stubborn. There is a cross on your palm. Sometimes you dream about the future." His voice was very soft, and Marine had to lean close to hear him. Her hair brushed his cheek, and her scent filled his nostrils. He closed his eyes for a second, suddenly his chest felt tight and he could hardly breathe.

"Go on." Marine whispered. She was troubled. His hand was warm and strong. She could feel his pulse in his wrist. His heart seemed to beat very slowly, yet very strongly. Her own was starting to pound in her ears and she felt her head starting to feel light.

"That's all," he said. "I can see nothing else." But he didn't relinquish her hand. They stood together silently, Scott leaning over her. She felt herself sway, and then he caught her in his arms. She felt his chest against her own. It was broad and she knew that she could have felt secure there. Her face fit in the crook of his neck, her cheek against his collarbone. He smelled so good, like spice and lime, with the underlying musky scent of maleness. "I'm sorry," he said again. "And this time I mean it."

Marine drew back, confused and flustered. She tried to collect her thoughts. She hated Scott Kelsey. He was overbearing, proud, and barbaric. He was no better than any other man was, he was probably even worse. And like Red, he would leave her without a backwards glance.

"A penny for your thoughts," said Scott. He couldn't have chosen a worse phrase. It was the one Red had always used. Marine broke away from him, disengaging her hand from his.

"Nothing. I was thinking about nothing. Easy enough for an empty-headed model like myself," she said. But her voice was devoid of any real anger, and Scott thought he could hear something like regret in it. He stood still and stared at her for a minute, then nodded.

"All right. I won't bother you any more."

Dinner was delicious, but only Edgar ate anything. Marine didn't even try to eat, and Scott simply pushed his food around on his plate. Edgar tried to keep the conversation going, but he finally gave up and concentrated on enjoying the grilled lobster with the sweet pepper sauce, and

the guava ice for desert.

After dinner Marine and Edgar went back to the boat alone; Scott had left soon after dinner without saying where he was going. Marine fell into an uneasy sleep, and was woken up some time later by the sound of Scott's footsteps on deck. She glanced blearily at her clock, three a.m. She wondered briefly where he'd been, then decided she really didn't want to know, and fell back to sleep.

## Chapter Six

The next day they set sail at dawn. They headed east, across the Anegada passage then over to the islands of Antigua and Barbuda. Ten hours later they docked at St. John's, the capitol. The sailboat had eaten up the miles effortlessly. Another time Marine would have gloried in the trip. The sun had sparkled off the waves and the water was a deep indigo, putting all the world's sapphires to shame. However, not today. Scott, too, had been somber. They tried not to look at each other, and spoke only when they absolutely had to.

*The Ranger* sailed majestically into the beautiful little bay and they anchored at one of the buoys bobbing in the harbour. The little houses were painted candy-colours and nestled in the emerald green foliage. They had tin roofs and the eaves and windowsills were decked in white gingerbread scallops.

There were other boats in the harbour, but none attracted as many covetous looks as *the Ranger* did. After they'd reefed the sails and cleaned off the deck everyone went below to shower.

Marine finished quickly. She always used as little water as possible. Growing up in St. Thomas, an island with no natural source of water, she'd learned how to be frugal. First she turned on the shower and wet herself all over, and then she turned the water off. She soaped up, and washed her hair, and only then did she turn the water back on to rinse off. She put on white shorts and a yellow silk blouse and went to the kitchen to fix drinks.

By the time Edgar came up on deck, there was a table set with white linen and a pitcher of sangria. Marine had taken out the good crystal glasses. A bouquet of blood-red roses was in a cut-glass vase.

"Very nice," he said. "What's the occasion?"

Marine smiled at him. "No occasion. It's just nice to be here. Tomorrow you and Scott can rent a car and explore the islands. I have some things to do."

"Won't you come with us?" Edgar asked.

Marine shook her head. "No, I really want to be by myself a bit. I hope you don't mind."

"No, of course not," Edgar said. He shrugged. "I think I can guess why."

Marine looked at him. "You mean, do I want to get away from Scott?"

He smiled. "Well, actually, yes."

"I like him, but he gets annoyed with me so easily. Maybe he's still upset about his fiancée breaking up with him. He mentioned being engaged to your daughter. Why did she break up with him?"

"She didn't," Edgar said slowly. He looked out at the sea and his eyes were bleak. "She died four years ago in a plane crash. She and Scott were to be married a week later. It was a terrible tragedy."

"Oh!" Marine felt her legs give out under her and she sat down heavily on a chair. "Oh Edgar, I'm so sorry!" Her eyes filled with tears and she took his hand. "I'm so very sorry."

He patted her hand kindly. "I have two other daughters. They're twins. Ellen was the youngest, she was our baby." He sighed and poured some of the sangria in his glass. "Sometimes I think that Scott will never get over Ellen's death. I keep hoping that something will interest him. That's why I was eager to sell him *the Ranger*. I thought the boat would be just what he needed."

"He does seem to love the boat," Marine said cautiously. "I hope your idea will work."

Edgar smiled at Marine. "You really are sincere aren't you? You love this boat, yet you hope that Scott will fall in love with it and buy it."

"Boats aren't as important as people," Marine said slowly. "My sister tried to tell me that for years. I suppose I understand now." She bit her lip. "It must have been very hard for you, and yet you think of Scott, not yourself. He's lucky to have you as his friend."

"Why, thank you dear."

Marine poured the ruby-red sangria into the crystal glasses. She had put fresh fish filets in the oven to cook, and the smell of garlic and lemon was starting to waft up from the kitchen.

"That smells wonderful."

Marine started at Scott's voice. For such a big man he could walk as silently as a cat. She spun

around and stared at him. He was dressed in faded denim jeans and had on a large white linen shirt. He'd rolled up the sleeves and left the collar unbuttoned. His feet were bare, and his hair was still wet from the shower. He looked like a pirate. All he needed was a sword and a six-gun by his side, Marine found herself thinking.

Scott grinned broadly, his teeth gleaming in the lavender half-light of the evening. His skin had tanned deeply after the days spent at sea and his eyes were emerald chips. "I have something for you," he said to Marine, and he handed her a large, flat box he'd held behind his back.

"For me?" Marine was confused. "But why?"

"Just open it!" His tone was peremptory but his eyes were twinkling.

She lifted the box cover and gasped. In it was the shimmer of deep violet silk. She lifted it out, and it unfolded into a long dress. She looked at the tag, it was one of Tahia's. "It's beautiful," she breathed.

"I went to see Keith and Tahia after dinner last night, and she told me that it was your birthday today. Is that true?" Scott asked.

"My birthday?" Marine gaped. "I completely forgot!"

"It is the seventh of February, is it not?" Scott sounded exasperated.

"Why, yes, but..."

"Put it on." This time it was Edgar, he waved her towards her room. "Put it on, I can't wait to see it!"

Marine went down to her room and took off her clothes. She held the dress up and looked at it. It was gorgeous; the deep purple silk had indigo highlights in it. The bodice was cut low, decorated with intricate embroidery in gold thread. The back was cut low too, with a zipper hidden neatly in the seam. There were two slender, gold silk cords running along the top of the bodice that went over her shoulders and held the dress up. They crossed down the back and tied behind. Marine slid the dress over her head and then wriggled it down over her hips. It was perfect, absolutely perfect. There was a knock at the door.

"Can I help with the zipper?" came Scott's voice.

"All right, it is rather hard to do."

Scott opened the door and whistled. "That is some dress," he said. "Turn around, I'll zip you up."

His hands were warm as they brushed her back, and as they and the silk caressed her body she shivered with delight. Scott caught his breath and as he touched her, he thought he had never seen such a long, lovely back. Her skin was apricot; even the silk was not as smooth. She turned around slowly and his breath caught in his throat. "My Lord, you are beautiful," he said huskily.

She blushed. "It's the dress, Tahia's talent is amazing."

"The colour brings out the gold in your eyes and skin," he said.

She smiled. "I've never had anything so lovely. Thank you."

"My pleasure." His eyes were admiring. "I think I will invite you out to dinner. Can you get into the Zodiac with that on?"

"Of course." Marine grinned. "But where are we eating?"

"I made reservations at the Rose-House Inn. I hope you'll like it."

"It's very expensive," Marine said.

"You're worth it." Scott said shortly. He bent over suddenly and kissed her. His mouth barely brushed her lips, but Marine felt the kiss as if it had branded her. She trembled. She hadn't felt like this since Red touched her, and thinking about him was like a cold shower. She'd had her fun, and Scott had had her body. Now it was time to end the charade. She stepped back and nearly pushed Scott away. He stumbled but caught himself like a cat.

He looked at her in astonishment. "What happened to you?"

Marine swallowed. Her throat was so tight it hurt. "What do you mean?"

"If you were a horse I'd say you were head-shy. You act like a nervous filly."

"I'm sorry. Excuse me for pushing you." Marine thought her cheeks must be crimson.

Scott stared at her a moment longer. He felt the desire to take her in his arms, to crush her to him and to feel her slender body pressed close to his own. He remembered their lovemaking in the dark and in the water, and his penis grew stiff. But he also realised they'd never really spoken. He

was about to say something, but something in her eyes stopped him. He knew enough about fear to recognise it when he saw it. He wondered who had hurt her, and he was surprised to feel anger – anger at the fool who'd made her amber eyes so wary.

“Don't worry about it. It was just a birthday kiss. You know, one to grow on.” He smiled and drew his finger lightly down her face, tracing her broad forehead and narrow nose, finishing on her lovely, sensuous mouth. “You have the most beautiful mouth,” he said softly. “Full lips, naturally red, curved just so,” he bent forward again and kissed her. This time he kissed her hard, giving in to himself. He claimed her mouth as his own. With his lips, his tongue and his teeth, he explored it.

After a seconds hesitation Marine kissed him back. His passion was contagious, and she opened her mouth to his, feeling the soft velvet of his lips and the deep thrust of his tongue. Her legs grew weak and her stomach throbbed as the feelings she'd thought buried deeply came to the surface and inflamed her.

Scott groaned as he felt her lithesome body close to his. Her breasts were crushed against his chest, soft and yet incredibly firm. Her body fit into his. Her arms crept around his neck and she pulled him to her, her hair brushing his neck. He felt as if he'd suddenly become whole again. Slowly he cupped her face in his hands. He stepped away from her and looked into her eyes. They were no longer afraid. They glowed up at him, twin pools of molten gold. He smiled at her. “We better stop, or else we'll never get to the restaurant.”

“I don't care.” Marine sounded breathless. She pulled him to her once again, and Scott felt her hands slide under his shirt, along his chest and over his shoulders.

“Lord!” He gave a deep moan and gathered her to him. His own hands slipped over her smooth shoulders and down the deep dip of her back. He felt his cock straining against the fabric of his pants, pressing against her thighs. Her bed was just behind them, an inviting expanse of neat white counterpane. He moved towards it, just two steps in the tiny room, but before he could lower her onto it he chuckled and straightened up. “We're not going to do this here and now.” He stood and took a few deep breaths to cool himself down. “Well, let's go shall we? Edgar will be wondering where we are.”

She nodded. "Yes, let's go." As she walked out the door she was thankful for the gathering darkness that hid her bright eyes and red face. She had never, ever, felt like that before. Even Red had failed to excite her so quickly. Scott, she reflected, must know everything about women to be able to inflame her like that.

She thought with regret that she would like to be able to get to know him better. But she also swore to herself that she wouldn't let him get close to her again. Red had done enough damage. Let Scott make love to her body, he would never have her heart. No one would break it again. She could make sure of that.

Edgar whistled appreciatively when he saw Marine. "You look stunning," he said.

"Thank you." Marine smoothed her dress self-consciously. "But like I said, it's Tahia's talent. She can make anyone look good."

"Not as good as you," said Scott seriously. He held out his arm, and Marine took it to step into the Zodiac. He had changed out of his jeans she noticed, and wore a tie with his white shirt. He held a black jacket loosely over his arm.

"Aren't you coming with us?" she asked Edgar, but he shook his head no.

"Who will eat the fish in the oven if I go with you two?" he asked, eyes twinkling.

Marine gasped, "The dinner! I completely forgot about it!"

"Don't worry about it. Whatever's left over I'll put in the cooler. You go on now, and enjoy!" He waved at them as Scott manoeuvred the dinghy across the bay.

They didn't speak for the rest of the short ride, until Scott neatly docked the Zodiac and took her arm to walk through the small, picturesque town.

"Who's Red?" Scott said suddenly.

Marine was surprised. "Where did you hear his name?"

"Tahia. She mentioned him to me last night."

"Why did you go see her?" Marine tried to change the subject.

"I wanted to apologise, and then we just started talking. She and Keith care a great deal for you. We wandered through Road Town a bit, and they invited me to their house for a drink. I saw

the dress and thought it would be perfect for you. Tahia told me that it was your birthday and I thought, why not? Now, who was Red?"

"Why did Tahia mention him?" Marine said angrily.

"All she said was, 'I hope you're not like Red', but then she wouldn't say anything else."

"He was a boyfriend." Marine's voice was flat.

"Your lover?"

"That's none of your business." Marine felt like crying. Why did Scott want to talk about Red? Couldn't he see it hurt too much?

He noticed the tears sparkling in her eyes and he cut the motor. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry. Of course it's none of my business." He dug in his pocket and came up with a tissue. "Here, use this."

She sniffed and wiped her eyes. "Thanks. Why do you carry a hankie?"

He grinned. "Allergies. Would you believe it? I'm allergic to certain types of pollen, and I got in the habit of always carrying one around. It's better than wiping my nose on my sleeves."

Marine giggled, a warm sound that tickled his ear. "I guess that's a good reason."

Scott started the boat again and they motored to the dock. He sprang ashore and tied up the boat then helped Marine climb onto the pier. She held her dress carefully so she wouldn't tear it.

They walked up the hill to the restaurant. Their table overlooked the harbour. The waiter took their order and brought them a drink. For a while they talked about the weather, the beauty of the islands, and other innocuous subjects.

"I can see *the Ranger* from here," said Marine. "Can you?"

"She stands out from the other boats like a swan from geese," said Scott reverently. He sipped his champagne. "Mmm, Moët & Chandon, my favourite."

Marine took a sip. "Very good. And the lamb is wonderful. Thank you for all this," she indicated the dress she wore, and her dinner. "It's very generous of you."

"It's generous of you to take us out on *the Ranger*, to show us the islands, to recite poetry for us, and to introduce us to your friends." He took her hand in his, feeling the pleasant shock of her

skin against his again. "Do you have more poems?"

She blushed. "I do, but I'm shy about reciting them."

"Why?"

"Because they're so, I don't know, beautiful I guess. Keith wrote most of them; I really appreciate his works. Maybe because he and my mother are so close, he comes to our house a lot, and they talk together for hours. He recites all his poetry to her."

"I would love to meet your mother. Tahia says she's the most beautiful white woman on St. Thomas."

Marine laughed. "She would say that. I think Tahia is the most beautiful woman, period."

"Keith's a lucky guy."

"Last night you read my palm. Was that serious, or just a joke?"

"Whatever you want it to be. A fortune-teller once showed me how to read palms. But you don't have to believe any of that stuff. I'm not sure I do anyway."

"Show me yours." Marine turned his hand over and looked at it. He pulled it back, but not quickly enough. She saw the scars and gasped. "What happened?"

"I was in an accident." His voice was flat.

"Let me see." She took his hand and firmly pushed his sleeve back.

"Satisfied?" He waited until she let go, then pulled his sleeves down. His eyes were shadowed, so she had no idea what he was thinking.

Marine looked at him, troubled. The scars were fading, but still quite clear. Long gashes running from wrist to elbow. "What happened?"

Scott smoothed his sleeve over the scars and shrugged. Then he took another sip of champagne and looked out over the harbour.

"All right. You don't have to say anything. I'm sorry though, about whatever it was."

He glanced at her quickly, to see if she was mocking, but she wasn't. Something in her eyes, a sadness, struck a chord in him. He reached over the table and took her hands again. "My father, stepmother and I were in a car accident when I was thirteen. They were thrown clear, but I was in

the back, with my little sister. She was in a car seat, and I tried to get her out." He faltered and looked away from Marine. "I don't remember much else. I remember pulling at the strap, and a flash of light, then there were flames and a policeman pulled me out of the back window. My arm was still caught in my sister's seatbelt. That's what the scar is from. My sister didn't make it. My stepmother never forgave me for not saving her."

Marine was shocked. "How dreadful! It wasn't your fault!"

"I know that now. But it took me years to realise that she simply couldn't forgive herself."

After dinner they wandered around the town. Live music from a steel drum band playing in the park followed them as they walked down the narrow streets. The night was sultry; Scott took off his jacket and slung it over his shoulder. He rolled up his sleeves, took off his tie and stuffed it in his pocket. He put his arm around Marine's shoulder and they walked in companionable silence. She liked the feel of his body, so tall and strong, next to hers. He made her feel so safe. And at the same time her heart was beating faster than usual, making her blood sing in her veins. When he touched her, all she could think about was his cock, buried in her heated pussy.

"Are you tired? Do you want to go back?" Scott asked.

"Maybe we should. You and Edgar can rent a car and go to the beach tomorrow, but I would like to get some supplies for the boat. And I have to have a repair man come and look at the fridge, it's leaking a bit." Marine stifled a yawn. "It's been a long day."

They climbed into the Zodiac and Scott started the engine with a practiced pull. He sat down and they started back across the deep bay. The water was like obsidian now, flat and shiny black. Halfway to the boat Scott suddenly turned off the motor.

"Why are we stopping?" asked Marine.

"I wanted to talk I guess. I wanted to tell you why Edgar wants me to have *the Ranger*." He didn't speak for a few minutes. Then he drew a quick breath. "It was four years ago. I was engaged to marry to a wonderful woman. She was the kind of person who never thought of herself, only of others. When I met her I was eighteen. I was in my first year of collage, and not doing very well. I was struggling, to tell the truth, nearly failing. I doubted myself, and I was starting to believe everything my stepmother had ever told me, that I was good for nothing,

doomed to failure.”

“Oh, that’s so cruel!” cried Marine.

“I know. But that’s how it was. I was wild, unruly, with a chip on my shoulder. I was ready to fight the whole world, and I had bruises to prove it. I spent most of my time hanging out with a bad crowd. They were a crazy bunch, none of them took school seriously, they would rather party all the time. I went along. It was easier to belong to a crowd than to be alone. I was lonely, confused. I knew I didn’t fit in with the students at the posh collage I’d somehow landed a scholarship for. They all avoided me. Except Ellen.”

“She was Edgar’s daughter, wasn’t she?” asked Marine softly.

“Yes, she was. She was the only one who believed in me. Even before she got to know me she believed. She invited me to her house. Do you know what that meant to me? It was like another world, another planet. And she made me believe in myself. She pulled me out of the dark. She set goals for me, and she persuaded me to try for them. And when I succeeded she told me to aim even higher. She showed there were no limits, that life was there for me, for the taking, if only I’d try.

“I fell in love with her. And she, crazily enough, fell in love with me. And her family didn’t object. In fact, Edgar always made me feel as if I was a member of the family, like I was the son he always wanted. That was his gift to me. He made me feel wanted.”

“And then she died.” Marine spoke in a whisper. “Oh Scott, I’m so sorry. She must have been a wonderful person. You must have been devastated.”

“I was,” he said heavily. “I was so young then. Maybe when you’re young you feel things more keenly. I thought I’d lose my mind. I went back to the parties, to the alcohol, and one morning I woke up in the hospital. I still have no memory at all of drinking too much and crashing my car. A pretty young nurse was leaning over my bed, and she took care of me for the three weeks I was there. Her name was Julie. I’ll never forget her, because she managed to put the shattered pieces of my life back together. Every day she’d come and we’d talk. Just quiet talks, about anything. And Edgar helped me. He was always there when I needed him. He listened, and it helped. You know, you can tell me what happened to you. If you talk about it, you’ll feel better.”

They sat in silence a moment. The boat bobbed gently on the dark water, the stars twinkled above their heads, and the lights of the town cast shadows on their faces.

"I'll tell you about Red, but it's not easy to talk about him. He came into my life two years ago, and I suppose I fell in love with him the first second I saw him. Most girls did," she added dryly. "He looked just like the man in the painting by George de la Tour called *The Cheater*, the one with the auburn hair. I should have known then, but he was so handsome. He said he loved me." Her voice wavered a bit.

"You can tell me." Scott said gently.

"Perhaps. I never told anyone what happened."

"No one?" he sounded surprised.

"Not even my sister, although she probably guessed most of it. It's just so embarrassing. So humiliating. Does it really help to talk about things?"

"It does, I swear."

"He told me he loved him. And I believed him. We dated for six months. He said he wanted to marry me, but it was just a way to get me to sleep with him." She said the last words in a rush.

"That's awful. But what's so bad about sleeping with someone?"

"I wanted to save myself for my marriage," said Marine.

Scott guffawed. "What? A virgin bride? You?"

She sniffed loudly. "Give me your handkerchief again." She blew her nose.

"Go on about Red," Scott commanded.

"Up yours," Marine said ungraciously.

"I deserved that. I'm sorry." Scott said humbly. "Please tell me what happened. You'll feel better, I promise."

"I don't believe you any more. Right now I feel worse. Men are all the same. You're all exactly like Red. You'll lie, cheat, and steal to get in bed with me, and once you're there you'll say I'm a whore."

"I said I was sorry." Scott sounded amused.

