

Uncharted
Territory

Ann Cory

Uncharted Territory
by Ann Cory

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT

UNCHARTED TERRITORY

"I recommend this book to anyone who loves pirates and the sea, and who dreams of one day having an adventure to take her out of ordinary life and off to a romantic future."

Sky

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Dedication

For the adventurous souls who love without boundaries.

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Chapter 1

Charlotte dragged her body along the sand, her dress heavy, making it difficult to move. She longed to close her eyes and rest. Her lungs felt tight, and she wheezed between breaths. Further, she pulled herself along, well away from the foamy water dotting the shore like ruffled lace. She had no idea how far the ocean tossed her, or what island she'd washed up on. Damn the misleading brochures and their exotic promises. Her vacation hadn't gone at all as planned. The weeklong soiree of erotically charged nights with handsome men would remain as nothing more than pure fantasy. Her one time to escape ... to be someone else for a change ... went horribly wrong, and may have sealed her fate.

She reached up to her cheek and remembered the last few moments before her body hit the icy water. He'd been suave, debonair, a smooth talker who packed a wallop in his pants—and his fist. Her consistent poor judgment in men should have taught her something, at least set off a warning bell to her instincts, but she was a sucker for intelligent conversation, and the hypnotically endowed.

Charlotte swallowed hard against her dry throat. She stared at her wrinkled fingers, surprised at how the puckered skin made her look well beyond her thirty-two years. The ends of her auburn hair were twisted and knotted with seaweed, a far cry from the elegant French twist professionally done by a blonde stylist onboard. Her reflection

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at the time suggested royalty and a woman to be desired. Now the illusion was ruined.

Finally, her arms gave out and she rested her tear-stained cheek onto the sand. As the tip of her tongue slid along her lips, she grimaced. Bitter saltwater and rough grainy sand erased the delicious taste of late vintage Pinot Noir savored earlier on the lido deck. She could only hope someone would notice her absence from the boat and call for a search and rescue team. In the meantime, at least she was on dry land.

Charlotte attempted another deep breath that rendered her into a painful coughing fit and sent sharp pains throughout her head. A tear formed in the corner of her eye. When the fit subsided, she groaned. Miserable didn't begin to describe how she felt. She must have pissed off someone in a former life without knowing it.

After the searing pain subsided, Charlotte opened her eyes and noticed a dark object appear a mere inch from her face. A black boot, long and shiny. Someone had seen her after all. She sighed in relief. Clean clothes and a glass of brandy would help erase the nightmare of the last few hours.

Before she had a chance to express her gratitude, the tip of a sword sank into the sand uncomfortably close to her outstretched hand. She didn't consider it a friendly gesture.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to move, my proud beauty."

The deep voice brought on a sudden burst of goose bumps across her flesh. "Please..." Her voice came out faint, raspy, and it took several tries of clearing her throat before she

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could finish. "Please. I can hardly move. My muscles ache from head to toe."

"I only be askin' once, wench. Move."

From his gruff tone, she didn't question how often he got his way. She stared at the black boot, so defiant and firm in its stance. To add insult to injury, he prodded her shoulder with it.

Charlotte rolled herself over, and focused on the blue sky. Scattered white clouds in the formation of doves floated overhead almost close enough to touch, or so it seemed. She glanced to her left and sighed. Pain racked through her tired body repeatedly until the owner of the boot had her full attention.

A devastatingly handsome man stood over her, wearing a black tricorne hat with a crimson feather. The look on his face suggested he knew something she didn't. He squatted down, his long coat opening wide enough to show a white shirt undone to his naval, dark, knee breeches, and bucket topped boots. A chain hung around his neck with a gold coin at the end that swung in a circle above her head. She shivered as a light breeze stole over her damp skin.

"You're resting on me swag, lass, and nothing comes between me and my swag."

Charlotte didn't need a mirror to know she looked like hell, but it didn't give him the right to be rude. "I am hardly a hag, sir."

Laughter broke out, but from where she couldn't tell.

A smile played across the stranger's lightly whiskered features, enhancing the etching of wrinkles around his

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sterling blue eyes. "See here, lassie. I'm not one for making idle chitchat; it's not my style. Remove yerself from the place I want to dig or risk a dagger in your bountiful bosom."