"I heard you, I just didn't believe you." She sighed. "Red and I made plans. We even picked out the ring." She twisted her mouth in a semblance of a smile. "He had me so worked up, he told me over and over that we had to get to know each other completely. He was like a broken record. Finally I gave in. I told myself, it's all right, he loves me, we're engaged, we're getting married." Marine laughed mirthlessly. "I gave in. He slept with me, and in the morning I turned over in my bed and reached for him, and he was gone.

"He told me afterwards that now that he'd had me, he was going to find someone else—someone with more experience. He said he only wanted my virginity, the rest didn't matter. I threw his ring at him and left. I didn't have the energy to fight with him. He broke my heart. I wanted to crawl into a hole and die. I felt like the stupidest person on earth. Red finished his job and left the islands, and I never told anyone why we broke off our engagement. It hurt too much to talk about," Marine whispered.

"You poor thing. You're lucky you didn't get pregnant." Scott said.

At that she burst into tears. "Thank God."

Scott watched her crying. Her head was bent, her hair a mass of darkness hiding her face. The gold threads in the dress gleamed in the starlight, and she looked as pale and fragile as a moonbeam. He reached over and smoothed her hair, pushing it back off her face, using his thumbs to gently wipe the tears from her cheeks. "Now, now, it's all right. Don't cry, please? It's not the end of the world. So some stupid chump got your virginity. It could have been worse."

"You know what?" she sniffed.

"What?"

"I don't feel any better after talking about it." She gave a hiccup and then giggled. "I feel like I could use a good, stiff drink. Will you please take me back to the boat and pour me a glass of brandy?"

Scott snorted. "What you don't need is to get drunk. Then you'll probably get maudlin, and cry even more."

"I promise I won't." She scrubbed her hands over her face, smearing her make-up. "I do feel better, actually. I thought I'd never be able to tell anyone what happened. Tell me the absolute

truth, as a man. Do you think it matters if I'm not a virgin anymore?"

"In a way, yes, and in a way, no. I didn't realise you were so inexperienced, although I sort of guessed. You don't know how to make love, do you?"

"Oh. Well, if you're trying to make me feel better you've just blown it," she said bleakly.

"I am trying to be honest. I won't lie to you Marine."

"Thank you. I appreciate that. I guess." She sighed. "It's so unfair being a woman. I couldn't care less if you were not a virgin, or if you were. What should it matter if you love someone? But there's this cruel double standard that applies to women, if we're not pure, we're no good."

"That's rubbish," Scott said.

"Maybe, but it's true. If you were really honest with me you'd admit it."

He thought a moment then shrugged. "I admit. I'm sorry."

"We seem to say that a lot to each other," Marine said with a catch in her voice.

"I'm sor...you're right." Scott laughed.

"You have such a nice laugh," Marine said.

"Do I?" He was surprised.

"I don't hear it often. I like it. Laugh again."

"I like it when you smile. I can see your teeth in the dark." Scott said.

They leaned closer to each other, and with no forethought, kissed. It was a kiss as slow and sweet as honey. When they broke apart it was with a little gasp.

"Why did you do that?" asked Marine wonderingly.

"Because I thought it was better than a stiff drink." Scott started the motor and drove the Zodiac back to *the Ranger*. He helped her on deck, and then took her hands in his and pulled her close once more. "I want another kiss," he said sternly.

Marine felt his touch like an electric shock. Her whole body responded to his kiss, making her legs wobbly and her heart pound. She felt her body dissolve into a liquid bliss while her arms encircled his neck and his arms held her around her waist. She opened her mouth to his questing tongue, letting him explore her lips and teeth. One of his teeth was chipped, she could feel it with

the edge of her tongue and the sensation sent quivers down her spine. He let her take the initiative. She gently pulled on his bottom lip with her mouth, and then she licked his upper lip like a kitten.

She could feel his hardness through the thin cotton of his trousers and the fragile silk dress she wore. The heat in her belly was nearly unbearable. "Show me how to make love," she gasped.

"Not here. Come into my cabin."

Once in his cabin, Scott unzipped her dress and carefully lifted it over her head. Beneath it, she had the tiniest scrap of lace underwear, and he felt his cock stiffen. It got even harder when he slid her underwear off, his hands sliding down her long, smooth legs. He tried to get a hold of himself, but the sight of her body, naked in the warm light, excited him so much his heart felt like it was about to jump out of his chest. She looked at him, but made no move to touch him. She seemed petrified, her eyes fixed on the bulge in his pants.

"It looks like someone's glad to see you," Scott said, trying to relax the atmosphere.

Marine raised her eyes to his. "What should I do? Red told me not to move. When I did move, he yelled at me."

"It sounds like Red had a little problem with control," said Scott. He cleared his throat, thinking that he was about to have the same problem. He could feel his balls contract as he tried to get a hold of himself. It didn't help when Marine turned around. Her long back and smooth buttocks were just as inviting as her breasts and saucy triangle. "Lie down," Scott managed to say.

She did, and spread her legs wide. Her breasts pointed straight up, and her breath was coming in quick gasps.

"What is the matter?" Scott asked.

"Am I doing this right?" she asked. "I thought I had to put my legs like this."

Scott unzipped his pants and pulled them off. "Do you ever touch yourself?" Scott asked, sitting in the folding chair at the foot of the bed.

"Sometimes." Her face flamed scarlet.

"I want you to touch yourself. Find what you like the best. Fantasise. Come, I want to see you

come right before my eyes.”

Scott had a clear view of her splendid pussy. Her dark, curly hair was trimmed short in a bikini cut, and showed the pale outer lips of her labia, and the darker inner lips surrounding her passage. As he watched, she moved her hips a bit, and her hand crept between her legs. Her finger sought her clit, and she rubbed it. Her hips raised, and before he knew it, she'd slid another finger into her vagina and was masturbating herself. Slick juices made her cunt all shiny. In and out went her finger. Dipping in, sliding out. After a few minutes, her labia swelled and Marine threw her head back and moaned. She bent her knees, braced her feet on the bedspread, and lifted her hips so she could penetrate further with her fingers.

Now two fingers were plunging into her slick passage, and her thumb was drawing circles around her clit. With her other hand, she grabbed one of her breasts and massaged it, tugging on her nipple and squeezing it between thumb and forefinger. Her hands moved faster as her hips started to thrust in time to her fingers. In and out, her fingers disappeared into her slippery hole. She grew wetter as she explored herself, her hand sliding up and down.

Scott's penis was standing straight up, as if to get a better view of the proceedings. He didn't dare touch himself. He knew that if he did, he would come in seconds. He reached down and grabbed the sides of the chair, his back arching in an effort to reach Marine. A drop of sweat rolled down the side of his face. He shuddered with the effort of not grabbing his cock. Marine's chest was heaving now, and she suddenly arched her hips and spread her legs as wide as possible, ramming her fingers into herself. He saw her flesh contracting around them as she uttered a soft cry.

At that, Scott's control shattered. He catapulted out of the chair and landed on his knees at Marine's feet. His hips thrust of their own accord as his cock spurted its milky seed all over Marine's hand and cunt. Moaning, he rubbed himself against her until he was spent.

Marine sat up, her face bright red. “I can't believe I just did that,” she said.

“I never did that before either,” Scott admitted. “I wouldn't mind doing it again.” He stood and pulled his pants back on. “It's hot here.”

“Let's go up on deck.” Marine said. She grabbed her dress and they went to sit outside. The

night air was sultry, and Scott admired the view of the bay. The little town's lights were reflected in the calm water. As he watched, Marine came and sat on his lap. She folded her dress on the chair, and she was naked. When she sat down, she straddled him, her breasts pressing into his chest. It didn't take more than that to get him hard again. With a wicked grin, she unzipped his pants and freed his stiff cock.

"Where should I put this?" she asked, her voice teasing.

"Anywhere," he said, his heart beating painfully in his chest.

"Anywhere?" She knelt then, and slid the tip of his penis into her mouth. She tickled him with her tongue. "Get up." she pushed his pants down, and he lifted his hips to help as she slid them off. Then he sat with his legs apart as she knelt between them, her head bent over his lap. At first shy, she soon began to lap, lick and suck with little gasps and moans of pleasure. Looking down, he saw that she had her hand between her legs once more, and that two of her fingers were buried to the hilt in her sweet flesh.

The sight nearly set him off, and as it was, he gave a little spurt into her mouth. She swallowed and sucked harder, pulling his cock further and further into her mouth. Soon he was trying to recite his alphabet, thinking of the constellations in the sky – anything to keep him from exploding into her sensual mouth. It didn't work. He glanced down, and at that moment her fingers swirled around her clit and he caught sight of her swollen cunt.

"Wait," he gasped. He reached down and fumbled in his pants for his rubber. When he found it, it seemed to take forever to get the packet open and sheath his quivering penis. Once he did, he hauled her to his lap. She opened her legs, and he thrust his cock into her cunt, grabbed her buttocks and held her tightly to him. When he'd penetrated her, she'd pushed harder against him. Her hips slid back and forth on his lap while his hands clasped her buttocks. Her breasts rubbed against his chest and her head was thrown back, little cries of delight coming from her throat. She bounced up and down on his lap, plunging deeper and deeper. The feeling of her tight pussy sliding so quickly up and down the length of his swollen cock was too much. He cried out while he ejaculated. He thought he'd never finish. Suddenly he felt her cunt contracting. Rapid contractions that seemed to pump every drop from his cock came from within her body. She shuddered once,

very hard, then rested her head on his shoulder.

"That was wonderful," Scott said.

"I liked it too." She sighed and kissed his cheek.

He opened his mouth to ask if it was better than with Red, but decided against it. Instead, he yawned.

"Are you tired?"

"A little." Was she one of those woman who had to talk for hours after they made love? He braced himself for an onslaught of chatter, but she just nodded.

"Good night. Sweet dreams." She picked up her dress and waved as she climbed back down into the boat.

Scott watched her leave with real regret as he sank down on the deck. He leaned back and rested his head on a cushion staring up at the billions of stars in the Milky Way. They seemed close enough to touch, and each one blazed with a different colour. Diamonds were just poor copies of stars, he thought, and most other women were just poor copies of Marine. Was she as far out of reach as one of those stars? He was afraid to try to love again. To put all his trust and feelings into another relationship seemed impossible.

Yet here he was, staring up at the sky and dreaming about holding a beautiful dark-haired girl in his arms. But she was as shy as a wild fawn. Would he be able to overcome her pain? He wondered if he could. In the darkness his lips curved in a smile. She made him forget his own pain, she made him laugh, she was beautiful and...and still in love with another man. He heard it in her voice whenever she mentioned Red. The thought that she was just interested in him for *the Ranger* came back to him again, and he scowled up at the velvet night sky.

Marine lay on her narrow bed staring out the porthole at the big, yellow moon. She had showered and slipped into her cotton nightie. She lay on top of the cool sheets, the night breeze just barely moving the edges of the muslin curtains. Her body tingled and was sated, but her heart was heavy. Scott was a wonderful lover, but he never spoke of love.

## Chapter Seven

The next day Marine got up as early as possible to avoid meeting Scott, but as she crept up on deck she stopped in stunned surprise. Scott was stretched out on the bow, his head cradled on a chair cushion, his jacket lying in a crumpled heap beside him. He was snoring lightly, and his face was so peaceful in repose that Marine caught her breath. Sleep erased the bitter lines around his mouth and smoothed his forehead. He was on his back, one arm thrown back over his head, the other clasped across his chest. His shirt was open, revealing his broad, tanned chest with its soft tangle of curly black hair. One leg was straight, the other bent at the knee. He'd taken off his shoes and Marine thought she only saw one. No, the other one was there, half hidden underneath his leg. She smiled fondly.

There was something touching about him sleeping like that. He was vulnerable, his hands were relaxed and still, and it made her realise just how much energy he seemed to expend when he was awake. He never seemed to stop moving, and now he was lying in sleeping abandon on the deck, the dawn just starting to colour the sky with its pale glow, casting a rosy light over his face. His narrow nose was slightly crooked, she noticed, and his lashes were absurdly long, sweeping down on his cheeks.

Marine smiled tenderly as she tiptoed around him, picked up his jacket and softly laid it over him. He snuggled into its warmth, but he didn't wake up and she wondered how long he'd been lying on deck before finally giving in to Morpheus's embrace. Without a sound she turned and went back down to the hold and quietly began to clean up the boat.

She checked the navigation system, making sure that everything was in perfect order, and then made radio contact with St. Thomas. Her messages were mostly from her family and friends. And there was a message from Chris asking her if she'd work with him again next month as a model, as a client of his insisted on booking her. She smiled as she radioed back her replies.

One message was from Charlie Brown, a radio ham from down island. He and Marine had never met, but they communicated by radio every once in a while. Charlie Brown was his code

name; he was one of the oldest radio hams in the Caribbean. He was also an expert on tropical storms, and his message to Marine was about a depression moving into the Caribbean from the south. Marine sat for a moment, undecided, and then she took the controls and radioed his number. After a few moments his voice crackled into her headset.

"Hi Charlie, it's me, Marine. I got your message, what's up?"

"Hi honey, how are you?" His voice was old and rusty, with an accent she could never place. She'd asked him numerous times who he was, and where he was from, but he always laughed and told her to mind her own business. Despite his gruff ways he was a friendly person, and the only thing he would tell her was that he was confined to a wheelchair.

"I'm fine, I'm on a charter cruise right now."

"I know, I know. Is *the Ranger* as beautiful as ever?"

"You bet. She's a dream."

"Listen kid, where are you exactly?"

"Antigua, in the harbour, why?"

"Better get out of there. That *Ranger*, she's fast right?"

"Of course!"

"Yeah, I knew it, fastest class J in the world. Well, haul ass outta there sweetheart. There's a big storm comin'. It ain't a hurra-cane yet, but it'll be one soon."

Marine remembered the last time Charlie Brown had issued a warning; it had been in September, nearly two years ago. He'd called her on the radio in a panic. "Get to cover honey-pie!" he'd shouted. "There's a storm brewin' that'll knock the socks off the islands. They're gonna call her Hugo, if you can fancy that. Hugo's a guys name!"

And Hugo had done just that, knocked the socks, and everything else, off the island. Luckily she'd had time to dismantle *the Ranger* and stow her away; more sailboats than she liked to think of had been wrecked in that massive hurricane.

"Where should I go?" Marine asked worriedly. "Which way is she headed?" As she talked she hastily keyed the weather channel, but the depression wasn't showing on her

charts. "Damn," she swore, "there's nothing here. Are you sure Charlie?"

"Am I sure? Listen, I found out from a diver friend of mine that the water is nearly 29 degrees C° out there in the Atlantic, at a depth of 60 meters. You know what that means don't cha?"

"Fill me in," she said worriedly.

"It means the current's going straight up, and water vapour is forming at the surface. It's swirling around like a mini tornado, slowly at first, then faster and faster. It's unusual as hell this time of year. I ain't never seen it in winter to tell you the truth. But I think it's time to get to cover."

"All right, I'll go. You say it's out in the Atlantic, how far out? And which way will it go?"

"The wind's from the South East, bad sign sweetie. Better head home. If I was you, I'd radio ahead and book a spot in the marina. If you ain't got the time, if you see the storm overtaking you, just get past the deep passage and head for the mangroves, if you can hide in there they'll take the brunt of the wind and waves for you."

"It sounds like it's close," Marine was anxious. "How long 'til it hits? Can't I stay here in St. John's harbour?"

"It should be here in about twelve hours. You better get moving. The harbour in St. John's ain't deep enough, the storm'll clear her out. Already the warning's being issued. You won't see a boat there in half an hour. Go on sweetie, enough talk for now. You call me after the storm and tell me how you made out, okay?"

"Okay, Roger and Out Charlie." Marine hung up, fear niggling at her stomach. If it was one thing she feared it was a hurricane. She never took any charters from September until the end of November to avoid any chance of a tropical depression, but the weather had been abnormally hot this year, record highs since Christmas. It was great for business, lousy for the weather report. "Get a hold of yourself girl," she muttered crossly. She picked up the mike and called the marina in St. Thomas and booked a docking, telling them to expect her late that evening. Then she called the harbour control at St. Johns and they confirmed her worst fears: a storm warning had been issued and they were clearing out the shallow harbour and calling the population inland.

Marine radioed the marina in St. Thomas, leaving a message for her family, telling them not to worry, that she was aware of the storm and heading towards home. "And if I don't make it I'm

going into the mangrove forest, there's a deep creek that'll shelter *the Ranger* from the storm."

She rushed back up on deck, intending to wake Scott up, but to her consternation he wasn't there. The Zodiac was gone as well; while she'd been talking he'd taken the boat and gone into town!

"Edgar! Edgar!" she cried, taking the stairs two at a time and tripping and nearly falling in a heap in the galley. "Edgar!" She got back on her feet, ran through the narrow hallway to the stateroom door, and started to pound on it. "Edgar! Please! Wake up!"

"What? What is it Marine?" He opened the door, his white hair standing on end in a way that Marine would have thought comic if she weren't so worried.

"Edgar, listen carefully. There's a storm heading this way from out in the Atlantic. It's going to be a big one, so we have to take cover. We have to leave right away."

"All right, I'll get dressed and I'll be with you in a second."

"But Scott took the Zodiac and he's left the boat!" Marine wailed.

"What? Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. Listen, use my radio, get hold of the marina and have them look around for Scott, in case he's just in the area. If not, call the police station on the island, and have them go and pick him up, tell them it's urgent, they'll understand."

Edgar wasted no time, and by the time Marine had finished getting the boat ready Scott was motoring across the bay towards *the Ranger*, his face set with worry.

"What's going on?" he yelled as he jumped on board.

"We've got to get out of here," Marine said tersely. "There's a storm warning. We're heading towards St. Thomas, I hope we'll make it on time."

"A storm?" Scott looked up at the blue sky, a perfect bowl of pure robin's egg blue cupped over them. "There's not a cloud in sight!"

"It's coming. Let's go!" Marine nodded towards Edgar and he started the motor as she hauled in the anchor. "As soon as we clear the harbour get the mainsail up and the jib, the Genoa, too. We're going to head straight west. We'll pass just north of St. Croix, and keep to the deep water. If

we start getting heavy weather we head for St. Thomas and take refuge in the mangroves." Her voice was strained and she chewed at her lip.

Scott nodded. He set about getting the sails in order as Marine took the wheel and aimed the boat towards the west. The wind hit them as soon as they cleared the shelter of the island. It came in hard from behind them, pushing the boat before it. *The Ranger* leapt forward like a coursing hound, her bow cutting through the waves and sending a fine spray off to either side. Scott felt the moisture in the wind. Usually the air was bone dry, but not today. He glanced at Marine and saw her face was tight with worry. He hoped they would make it to Puerto Rico.

Edgar too was worried; he knew that *the Ranger* was made for the open sea, and could take heavy swells and hard wind in stride, but a tropical storm was incredibly violent and the boat wouldn't stand up to a gale. He pulled the mainsail in a bit tighter, speeding the boat along faster. Marine looked at him approvingly; he was not just cruising along now, they were in a race. It was a race against the storm.

The three of them forgot everything in the strain of keeping *the Ranger* sailing at top speed. The waves sometimes washed over the hull, drenching them. The sails and rigging sang with the wind and the speed, and the boat surged forward, bounding over the waves eagerly. *The Ranger* was a joy to sail, but to really go all out there should have been at least five more crewmembers. As it was, Marine had to be all over the boat, checking the navigator and the charts constantly, keeping the boat on the right course. Scott and Edgar took care of the sails, pulling them in as tight as they dared; sitting on the very edge of the side and leaning far out to try and balance her. Now it was their strength against the wind's.

The sky was still bright blue, but Marine could see the depression on her charts now, moving with frightening speed towards them. They had barely come in sight of St. Croix when she decided to swing north and head for the mangroves. A faint black line on the horizon showed the storm front.

"We've got to make a decision fast," cried Marine. "We've got about twenty-five miles to St. Thomas. I think we'd better head north. We can make it on two tacks, and the wind will be better for us, we can go even faster. What do you say?"

"I agree," said Edgar.

"Count me in," Scott said. His black hair was a wild tangle of curls and his face was split in a huge grin. His emerald eyes were flashing with excitement. "This boat can really fly!" he exclaimed.

Marine decided that she'd never seen anyone look quite so much like a buccaneer. He really could have been a pirate, she thought, and the impending storm and danger didn't seem to worry him a bit. If anything he seemed more alive and vibrant.

They turned the boat to the north and the wind caught them and sent the boat hurtling towards St. Thomas.

"We have to get there before the waves get too strong, otherwise we can't get into the narrow passage that leads to the mangroves. In the worst case we stay in deep water and take down all the sails." Marine said, checking the horizon with binoculars.

"Let me see," said Edgar. He took the binoculars and made a slow sweep of the horizon. "It looks..." he broke off suddenly and gasped. "What's that?"

"Where?" Marine kept a tight grip on the wheel, but leaned towards his pointing arm. "I don't see anything."

"It looks like a boat in trouble." Edgar passed her the binoculars and took the wheel. "Over there, you can just catch a glimpse between swells."

Marine looked, and caught a glint of something white just as the boat rose over a wave. The next second they had coasted down again and she lost sight of it. When the next wave picked them up she was sure, it was a boat, her mainsail hanging in tatters from the mast.

"We'll have to go pick them up!" Edgar declared.

"I know." Marine gnawed at her lip. "Tell Scott we're changing tack." She waited until the men were ready and then swung the boat around. They were now heading nearly straight into the storm and the waves were hitting them head-on over the bow. Marine started the engine and they motored up wind, with the Scott hastily taking in the sails.

After nearly twenty minutes they came upon the boat in distress. Marine had been unable to

make radio contact, but she did call the coast guard and gave their exact position. "I'll call if we need help," she told them. "The best bet would be to have a motorboat ready." She hoped no one was hurt.