She heard a chorus of "oohs" and "ahhs" at the stranger's harsh words, but she still couldn't see the owners.

"It looks as though the vote is unanimous."

Charlotte gave him a piercing stare. "Says who?"

"My crew, lassie." He winked and then turned around. "She be an addled wench. Beautiful, but addled." Again laughter broke out followed by applause.

Of all the nerve. Charlotte had enough of being talked about and mocked. If an audience of perverted men wanted to make her feel inferior, she'd show them a thing or two. She had more than enough of males and their pompous ways.

She pushed the backs of her arms into the sand and struggled to prop herself up. The sudden movement propelled her into another coughing fit and made her stomach wrench.

"Easy there, Miss, you don't sound too good."

She clumsily batted away a gloved hand reaching for her, and tried again to sit up. A kaleidoscope of faint and blurry faces appeared, and then they, along with everything else vanished.

* * * *

"Looks like she fainted, Cap'n."

Phineas Parr gave a nod to his longtime crewmate and friend. "Aye, Bart. Take her to the ship and put her next to me quarters. She must have gotten a hold of some tainted rum."

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His crew laughed in unison as they hoisted the curvy cutie from the ground and carried her away. Phineas brushed away the sand where she'd lain and knew the treasure wasn't there. He stared at the map, turned it every which way, and then rolled it up. Due east, twenty paces. Due west, five paces. The words repeated on his lips. He'd followed the damn directions and still come up in the wrong place. It had to be the right island. He could feel it in his bones. The three rocks to the left and the V-shaped parting of the trees were as the drawing suggested. Even a child could see that. Frustrated, he kicked at a nearby rock. He was running out of time to find the treasure and that didn't sit too well with him.

Phineas slid the rolled-up map into his coat pocket and looked out to sea. The only ship in eye distance was his own, The Fortune. How had the mysterious woman come to the island? And how had she managed to end up right where he intended to dig? Two surprises in one. The lady and the absence of his gold. He didn't believe in coincidence. His father said females meant trouble. When the beauty regained consciousness, he'd be there to question her and find out the truth.

Phineas rested his palm on the sand; the spot still warm from her body. She was a sharp-tongued lass, that was certain, with fiery red hair and a batch of alluring freckles along her peach skin. A sight for sore eyes. The way her torn wet dress exposed her breasts and how the garment fit like a second skin, tight around the curves of her body, stirred his interest to the point of an uncomfortable strain in his groin. It had been too long since being in the company of a woman,

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and not just for him. The thought of his crew ogling her, as she lay silent, concerned him. He quickly headed toward his ship to check on her. One could never be too careful with a group of sex-deprived men.

* * * *

Phineas entered the small room beside his quarters and to his relief found his trusted friend, Bart, doing his best to wipe away dark smudges from the woman's face with a cloth. His gaze stole over her. Sleeping Beauty in the flesh. She looked peaceful, if not a little worse for the wear. Her breasts rose and fell in a steady rhythm, with her lips parted slightly.

In a tone he hoped sounded nonchalant, he asked, "How is she?"

Bart turned and wrung out the damp cloth in a wooden bowl. "Sound asleep, which is what she needs most. Looks like she took quite a beating."

Phineas reached forward and moved several strands of hair from her face. It disturbed him to see the bluish-purple marks along her cheek and neck. Still, the flaws didn't deter from her loveliness. He shifted uncomfortably, not wanting his attraction for her to be witnessed.

"Perhaps she hit her head?"

With a heavy sigh, Bart shrugged. "I have a feeling the poor thing had an unpleasant altercation with someone. The marks suggest a struggle. Do you plan to stay here until she wakes?"

Parr nodded. "Aye, I can stay." He was bothered someone would harm such a fine-looking creature. If he knew who and

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where the culprit was, he'd strangle him to death without a second thought. Now he felt guilty for having spoken to her with such a gruff tone.

"Good, she shouldn't be left alone right now. I'll go and see to it the crew is busy working. Will we be digging where you found her?"

Lost in thought, Phineas caught only half the question. "You mind repeating yerself, old friend?"

Bart tipped his hat. "Just asked if you wanted us to dig, sir, where we found the lass. We've several more hours of daylight and the men are restless. Especially with the woman onboard."

Surprised he'd forgotten all about the treasure, Parr rubbed his head and nodded. "Ah, yes, but not where we found her. The treasure isn't there. Tell them boys to dig anywhere and everywhere until supper. The blasted chest has to be on the island."

Bart nodded. "Yes, Cap'n."

Phineas propped a hand on his friend's shoulder. "We've known one another for thirty years. You know you don't have to call me captain."

"Aye, Cap'n, but I'll do it anyhow."

Phineas chuckled and watched his friend leave. They'd been through a lot together and he considered Bart the only man he could fully trust.

He turned his attention back to the beauty. She was a far cry from the women he'd come across when they docked at ports to restock supplies. Well educated, he would guess, and not from around these parts. He admired her long, black

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lashes and the way they rested gently along the swell of her cheeks. A perfect nose and equally perfect lips. The bow of her upper lip made his mouth twitch, as if she was magically trying to draw him close. To kiss a woman like her would be dangerous, and no doubt lead to more.

Phineas shook the thought from his head and forced his gaze to her small, thin hands curled gently into fists. The absence of a ring on her finger surprised him. Surely, she had a lover. Or perhaps the lover had been the attacker. But why? Even in anger, he couldn't fathom the thought of striking a woman. To look at her made him want to keep her safe and out of harm's way. Protect and shelter her from the dangers that lurked in every corner.

His gaze continued along her figure until he felt his ears brimming with heat. He should be ashamed of himself for gawking without her knowledge. But her breasts, they looked so soft and full. Sexual tension brewed beneath his layers of clothing and made his muscles taut. He'd have to find a way to get her off his boat, nay—off the island altogether or trouble would ensue. Her innocence would become too much for him sooner or later, and the last thing he wanted to do was scare her off with an unwanted advance. She deserved a slow seduction. His hands itched to reach out and caress her. Show her not all men were brutes. Prove a touch could be gentle. If he thought it would work, he'd kiss her bruises away.

Parr again cursed the thoughts that ran through his mind. Which head was he thinking with? Hell, what did he know of her? Nothing. Granted, she was a vision and made his cock so

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hard it hurt, but he needed to keep his wits about him. For all he knew she'd been sent by his sworn enemy. Sent as a distraction to keep him away from finding the treasure. He didn't want to believe it, especially when she appeared innocent enough. But Phineas knew all too well about mirages, and he vowed to be on his guard. It would take more than a pretty face to lure him into a trap.

As he took a seat on an old barrel, the woman's eyelids fluttered. He resumed his post beside her and waited for her to come to full consciousness. The sooner he had his answers the better. Spy or not, having a woman onboard meant trouble.

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Chapter 2

Charlotte fought to stay wrapped in the erotic lure of the dream. Forget cruises and vacations—this was the romantic escape she'd been looking for. The handsome rogue of a man she'd seen earlier might have tried to scare her off with a sword, but now he had something far more dangerous. He had her body on fire, and a fierce need that couldn't be sated without his touch. He'd stripped her naked right there on the beach. Whispered dirty sweet words in her ear. Cupped her breasts and darted his tongue out and around her nipples. Teased with his lips and teeth until she couldn't see straight. She pulled him close, his body nestled between her legs, his hard, thick cock drumming along her upper thigh. He waited for her to beg and when she did, the dream slipped away.

Damn.

She opened her eyes and tried not to scream when she noticed the man she'd dreamt about standing over her, all six-foot-two of him, with a sexy smirk fixed at his lips. Heat tingled beneath her skin. Charlotte hoped she hadn't given away her racy thoughts aloud.

He ran his finger along the side of her face and a frown creased his brow.

"Yer sportin' quite a shiner there, lass. Lover give you that?"

His tender stroke momentarily eased the pain. "I would hardly call him my lover. The man who hit me had more than

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a casual night together in mind." She slowly sat up, ignoring the dizziness.

"I don't think much of men who hit women," he growled and gave her some room.

Impressed he held some sense of morals, she attempted a smile. "No, I don't either."

Charlotte noticed him glance several times to her chest. She looked down and noticed the convenient rip in the bodice of her dress. Her breasts were practically falling out. No wonder he couldn't hold her gaze for long. He might have some morals, but he was still a man.