They drew up beside the crippled boat, but no one was on deck. Her sails were ripped, as if the wind had torn them, and the wheel was jammed with an empty kerosene can.

"Hello!" shouted Scott. "Anyone on board?"

They listened carefully, and then they heard a faint call from below deck. It sounded like a woman's sobbing.

"I'll go," said Scott.

"Hurry lad!" said Edgar.

Scott nodded, then taking a deep breath he launched himself across the narrow space that separated the two boats. He landed like a cat on the smaller craft. Carefully he made his way to the hatch and peered in. A second later he was thrown backwards as a man dressed all in black with a black hood over his head hurtled through the doorway and hit him in the stomach.

"Scott!" screamed Marine.

"You! Get over here!" The man in black was holding a pistol and pointing it at Scott's head. He was talking to Marine though.

"Me?" Marine looked around wildly for Edgar, but he'd disappeared. She supposed he'd gone below deck.

"Get on board, now!" commanded the man again, in a strange, gruff voice, and Marine let go of the wheel and got shakily to her feet. She looked across to the other boat and hoped she could jump across; her legs suddenly felt as weak as cotton, and her hands were shaking.

She screwed up her courage and leapt. At the last minute her foot slipped and she fell halfway into the water. Her hands caught hold of the rail and she managed to hang on though. The man in the black outfit leaned over and grabbed her by the arm, dragging her roughly on board the smaller craft.

"Hurry up," he said. He raised his arm and Marine saw a gun in his hand. With a shriek she

lashed out with her foot and knocked it out of his grasp. The gun skittered across the deck and fell into the water, sinking immediately out of sight beneath the indigo waves.

"Scott!" she screamed, then something hit her on the back of her head and her world exploded in a flash of white pain, and everything went black.

The boat was rocking. There was the smell of gasoline, and someone was calling her name. Marine opened her eyes and then shut them again. Her head was aching horribly and she felt like vomiting. When she opened her eyes her vision swirled around, spinning.

"Marine! Marine! Answer me damn it! You have to wake up." It was Scott, his voice sounded muffled, strained.

Blearily she opened her eyes again, and tried desperately to focus on something. It was no good. All she saw was swirling light and shadow. Her stomach heaved. She drew a deep breath and tried to steady herself. She was on a boat. The boat was rocking wildly. She was on a boat. However, the boat's deck was white, not the smooth, dark wood of *the Ranger*.

Her eyes flew open. Her vision was still blurred but no longer whirling. She was lying on her side in about two inches of water. Her hands and feet were numb, but when she tried to move them she found she was securely tied.

"Marine!" Scott's voice was pleading. "Look at me. Are you all right?"

She lifted her head and looked towards Scott. He was tied to the mast, his legs straight out in front of him. One of them was bent at an awkward angle, and Marine realised with shock that it was broken.

"That bastard broke it." He spoke with clenched teeth and Marine saw that he was terribly pale. "He broke my arm too, I tried to jump him from behind, but he had an accomplice."

"Oh, Scott!" Marine said, her voice cracking. "What happened?"

"When you jumped on board he had a gun, and you knocked it out of his hand." There was something like wry satisfaction in his voice. "He was furious. His partner hit you on the back of the head with a wrench. My God, I thought she'd killed you."

"She?"

"A woman. There was a woman and a man. They counted on the gun to control us, or to kill us perhaps." He stopped talking and groaned.

"But how...?" Marine's voice broke. She shook her head. "How did he know where the boat would be?"

"He said he listened in on the ham radio, that he caught your conversation with Charlie Brown so he knew just where you'd be."

"Is that what he said?" asked Marine.

"Yes. The conversation was on open air, Charlie Brown was issuing a storm warning."

She pulled herself upright and strained at the rope holding her hands tied. "Where's Edgar?" she asked, looking around. All she could see was the empty sea, and the tall waves coming towards the bow as the boat drifted helplessly in the face of the oncoming storm. The sky was pewter gray now, with an ominous green cast to it.

"He's in the cockpit, where they threw him." Scott's voice was anguished. "I don't know if he's dead. I only saw him being hit on the head. We have to find help, we have to find some way to help Edgar!"

"How?" Marine laughed mirthlessly. "We're about to be hit by a storm in a crippled boat, you have a broken leg, and we're both tied up."

"I think I've just about worked one hand free," Scott said. "If I get it loose I can untie your hands. Can you try and crawl over to me? I won't be able to move."

Marine heaved herself along the deck. The rolling, pitching boat making her progress difficult and her head hurt terribly. She had to hook her chin over Scott's good leg to pull herself closer to him. When a particularly strong swell made her roll over onto his broken leg he gave a cry.

"I'm sorry!" screamed Marine. "Hold on, I'm going to try and brace myself against your back."

She positioned herself the best she could along the mast and then she felt Scott's hand groping for her wrists.

"I've got them," he said. "Hold still, please!"

"I'm trying." Marine shuddered as the urge throw up clenched her gut.

"Are you all right?"

"I think so." She shivered and realised she was freezing cold.

"The wind is more northerly now," said Scott worriedly. "It's changing direction."

"We have to head to St. Thomas," said Marine.

"No, it's too late. We have to stay out in the open sea. If you can just keep the bow pointing towards the wind we might make it."

"Me?" Marine tugged on her wrists and found that Scott had loosened the ropes enough for her to ease her hands through the cord. She was free! Gasping she leaned forward and untied her legs. It seemed to take forever; her hands were awkward and numb. She fumbled with the water-swollen knots, tears of frustration brimming in her eyes. "Damn, I can't do this!"

"Just...slow down. Take your time..." Scott tried to sound reassuring, but his voice kept breaking. "My arm hurts, can you...untie me?"

Marine kicked her legs free and turned to Scott. She undid his bonds and then cried out as he pitched forward onto the deck. He had fainted. "Scott!" she screamed. "Damn you, wake up!"

He didn't though. Panicked, she got shakily to her feet then staggered down the hatch. Edgar, she had to find Edgar!

He was lying in a pool of blood at the foot of the stairs. With a cry she dropped painfully to her knees beside him. "Edgar!" she screamed. His face was white and waxy looking, and there was a nasty cut on his head, but he was breathing. The relief was so great that she felt as if she'd received a jolt of electricity. Drawing a deep breath she gently probed his wound, wondering how on earth she was going to help him. He didn't stir, and she noticed a large lump over his ear where he'd been struck. She frowned and bit her lip. He was out cold, no telling when he'd wake up.

## Chapter Eight

As she'd feared the radio had been completely ripped out. There was nothing below deck, not even a blanket. She searched frantically for something she could use to help Edgar, but didn't find anything but a small jack-knife in the corner of the hold. She picked it up and stared dumbly at it for a second, then she raced back upstairs and started hacking at the sails. The first thing to do was to get every scrap down and then try to rig up a small storm-sheet. She glanced over at Scott, but he was still sprawled on the deck.

Edgar was heavy, and Marine had to strain to push him so that he rested against something solid. She braced him against an empty bunk and, using strips of sail, tied him securely so that the boat's tossing wouldn't bang him around. She placed him on his side, in the recovery position, and made sure that he could untie himself if he awoke. Then, knowing there was nothing else to do, she went back up on deck.

Scott raised his head at her approach, but pain glazed his eyes and he could only move a little. He was shivering, and Marine realised he was in shock. She had to keep him warm.

She used part of the mainsail to wrap Scott, and then tied him securely to the mast using his belt, leaving his arms and legs free. She looked worriedly at his broken arm. It was swollen and felt hot to the touch. The break was on the forearm where he'd taken a horrendous blow. She wrapped it in stiff sailcloth, praying that it would act as a temporary splint. She made sure his fingers were above elbow level. Then she used the knife to cut his pant leg open. His leg had been broken in mid-tibia, and the ends of the bone protruded through the skin. Blood seeped out, but the bleeding had almost stopped.

Marine tried desperately to remember her first aid. Carefully she covered the wound with a clean bit of cloth she tore off her shirt, and then slowly she eased a piece of sailcloth under his leg and drew the ends up and over the break. She knew the leg had to be put in traction and the bone set, but only a surgeon could do that. She rolled up a length of cloth and put it long ways between Scott's legs then she tied his two legs together, totally immobilizing the broken leg. She wanted to

stay by his side and make sure he was okay, but first she had to get the boat settled. Raindrops started to splatter on the deck, and she knew the storm was getting closer.

The boat's rudder had been jammed, but, by luck, the boat had held its position with its nose nearly to the wind, thus keeping it from rolling over. Marine sighed with relief when the last of the sails had been taken down and the wind stopped tugging the boat backwards and sideways. There was no motor, but Marine found a jib stowed beneath one of the seats on deck. The seat cover lifted to reveal a small hold and Marine guessed that the pirates had not thought to look under there, or they would have cast it over the side. She carefully opened the sail up, hitching it onto the jib-line, and stopping when it was a quarter of the way up. The wind had become impossibly strong, and even that little bit of sail threatened to overturn the boat. Marine sawed at it with the knife, finally cutting it nearly in two. Then she took the knife and made two diagonal slashes in the sail, to let the worst of the wind through. When she was finished she let the wind catch hold of the leftover sail and whip it away over the raging sea.

She rolled the makeshift storm sheet as tightly as she could along the mast and tied it. She would only use it in an emergency. Now all she could do was to hang on for dear life to the tiller, pray that the rudder held, and try and keep the boat pointed straight into the storm.

The sky grew darker and darker. The white caps on the waves glowed eerily in the gloom, and the sea was a murky green. The wind whistled deafeningly over the waves, bringing stinging salt spray and huge drops of rain. The rain battered her, sometimes blinding her, filling her mouth and nostrils. At some point she wondered if she were even still afloat, the waves washed over the hull and tried to swamp the boat, the rain pounded relentlessly, driven nearly horizontal by the rushing wind.

Marine tried to keep an eye on Scott, and once she thought he was awake, looking at her, but the flash of lightning that lit up his face for one blinding second bleached the colour from his skin, making her afraid that he was already dead. She couldn't leave the helm long enough to check. She could just pray that the cords holding him to the mast would hold, and that he wouldn't be washed overboard. She had even tied herself to the wheel, using the rope and fastening it tightly to her waist and around her thighs.

Lightning cracked across the sky, giving Marine harrowing glimpses of the sea gone mad. The boat seemed to rise up the troughs and plough down them as if they were mountains not waves, and every time they went up and came hurtling downwards once more Marine was sure it was the end, and that the bow would be forced under, breaking the boat's spine. But the little boat somehow bobbed up again, shaking the sheets of water off its back and shuddering under the onslaught of another wave.

Her arms were leaden things, with no feeling or strength. The wheel, jammed as hard as she could keep it against the jerry can and her hip, seemed like a living thing bent on escaping her grip. Whenever her hands slipped the boat would slew sideways, but somehow Marine found the force to haul the wheel around. Her muscles screamed for rest, but she knew that if she let go she was doomed. Perhaps if she had been alone the fortitude would have deserted her, but there was Scott, helpless, sitting with his back to the mast, with his head upon his chest. Edgar was still in the hold, unconscious or dead, Marine didn't know which, but if he were alive, she would save him.

The boat tipped backwards as it met another monstrous wave head-on, and as it reached the crest a flash of lightning ignited the sky. The lightning seemed to rip the very fabric of the air apart, and the accompanying clap of thunder was deafening, but Marine felt her legs give way underneath her for a different reason. The lightning had lit up the sky, and the sea, and showed Marine a solid white sheet of water boiling up not five hundred yards away. It was a reef, the waves booming against it threw up a milky froth that looked as soft as a cloud, but the reef could rip the belly off a boat in an instant. Marine screamed aloud, and her voice rose above the storm to be lost in the howling wind.

Panicked, she twisted around and snatched at the rope that held the storm jib to the mast. Desperately she tugged on it, sheer fright lending strength to her exhausted arms. Stretching to the limits of the cords that held her to the wheel she pulled the half-sail out and yanked the cord that bound it. As soon as it was free the wind tore at it, but the twin slashes in the sail kept the fabric from shredding. The boat heeled over with the new pull from the sail. Marine screamed again, this time with triumph, as the boat answered to the rudder and lumbered up the sheer wall of a mountainous wave, but at a slight angle this time, away from the seething cauldron of the reef.

The sail held, and the wind pushed the boat sideways while Marine kept the bow as straight into the waves as she could. Whenever there was the slightest chance, she heeled the boat sideways against the sea and let the wind take her, the wind that screamed like a fury through the sail, tossing the boat like a cork on the face of the raging sea.

The sky turned from inky black back to pewter, and the storm swept by so suddenly that Marine thought she'd gone deaf. She shook her head to clear it, not able to believe that she was still alive, and the boat was still afloat on the waves. The waves stayed huge for an hour more, but without the wind there was less danger, and Marine raised the storm sheet and set sail for the north, using her own sense of wind direction to guide her.

When she was able to untie the knots that held her to the wheel, she fell. Her legs buckled under her and she ended up crawling to Scott's side. His head was still on his chest, his face pale, and for a horrible second she thought he was dead, but he opened his eyes when she called his name, and tried to grin. "Edgar?" He asked, his voice rasping.

"I don't know," she said, "He's down below. He was unconscious when I found him. I'll go see him in a minute."

"The storm?"

"It's all over. We made it, somehow, through the storm. I'm putting in at the first port we come to. The wind is still fairly strong so we're moving at a good clip. Do you want to lie down? It can't be very comfortable strapped up like that."

He nodded, and she carefully untied him from the mast and lowered him. She used some of the sailcloth for a pillow, and she checked his arm again, making sure his fingers weren't turning blue. She was afraid to check his leg, but she did look at his foot, to make certain there was still circulation in it. It was nearly all white. She bit her lip. He saw her and winced.

"That bad?" he managed to articulate.

"It'll be all right, I hope."

"How bad is it?" he insisted. Marine looked away, but was startled when he grabbed her arm with his good hand. "Don't lie to me," he said hoarsely.

"It's a bad break. The bone has pierced the skin and I think you've bled quite a lot. I put a

bandage on it, to stop the bleeding, and I've immobilized your leg. I have to get you to a hospital as soon as possible." Marine paused and took his hand. "I'll do everything I can for you, I promise."

He looked at her and Marine was frightened to see how sunken his eyes were. His face had a chalky look to it, and deep lines of pain pulled his mouth awry. "I know you will," he said simply. Then he closed his eyes.

Marine rocked back on her heels, her fist pressed to her mouth. Tears welled out of her eyes and scalded her cheeks. She had been so relieved to see the end of the storm, now she was adrift on an empty sea, blown off course by the unimaginable forces of the storm, and Scott's life depended on her being able to find her way to a safe port.

She got stiffly to her feet and then, summoning all of her strength, she went down to the hold.

Edgar was still lying on his side, but Marine could see that he was no better. If anything he was worse. His breathing was sonorous and laboured, and his colour was bad. Marine checked to see if he was awake anyway, shaking him gently and calling his name, but there was no reaction at all. She stood over him for a minute, wishing there was something she could do, but then she figured the best thing for her to do would be to get them to land.

She climbed back up the ladder and surveyed the boat. It hadn't suffered too much during the storm, and it was still afloat. Well, it was a start at least.

She grabbed the mast with both hands and shimmied up it. Using the storm sheet as a brace for her feet she pushed her way up the mast until she could catch hold of the mainstay. Pulling herself up the mast was exhausting, and she stopped a moment to catch her breath. She gave a quick glance down at Scott, but he was still. With a last effort she pulled herself up to the top. Hooking her legs around the rigging she scanned the horizon for a sign of land.

The boat tossed her back and forth, but she held on, looking hard on all sides for any telltale shadow or smudge on the horizon. The sky was getting darker again, but it was night coming, not the storm. She searched for lights in the gathering dusk, but saw nothing. Still she stayed up, her only hope was to sight land, or another ship, and go towards it. She looked up at the sky, hoping to spot some stars to guide her, but the clouds were still too dense. She stayed until her strength

failed her, and then she let herself slide down the mast.

Discouraged, she made her way to the wheel and made sure the jerry can was still in place. It was, so she turned her attention to the sail she'd rigged, stretching it tighter to get some more speed. She hoped she was going in the right direction. If she followed the wind she should head in a north, slightly westerly direction. She hoped to correct that, and head sideways to the wind, nearly due north. She hoped to connect with Haiti or the Dominican Republic. She had no idea how long the storm had lasted, or how far it had blown them off course, but if she didn't find land soon they would all die. Already thirst was parching her throat. The rain had filled the cockpit with water, but so had the waves and the pools of water that remained were all salty. With a sigh she dipped her fingers in the water and sucked them. The moisture was welcome, but her thirst remained unabated.

Night fell like a black, velvet curtain, and then, to Marine's delight, the stars came out. She found the Southern Cross and then, far ahead of her, nearly on the horizon, the Big Dipper. The North Star was there, dead ahead. She had reckoned correctly and for a wild minute she laughed with sheer delight. However she sobered up. She was heading north; therefore she'd hit land soon. At least eventually she would. But it was dark, and in the dark the reefs were treacherous. The sea was still agitated. The waves crested white so a reef would be hard to spot. Her only hope was to remain completely awake and alert and try to hear the telltale sound of waves breaking on the jagged coral before the boat hit.

She rubbed her face with both hands and walked the length of the boat to the very tip of the bow. She would have to stay here, straining her ears, ready to rush back to the wheel to change direction any minute. She decided to stay on her feet to stay awake.

Every once in a while she'd go below to check Edgar, but there was never any change.

The endless rocking motion of the boat hypnotized her. Once she fell forward, nearly pitching right off the boat, only catching herself by miracle the very last minute.

After that she sat down, but it was too hard to stay awake. Her whole body was bruised and battered, her head ached terribly, and her eyes kept closing by themselves.

Finally her body slumped down to the deck and exhaustion claimed her. She fell into a deep

and dreamless sleep that lasted until the cold seeped through her bones, waking her with violent shivers.

The night was still young and the last of the storm had passed away. The sky was clear and a billion stars blazed in the heavens. For a blissful minute Marine simply lay on her back and stared at the magnificent vista above her. The Milky Way was a white swath through the middle of the sky. Orion had just come up over the horizon and Scorpio had yet to appear, so Marine figured she had only slept an hour or so. The moon was nowhere in sight, but the stars were so bright they were reflected in the waves, a black and silver kaleidoscope surrounding the crippled little sailboat.

Marine heard a soft moan from Scott and she was instantly on her feet, moving swiftly to his side.

"Are you OK?" she whispered.

"I think so." His voice was raw with pain and when Marine put her hand on his forehead she was shocked to find it burning with fever.

"I'm afraid there's no fresh water," she said, hurriedly pushing aside the sailcloth which wrapped him like a shroud. She opened his shirt and let the cool night air play across his broad chest. He sighed and closed his eyes.

"Where are we?" he asked weakly.

Marine shook her head, "I don't know for sure. Somewhere off the coast of St. Dominique I hope." She pronounced it like the Dominicans did, giving it its Spanish name. She stood up and peered again into the night, searching for some sign of land. A faint sound came over to the water and she stiffened.

"What are you doing?" Scott asked.

"Shhh...I think I hear..." She grasped the mast and hauled herself up it again. Excitement lent her energy. Once up to the top she drew a deep breath and closed her eyes, calming her pounding heart. When she was composed again she opened her eyes and very carefully peered all around the horizon. Yes! There it was! A faint flicker of light nearly dead ahead of them. She took bearings from the stars and then slid down the mast. She hated losing sight of the light but she had lined it

up with the North Star and she knew just where to head.

"I've seen a buoy!" she announced excitedly to Scott. "I thought I heard the sound of metal clanging, and when I climbed up the mast I spotted it! We're heading nearly straight for it."

Scott nodded, but couldn't answer. Marine knelt a second by his side and gently smoothed back the hair off his forehead. His eyes glittered bright with fever and his skin burnt her hand.

"Hang in there," she said urgently. "Hang in there!"

Marine went back to the wheel and corrected their course. Then she shimmied up the mast to check their bearings again. This time she only had to climb halfway up, they were closing in so quickly on the buoy.

She went to the bow of the boat and peered closely at the water, listening for the telltale booming sound of waves on the reef. Faintly the crash of surf came to her ears. She knew that the buoy was guarding dangerous water but she had to get as close as possible to it to try and sight land. The boat they were on was tiny, only about twenty feet long. She was wide and sturdy, and had come through the storm like a trooper. Marine wished she knew how deep her keel was, but she guessed that it was fairly deep from the way the boat had responded to the rudder. She didn't want to get near a reef. While she was searching for the buoy another sound came to her over the water. It was the faint sound of singing. Someone was singing in the darkness just ahead!

Marine couldn't see any lights, but she realised that she didn't have any lights either. She cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled into the darkness; "Ahoy!! Can you hear me? Hello! Is anyone there?"

She paused and listened. The singing had stopped. The night became enveloped in a deep silence.

"I'm over here!" She screamed, "My boat has been damaged by the storm, and I have two seriously injured people on board!" No one answered and Marine suddenly panicked. "We're not pirates," she cried, "and we need help! Do you speak English?" she added, a sudden doubt assailing her. "*Somos perdidos! Socorro! Por favour! Can you please help me?*"

After a second she saw to her immense relief a light come on to her right. A voice came floating out of the darkness. It was deep and rich and it said, "*Bon soir!*"

Oh my God, Marine said in disbelief. "We're in Haiti!"

Scott pulled himself up on his good elbow and he asked Marine, "How the hell do you know where we are?" His voice, though weak, still had an edge of dry humour in it. Marine was so relieved she thought she'd cry.

"He spoke French, we must be near Haiti."

The tiny fishing boat materialised out of the darkness. A tall man was holding a flickering storm lantern over his head while he drove the little outboard motorboat towards them. Marine saw shock on his face when he saw the state of the boat.

"*Mon ami*, you been in dee big storm, no?" he asked, while tying his boat astern and coming on board.

Marine nodded. "We were just south of St. Thomas when it hit. It must have carried us a hundred miles in the time it took to blow over."

The man nodded. "It was a big one. It lasted nearly four hours here. I jus' been checking my lobster traps, but deys nearly all gone out to sea. Dat big storm jest took dem a-way. Lucky t'ing my house doan' go with it! *Mon Dieu!*" He laughed, showing even white teeth in his broad, handsome face. His skin was so dark it was confounded with the night and to Marine's exhausted senses it was like talking to a ghost.

"Please," she said, "can you take us to a hospital? My friend here is hurt, and there's another man down below. I think he's got a concussion."

At that the man quickly went to Scott and looked him over. With gentle, deft hands he assessed his broken arm and leg while Marine held the lantern up, casting a greenish glow over them. Then he went to see Edgar, and to Marine's relief, he was able to hoist Edgar over his shoulder and carry him onto his own boat.

"We'll have to leave your boat here and take my motor boat," the man said, tucking a large piece of sailcloth around Edgar and making sure he was secure. "We'll go much faster."

"No problem," said Marine. "It's not our boat anyway."

"Dere's a reef jes' over dere," the man said, pointing ahead. "It will sink your ship if she gets

too near."

"Don't worry. I've taken down the sail and I'll turn the wheel hard astern and block it. She'll just drift in a big circle until someone finds her."

"I'll send my boy out to take care of her," the man promised.

"He can have her," said Marine. "Right of salvage."

The man came back on board and lifted Scott. He was big and strong, but Scott was also, and Marine had to help lower him into the boat. His legs were still tightly tied together, but it was hard not to jostle. Once Scott screamed, and he bit his lower lip so hard blood ran down his chin. Marine settled herself between Scott and Edgar, taking Scott's head on her lap.

The little motor boat ploughed gamely through the water towards the dark bulk of the island and Marine saw lights appear as they rounded a sharp spit of land.

"Where are we exactly?" she asked.

"Dis be near the South side of Haiti. Not too far from dee border. An' the village is jes around the point. Doan worry, we be getting dere in half and hour. Jes you hang on now."

Scott was lying with his head in Marine's lap and she stroked his forehead, trying to comfort him. His breathing was uneven, and he kept slipping into a delirium, once murmuring "Ellen..."

Marine was surprised at the sudden, sharp pang of jealousy that hit her. She stared bleakly at the approaching lights and wondered what her world would be like now, without *the Ranger*.

She had to get back to St. Thomas right away. There must be some way to get *the Ranger* back.

She had been knocked out and damn nearly killed. Her boat was gone, and Scott and Edgar were severely injured. She was filled with a cold, white anger that threatened to overwhelm her. Those thieving pirates. She'd see them in prison if it were the last thing she did. What's more, she'd get her boat back. Even if it meant going to the ends of the earth.

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Marine flew back to St. Thomas two days later. Edgar was still unconscious. He was in a coma

and had been transported to Miami.

Scott was as comfortable as he could be in the hospital at Port au Prince. The man had called an ambulance once they were docked at the little fishing village and Scott had been transported across the island right away.

He'd had an operation on his leg. It was in traction, and his arm was in a cast. The doctors said he was lucky to be alive. When he got to the hospital his temperature was nearly a hundred and four and his arm was swollen twice its normal size.

Marine stayed with him until he woke up after his operation, and so the first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was her face, bent over him, her amber eyes dark with worry, her face pale with lack of sleep.

"Where am I?" he rasped. His throat was dry and he was glad when Marine gave him a sip of cool water.

"Hush, it's all right. You're in Haiti. The doctors here are wonderful. They say you'll be out of the hospital in three weeks."

Scott frowned and tried to sit up in bed but his head spun and he slumped back against his pillow. Marine put the glass of water down and touched his forehead tenderly.

"You stay right here," she said firmly. "Your leg is in traction, you mustn't move at all. It's very badly broken, but the doctors say it should be good as new. Your arm is broken too," she added, seeing him looking with a puzzled frown at the cast lying by his side. "You'll have to keep it in a cast for a few weeks. Don't you remember anything?"

"No." Scott shook his head. He tried to think, but his head was hurting and seemed to be full of cotton wool. A glance at the window showed him darkness. It was night, but which night it was he didn't know. Had he been here a day, or a week? He tried to ask Marine, but the words wouldn't form in his throat. Speaking was an effort. He closed his eyes again, exhausted, and slipped back into a dreamless sleep.

When he woke up again several hours later he felt better. Marine was still by his bedside, but she had dozed off on the chair. She was slumped over onto the side of his bed, her hair tumbling over her folded arms. Her cheek was pressed to the back of her hand like a child. Her mouth was

open and she snored gently, making Scott smile.

Light was streaming in the window now; a pale, early morning light that made the white sheets on the bed glow and sparkled off the metal stand holding the saline solution hanging above his head. He looked down his arm, a needle was taped to it, but he didn't feel any pain. He looked down at the foot of the bed. His leg was in traction, hanging twenty centimetres off the bed, attached with weights and pulleys to the ceiling. Bandages covered it, so he couldn't tell how bad it was. He grimaced and tried to examine his arm, but a new, white cast covered it, and only a dull ache reminded him of the break. He remembered where he was now, and more importantly, how he'd gotten here. A frown crossed his face, and his eyes blazed suddenly with a feral glow. All at once he looked like a savage, and even tied down to the bed with broken limbs he looked somehow dangerous.

He reached over to the table by his bed and managed to get the glass of water without spilling it. After he'd drunk the whole thing he felt better. The door opened and a nurse poked her head into the room. She saw he was awake and a wide grin split her pretty, brown face.

"Bonjour! Well, if sleeping beauty isn't finally awake." Her voice was lilting and singsong, a Haitian lullaby all in itself.

Marine raised her head groggily and rubbed her eyes. She saw Scott and smiled shyly at him. "Did I snore?" she asked him.

"A bit," he teased, "not as much as a bear, though a little more than my old Granny." Then his grin slipped. "How's Edgar?"

Marine sat back in her chair and frowned. "He's in Miami. He's still in a coma. The doctors are optimistic though. They say that he's doing well, considering."

"Thank God!" said Scott with relief. "You know, I was afraid to ask. I thought...I thought he was dead," he finished quietly.

"He's not." Marine took his hand and squeezed it. "I believe he'll be all right."

Scott closed his eyes and Marine saw the deep lines of worry ease somewhat.

"You must be feelin' much bettah," said the nurse, taking his pulse and slipping a thermometer in his mouth. "You are goin' to be all right. The doctor will be here in a few minutes

to see you." She checked his temperature and wrote everything down on his chart, hanging it back on the foot of his bed when she finished. "You want some tea?" she asked him.

"Yes please," Scott mumbled through the thermometer. "And I'd like a telephone. I have to make some phone calls, it's very important."

"Well, you just take that up with the doctor. I can give you some tea or a shot in the derrière. The rest is up to him." She dazzled him with another white smile and took the thermometer out of his mouth. She looked at it, pursed her lips and wrote something down on his chart. Then she went out of the room. "I'll be back with your tea in a moment," she called back over her shoulder.

Marine burst out laughing.

"It's not funny," said Scott, suddenly terribly agitated. "I have to call the police!"

"I've already talked to the police," said Marine, soothingly. "They'll contact us as soon as they find anything, but for now it's as if *the Ranger* has disappeared again. I'm sorry," she added softly. "I'm flying back to St. Thomas this evening to start looking for *the Ranger* myself."

"You're leaving?" Scott asked, bewildered. "Why so soon?"

"Because I have to. My family was worried sick, I want to go see them and reassure them. I've asked Chapel and Travis to help me hunt for *the Ranger*. We're going to go down island in their boat tomorrow. I want to leave as soon as possible."

"But, do you know where to go?"

"I think so. Off the coast of Brazil is one of the biggest pirating operations in the Western Hemisphere. If the pirates wanted to steal *the Ranger* I'm sure it wasn't to keep her for themselves. They most likely want to sell her, probably to some drug lord from Columbia. We'll have to act fast if we want to intercept her."

"I want to come with you!" Scott pounded the side of his bed in frustration.

As he spoke the doctor strode in. "I don't think you'll be going anywhere," he said as he perused Scott's chart and then scrutinized his leg. He frowned, and ran his hands over it, eliciting a small cry of pain when he reached a certain spot. "That's a bit sore there, but it should be all right soon enough, don't worry. Here is the X-ray of your leg before the operation." He held a large

gray sheet of clear plastic on a light board on the wall in front of Scott, using his pen to point out the breaks. "As you can see the tibia was broken here and here. The fibula was broken here. There was a bit of crushed bone, that's why there's a depression here. You were hit three times with an extremely heavy object."

"It was the boat's anchor," said Scott, wincing at the memory. The man had held it by the chain and swung it against his leg, but he couldn't bring himself to talk about it. Marine gave a little gasp and squeezed Scott's hand.

"And my arm?" Scott asked.

"I'm getting to that. Sheesh, so impatient! Any questions about your leg?"

"How long do I stay in traction? When do I get the hardware out? When can I walk?"

"Good questions!" The doctor winked at Marine. "He's smart and to the point. Well, you stay in traction until there's no danger of your muscles pulling your bones out of place and messing up my lovely work. Depending on how quickly you heal, I'd say between six and twelve days. Then you get to find someone to wheel yourself around in a wheel chair for a few more days. One of the nurses will be glad to help you out, I'm sure. Then when I'm sure that a sudden move won't snap the steel plate or bend the screws, you get crutches and you're out of here. You come back, of course, in two months time to take out the hardware, or else it will be tricky getting past airport security with all that metal in you."

"And my arm?" Scott asked, after a few seconds.

"*Trés beau!* Lovely! Hit with a blunt object just on the ulna, here's the X-ray. You can see the fracture and the long splinter of bone that broke free. It needed a thin wire to hold it down and a little cast to keep everything nice and still while it mends. Are you right handed? Well that's a lucky break then, ha ha!"

Scott tried to glare but ended up grinning. "Well, thank you doctor, now I know everything. I do need to have a telephone and a fax machine at my disposal. I have a business to run and a boat to recover."

"Yes, I heard about that. Well, I'll see what I can do, but you have to get rest now, I'll see you tomorrow morning. If you need any painkillers just ask Doris, she'd my assistant here on this

ward. You reach her by pressing this button."

"Thanks again." Scott shifted a bit in bed and blanched as a wave of pain hit him.

"That leg will be very painful for a while," said the doctor.

"I see," gasped Scott. "By the way, what's your name? I forgot to ask."

"Doctor Arnaud Payne, P-A-Y-N-E," said the tall black man, waving as he went out the door.

"Oh great," groaned Scott. "I break a leg and all I get is pain."

"Well, if you're making jokes you must be feeling a bit better." Marine looked at her watch and sighed. "I have to go. The airport is an hour drive away and I have to catch the flight."

"Don't leave!" Scott sounded anguished. He flushed. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound like that."

"It's okay." Marine said gently. She took his good hand and pressed it to her lips.

Scott felt his stomach contract at her touch. The sheer physical reaction he felt for her took him by surprise, as it had the first time he'd kissed her. He caught her by the hair and gently drew her down to him, kissing her hard on the mouth. "Thank you for saving my life," he murmured. "I won't forget it."

Marine got shakily to her feet and went to the door. She was late for the plane, but she didn't want to leave. She turned one last time and stared at Scott. He looked back at her, his face still as stone, but his eyes a deep, blazing green. Then she swung around and left, running down the corridors, trying not to let the tears she felt threatening spill down her cheeks.

Chapter Nine

The taxi drive from the hospital to the airport was beautiful. The road wound through verdant hills, past little villages with their candy-coloured houses, past wooden mansions high up on the hills, past placid cows knee-deep in tall grass, and then it followed the coast. The land became arid, and white dazzled against a thousand colours of blue and green as the blazing sand met the crystal sea.

On Marine's right was the water, the road was only a few feet away from the shore sometimes, and on her left the hills rose up to the clouds. White egrets perched in the mangrove trees on the water's edge, and emerald green parakeets fluttered through the scarlet blossoms of the flamboyant trees.

She closed her eyes and let her mind wander. The beauty around her couldn't keep her from thinking of *the Ranger*. When she found the boat she would come back and pick Scott up, and they would sail up to Miami together.

The taxi stopped suddenly, throwing her forward against the seat and her driver turned around and yelled, "*Voilà! We're here!*"

"I see that, thank you," Marine said crossly, rubbing her head. Her father had wired her money to a bank in Port-au-Prince, so she had enough to pay the taxi. She thrust a wad of bills at him and rushed to the plane, barely making it on time.

Thank goodness I had no luggage to check in, she thought, but her torn shirt, filthy shorts, and bruised face made more than one person stare at her in horror.

Her sister, who had been at the airport to pick her up, stared in horror too. "Oh my poor baby!" she screamed, throwing her arms around Marine and hugging her tightly. "You poor thing! You look awful! We were so worried!"

"It's all right, nothing a nice hot shower and a change of clothes won't fix." Marine hugged her back. "But I won't pretend I'm not relieved to be back here in one piece. Shall we go home now? I bet Maman is out of her mind with worry."

"Of course she is! We all were. The storm came up so suddenly, and then the marina said it hadn't seen *the Ranger*, although you'd made reservations to dock there. Travis went to the mangroves and searched everywhere, and the coast guard had an all-points bulletin out for the boat. There were some sightings, but nothing concrete." Claire spoke quickly as she drove, filling Marine in on everything. Marine listened carefully, only asking a question now and then to clarify a small point.

"Did the Coast Guard fly a chopper over the mangroves?" she asked.

"That's the first thing they did."

"I think they headed south," said Marine.

"Probably." Claire faltered. "They're saying now, I think I should be the one to tell you..."

"What?"

"They think that *the Ranger* was sunk in the storm. She's a racing yacht after all, not made for high seas. A storm that size would swamp her. The coast guard thinks that they should start searching for underwater wrecks."

Marine was silent. The idea was not new to her, and Claire, after glancing at her said, "You've thought of that too."

"Yes." Marine sighed. "I've thought of that, of course. But I don't want to believe it."

"Neither do I," said Claire grimly.

Marine spent the night with her parents, but dinner was a tense affair. Marine's mother sensed that her daughter was already thinking about the morrow when she would leave with Travis and Chapel and try to find *the Ranger*.

Marine tried to reassure her parents, telling them not to worry about her, but her mother's fears wouldn't be assuaged. Her father pinched his lips tightly together and refused to say anything else than, "I wish you would just let the Coast Guard take care of it Marine. What good will it do you to catch up to the boat?"

Marine had no answer to that, and to make matters worse the next morning, before she left, she tried to telephone Scott to tell him she was leaving. He didn't answer the phone, and when she

at last got hold of a nurse the woman told her that Scott had developed a fever and was back in the operating room.

"It's not serious, is it?" gasped Marine.

"It is quite critical, but I can't tell you any more. Call back in two hours. The doctor will be able to talk to you then."

But two hours later Marine was aboard *the Triton* with the wind tangling her hair and making the mast creak as the boat ploughed valiantly through the waves.

White caps danced upon the water and the wind was stiff, right out of the north, with a cool bite to it that would have made Marine feel exhilarated any other time. But today her stomach was knotted with worry as she helped Travis plot out a course that would take them straight down the middle of the Caribbean Sea towards South America. They would stop over at Aruba, then head for the coast of Columbia.

Travis looked over at his long-time friend and his blue eyes narrowed with concern. "I know of a guy in Aruba who might be able to help us," he said.

"You mean Jake? He's an old pirate himself, I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him." It was Chapel, who'd come over beside them. He squatted down on the deck next to Marine and peered at the map she held in her hand. "Let me see that." He took the map and studied it a minute. "I grew up here, on this island," he said, pointing to Tobago. "It's not too far away from where're going."

Marine's eyes filled with tears and she turned her head so that the two men wouldn't notice, but Chapel saw and he put his arm around her shoulders.

"Don't fret now, you'll see, we'll find that old *Ranger*." His dark brown face was serious, for once his eyes had lost their merry twinkle. She rubbed her palm across her eyes to dry them and smiled bravely.

"What would I do without you guys? You're both so sweet to help me," she said.

"You think we're doing this for you?" Travis guffawed. "We're in this for the money kiddo. When we rescue the boat that old guy who owns *the Ranger* will give us millions in reward. Won't he?" His voice twanged like a banjo, betraying his deep south origins with every syllable.

"Don't get cocky," said Chapel. His voice was deep and warm with a calypso lilt. Marine had no idea how they had gotten together, everything about the two men was as different could possibly be.

Travis had white-blond hair down to his shoulders. His eyes were pale gray and he was lithe and lean. Chapel was a black man, with a shiny bald head he kept carefully shaved and was built along the lines of a professional wrestler. He was as gentle as he was strong, though Marine knew that he was incapable of inflicting hurt on anyone. He only looked fierce. He had a diamond stud in his nose and he wore a gold *piece of eight* on a chain around his neck.

Their boat, *the Triton*, was a large sloop. The men had outfitted her for treasure hunting and she had the latest gadgets for sounding the ocean floor and computers stuffed with the records of cargo ships and Spanish galleons gone aground all through the Caribbean. She wasn't fitted out for comfort though. They all slept in hammocks slung along the wall, and there were no tables or chairs.

As they sailed, they kept up the satellite liaison as they scanned the seabed for signs of *the Ranger*. Marine was sick at heart thinking that the most likely place to find the magnificent boat was on the bottom of the sea.

The day wore on and still they kept heading south. The weather and the wind held, driving them at a fast clip through the choppy sea. Travis made lunch while Chapel tried to cheer up Marine, but when the sandwiches came, she took only two bites.

"I'm not hungry," she sighed.

On and on they went. *The Triton* was a fast boat, but Marine knew *the Ranger* spoiled her for any other boat. She couldn't help making comparisons.

She tried to go below and sleep, but the *bib-bip-bip* of the radar kept her awake. She was straining her ears for the slightest difference in sound that would mean they'd found a wreck. She knew that the computers were registering everything, but she couldn't relax. She got up off the bunk and went to stand in front of the glowing screen.

When night came she sat on deck with a woollen sweater wrapped around her shoulders. She watched the phosphorescence glimmering in the wake of the boat as the microscopic creatures lit

up the sea with a ghostly glow. The sky was ablaze with stars, the inky sea was dotted with light, but Marine saw nothing of the beauty around her. She could only imagine *the Ranger* sunken on the sea floor.

Chapel pressed a cup of steaming soup into her hand, and when she finished she lay down where she was and slept. The sun rising over the horizon woke her up.

She sat up stiffly and stretched. Travis was at the helm; the two men had relayed each other all night long as they usually did. He cracked her a smile and asked her if she wanted some coffee.

"I'll get it," she said. She filled a mug for herself and took another one to Travis.

"Thanks kiddo." He pointed his chin at the water in front of the boat. "We're doing okay, and the Coast Guard are about twenty-five miles ahead of us. They have several boats searching, so we've spread ourselves out."

"How often do you talk to them?" asked Marine.

"Every two or three hours."

"Can you ask them to contact the hospital in Port-au-Prince? I want to keep Scott posted." Marine asked worriedly.

Travis looked at her out of the corner of his eye and there was a sly grin on his face. "I say, did you get a crush on this guy or what? Who is he anyway?"

"He's just a friend," said Marine, "and I don't have a crush on him."

"Yeah sure. And pigs fly." Travis finished his coffee and gave the mug back to Marine. "Go make yourself useful woman, and wash the dishes."

"No problem," Marine said cheerfully and tossed the mug into the water off the side of the boat. "It should be clean now."

"Aggh!" Travis leapt towards the railing and leaned over. "That was my favourite mug! Why did you do that? I should throw you in after it," he added darkly.

"You said to wash it," Marine said sweetly. "Are there anymore dishes you need cleaned?"

"Yes, NO! Damn it girl. I sure feel sorry for that poor Scott. Does he know what you're really like?"

Chapel came on deck yawning hugely. "What's up Trav?"

"She threw my favourite mug overboard!" Travis sounded pained.

"No! Not the one with the little mermaid on it!"

"Yes. The one with the little mermaid. Now I'll have to go back to Disney World and get another one. Jeez Marine, all because you're a woman's libber or something terrible like that." Travis shook his head in mock despair and went back to the wheel. "What is the world coming to? Woman barefoot in the galley, men on deck, that's what my old daddy taught me."

"My oh my. Your daddy sounds like a real Don Juan," said Marine. You must introduce me someday.

"Can't, my momma shot him." Travis glanced at Marine to see if she believed him.

"Did she really?"

"Well, she did. But it was an accident. She was cleaning the hunting rifle and it went off. Got daddy in the backside with a load of shot. Then she spent three days pickin' the lead outta his rump."

"Serves him right," said Marine.

Chapel patted him on the arm. "Hey Trav, I think there's news on the radio."

The three friends looked at each other and then they all bolted for the galley where the radio was crackling away.

"*Triton*, come in *Triton*..." The reception was not very good and Chapel quickly set about turning knobs. "I'm calling from Maracaibo, can you read me?"

"I can," said Chapel. "Who's calling *the Triton*?"

"*The Green Dolphin*. We're a survey boat. We put into the Gulf of Venezuela during the storm."