Determined not to make a big deal of it, she challenged him. "I seem to remember you said something about piercing my bosom earlier, with a dagger no less."

His entire body shook as he roared with laughter. "Argh. The crew likes it when I talk tough. Reminds them I'm still in charge."

"I see." Charlotte watched the way the gold coin around his neck tapped against the smooth plane of his chest when he moved. "Well, so long as it's only talk. I'm somewhat fond of my breasts as they are. Reminds me I'm a woman."

There was no mistaking the predatory gleam in his eyes. "I can think of other ways to keep you in line, lassie, if need be."

She shuddered, but not from fear. Where he'd touched her face, a new feeling blazed and spread throughout her body. A feeling she needed to ignore. Hadn't she learned anything from all her past encounters with strangers? Even if he did make her body buzz all over with a single look, it didn't give

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her the green light to act like an idiot with an overactive libido. She was through falling for mysterious brooding men. Well, almost.

Lips pursed, she narrowed her eyes. "I shouldn't be talking to you."

He cocked a brow. "And why is that, lass? I'm curious."

She didn't really have a reason, other than his very presence put her at risk of showing weakness. "Because ... we hardly know one another."

"Allow me to remedy that." With grace, he removed his hat and bowed. "My name is Captain Phineas Parr, fierce pirate of the sea. I command this very ship, *The Fortune*, and I've come to the island in search of buried treasure. I have a nasty temper when provoked, drink far too much rum, and don't give my trust freely. Not much more to tell. What about you?"

Charlotte found herself tongue-tied from his introduction. While she was charmed by the bow, she had a hard time getting past the fact he was a pirate, of all things. How could she have thought about running her hands across his chest? Or sink into his strong embrace? Pirates were vile, disgusting thieves. Monsters, who pillaged, plundered and well, she didn't want to continue along that train of thought. At least that was how they are perceived in movies and books. Maybe it was best he didn't know anything about her.

His heavy stare made her uneasy. "What's the matter, lass, cat got your tongue all of a sudden?"

She trembled. "No, I—"

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He curled his lips into a scowl. "You what? I tell you something about myself and you clam up? Or are you fishing for information to use against me?"

"No!" she exclaimed, dumbstruck by his sudden change in manner. "Of course not."

Darkness stormed behind his eyes. "Like I said, I don't give me trust freely, wench. Either you be giving up your name or I'll be forced to lock you up like some prisoner."

Charlotte tensed. What was she thinking by angering a pirate? A moment ago, he nearly seduced her with his eyes and now she worried about that whole piercing her bosom threat coming to fruition. She had only herself to blame by allowing her imagination to run wild. Maybe he was a good pirate, if such a thing existed. He'd treated her decent enough, all things considered. He could have walked away and left her on the beach to die or become some animal's meal.

She wet her lips and decided some damage control was in order. Her very life depended on it. "Sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. I'm Charlotte Alderman. I ended up on this island by accident thanks to foolishly putting my trust in a stranger, and well, I'm afraid I don't have any fancy title to impress you with."

His expression softened. "And here I figured you for a duchess."

She'd almost felt like one aboard the cruise ship, up until she was thrown overboard and knocked around by pounding waves for hours on end. "Nope. I'm a simple and old-fashioned kind of gal."

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He snorted. "I'll bet." Before she could counter his words, he started to pace back and forth, the feather of his hat rippling. "Now that we've gotten formalities out of the way, I'm not entirely convinced you aren't a spy."

She stopped watching the gold coin sway across his chest, and gave him a dirty look. "A spy? You find me nearly drowned with a bruise on my face, and have the nerve to think me a spy?"

He shrugged his powerful shoulders. "They come in all shapes and sizes, lass, and in your case, I'd say you're the most dangerous kind of all."

The man was infuriating. One minute he acted charming and the next he made her want to reach over and strangle him with his chain. "If you'd thought me some traitorous whore, you should have left me to battle the elements on my own. How dare you accuse me of something so ridiculous?"

His brows arched. "Is it ridiculous?"

She snorted. "Yes, it is. I'm offended you would think me a spy. I demand you apologize."

"Oh, you are a spirited one, lass. Let me remind you of one important fact here. I'm the captain. I don't have to make an apology for my words or behavior."