"Why are you calling, *Green Dolphin*?"

"I heard you were looking for *the Ranger*. One of our divers swears he saw her at the mouth of the Gulf."

"But that's impossible!" cried Marine. "We left the *Ranger* nearly six hundred kilometres from

there!"

"Wait a minute. How far were you from Puerto Rico when the storm hit?" Chapel asked her.

Marine frowned, "I'm not sure. Maybe fifty miles?"

"I don't think it's impossible, I think we should check it out," said Chapel. He spoke into the mike. Can you give us the exact location?"

"I can," the man answered. "It was at 70° longitude, just above Curacao."

"We're nearly there!" Marine cried. "How long ago was this?"

"About five hours ago. We got an all points bulletin and our diver remembered seeing the boat."

Marine clapped Travis on the back. "We've got them!" she cried.

"Not so fast," Travis said somberly. He took the mike from Chapel and asked, "Did you contact the coast guard?"

"We did," said the man on *the Green Dolphin*.

"Well done," said Travis. "By the way, what's the name of the diver, we'd like to congratulate him."

"His name's Randolphe Currier, but everyone here calls him Red."

Marine gasped and sank down onto the bench behind her. "I don't believe it," she said, her voice ragged with emotion.

"*Green Dolphin*, over and out," came the man's voice over the static, and the connection was broken.

"Red!" Marine stared unseeingly at the radio.

"Are you okay?" asked Travis.

"Yeah, I guess." Marine lied. Actually she felt as if someone had hit her with a bat. "Just when you thought it was safe to go back into the water," she joked feebly.

"Why did you guys break up?" Chapel wanted to know. "You were engaged, so I thought."

"I thought so too," Marine said sadly. "I really did."

Chapel looked obliquely at Travis and shrugged. "Should we pursue this?" he asked.

"Not unless Marine wants to talk about it," he answered.

"I already tried talking about it and it didn't work! Thanks anyway fellows. I appreciate it. Let's just head towards Curacao and see if we can catch up with *the Ranger*."

"You're the boss, said Travis, giving her shoulder a light tap. "I'll call ahead to Amuary, La Guaira and to Puerto Cabello to give them *Ranger's* description. Now that we know where she was last sighted it will be easier to look for her."

"Don't forget Oranjestad and Williemstad, said Chapel, checking the map. "I better get back to the helm." He thrust the map at Marine and disappeared up the hatch.

Marine looked down at the map and frowned. Where could *the Ranger* be heading?

Travis went back to the radio and Marine wandered above deck where Chapel was at the wheel. She watched him for a while in silence then walked to the stern where she stood looking back at the white froth the boat left in her wake. Several times she spotted flying fish leaping above the waves and once the dark shadow of a manta ray slid beneath the boat. It was only when the sun began to set on their second day at sea that she shook herself and went below.

She showered and washed her hair with seawater, then she went into the galley to see what she could fix for dinner. The bachelors had boxes of pasta, and cans of tuna seemed to be their main diet. Marine wrinkled her nose and dug deeper into the pantry. She came up with a few cans of vegetables, a tin of anchovies and some spices. It would have to do.

A half and hour later she called the men down to dinner. She'd cooked some spiral pasta and made a sauce with anchovies, canned tomatoes, garlic, and black olives. There was a salad made with canned green beans and artichoke hearts, and for dessert she'd poached pears in wine flavoured with cinnamon.

"Wow!" exclaimed Chapel, "I thought you could only do this on *the Ranger*."

"Yeah," added Travis, "I didn't know you could cook this well on just any boat. You'll have to stay and cook for us all the time. But don't do the dishes, we'll take care of them. "

"I wasn't planning on doing the dishes," said Marine.

“Good, because these are the only ones we have,” Travis said.

When Marine crawled into her hammock that night she couldn't sleep. Her mind was in turmoil. She couldn't stop thinking about catching up to *the Ranger*. She thought about Edgar and hoped he was all right.

She thought about Red too, his beautiful, angular face and his mocking gaze. He'd found *the Ranger*. That made sense, all he'd ever loved about her had been that boat. But his image in her mind was being superimposed by another face, the wide, white grin and deep green eyes that she knew belonged to Scott. She remembered his warm, slightly sardonic voice and his broad shoulders. His black, unruly hair that curled around his well-shaped head and the way he moved, like a big cat, were all insinuating themselves in her thoughts.

She hoped he was feeling better. She hated thinking of him alone in the hospital, broken and in pain. And the last news she had of him was that he was being operated on again. The nurse had sounded so worried. Her eyes filled with helpless tears and she buried her head in her arms and cried herself to sleep.

In the early morning Marine awoke with a start. At first she didn't know where she was, then she groaned and rolled out of the hammock. She stared bleakly at her reflection for a few moments then scraped her hair back in a tight ponytail and swiped some peach coloured lipstick across her mouth. The result didn't please her and she wondered why. Perhaps she was afraid Red would see her, but why should she care? She hated him, didn't she?

She snagged a quick cup of coffee in the empty galley before heading up on deck. Travis was at the helm and Chapel was checking the rigging. He waved good-naturedly at her, his diamond nose-stud winking in the pale, early-morning light. He had taken off his shirt and Marine thought he looked exactly as a pirate should. All he needed was a black eye-patch.

Marine helped Travis with the sails then they both went below to call the Coast Guard. They said that they'd heard nothing new, and then Travis called all the ports, asking everyone if they'd seen *the Ranger*. He called his friend Jake in Aruba, but Jake said that the boat hadn't been sighted by anyone, and that she hadn't been offered up for sale either.

The radio crackled just as Jake got off the wire. It was Charlie Brown, who'd warned Marine

about the storm.

"How-ya doin' kid?" he wanted to know. "Rumour has it you're chasin' your beautiful boat clear to Curacao."

"That's right," Marine said. "She's been sighted."

"Well, I heard a strange conversation today over the air, and I thought I'd better get a hold of you."

"How'd you know where I was?" asked Marine.

"I listen in on coast guard air. Okay, here's the dirt. *The Ranger* was last seen near the Gulf of Venezuela, then she disappeared again, right? Well, I got friends in the Maracaibo Lagoon who think they saw a racing yacht last night. It's worth checking on; the yacht in question was seen just off the city of Maracaibo. It's a big place, and it's pretty hard to go sneakin' a pretty boat like *the Ranger* past it. Even in the dark."

"Why would they go there?" Marine wondered out loud. "It's a dead end. Surely they know the boat is being sought after!"

"It's a pretty big place, and there are lots of places to hide a boat once it's dismantled. I think they'll probably try to sell her at one of the little ports in the Gulf, and then she'll be dismantled and taken overground to Mérida, or even Barquisimeto. In Barquisimeto she can be re-painted, renamed, and sail down the river to Puerto Cabello. There she can be sold."

"I hope we catch her in time," Chapel said, drumming the desk with his fingers worriedly.

The radio crackled once again and Charlie Brown signed off. They turned the boat once more dead south and sailed for the Gulf of Venezuela.

The sun was burning Marine's back and arms, even through the long-sleeve shirt she wore. The straw hat she'd pinned firmly to her hair kept her face in the shade but even so the sweat made her eyes sting and stuck her shirt to her chest.

Chapel was the only one of the three who didn't suffer from the heat, but even he wore a wide brimmed hat to protect his shiny bald head.

The heat was unbearable. Inside the Gulf the air was as still and hot as in an oven. The river

water mingled with the seawater in a churning, muddy maelstrom at the mouth of the channel. The Gulf was full of tankers and barges as boats headed for the refineries or the plantations picking up loads of bananas, sugar, or petrol, the three main resources of the area. Marine wondered how a racing yacht could go unnoticed here, until night fell. Then it was as if a black velvet curtain dropped over everything, the air was as thick as the water, and the darkness was impenetrable. The lights from the villages were flickering pinpoints in the darkness and they picked their way slowly and carefully through the gloom.

The heat didn't abate for a minute. Even at midnight the air around the boat seemed to be a living thing. It was so sultry that a sheen of moisture covered everything and Marine felt as if every movement was a momentous effort. She slept on deck, taking turns with Travis and Chapel down below deck in the stifling radar room. The night seemed never-ending, but at last the first rays of dawn lit up the sky on their port side. They were still heading due south.

As the day wore on the sky became an inferno. The water beneath them was no longer the transparent blue of the Caribbean, but an opaque, brownish-green that swirled and churned in uneasy eddies around the boat's hull. The water did nothing to cool the air, but instead it gave the impression of radiating its own heat. The coast was nearly out of sight. On either side of the channel was a sort of heat haze. They would pass Maracaibo soon. Then it was nearly three hundred kilometres more of torrid sailing towards the south.

Marine was slumped over the wheel on the evening of the second day when Chapel came over to her. "We've got company," he said, jerking his thumb over to their right, starboard side.

Marine peered through the shimmering heat and saw he was right. A ship was heading towards them. As it drew nearer Marine saw that it was a converted cruiser. She knew who it was even before she spotted the name painted in green on her white hull. It was *the Green Dolphin*. Her heart lurched in her chest and she stood up quickly.

"Take the wheel," she said to Chapel.

"Where you off to?" he asked.

"To change. I can't let anyone see me like this." Marine gestured towards her sweat-drenched T-shirt and her grimy shorts. "I'll just be a minute."

Chapel nodded, his dark eyes alight with comprehension. "You look gorgeous no matter how you're dressed," he said softly. "But if you want you can take a quick shower, I think we have enough water."

Marine nodded gratefully. To conserve water they had been sluicing themselves off with seawater since the beginning of their journey, and Marine knew her hair was matted and greasy underneath her straw hat.

She disappeared below and rushed into the tiny room allotted to her. . Hurriedly she washed off in the narrow shower. There was no need to dry off, the heat and humidity kept everything damp anyway. She pulled a tee shirt on over her head and put on some almost clean shorts. Pinning her wet hair in a tight chignon, she looked desperately around for her shoes. They were not in her bag, or under her bed. Swearing under her breath she went above deck. Already she could hear the low throbbing of *the Green Dolphin's* engines as she drew alongside *the Triton* . Two men descended a ladder and got into a small Zodiac, then motored over to *the Triton*.

The first man Marine saw was Red. He was standing on the deck of the little Zodiac, he held a rope in his hands, and he tossed one end of it to Travis who caught it and expertly tied it to a cleat. He saw Marine and waved, but she simply folded her arms across her chest and stared at him. He grinned then, and Marine felt her anger weaken. He was still the best-looking man she'd ever seen. His hair gleamed dark red in the bright sun and his skin was deeply tanned. Unlike most redheads, his skin wasn't fair and the sun didn't burn him. It seemed, on the contrary, to burnish him. His whole body was lean and golden. His shorts rode low on his narrow hips and he wore no shirt, showing off his wide shoulders and flat stomach.

The devastating heat didn't even give the impression of affecting him in the least. He looked crisp and cool. Marine tried to take an even breath and calm her pounding heart. But she knew her face must be crimson from the heat radiating from her cheeks and sweat was already beading on her upper lip. She sighed and looked over to Travis who was now pulling in on the rope so that Red and the Captain of *the Green Dolphin* could come on board.

With a cat-like movement Red climbed up the little ladder on the stern of *the Triton* and jumped lightly on board. Then he turned to help his captain. The other man was as dark as a

moonless night. His skin was so black it had bluish highlights. His high, flat cheekbones gave him a savage look, but when he smiled kindly, Marine felt herself trusting him right away.

"Hello Marine." Red didn't try to touch her. He contented himself with a long appraising look. "Hello Travis, Chapel. How have you been?" He knew them of course, from the trips they'd taken on *the Ranger*.

"Fine." Travis was laconic. He didn't know what had happened between Marine and Red, but he could tell Marine was uncomfortable and his blue eyes narrowed.

"I'd like to introduce you to Captain Albright," Red said. "This is Marine Fontaine, Travis Tait and Chapel Bernatty." They all shook hands and then Red said, "Captain Albright has been in touch with the Coast Guard ever since I saw *the Ranger*. He wants to help look for her."

Marine glanced at the Captain and back at Red. She cleared her throat. "Thank you, sir," she said. "I'm most grateful."

"I have a helicopter," he said, indicating the small craft on board *the Green Dolphin*. "I suggest you and Red take her over the swamps to see if *the Ranger* hasn't taken refuge there. It's not improbable that the pirates have taken her into the labyrinth of small rivers and swamp land south of the city, I think it's worth a try."

"I hope the pirates don't know we've spotted *the Ranger*," said Marine worriedly.

"But the pirates surely know by now. They must be able to listen in to the Coast Guard's radio." Travis said in his twangy, southern accent.

"*The Ranger* has all the latest equipment," admitted Marine. "They must know all right."

"I suppose she's probably already been sold and the pirates are taking her towards her new owner." Travis pushed a lock of sun-bleached blond hair out of his eyes. "I'd like to offer you a cold drink Captain, but we ran out of ice a while back. How about a warm beer?"

Captain Albright laughed. "No thanks. I'd better be getting back to my ship. Red will take care of getting the helicopter in the air. Miss Fontaine?" He held her hand as she clambered into the Zodiac. She sat down and grasped the side of the seat to keep her balance as the little boat sped over the choppy waves to *the Green Dolphin*. Captain Albright indicated an aluminium ladder on the side of *the Green Dolphin*, and Marine nodded. Holding her skirt tightly around her legs, she

clambered on board the survey ship.

Once on board, she looked around with interest. The boat was divided into three distinct parts. The bridge was large, housing complex radar and several computers. The deck had a helicopter port and four Zodiacs were attached to the sides of the boat. In the middle of the boat was a small submarine. Marine approached it and peered inside the little porthole. The interior was covered in buttons and levers of all sorts, with two small swivel chairs and a narrow desk. She wondered what it would be like to go under the water inside such a thing, and decided it would be very claustrophobic. She turned and saw that there were rows of diving tanks and equipment lining the hallway leading to the cabin. A wide staircase led below.

Then Captain Albright called to her and she was introduced to the crew of fifteen. She smiled and shook hands all around. Captain Albright took her to the dining room and gave her an iced-tea, which she sipped gratefully as she completed the tour of the boat.

There were rooms of scientific equipment and one whole room devoted to tanks of multicoloured fish. The captain explained that they were testing the reactions of different species of fish to various levels of pollution. "The gulf," he said, "is a rather interesting environment because of the mixture of saline and fresh waters as well as being filled with industrial pollution. We're running tests on the water as well as tests on the wildlife. Tomorrow we're going to fishing villages to talk to the fishermen. We want them to tell us their impressions. We want to know everything. We want to know what they usually catch, what they've caught in the past, and all the changes they've noticed."

"It sounds interesting," said Marine, thinking of the reef she'd seen in the Dominican Republic. "I hope you can help."

"I hope so too," he said seriously.

When she heard the whine of the helicopter as it prepared for take-off Marine put her empty glass down on a table. "Thank you so much for your helicopter," she said.

"I only hope you find the boat," said Captain Albright.

She was shaking so much with nerves she could hardly fasten her seat belt. When the crewman outside of the aircraft gave Red the thumbs-up he nodded and gently eased the

helicopter into the air. Marine had no doubt he was an excellent pilot. His handling of *the Ranger* had been fluid and expert. He flew the same way he sailed; with an uncanny feel for the air currents and the helicopter itself. The noise of the engines was terribly loud, but they both wore headsets, which enabled them to communicate with each other as well as with the ship's radio.

"How've you been?" came Red's voice into her ear, only slightly distorted by the intercom.

"Fine." She said shortly.

"I'm sorry about *the Ranger*," he said.

"You would be." She couldn't keep the bitterness out of her voice. "It was the only thing you ever loved."

"Marine..." he began, but she interrupted him.

"Please, let's just look for the boat, all right? I'm glad you saw her, and I'm glad your captain has loaned us the helicopter. But don't try and make small talk. I'm not in the mood."

There was dead silence after that. Red didn't even shrug nor have the grace to blush. He turned to his instruments and flew the helicopter towards the horizon. After what seemed a long time Marine spotted the coast. It was criss-crossed by canals and rivers, which were surrounded by swamp and jungle. Further inland were groves of banana trees. The jungle was everywhere, a brilliant green tangle of vines and mangrove trees. Every once in a while a brilliant red or blue parrot would fly among the emerald foliage, but otherwise the green was uninterrupted. The waterways were dark green and sluggish looking. And even the air seemed tinted with green.

Red checked his map and started his search pattern. They had decided beforehand where the most likely places the boat would be and Red was methodically flying over all of them. Marine kept her binoculars glued to the water below, sweeping them back and forth, searching for the telltale flash of sunlight on an aluminium mast.

They flew on and on and finally Red's voice crackled over her headset. "We're getting low on fuel, I'm afraid we'll have to turn back."

Marine bit back her disappointment. "Do you think we can search again tomorrow?"

"Yes, I think so." Red said laconically.

The two boats docked in Maracaibo's marina that evening. Marine didn't take any notice of her surroundings, she was too worried about *the Ranger*. The night was as hot as the precedent, and Marine couldn't stay below deck. She thought she would stifle. Travis and Chapel set about filling the boats tanks with fuel and water for the rest of the voyage, and Marine decided to take a bus to the city and buy some food.

The dock was at the far side of the marina and Marine had to walk past *the Green Dolphin* on her way to the bus stop. As she strode by she heard her name called out. Her heart sped up; it was Red. He swung down the ladder onto the dock so lightly his feet made no sound. He was dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt, showing off his wide shoulders and deep tan.

"Can I accompany you?" he asked. "I want to talk."

Marine wished she could just say no, and walk away proudly, but she couldn't. She hadn't been brought up to be rude. "All right," she shrugged.

They threaded their way along the narrow docks until they arrived to the customs shed where they gave their passports to the official and got them stamped. Marine gave the temporary passport she had got from US customs in St. Thomas. Her old one had been on *The Ranger*. Then they walked outside and Red hailed a passing taxi.

"Take us to the market" he told the driver.

"How did you know I wanted to go shopping?" Marine asked.

"You forget, I've crewed with you before. Whenever you arrive at a new port you go to the market and get fresh food."

Marine nodded. "That's right."

"I'll help you carry things," he said.

"What did you want to talk about?" Marine asked.

"Us." Red was as direct as he always had been.

Marine sucked in her breath. "Oh? Is there something I missed? I thought there was no more us."

Red chuckled. "You kept your sense of humour."

"It was the only thing you left me," said Marine bleakly. "I would have rather kept my virginity, to tell you the truth."

"Oh now, come on. Don't tell me you didn't enjoy making love to me." Red was incorrigible.

"I'm not that much of a hypocrite," she said. "You know I enjoyed it. But that's not the point. I was saving that for the man I married. That's all."

"That's all?" Red didn't try to touch her, but Marine felt his presence like a constant caress and it made her nervous. "Are you still hung up on marriage? What's so great about marriage? Can't two people enjoy themselves without running off to the church?"

"So you admit churches exist?" Marine was sharp.

"Let's not fight," said Red. "It's too hot."

Marine nodded. Her shirt was plastered to her body with the heat. "A truce, then," she said.

The taxi stopped and they got out. Red paid before Marine could get her money out of her purse. "Here we are. I'll take you to the best stands, I've been here before. That will save you time anyway."

"Thank you." Marine looked around. There were strings of bare light bulbs strung up over the market place, and the streets thronged with the crowd.

"It's so hot that people usually go out at night," explained Red. "Here's a good fishmonger."

"It's hot even at night." Marine wrinkled her nose. "I would have found this stand even if I were blind."

"Yeah, well, the heat does make the fish smell."

Marine poked around until she located a fairly fresh-looking grouper and bought it. She gave the package to Red and then followed him through the crowd to a fruit stand where she bought bananas and oranges. She found a vegetable store, where she bought tomatoes, peppers, onions, eggplant, zucchini, and garlic. Then Red took her to a bakery where she bought some bread. She couldn't help giggling at the sight of Red staggering under the weight of all the packages. "I'm almost done," she told him.

They walked about for a bit longer, and then Marine found a little shop where she stocked up

on rice, coffee, eggs, and various spices that intrigued her.

When Marine said they were finished, Red gasped, "Lord, get me a cab."

On the way back Red put his arm around Marine. She tried to shrug it off, but he tightened his grip.

"I'm not letting you go again," he said.

"You didn't let me go," said Marine dryly. "You told me you wanted to marry me to get me in bed with you. Then you left."

"I'm sorry about that." Red didn't sound sorry though, he sounded amused.

"Sorry?"

"Well, sorry I hurt your feelings."

"Fine. It's over now. So you can take your arm off my neck and we can be friends. And if you don't want to be friends, well, you can go f..."

"Don't say it!" Red threw up his hands in mock defeat. "All right, you win. I won't try and sleep with you, deal?"

Marine looked at him suspiciously. "Deal," she said. "But I don't trust you anymore."

"Fine, I can live with that." Red shot her an amused glance.

"And don't think that I'll change my mind. I'm not in love with you anymore Red." Marine tried to sound defiant, but the words trembled on her lips. Red still had the power to make her weak in the knees.

"That's what you think." Red narrowed his eyes at her and smiled a mocking, half-smile.

"That's what I know!" cried Marine, exasperated with Red and with herself.

"I think that you'll change your mind," was all he said after that.

The next day they searched for *the Ranger* again. They went deeper into the Gulf, flying in a regular searching pattern until nearly noon, when Marine spotted a familiar sail.

"It's *the Ranger*!" she shrieked. "She's down there!"

"Are you sure?" Red took the binoculars from her and peered through them. "I believe

you're right," he said, unable to conceal the excitement in his voice. He picked up the radio and called *the Green Dolphin*. "We've found her!" he said. "Contact the Coast Guard and give them these coordinates." He gave the exact location of the boat, the time, and then he swung the helicopter away and started back to *the Green Dolphin*.

"What are you doing?" cried Marine.

"Going back, what do you think?"

"Can't we stay with *the Ranger*?"

"No, we can't. We have to hope she hasn't already noticed we've spotted her, and we wait for the Coast Guard to do the rest. We don't rush in ourselves like Rambo, capture the pirates, and take the boat back. It doesn't work like that. We spotted *the Ranger*, now we go back and wait until the Coast Guard delivers us the boat safe and sound."

"What would the pirates do if they thought we saw them?" Marine was worried.

"They might sink the ship to avoid being caught. I don't know." Red shrugged. "But I doubt they'll do that, not after bringing her down through the storm this far. They must already have a buyer lined up, and they're in a hurry to unload her."

"But can the Coast Guard legally seize her here? After all, this isn't American territory."

"True, but the boat's registered as American. Moreover, the Coast Guard won't go in alone, they'll have to act along side the Venezuelan authorities. But I think they've done this sort of thing before."

Marine was so impatient to see the boat again she thought she'd go crazy waiting. Travis and Chapel were thrilled that she'd been located, but the three friends grew nervous as the day wore on with no news from *the Ranger*. *The Green Dolphin* had gone into the Gulf, leaving *the Triton* at the marina. Red had stayed behind as well, to take care of the paperwork required by the Venezuelan immigration services pertaining to *the Green Dolphin's* stay.

Marine baked under the hot sun on *the Triton's* deck as she and Travis worked on the rigging. Chapel had gone into the city.

"How are you going to sail *the Ranger* back to St. Thomas?" asked Travis.

"I don't know," admitted Marine. "I hadn't thought of that. I suppose I can call some crew to fly down and sail *the Ranger* back home with me." Marine rubbed her hands over her sweaty face. "If only it wasn't so hot. I feel like I'm melting."

"Me too." Travis looked over the side of the boat at the dark water and grimaced. "This water's so dirty I don't want to go swimming."

"Yuck. I guess *the Green Dolphin* will have a lot to study, if they're interested in pollution."

"Oh, we are!" It was Red. He clambered aboard *the Triton* without bothering to wait until he was invited. Travis's protestation died on his lips when Red produced three cans of ice-cold soda. "I just got news from the marina office, the Coast Guard has captured the pirates and they're bringing *the Ranger* back here. She's safe and sound." Red said, triumphant.

"What?" Marine shrieked and leapt to her feet. "When? How? Where?"

"They'll be here in three hours. They caught the pirates trying to sell her, and they've arrested five people believed to belong to an international piracy consortium. *The Ranger* is fine."

"I have to contact Scott right away," said Marine.

"I hope you don't mind, but I took the liberty of contacting the boat's owner," said Red.

"How could you? Edgar is in a coma!" cried Marine.

"No he's not. He woke up three days ago."

"H-how did you...?" Marine stuttered.

"How did I know? The information was in all the newspapers last week; didn't you see any? Scott Kelsey posted a reward. I tried to call him as well, but he wasn't available."

Marine's mouth was hanging open and she snapped it shut. "How could you? You should have waited until I talked to him! You might have let me talk to Edgar! Just who do you think you are?" she stormed, furious.

"Hey! Calm down! I know who I am. I'm the guy who first spotted *the Ranger*, remember? And who flew you around in circles for two days searching for her."

Marine was abashed. "I apologise. I didn't mean it like that. But I'd really like to talk to Edgar."

"No problem. As soon as *the Green Dolphin* gets in I'll take you to the office and you can use the satellite phone."

Marine suddenly thought of something else. "Where is Scott Kelsey? Isn't he still in the hospital?"

"No." Red frowned. "He was moved to the States. I guess his condition worsened and the doctors thought it would be better if he went to a hospital in Boston."

"Marine!" Travis jumped forward and caught her just as she swayed and nearly fell. "Are you okay? You're all white! Sit down, quickly, put your head between your knees."

"It's nothing," Marine said weakly. "It must be the excitement. I can't wait until *the Ranger* comes in." She took a long drink of cold soda and used the chilled can to cool her forehead. She wasn't about to admit to Red that she was frantic with worry about Scott. She didn't know why, but she didn't trust her own feelings when it came to Red. She had thought that she hated him, but every time he came near her she could feel her blood pounding in her veins and the memory of his hands on her naked body troubled her so much that she couldn't concentrate. Yet when she heard the news about Scott she almost fainted. She grinned wryly. It must be the heat.

Chapter Ten

Marine sailed *the Ranger* home with Red as her only crew. The boat was easy to sail. There had only been two pirates sailing her through the storm.

Before heading back, Marine had gone to the courthouse and testified. She hadn't recognised the man and the woman who had been arrested, but that was because the man had been wearing a black mask and the woman had hit her on the head from behind. Once the papers had all been signed releasing *the Ranger* from the custody of the Coast Guard, Marine called Edgar and talked to him for nearly an hour. He felicitated her on her bravery and thanked her for saving his life. He was still in the hospital in Miami, but he was counting on Marine to come and visit him as soon as she'd docked *the Ranger* in Caneel Bay.

Marine asked him about Scott, and Edgar couldn't keep the worry out of his voice.

"He's in a bad way, honey," he said. "His leg got infected and the doctors are doing all they can to save it."

"I'll call him right away," said Marine.

"No, don't." Edgar sounded embarrassed. "I don't know why, but he told me that he didn't want to talk to anyone, even you. I think it must be because of his leg—he's so proud. Wait a while, please?"

Marine agreed, but she was hurt and mystified. Why would Scott not want to see her? She fretted about that almost all the time. She and Scott had been getting on so well, and when they'd kissed, she was sure that there had been real feeling behind it.

Then she remembered Scott calling out Ellen's name when he was on the boat, and she sighed deeply. Perhaps he simply couldn't forget Ellen, and Marine hadn't been the woman to help him get over her.

She turned her face into the wind and let the cool ocean breeze dry the tears on her cheeks. She had fallen in love with Scott, that was all there was to it, and she might as well admit that. She

might as well admit also that Scott was not at all interested in her, and that she seemed to have a knack for falling in love with men who didn't reciprocate her feelings.

Not that Red was being anything but the perfect gentleman. He didn't try to touch her, but his attitude only made her more suspicious. Just what exactly was he after?

When Marine arrived in St. Thomas the first thing she saw was the newspaper her sister Claire was waving in the air.

"What on earth is that?" exclaimed Marine.

"Read it!" Claire's cheeks were pink with indignation.

"The Model and the Scientist rescue famous racing yacht?" Marine read out-loud with dismay. "What on earth?"

Red peered over her shoulder. Claire had pointedly ignored his cheery "Hello," and had turned her back on him. It didn't seem to annoy him in the least. "Well, it's a good likeness of you," he said to Marine, "But I look a bit thin, don't you think?"

"Where did this picture come from?" Marine wailed. The picture had obviously been taken at the courthouse in Maracaibo, just as they had left the hearing. Marine was dressed in a light summer frock, in concession to the burning heat. The sun had filtered through the material; making it transparent and her legs were clearly visible right up to her panties. Red, who was leaning over and whispering something in her ear, did look thin, and terribly elegant. He'd borrowed a white linen jacket from Captain Albright for the trial.

Travis and Chapel were right behind them, and their glowering looks toward the photographer made them look like bodyguards.

Marine read the rest of the article with growing dismay. "Marine Fontaine and Randolphe Currier were the heroes of a boat rescue last week in Venezuela. Miss Fontaine, a model, (see insert pg. 3)." There, Marine paused and turned the page, and on page three was the ad with the soda can. "I don't believe this!" she shrieked.

"Read on!" urged Claire, glaring at Red who stood at Marine's shoulder, looking with interest at the newspaper.

“Marine Fontaine, a model, had been brutally attacked a week ago as she and the boat’s owner cruised the Caribbean. Their boat was hi-jacked by pirates, while Miss Fontaine and the boat’s owner were marooned in a derelict boat. The owner and another unnamed man are in critical condition in a stateside hospital. The boat, named *the Ranger*, is a famous racing yacht that won the America’s Cup boat race. Miss Fontaine risked her life to go after the boat. She received a call from a Scientific survey boat *the Green Dolphin*, after one of their scientists, Randolphe Currier, spotted the boat in the Gulf of Venezuela. Mr. Currier, who is Miss Fontaine’s fiancé, had been on the boat numerous times and was able to identify it immediately.” Marine’s voice rose to a shriek. “My fiancé?”

“Together they searched the Gulf in a helicopter. Miss Fontaine and Mr. Currier were able to give the Coast Guard *the Ranger*’s exact location after they saw the boat from the air. The Coast Guard, acting in concurrence with the Venezuelan authorities, arrested the pirates and returned the boat to its rightful owner. The photo shows Miss Fontaine and Mr. Currier leaving the Courthouse in Maracaibo after the trial which condemned the pirates to ten years in prison.” Claire finished reading aloud.

“Pretty good!” said Red, grinning broadly.

“You, a scientist?” sneered Claire. “Where did they get that one I wonder?”

“Well, I am listed on *the Green Dolphin*’s charter as a scientist.”

“You’re a diver,” said Claire.

Red shrugged. “It’s of no importance. Marine’s not a model, is she?”

Marine clapped her hands over her ears. “That’s enough you two! Claire, stop picking on Red. I can’t believe they said we were engaged. Who in God’s name told them that?” She glared suddenly at Red. “Did you?”

“Of course not!” he spread his hands. “Maybe it was Travis or Chapel.” He shrugged. “What’s the big deal anyway?”

Claire pursed her lips but didn’t say anything. But her eyes were blazing with fury and Marine knew that as soon as they were alone Claire would insist on an explanation. She rubbed her face wearily. “Listen, I just want to get *the Ranger* over to St. John and leave her in her berth at Caneel

Bay. Then I want to take a shower, eat dinner on solid land, and sleep for twelve hours straight without having to wake up and check the radar. Tomorrow I have to make reservations to fly to Miami, I must see Edgar."

"Shall we go then?" asked Claire. She'd offered to help Marine sail *the Ranger* to Caneel Bay. Red had to take a flight back to Venezuela from St. Thomas later that evening.

"Wait, hold on a minute!" Red said. "I have to get my things from my room down below, and I thought we could grab a bite to eat in your father's great restaurant. I haven't seen him in a while, and I'd like to say *Bonjour*." Red was using all his considerable charm on Claire, but she was having none of it.

"The restaurant is booked solid. If you want a bite to eat we can go to the Crazy Cow, the hamburgers are good." Claire grabbed Marine's arm. "Come on, we'll go see Papa quick, then we'll meet you in the Crazy Cow."

Nevertheless, Red followed them to Mr. Fontaine's restaurant, and he managed to wheedle a table from Pierre, the headwaiter. They ended up having lunch at a charming table-for-three just in front of the bow window looking out over the busy harbour. Mr. Fontaine came and sat with them and they all had coffee together.

"So, I see by the newspaper you are famous now," said Mr. Fontaine to Red.

"Not at all. It's Marine who's famous." He grinned engagingly. "I was just happy to have been able to help. It's a good thing I knew what the *Ranger* looked like. Not many people do, so I was able to identify her when I saw her."

"That was quite lucky," admitted Marine's father.

Marine glanced at her watch. "I don't want to hurry anybody, but it's nearly three. Red, if you want to catch the five-thirty flight to Maracaibo you better leave now."

Red actually looked sad as he left, Marine thought with confusion. She was still a bit breathless from his good-bye kiss that had caught her by surprise. He'd held her tightly and whispered into her ear that he wouldn't let her get away from him again. She wondered what he could mean by that. The last image Marine had of him was of his face, somber for once, staring at her from the open window of the taxi.

She and Claire sailed *the Ranger* to St. John and then they caught the ferry back to St. Thomas. Marine was so tired she barely stayed awake during dinner, and afterwards she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The next morning Claire drove her to the airport. She had come to pick Marine up at eight a.m., so Marine barely had time to have breakfast with her mother before her sister swept into the house and took her away.

Her mother had wanted Marine to tell her all about her adventure, and she'd signed as rapidly as she could so that her mother would know everything. She omitted nothing, but her mother knew her too well.

"What about Red?" she had signed. "And tell me more about Scott."

Marine didn't have any answers for her, all she could sign was, "I don't know, I don't understand men at all."

To that her mother had replied, "Who does?" with a wry grin and a flourish of hands.

Claire was more direct. "Just what on earth do you think you're doing? Red is not the man for you and you know it."

"I do know it," admitted Marine. "And I also know that each time I get near him I don't know what to expect. He's always a step ahead. He makes me so angry, and yet he makes me laugh. I haven't the faintest idea what is going to happen, but at least I can tell you that I'm not crying all night long anymore. As a matter of fact, I seem to be getting over him, despite what he seems to think."

Claire shot her a sideways look but said nothing more about Red.

At the airport the two sisters hugged and then Marine boarded her flight. She was anxious to see Edgar, and to tell him all the news.

It turned out she didn't have to. The article in the little daily newspaper in St. Thomas had managed to make headlines all over the States, and Edgar was reading about 'the Model and the Scientist' when Marine came into his room at the hospital.

"Oh no, not again!" she cried. "It's really ridiculous! Don't the newspapers have anything else

to write about?"

"Well, well, well!" exclaimed Edgar jovial. "A celebrity in our midst."

"Don't pay any attention to that. It's pure invention. I'm not a model, and Red is certainly no scientist."

"Red? Who's Red?"

"Randolphe Currier, the man who first sighted *the Ranger*. Would you believe, he used to be an old boyfriend." Marine shook her head in exasperation. "The newspapers only print sensational news, so they had to elaborate a bit I'm afraid."

"I'll say! In this paper it says that, 'Randolphe Currier and his fiancée, Miss Fontaine...'"

"Where does it say that? I thought it was only in the local papers." Marine had gone quite pale, and she sat down suddenly on the chair next to Edgar's bed.

"Right here. The journalist interviewed one of the Triton's crew, a Mr. Chapel..."

"He wouldn't say that about Red and me!" Marine interrupted. "Chapel would never say we were engaged. He must have said we had been engaged or something and they misunderstood."

"Well, it's written here in black and white. At any rate, I talked to Mr. Currier, you know."

"I know, he told me he called you when we found *the Ranger*. What did he say?" Marine was curious.

"He asked about the reward."

"He would," Marine said dryly.

"And he also seemed interested in buying the boat. I told him she wasn't for sale."

"Oh?" Marine blinked. "You're going to keep her then?"

"I don't know." Edgar was silent a minute. "Then Mr. Currier wanted to know if you were going to be able to keep sailing her. He seemed quite interested in that."

"So that's why he was so nice to me," groaned Marine. "I should have known."

"He's an ex-boyfriend?"

"Can we talk about something else?" Marine asked.

"I want to hear all about your part in the rescue," said Edgar. "And I want you to tell me about the storm. I can't believe I slept through the whole thing!"

"Marine looked at him and laughed in astonishment. "Slept through it? You were out cold. What was the last thing you remember?"

"Getting a call from someone named Charlie Brown, unless that was just part of my dream?"

Marine shook her head. "Oh no, he's real all right." She then proceeded to tell him everything.

"Is that all?" he asked, when she finished.

"Yes! Now it's my turn. Where's Scott, and when can I see him?"

"Scott's in Boston, I told you already. But he's not doing so well." Edgar's face was bleak.

"Why? What is it? Tell me!"

"He lost his leg."

"Oh no!" Marine clapped her hand to her mouth. Tears of shock spilled down her cheeks. "That's awful! Poor Scott! I have to go see him!"

"No!" Edgar's voice was sharp. "You mustn't. Not yet."

"Did Scott tell you that?"

"Yes. I'm sorry Marine."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know, but I have to respect his wishes. Give him time Marine. It's overwhelming him right now, and he's just trying to cope. Give him time."

"How much time?" murmured Marine sadly. "I want to see him so badly."

Edgar reached over and patted her hand. "I have an idea," he said. "But we'll have to wait until I'm out of the hospital."

Marine pulled the down jacket closer around her throat and huddled into its warmth. The sky was pewter gray and the choppy sea around the *Ranger* was pure ultramarine blue. She was astounded by the weather.

"Doesn't it get warm here?" she asked Edgar.

He chuckled. "Only the last week of July. No, seriously, of course it gets warm. Let's see, now it's the first week of May. The weather should start changing. When we get to Boston you'll see the spring flowers and the sun should come out a few minutes a day."

Marine shivered. It had been Edgar's idea to sail *the Ranger* up the Atlantic coast to Boston. He had timed it with Scott's release from the hospital, where he'd spent two months recovering.

"I still can't believe he was so ill," lamented Marine. "If I had known I never would have left him."

"You couldn't know that he would get an infected leg. Nor that he was allergic to antibiotics and nearly died. He nearly died three times you know. The doctors managed to save him each time, but it was terribly close." He shook his head. "I spoke to Scott nearly every day, but he sounded so desperately sad. I hope that we're doing the right thing. It's the only idea I have though."

"Are we almost there?" asked Marine.

Edgar smiled. "Well, there's Martha's Vineyard, that big island there. Boston is just a ways up the coast."

"It is just incredible here," said Marine. "I thought the Caribbean was beautiful. This is too, but in a different way. The Atlantic is so wild here. I love the air, it bites. In the Caribbean it only tickles."

They arrived in Boston and docked at the beautiful Long Wharf. Edgar had an apartment in Boston at the Ritz Carlton and he insisted that Marine stay with him. He had lots of room, and he wouldn't hear of her going to a hotel.

Edgar's apartment was on Newbury Street. It overlooked the Park and Marine shrieked with delight. "This is the park with the ducklings! I recognise the swan boats! Can I go on one? Oh Edgar, this is so great! I read *Make Way for Ducklings* when I was a little girl, it was one of my favourites!" Marine gazed out the window, enraptured. Then she turned and her face grew serious. "Edgar, I have the worst case of nerves about seeing Scott tomorrow. My stomach feels tied in knots." Her face crumpled and she looked very much like the little girl she once was.

Edgar looked as apprehensive as she did. "I hope that we're doing the right thing," he muttered for the hundredth time.

The next day dawned rainy and Marine teased Edgar as they had breakfast together. "I thought you said that I'd see the sun. I'm beginning to think that the sun only exists in the Caribbean."

Edgar's two eldest daughters came to see him that morning. They had flown to Miami often while their father was in the hospital, but they wanted to meet Marine, because, as one of the girls said, "You're the girl who saved Daddy, so we wanted to thank you in person!"

The girls were twins, and they certainly looked alike. Julia and Emma were their names, and they had auburn hair and nice, though homely, faces.

They each bought Marine a present. Julia offered her a red cashmere sweater, and Emma had bought her a silk scarf from Hermes to go with it. The scarf had a nautical motif, and Emma said she hoped that Marine wasn't sick and tired of boats.

Marine thanked the girls warmly. She would have liked to see them longer, but both women worked and they had to leave.

"But we'll see you tonight," said Julia warmly. "You and Daddy are eating dinner at my place."

"And you can tell us all about Scott," said Emma, her face wrinkled with worry. "We've called him numerous times, but he's always refused to see us."

"I hope you can persuade him to go out on the boat," continued Julia. Marine noticed that the twins tended to speak one after the other, as if they were one person.

"Yes, I think it's an excellent idea. Well, see you tonight!" Emma gave Edgar a peck on the cheek and then she and Julia left. It was only after they had gone that Marine thought to look for a photograph of Ellen.

She wandered over to the chimney where several photos in silver frames were posed. She had no trouble identifying the twins; Julia and Emma were pictured standing together in the park, their arms around each other. A tall, red haired woman was in another photo. Marine guessed it was Edgar's wife. She was staring at the camera with a small smile. She hadn't been pretty, but she had

been clever looking.

The middle picture was of a young woman. She was plain, with bright red hair and pale blue eyes half-hidden behind wire-framed glasses. She was wearing a beige skirt and a turtleneck. She looked very sweet as she smiled shyly at the camera. Marine could see why Scott had fallen in love with her. Not for her looks, but for the aura of bright intelligence she seemed to have about her. She stared at the photo for a while then sighed.

"I miss her." It was Edgar who'd come up behind her.

Marine blushed. "I'm sorry," she said. "I was snooping."

"No you weren't. You were admiring the pictures. Emma and Julia were about seventeen in that picture. And there they were as children. My wife always hated having her picture taken. She used to complain that photos never flattered her. I'm afraid she was right. She was so much more vibrant than the pictures show. She simply glowed."

"She had lovely hair."

"My redheaded brood," said Edgar fondly. "My wife's genes, of course. And here's Ellen. She was the sweetest child imaginable. When she was a baby she wouldn't stop beaming."

"She had a lovely smile," said Marine.

Edgar nodded. "I always thought so."

"Are Emma and Julia both married?" asked Marine.

"Yes, and they have wonderful families. You'll meet everyone tonight. You'll have to excuse them, they so wanted to meet you."

"I'm flattered."

"Shall we go see Scott now?"

Marine swallowed nervously. "All set, I guess. I wish my stomach wasn't so fluttery."

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, I'm nervous too."

At the hospital they both stopped in front of Scott's door. Edgar raised his hand to knock. At that moment they heard a trill of laughter. Woman's laughter, and a soft voice said, "Now Scott, you'll have to do better than that!"

Edgar smiled. To Marine he said, "That's Julie, I recognise her voice. She was the woman who nursed him out of his depression, did he ever tell you about that?"

"Yes," said Marine bleakly. "He did."

Edgar knocked, and then when Scott said, "Come in!" he pushed the door wide open.

Scott was standing in front of the window. He was leaning on a pair of crutches and a pretty brunette was standing right next to him.

"Hello Scott," said Edgar.

Scott swung around at the sound of his voice. He staggered and would have fallen except for Julie's hand on his arm. "Hello Edgar." Scott's voice was neutral, but Marine could see a muscle in his cheek clench. "I thought I asked you not to visit."

"We wanted to see you," Edgar said warmly. "Look me straight in the eyes boy and tell me you're not glad to see me."

Scott glared at him for a minute then he broke into a faint grin. "You win, you know I'm glad to see you."

He turned himself around and, using his crutches he hobbled over to Edgar and gave him a one-armed hug. "Thanks for coming."

"And here's Marine. She wanted to come too."

"Marine." Scott's voice sounded strained. "Marine, this is Julie. Edgar, you do remember Julie don't you?"

"Of course," Edgar shook her hand.

Julie smiled brightly and said "Hi" to Marine.

Marine looked at Scott. His eyes were still bright green. His hair was shorter, but still an unruly black tangle of curls. However she couldn't get over how thin he'd gotten, or how pale his face was. There were new lines on it. Marine couldn't help looking down at his leg, and she felt a stab of sharp pain when she saw how his pants were neatly pinned up over the missing limb. Scott followed her glance and his face grew harsh.

"So, Marine, the model. I read the magazines. Scientist Randolphe Currier, or shall I say Red?"

One of the articles had his nickname in it. It must have been..." he paused, "...interesting to meet him again."

"He helped a great deal, but the articles made a big deal about nothing."

"Well, I'm glad you came. Now I can thank you for saving my life, and you can get on with your life. I suppose you're going to marry Red. The articles said you were engaged. Nice for you."

"I'm not marrying Red!" cried Marine.

"Whatever." He grimaced and hopped over to his bed where he sat down. "I hope you'll forgive me, but I get tired easily."

"Oh Scott! If I had known I never would have left you in Haiti."

"Why? No one knew that I was allergic to antibiotics, or that my leg would get worse instead of better. There was nothing you could have done. Doctor Payne did his best. Then I was transferred to Boston. That's all there is. Don't worry your pretty little head about me. Now, good-bye. I hope you have a nice stay in Boston. You should see the Science museum before you go back to St. Thomas, it's quite interesting."

"Scott!" Edgar's voice was sharp.

"What?" Scott turned to him. "What is it? Now that Marine has come and seen how much I've changed she can leave, can't she?"

"I don't think you've changed at all," said Marine. "You're still the same rude, overbearing, obstinate fool I met in the Caribbean!" She stopped, horrified at herself. "I'm sorry," she said weakly. "I'm leaving now. But you'll be seeing me sooner than you think. We're coming to get you in two days when you get out of the hospital and we're taking you out sailing."

"Sailing?" Scott looked blank. "*The Ranger?* You came with *the Ranger?*"

"What do you think took us so long?" Edgar said. "And you're coming with us in two days. We're taking *the Ranger* home."

"Home?"

"Yes, we're going to Newport."

"But, but I'm not ready!" Scott looked wildly at Julie. "Tell them I'm not ready."

"Don't be silly." She grinned. "Of course you can go sailing."

Marine was surprised by the little nip of jealousy she felt when she saw how comfortable Scott and Julie seemed together. She was standing close to him, her hands on his shoulders. She said good-bye to Julie and they shook hands politely. Scott looked at her as she left, but his gaze was inscrutable. Marine wished she'd never come to the hospital, and as soon as she and Edgar got into the taxi she burst into tears.

"Now, now!" Edgar patted her kindly on the shoulder. "I thought it went quite well actually!"

Marine had cheered up enough to go to dinner that evening, and she was glad she did. Julia and Emma had gone to a lot of trouble cooking a huge meal, and their two husbands were present as well as their six children. And they all wanted to hear about Scott.

"He said what?" Julia cried. "Marine, have some more fruit salad?"

"No thank you. It was really delicious but I couldn't eat another bite. Then Scott asked me if I was getting married. I told him that I wasn't."

"Men!" said Emma. "Can you understand them?"

"Never in a million years!" said Marine.



The next morning Boston unfolded its charms to Marine. Spring decided to show off its best, and the sun came out turning the air balmy. Bright yellow daffodils and pink tulips nodded sleepily in the shade of the budding maple trees. In the park the baby ducklings skittered across the pond behind their mothers.

Marine blinked in the watery, spring sunlight. It sparkled off the car's chrome fenders and the cities' streetlights. It bounced off the multitude of windows on the tall buildings, and it glittered on the water off the wharf.

Marine loved Boston at once. She adored the friendly size of the city. It wasn't too big or impersonal. The brick buildings were a warm colour, and trees and parks were everywhere.

She started her visit off the wharf. She went through the Marriott Hotel and to the aquarium. The three-story cylindrical aquarium in the middle of the building amazed her. She gazed in wonder at the sharks and sea turtles swimming lazily around.

Then she went along the Freedom Trail to the Old North Church, and she walked through the Italian section of the city past the old cemetery and then under the bridge towards Faneuil Hall. She strolled along the waterfront, then took the subway to the Science museum. After lunch she walked along the waterfront back to Faneuil Hall. Edgar met her there and he took her to see the Kennedy Library.

Marine loved everything, but as evening drew to a close she turned to Edgar and said, "I'm not looking forward to the sail."

"Nonsense," Edgar said. "Everything will be just fine."

"So why do I feel so up tight about it?" she asked.

"I don't know." Edgar sighed and shook his head. "But I have the intuition that *the Ranger* is the only thing that will save Scott."

Chapter Eleven

Marine and Edgar readied *the Ranger* for her sail up to Dog Island Sound. Marine had butterflies in her stomach when she thought about Scott. She couldn't wait to see him, but thinking about him hobbling around the boat nearly broke her heart. She wanted to make him feel at home, but she had no idea what losing a leg could mean to a man, especially one as dynamic as Scott. She remembered him clambering about the boat, playing polo, running down the sandy beaches, and tears pricked her eyes. She swallowed hard and went about her work. She had gone shopping, and now she was putting everything away.

In the bedrooms, woollen blankets and flannel sheets replaced thin cotton bedspreads. Warm sheepskins were laid on the shiny wooden floor to welcome bare feet in the morning. Marine checked the hot-water heater, and Edgar installed a special heating system in *the Ranger*, making her warm as toast even while floating in the frigid waters of the North Atlantic. May might seem warm to New Englanders, to Marine, it was freezing cold.

There were new maps to install in the navigator, and a picture of the turquoise water of the Caribbean was replaced by an old Currier and Ive's whaling print.

Marine had taken all her clothes out of the closet in her room when she was in St. Thomas, and now the only things in it were a couple pairs of jeans, three sweaters, and a new windbreaker. New shoes and warm socks were on her feet, and she'd put on the red sweater and silk scarf that Julia and Emma had given her. She pulled her dark hair back in a ponytail, and debated on wearing lipstick. If only she wasn't so nervous! What if Scott didn't even show up?

He did. Marine saw him coming slowly down the dock. He had a small duffel bag slung over his shoulder and he manoeuvred carefully across the uneven boards with his crutches. Edgar was down below, puttering around the dining room. Marine went to the walkway and waited. Scott stopped about fifty feet from the boat and just looked at her. He stood blinking and pale in the sunlight. The water sparkled all around the boat and the docks. Scott looked frail and tired. Dark circles under his eyes made them look greener than emeralds, and fatigue made his cheekbones

sharper.

"Hi," said Marine shyly.

"Hi yourself. The boat looks good." Scott nodded his chin towards *the Ranger*. She did look good. Marine and Edgar had spent most of the trip up the Atlantic coast scrubbing and polishing.

"Thanks. Can I give you a hand?"

"I'd rather you gave me a leg." Scott's wry humour surprised Marine, and she gave a shriek of shocked laughter.

"I would if I could," she said softly to him when he was on board.

He looked down at her thoughtfully. "I think you would, too," he answered. There was no mockery in his voice, only a faint note of wistfulness and Marine suddenly found that she missed the arrogant barbarian she'd known in the Caribbean.

To cover up her embarrassment she said, "Can I take your bag for you?"

"No thanks. I'll manage. He swung himself towards the stairs and lowered himself carefully below deck. There he was more at ease. The cramped quarters offered him brace and he leaned his shoulder against the smooth teak of the hallway while he opened the door to his room.

Marine stood in the doorway and watched as Scott placed his bag on the bed and looked around.

"I see you've made some changes," he said. He touched the soft wool of the blanket. "This should be nice and cozy. I like the rug too." He touched the sheepskin with the tip of a crutch. Seeing Marine's distress he smiled crookedly. "I'll have an artificial leg you know. Supposedly you won't even notice the difference when I learn to walk with it." He sat down on his bed and slid the crutches onto the floor. "But I don't see how I'll ever get used to it."

"We leave in an hour," said Edgar, over Marine's shoulder.

"I'll be ready," Scott said.

The day passed too quickly. *The Ranger* ploughed swiftly through the deep indigo waves of the cold Atlantic, making light of the miles as they sailed around the tip of Cape Cod and headed South to Newport.

The town of Newport charmed Marine from the minute she saw it. Evening had darkened the harbour and lights twinkled on masts of sailing boats and shone from the windows of the houses. Edgar docked *the Ranger* at the pier facing a beautiful old building. Everywhere Marine looked there were sailboats and old wooden houses. Edgar had reserved a table for them at the Dockside Saloon, where they had a quick dinner. Scott said he was tired and wanted to go back to the boat, but Marine wanted to see some more of the town.

She wandered around a while, just admiring the pretty village. She stopped at the Black Pearl for a drink, then went back to the boat. When she got on board she sat for a while on deck. It was chilly, and she was glad she'd bought a new jacket. The black water slapped against the side of *the Ranger*. Marine leaned back against the mast and looked up at the stars. She tried to clear her mind. She wanted to find peace within herself once more, peace that had been broken by Red, then further shattered by Scott. She found herself thinking of Chris. He was a friend to laugh with, a shoulder to lean on, and a comrade. But he wasn't a lover. Her heart never started pounding when she thought of him. When she thought of Red she was confused. And when she thought of Scott her breath shortened and she could feel the blood rushing through her veins. He made her feel alive.

The next day Marine and Edgar went shopping in Newport. Marine exclaimed every time she saw a fire hydrant. They were painted to resemble little ship's captains, and Marine adored looking out for them.

They strolled down Washington Street and stopped in Hunter House to see the museum. Then they went to Gibb's Avenue, and down America's Cup Avenue. The sun was still shining brightly when they got back to the boat. Scott was on deck, his shirt off, lying in a lounge chair.

"You'll catch a cold, it's chilly here," warned Edgar.

"I'm trying to get a bit of colour." Scott peered critically at his broad chest. "I'm so white I look like a ghost."

Marine sat beside him and pushed up her sleeve. She put her arm next to his. She was honey-brown, tanned from years of living in a tropical climate.

"Don't do that!" said Scott. "You make me look even worse!"

"No I don't. You look fine." She grinned at him, and, without thinking, leaned over and kissed him on the lips.

She meant it to be just a little kiss, a friendly kiss. But his lips were so warm she lingered. His arms came up behind her neck and he held her to him. She leaned forward and her hair slid down in a shining, brown waterfall and framed their faces.

"Ahem!" It was Edgar, standing just behind them. "Don't you think you better get dressed Scott? Look what you do to women when you're half-naked!"

"You should see what I do when I'm all naked," he replied jokingly.

Marine sat up and blushed. "Sorry Scott," she said. "I don't know what came over me."

"Sorry?" Scott looked startled, then frowned. "That's all right," he said stiffly.

Edgar nodded at Marine. "I'm going back into town to get us all pizzas for lunch. Why don't you help Scott get the sails reefed away. We didn't get time to do it correctly last night."

"Good idea," said Marine. "And I'll cook dinner for us tonight."

"No, not for me anyway," said Edgar. "I have a business dinner this evening." He looked at Scott. "You're on paid vacation for another two weeks, but after that it's back to the office in Boston for you!"

"I know." Scott shrugged. "I tried to keep up with my work while I was at the hospital, but it wasn't easy."

"That's all right. You did more than you had to. Just rest and get better now. Edgar sounded gruff, but his eyes were kind and his smile was genuine. I'm just glad you're still with us, my boy."

Scott was silent as he and Marine quickly reefed the sails. When they finished, Edgar came back with the pizzas and they ate up on deck. Afterwards Scott went below and took a nap. He tired easily and Marine was alarmed at how pale he got, and how drawn his face was.

That afternoon Marine went back to town. She walked through town, pausing to admire some scrimshaw and paintings in an art gallery. One of the paintings was very old. It was of a pirate standing on the deck of his ship. The skull and cross-bones floated stiffly from the mast, and a

bright, green and red parrot was perched on the pirate's shoulder. The pirate had a high-cheek-boned face and a blade of a nose. His eyes glittered in his pale face, and under a scarf was a riot of black curls. A wicked scar cut across his forehead. And he had only one leg. He wore a wooden peg leg, and he used the heavy blade of his cutlass to balance himself on the wooden deck of his ship.

Marine stared at the painting in fascination. It didn't really look like Scott, she told herself. It was just the coincidence of black, curly hair, and green eyes that threw sparks. The fierce look the pirate wore was just like Scott's when he was in a bad mood, and Marine's mouth curled up at the corners thinking of that.

"How much is it?" she asked the shopkeeper.

"That one is nine-hundred dollars. I just got it yesterday, and already I've had several queries. I think he'll sell fast."

"Faster than you think. I'll take it." Marine tried to shut out the little voice in her head that was screaming *You're spending all your savings!! Don't be so foolish!! You can't afford it!* She managed to write the check without hesitation, but her hands trembled a bit when the shopkeeper wrapped up the painting and gave it to her.

"You didn't ask, but I'll tell you anyway," he said. "This painting is not of Edward Teach, otherwise known as Black Beard, nor is it one of the better known pirates in this area or in the Caribbean. Identification is tricky in this portrait because the artist only signed his initials and the date: 1725. So the man in question was a contemporary of "Black Beard's" and of "Rackam the Red," a Scottish pirate. The boat is painted in very roughly and there are no details, except for the flag. So we can't identify him by his boat. The ocean seems to be a very deep blue in the painting, and he's wearing a warm coat, which seems to exclude the Caribbean pirates. The artist, however, gives us a clue with the date. He's crossed the "7", see? Making it look a bit like an "F". That is typically French. This pirate may not be a pirate at all. In fact, he may be a Corsair."

"A Corsair?"

"They were French pirates who had the 'legal right' to attack foreign ships and turn over their booty to the French king. The most famous was a certain "Surcouf", who ran away from home at

thirteen to go to sea.”

“So this may be Surcouf?” Marine asked.

“No, I don’t believe Surcouf lost a leg. But the mystery adds a bit of charm to the painting, don’t you think?”

Marine thanked him and took the package back to the boat. Scott was still sleeping when she arrived. Edgar had already left to go to his business meeting, and there was a note from him telling her not to wait up as he expected to be back late. She debated with herself for a moment what to do with the painting, but, unable to come to a decision, she put the painting, still carefully wrapped, away in her closet.

Marine cooked linguini with white clam sauce for dinner. She’d bought a bottle of white wine, and she set the table with the white linen tablecloth and poured the wine into the crystal glasses. She lit two candles and set them on the table. She lit the lanterns as well, and turned off the electric lights. She tossed the green salad and added more balsamic vinegar to the dressing. Then she wiped her hands on her apron and called Scott. “Dinner’s ready!”

“I can come out now? I’m starving!”

“Okay, oh, wait a second!” Marine whipped off her apron and hung it up. Underneath she wore the silk dress Scott had given her for her birthday. It seemed so long ago, she thought, nervously smoothing the violet silk over her narrow hips. The silk wasn’t really warm enough for the cool spring evening and her nipples immediately hardened.

Scott emerged from his room and stood stock still, taking in the candle-lit scene in front of him.

The boat was small, and Scott had to stand crookedly to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling. The bedrooms were just tiny things, with barely any space for a bed and a closet. The hallway was narrow and only five feet long. Scott filled the boat with his presence. Marine, standing in the dining room, was only a few feet away from him, and he thought he could sense the heat emanating from her body.

The dark made deep shadows behind her, obscuring the walls and giving an impression of depth to the narrow room. The candles glowed in the two storm lanterns hanging from the ceiling, and in the glass candlesticks.

"Come and sit down," she said.

"What's the occasion?" he managed to say. His voice cracked a bit and he cleared his throat. "You look beautiful."

"So do you," Marine whispered. They were so close now she could see that his eyes were almost all pupils. He wore his white, linen dress shirt and had even put on his fine, black woollen trousers. The empty leg was pinned up over the knee and he held himself up with his crutches, but he still looked devilishly handsome. His hair was damp from the shower and it curled around his finely shaped head. He had shaved, and his cheeks were milky white and smooth as pale marble. In the candlelight his eyes were deep jade.

"Mmm, smells good," he said, advancing into the room and sliding into his seat.

"Thank you." Marine couldn't eat. Her throat was tight, and she pushed the linguini around her plate. Scott was famished and ate like a wolf, pausing now and then to sip his wine.

"Why don't you eat?" He asked. "It's delicious."

"Oh, thank you. I don't know. When I cook sometimes I lose my appetite."

"That's too bad. Well, next time I'll take you out to dinner. It really is a shame. You're a great cook, who taught you?"

Marine told Scott all about her father and his restaurant. When she finished he looked at her, a strange expression in his eyes. "You're very close to your parents." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes, and my sister too. I can't imagine staying away from them for very long." She sighed. "Has Edgar talked to you about *the Ranger*?"

Scott nodded. "Yes. I still want her, you know. But he's decided to keep half share. I told him it was fine by me. He also said that *the Ranger* was to be kept here, in Newport. At the yacht club."

"Yes, Edgar told me."

"What will you do now?" asked Scott.

"I'm not sure," said Marine, perplexed. "I've been putting off thinking about it."

"Will you rent another sailboat and continue your charter cruises? They're very good by the

way. I didn't get the chance to tell you before, but I really enjoyed our sail, until the storm, that is."

"I'm so sorry about that," said Marine.

"It's not your fault. It happened, that's all."

"Well, I can't see myself renting another boat. Travis and Chapel offered me their boat. They said I could charter it out and they would crew for me, but I told them no. Not that I don't like *the Triton*, but it wouldn't be the same."

Scott grinned. "It doesn't have proper shower facilities?"

"Well, there's that of course. It would have to be completely re-fitted for tourists. Most people object to sleeping in hammocks slung to the side of the boat or sitting on packing crates to eat."

"How strange," Scott grinned.

"Anyway, I thought I would try something completely different."

"What?"

"I thought," Marine paused, "I thought you could give me an idea."

Scott put his fork down and looked hard at her. He picked up his glass. "What do you mean?"

Marine twisted her napkin on her lap, then flung it on the table. "You don't know?" She got up and took two steps around the table. Then she stooped down and took Scott's face in her hands. She leaned over and kissed him.

He kissed her back, and she slid onto his lap, her arms wrapping around his neck, hanging onto him like a drowning victim.

The candles on the table sputtered and went out, leaving the room in shadow, with just the two storm lanterns swaying above their heads.

Scott groaned, and then pushed Marine away from him, using all his strength. "Don't tempt me," he said harshly.

"Please?" was all she said. Then she stood up and held out her arms. He hesitated a bare second, then he got up and took her in his embrace. Using Marine as his crutch he swung himself to the hallway, then through his open bedroom door. Marine preceded him, and lay down on his bed.

"Are you sure?" He asked.

She nodded, pushing him onto the bed. Kneeling, she undid the buttons of his shirt, pausing after each one. Then she pushed it off his shoulders. For a minute all she did was run her hands over his chest.

He let her unbutton his trousers, and then she stopped. She straddled him. "I have you at my mercy," she said.

"You do indeed," he gasped, as she eased his pants and boxer shorts over his hips. He couldn't conceal his desire. His cock reared up out of a dark tangle of soft curls. Marine caught her breath when she saw it, and her eyes widened. "Don't stop now," Scott breathed.

Marine got off the bed. She glanced down at him and then reached up to the thin silk straps holding up her gown. Slowly, in one fluid motion, she slipped them off her shoulders. The dress slithered off her body like amethyst water, falling in a heap at her feet. Scott stretched out his arm and hooked his finger over her panties. Without a word he slowly drew them off, brushing the delicate skin on the inside of her leg as he did.

Marine made a soft, mewling sound and her hips moved towards Scott of their own accord. Between her legs a heat was building up, that only one thing could quench. She felt as if her bones were melting, and she fell forward, pulled into Scott's strong embrace. He pulled her to him, until her thighs were inches from his face. Then he spread her legs with his hands and pressed his mouth to her pussy.

She gasped as his tongue darted into her, plunging deeply. Then his fingers were spreading her tender flesh apart, and he was licking her clit, twirling his tongue around it until she felt it standing as stiffly as her nipples. Her hips thrust toward his face and she braced herself on the back of the bed so she wouldn't fall. Between her legs, a terrific heat was starting to build. He slid his fingers into her, first one, then another. His tongue never stopped rubbing her clit, and in a minute, she was sure she was about to come right into his mouth.

"Scott!" she cried.

He kicked his pants off the rest of the way and pulled Marine down on top of him, pressing his body the whole length of hers. His skin was stretched over his taut stomach and flanks, a soft swirl

of black curls reached up towards his navel. Marine arched her back, wanting him.

"If you're ready," he breathed hoarsely, "reach into the drawer next to you. I have some protection there."

"Let me do it," she said. She'd never put a rubber on, and her hands seemed awkward, but Scott's cock seemed to grow even harder as she smoothed it down its thick shaft. She held onto his cock, loving the feel of it. It was so big it almost frightened her, but her cunt was aching, begging her to hurry. Her breath coming fast, she straddled him and slid slowly onto him. It had been too long. She was so tight it was like the first time all over again. She could feel his cock plunging into her, stretching her. She had to stop, then pull out, then slide down again. Once, twice, three times she did that, then she felt him enter her fully. For a minute she knelt without moving, feeling his pulse beat in her belly. Then he raised his hands and grasped her breasts. He rubbed his palms against her nipples and she felt a tingling all the way down to her pussy. With his thumb and his forefinger, he pinched her nipples hard. Gasping, she lifted up and slid down his shaft again, harder and harder.

A storm seemed to build in the room as they grappled together. Scott arched his back, and Marine rode him like a wild horse, bucking against him, driving him as deeply as she could into her body. She cried out as his cock slammed against her cervix. She felt herself coming. She let herself go, opening her legs and sitting down on his cock, grabbing her breasts with both hands, pulling on her nipples. But Scott wasn't finished with her. While she sat on him, he took her legs and turned her around, so she was facing backwards. Then, taking hold of her buttocks, he raised and lowered her onto his erect penis. Slowly at first, then faster and faster. Marine leaned forward and the sensations changed. Now his cock was massaging a different part inside of her cunt, and she reared up and slid forward as fast as she could on the brink of another orgasm. She was so slick she was bouncing up and down his thick cock now, and she was so wet, she slid right off it. Scott grabbed her buttocks and pulled her down on to him. His cock brushed against her anus, and she didn't hesitate. She pushed down and sheathed his cock into her ass. As soon as she did, she started coming again. Her whole body was pulsing with pleasure. Scott uttered a strangled cry and pumped into her, his hands clenched on her hips. When he came, she could feel him jerking against her.

Exhausted, she rolled off him and lay by his side, her breath coming in gasps. Her cunt and her ass were throbbing, and when she put her hand between her legs, she felt another, mini orgasm shake her.



The moon rose in the sky and its silver light played across their bodies as they lay together in the tiny room. Marine's hair brushed Scott's cheek and her arm lay on his chest. He was on his back, gazing up at the ceiling, but Marine had fallen asleep. A sweet smile tugged the corners of her wide mouth. Her long eyelashes swept her cheeks.

Scott replayed the evening over and over in his head. He was afraid that if he didn't remember every second of it, it would prove to be just another dream. Like the dreams the fever and sickness had given him. The dreams he'd had when he was agonizing in the hospital. Even now he had a doubt. He had to shift his body slightly to be sure. Yes, Marine's body was really next to his. A warm, breathing presence. And his leg was really gone. That was Marine's delicate foot he saw at the end of the bed. His brows drew together in a terrible scowl and he cursed himself under his breath. Marine stirred and woke up from her light sleep.

"Scott." she murmured softly, then she opened her eyes and saw his expression. "What is it?" She pulled herself up on her elbows. "What's the matter?"

"I had no right to make love to you again." Scott sat up in the bed, pulling his shirt on roughly.

"What do you mean?" Marine cried.

"Just what I said. I have no future to offer you."

Marine was silent a moment then she said slowly, "I don't agree about you having no future. You still have your health. You have a good job with Edgar. You have *the Ranger*..." As soon as the words left her mouth she regretted them though.

Scott was quick to pounce on them. "*The Ranger*. That's what you want, isn't it?" he said bitterly. "I should have known"

"You don't know anything," Marine said, taking his arm and turning him around to face her. Her eyes blazed, and made Scott think of a tiger for an instant. "I only meant for you, Scott. You've got things to live for. And some day you'll have children, and they will admire you for who you are, not what you look like, or what you possess."

"I'll never have children," said Scott. "Can you see me playing football or running with them?"

"So what if you can't?" stormed Marine. "Did your father ever play football with you?"

"Yes, he did!"

"And do you love him because of that?"

"Not really," admitted Scott.

"And you told me you loved Edgar as a father. Did he ever run around with you?"

"No." Scott nearly smiled at the thought of Edgar running.

"Well, case closed. Children love their parents no matter what they look like or what handicaps they have. Sometimes they can be critical of their parents, what children aren't? But the love is always there. My mother is deaf," continued Marine in a softer voice, "but I love her dearly and I wouldn't trade her for anyone else in the world. You have only one leg now. Plenty of people have the same problem. They overcome it, as you'll learn how. You'll go back to the hospital in a few weeks and you'll get an artificial limb. Then you'll learn how to use it. You'll see, anything will be possible for you. You only have to believe."

"I don't know what to believe," conceded Scott.

"Then just believe that I love you." Marine told him simply.

"Give me time," Scott said bleakly. "And I just might. But first I have to learn to accept myself. If I don't, how can I ask anyone else to accept me?"

Marine stroked his cheek. "The first time I saw you, you reminded me of a pirate. An arrogant, brash, cocky pirate. Now, you're just like a peg-leg pirate of old. You didn't see those men whining about their fate, did you?"

Scott felt his chest contract. Her words needled him, but he was incapable of facing his

problem right now. "Marine, I know what you're trying to say. But I need more time before I can stand on the deck of a ship and feel like an arrogant pirate." He laid back on his bed and put his arm over his face. "Will you leave now? I need to be alone." He knew he sounded cold-hearted, but he was incapable of calling his words back.

Marine slid off the bed and scooped up her dress. Scott didn't move, although he felt like a cad, and Marine didn't say anything to him. But before she left, she leaned over him and kissed him softly on the lips.

He wanted to call her back. Her eyes were like those of a wounded deer. But he hardened his resolved. He had to settle this by himself.

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May, June, July, August...The months flew by like fall leaves ripped off the trees by a cold wind. Christmas came and went, and Marine stayed doggedly in the city, working as a model, trying to forget the Ranger, Scott, and the warmth of the Caribbean sunshine.

Freezing January wind cut right through the flimsy satin jacket Marine wore clutched around her shoulders.

"Smile!" screeched the photographer. "For God's sake, smile! You look like you're freezing to death, you silly empty-headed mannequin!"

"I am freezing to death!" Marine retorted furiously. "Whose stupid idea was it to shoot summer clothes in the dead of winter? I mean, look at me! I'm wearing a mini skirt and my legs are blue with cold. I have on a skimpy halter-top and a quilted satin jacket that has no buttons and just barely covers my back! And it's starting to snow!" she yelled. "It's January, you stupid shutter-bug, why the hell couldn't you negotiate a trip to the Bahamas like everyone else?"

"The Bahamas?" The photographer screamed back at her. "Who do you think you are? I could have gotten any other model to work for me; I am Mike Rhymehart. Don't you forget it honey."

"That does it!" Marine tore off her jacket and hurled it to the ground. "Mike Rhinestone-heart-whatever, I quit. You can take your summer clothes and stuff them in your ears. There seems

to be a lot of empty space between them." She stormed over to the assistant photographer and took her warm coat out of his hands. "Thank you." She hailed a passing taxi and jumped in it. "Hold on a sec," she said. She shrugged out of her skirt and took off the halter-top and she tossed them out the window at Mike's feet. "Well, what are you waiting for? Let's go!" she ordered the bemused cab driver.

Two days later she sat in the modelling agency as Sam, her booker, talked to her seriously. He leaned over the desk and cupped his chin in his hands as he spoke.

"You can't do things like that, Marine darling," he said. "Mike Rhymehart is one of the best. He was very, very cross with you. That was very naughty. Now I have to smooth things over, and it won't be easy. What am I going to do with you?"

"Just tell me what my next job is, and forget Mike. Tell him I have pneumonia and I'm consulting a lawyer to see how much I can sue him for." Marine shrugged. "What's the big deal?"

Sam sighed. "You are the grain of sand in the smoothly working mechanism, my dear. You are a great model. You are booked solid, you are making a ton of money, but somehow I get the feeling your heart isn't in it. You don't play along, you know what I mean?"

"I do know Sam, it means going against my principles. I can't, and I'm not sorry." Marine sighed. "You see, I don't have any patience with creeps like Mike. I was supposed to be doing winter coats, remember? He wanted to sleep with me. When I told him to get his hand off my thigh he decided to punish me by having me freeze my butt on Fifth Avenue in a snowstorm. I'm sorry, but I won't 'play along' on any level. I won't screw the photographers to get jobs and I won't be punished for not sleeping with them. This business is the pits Sam. I'm just being myself, that's all."

"Maybe you're not really cut out to be a model." Sam said, hiding a grin.

"Am I fired?"

"No, don't be silly." Sam leaned back and spun his chair around a couple times. "I just wish you could be more diplomatic," he said, looking at her over his shoulder.

"Get me jobs with people who respect me," said Marine. "I don't mind the work, but I do

mind the attitude, if you know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean, but you’re going to have to face facts darling. Models don’t get respect. They get anything but respect actually. That said, I respect you for saying no to that creep Mike Rhymehart.” He laughed.

“Thanks Sam, I feel much better now.” Marine couldn’t hide her sarcasm.

Marine left the building and walked aimlessly down the street. On each side of her the skyscrapers reached to the clouds, while people scurried like ants down below. The sky still had traces of sleet and snow in it, and Marine pulled her collar up over her chin, shivering as an icy blast of wind whistled past her. She had been in New York for nearly eight months now. She had left Newport the day after she and Scott had made love. And even now the thought of that evening made her blood quicken in her veins and brought a flush to her cheeks.

Ever since that day she had waited for some sign, some news from Scott. She had written once, and even left a message with his answering service. But there had been nothing but silence. A silence that first stung, then hurt, but had finally faded to a dull ache.

Edgar called her often. They talked about *the Ranger*. Edgar wanted her to come sailing that summer, but she hadn’t made any definite plans. They had avoided talking about Scott. But every once in a while Edgar would sigh, and he would say, I wish things had worked out differently, and Marine knew he was talking about Scott.

She had gone back to St. Thomas. But she didn’t stay long. Chris had come with renewed pleas for her to go to New York so she’d followed him here. He’d taken her to the agency where she had been signed up. Then he’d organised her portfolio for her. In less than a month she was working nearly every day. At first it had been fun, a lark. But then the underlying aspects of the business began to get to her. The men who only wanted to sleep with her, the people who were jealous of the beautiful models and made work difficult with their petty complaints.

The futility of it all made her want to scream sometimes, “This picture is going into a magazine that will simply be thrown in the trash! Nevertheless, everyone in the profession took themselves so seriously! The models who were mostly insecure and stressed out, the photographers who were grabbing at their chance to get published. (Or grabbing the model’s breasts and trying to get into

bed with them.) The art directors who thought of themselves as God, the stylists who thought they were artists, the make-up artists and hairdressers also considered themselves artists... Moreover, no one realised just how ephemeral their work was.

Since she'd been in New York, Red had made advances into her life. When he got back from Venezuela he'd called, left messages, and even wrote, but Marine refused to talk to him or to return his calls. After a while he stopped trying. The last message from him was a short letter mailed to her from Italy. It made her a bit sad, but at the same time glad she'd never gone back to him.

"Marine," he wrote, "I'm leaving to the Mediterranean with another scientific expedition. I really would have liked to see you again. But I think you were right to avoid me. I have no intention of ever getting married. I realise that now. You know, we never talked much about my reasons, but I'll tell you now. I was married once before, and the divorce was hell. I'm sorry I caused you pain once before. But that's all I regret. If I had to do it over again I would. I will always think of you as my "virgin" Virgin Islander. Have a nice life, Red." Marine crumpled the note into a little ball and tossed it into the garbage.

Marine shrugged deeper into her coat and peered around. She was on 5th Avenue now. Should she take a bus back to her apartment on 74th Street, or should she just keep walking? She looked at the street sign and sighed. She had nearly ten more blocks. It was getting colder by the minute. What crazy weather it was. She'd taken a week vacation at Christmas to visit her family, but she hadn't been able to go to the beach because a model can't have any bathing suit marks at all. But Christmas had brought its own good news. Claire was pregnant, and she and her husband Steve were radiant with joy.

Marine spotted a bus stop and she joined the crowd waiting. What an insane way to live, she thought as she clambered aboard the bus. It wheezed and lurched its way uptown, like some ironclad monster that stopped every now and then to gobble up passengers, and spew them out again on the frigid street. Marine had to push her way through the crowded bus to get off. A disgruntled woman poked her with an umbrella and someone managed to pinch her bottom before she made her way off.

"I Hate New York!" She yelled at no one in particular.

She grinned. That felt better. Actually she didn't hate the city. She enjoyed going to museums and plays, restaurants and movies. Central Park was nice, and the city had a sort of awesome majesty to it that Marine couldn't help but admire. The incredibly different areas were a source of amusement too, and one place she particularly loved was Chinatown. But right now the snow was starting to turn to ice and the wind stung her eyes. She had to get a good night sleep because she had a booking for *Glamour* at seven a.m. the next day, and Sam had warned her to be very, very polite with the photographer.

She turned the key in the lock of her tiny, studio apartment and swung the door open. The first thing she noticed was the tantalising aroma of lemon and curry spice. Then she saw that the lights were off and that there were candles everywhere in the apartment. They were lit and cast a warm glow on the table, which was set with sparkling crystal and silverware. Afterwards she became aware of the flowers. The apartment was filled with huge bouquets of roses, and their sweet perfume floated delicately in the air. The blooms were all different colours, deep red, icy white, palest pink, warm coral and soft yellow.

"What...?" She gasped. Then she saw him. He was sitting on her bed, which doubled as a sofa, and as she stared, not believing her eyes, he got up and walked slowly over to her. He hardly limped at all. His face was hidden by shadow, but as he approached the candlelight lit up his face and he broke into a wide grin. "Scott!" she screamed, and threw herself into his arms.

"Surprised?" he asked softly.

"More than that! How did you get in? When?"

"Chris gave me his set of keys. I persuaded him that you wouldn't mind. I also talked him into keeping it a secret. I got here early this afternoon. I've been working hard, very hard."

"I can see that" said Marine, looking around. "It's beautiful."

"I didn't mean that. I meant working on myself. I'm sorry though," he said seriously.

"Sorry about what?" She looked around, stunned.

"Sorry that I took so long." His voice was gentle. She'd never heard that tone before.

"Took so long for what?"

"To believe you. To believe that you could love me."

"And do you now?" Warmth was glowing in her chest.

"I do." Scott reached for her and held her in a close embrace. But first I had to believe in myself. It took longer than I thought."

"But here you are. How did you know I still loved you?" Marine asked, tipping her head up at him.

"Because of that," and Scott pointed at the painting hanging over her bed. It was the painting of the pirate. Marine had hung it there when she moved to New York. "You told me that the first time you saw me, I reminded you of a pirate. And now, I resemble him even more, peg-leg and all."

Marine bit her lip. "I wanted to offer it to you, but I wasn't sure how you'd feel about it."

"If you gave it to me, I couldn't help but love it." Scott kissed her gently on the lips. "And if you give me that painting, I will give you a diamond ring in exchange. One that you'll wear every day for the rest of your life. That is, if you say yes."

"Is that a proposal?"

"You could say that."

"Then yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes! "



The rose petals were scattered all over the bed. Naked, Marine lay in the midst of them like a wood nymph. She watched as Scott unbuttoned his shirt and took it off. Her eyes never left his face as he unzipped his pants and lowered them. He hesitated a minute, then said, "What do you think?"

"It looks so much better," she said. It was true. The new leg looked exactly like a real leg, and it wasn't made of metal or hard plastic. Rather, it had been made to look as natural as possible.

He nodded. "I'm finally used to it."

"So take it off now. You're coming to bed. And hurry, I'm getting cold." She pointed to her nipples. They were puckered and hard as little pebbles.

Scott nodded and removed his prosthesis. He set it carefully on the floor, then gave a little hop and slid into the bed beside her. He touched her nipples. "They look like they need to be warmed up," he said. Grinning, he cupped her breasts in his hands. "They're more than a handful."

"Are they more than a mouthful too?"

He tugged a nipple with his lips, and then sucked hard, drawing it into his mouth. Raising himself on one elbow, he slid his hand down her side, over her hips, and between her legs. "Open Sesame," he said, her nipple popping out of his mouth. He raised his eyebrows and captured it again with his lips.

Marine giggled, but it turned into a gasp as he parted her labia and inserted a finger into her pussy. He went straight for her clit, gently massaging it, while she writhed beneath his touch. She didn't want to hurry, but it had been so long since she'd seen him, and so long since he'd touched her. Shivers of pleasure ran down her spine. She saw his erection, and her stomach contracted. She'd forgotten how imposing his penis was. It was long and thick, and she reached over and grabbed it with both hands.

"Whoa!" he said, her nipple slipping out of his mouth again. He shifted position so he could capture her breast and put it back in his mouth. With his hand, he kept massaging her clit, slower now, but harder.

Marine held onto his cock. It was heavy, and she let out a little moan of impatience. Her cunt was getting swollen. She could feel her moisture on Scott's hand. He could too, for he gave one last suck to her nipple, then he lifted his head and gave her a wide grin, before lowering it again, this time between her legs.

Now he held her thighs apart, as far apart as he could, and plunged his face into her pussy. His tongue swept back and forth, from her clit to her swollen labia. She arched her back, pressing

herself to his face, wanting more. When he let go of one thigh and used his finger to penetrate her, she gave a cry of delight. He thrust with his finger, searching for the angle that would give her the most pleasure. He found it, and she arched her back higher with a shout. "Yes!"

Reaching down, she grabbed his hand and held it tightly inside her while her cunt contracted madly. She wrapped her legs around his head, while he tongued her clit, his finger deep within her. He didn't let her come down. When she finished, he mounted her and plunged his cock into her. As before, her tight vagina kept him from sheathing himself all the way. Marine dug her heels into the bed and pushed against him. "Harder!" she gasped, and he complied, thrusting right up to the hilt.

She felt him filling her completely. For a second he didn't move, but then he slid out, until just the tip of his huge cock was touching her outer lips. Slowly, he plunged back in, and she could feel the head, then the shaft, making its way into her tight passage. She bucked against him, and he gave a savage groan.

"You're playing with fire," he said.

"So burn me!" She arched her back. "Harder, faster!" she begged.

Now he raised himself on his arms, holding himself high above her as he thrust between her open legs. She spread them even wider, so that he could penetrate further, and raised her knees. He withdrew from her and rocked back on his heel. Then he leaned forward, and passed one of her legs then the other over his shoulders. Now she was wide open. She watched, fascinated, as his erect penis came closer to her cunt. From this position, she felt totally exposed. She quivered in anticipation. The only thing she could think of now was the urgency in her cunt. All she wanted was to feel him shoved as far up her as he could get, as hard and as fast. Juice ran out of her cunt from her excitement. Her labia were bright red and swollen with desire. Even Scott's penis looked incredibly aroused. Its massive tip was purple and shiny. Gently, he introduced his penis to her cunt. In her position, she couldn't slow him down or hold him back. But he went slowly, even though she was begging him to fuck her, and fuck her hard.

"All right," he said a catch in his voice. He thrust into her, holding back until he couldn't control himself any more. His hips suddenly seemed to have a life of their own, and he slammed

into her, his face contorted as he fought to slow down.

"Harder!" screamed Marine, and she grabbed his hips.

Now he was calling her name in hoarse cries, driving himself into her. Their bodies were glistening with sweat. As Marine looked down, she saw his stomach start to contract as he began to ejaculate within her pulsing cunt. Braced against her legs, he thrust to the hilt, crying out as he reached the end of his orgasm.

He rolled off her, his breath coming in deep gasps.

Marine moaned. He'd driven her to the brink, and then come, leaving her teetering at the edge. She throbbed with desire.

"You're insatiable," said Scott, kissing her deeply. He flicked her nipples with his tongue. "Wait five minutes, I promise you won't regret it." He licked and sucked her nipples. "Touch me," he whispered. Marine grasped his cock and pumped it, and soon his penis hardened again. When it was stiff, Scott kissed her one last time, and then turned her over and pulled her up to her hands and knees.

"Magnificent," he breathed. He felt her cunt. "Hot, wet and ready," he said, pressing his penis to her.

She reared back, impaling herself on him. It was soon over for her. She'd been in such a state of heightened arousal, all it took was one or two thrusts for her to topple over the edge, pressing her face into her pillow to muffle her cries. Scott withdrew his penis, and with a little moan of anticipation, pressed it against her anus. Marine widened her knees and pushed backwards, gasping as his cock slid into her ass. Scott waited until she'd adjusted to his size, then he drove into her, holding her hips for purchase, pulling and pushing her as his cock slid in and out of her ass. Marine needed to touch herself. Her cunt was throbbing, so she put her hand to it, and slid two fingers into herself. She could feel his cock penetrating her ass while she thrust with her fingers. When she felt Scott's cock start to jerk as he ejaculated, her second orgasm hit her, knocking her nearly senseless with its intensity. She hardly knew where his body ended, and hers began. Afterwards, she rolled onto her back and held him tightly.

Scott held Marine's face in his hands and he kissed her firmly on the lips. "My wedding gift to

you will be *the Ranger*," he said. "Edgar sold me his half when I told him I wanted to marry you. Now you are *Ranger's* woman."

## **About the Author**

Samantha Winston is the pen name for sci-fi writer Jennifer Macaire. She lives in France with her husband, children, and two dogs. She grew up in upstate New York, Samoa, and the Virgin Islands. She graduated and moved to NYC where she modelled for five years for Elite. She went to France and met her husband at the polo club. All that is true. But she mostly likes to make up stories.

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