While her body was still exhausted, her temper had no problem flaring up. "I could care less about you being the captain. I'm not part of your crew and I sure as hell don't appreciate being called something I'm not. You're rude and could learn a serious lesson in tactfulness."

Charlotte watched the vein in his forehead throb as he cast her a vicious look.

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"I see you don't mind doing the name calling."

She blinked. Whether he was right or not didn't make much difference to her. She'd had enough of his testosterone-fueled tantrum. In her experience, men felt obligated to tell her what to do. No pirate was going to pick up where the last jerk left off. Charlotte clenched her fists. "You arrogant ass. You don't know anything about me and yet so far, you've managed to belittle me in front of your crew, threaten me with your sword, and call me inappropriate names. I'm so mad I could—spit."

Amusement sprinkled across the pirate's face. It was then she noticed a dimple in his left cheek, subtle but alluring nonetheless. Damn him for being exasperating and sexy at the same time. She started to look away, only to have his fingers brush against her chin and gently force her to keep eye contact.

"Easy, lass. I haven't made up my mind about you yet so don't get yer garments in a bind." His gaze lingered, making it difficult for her to breathe. "It's been a long time since a woman has tried to seduce a treasure map right out from underneath me, and I'll be damned if it ever happens again."

Charlotte's pulse pounded. His voice a rough and tumble caress. "I can assure you I'm not a spy, and as for the seduction..."

He removed his fingers and resumed pacing, leaving her words dangling in the air. His touch had been more wanted than she cared to admit, and it jostled her mind.

She watched the way he paced, three large steps, a sharp turn, and another three large steps, as if a soldier marching.

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All the while, she wondered what kind of command he took in his bedchambers.

After several minutes of silence, he cleared his throat and glanced her way. "My dear, for all I know, you could be lying straight through your pretty teeth. Women can't be trusted onboard a ship."

"Then, as I mentioned, why didn't you leave me where I was? I think I'd almost rather be subjected to the harsh elements than deal with the likes of you."

His deep sigh resonated around the room. "Truth be told, at the moment I almost regret my decision. Almost. Regardless, I brought you here because I didn't want you to think me completely ruthless. And you were hurt. Then it occurred to me that you might have come here to distract me from finding the treasure. At least here on my ship I can keep a proper eye on you."

"Do you mean to say you're keeping me against my will?" Arms crossed, she gave him a pointed stare.

His chuckle vibrated low in her belly. "Oh no, lass. You are free to leave the ship, but seeing as how you're on an island, you won't be getting very far."

Oh yes, an island, she'd almost forgotten. All those silly schoolgirl dreams of being stranded on a deserted island with a handsome stud of a man—wild sex on the sand at sunset, and again at sunrise—none included a pirate per se, but didn't mean there couldn't be one.

"Well, it doesn't matter. I'm certain someone will come look for me."

"I'm counting on it, lass. Then I'll have my answer."

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She blinked back another wave of confusion. "What answer?"

"To whether or not you're a spy, of course. I know there's gold somewhere on this island, in fact, I bet me life on it. I have a hunch you didn't come alone, so where are the people who sent you? We're close, aren't we, and they're getting nervous. I can smell their fear."

Charlotte massaged her temples and groaned. The guy had a one-track mind. "You're irritating me with your line of questioning. If I had a choice, this would be the last place I'd pick to be. Not to mention in better company."

His brows furrowed. "Why else would you have showed up on the very same island as me? The timing is too much of a coincidence."

She'd about had enough. "Look, I'm not a spy and I haven't been brought here to take away the supposed treasure. Up until late last night or maybe it was early this morning, I can't recall, I was on a cruise ship. We're talking a fun-in-the-sun, catered to, spoiled rotten, dream vacation I'd saved up years to take, and then all hell broke loose."

"Ah, so you're a fancy living wench. And here you tried to claim you were simple."

Charlotte wanted to tell him to shut up, but instead she ignored him and continued. "The last thing I remember was dancing with a man I thought enjoyed my company, only come to find out he preferred my jewels." She reached up and smoothed her fingers along her exposed neck. "I felt like a princess at a ball wearing my sapphire and diamond necklace. The man I'd flirted with really knew how to throw

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on the charm, and literally swept me off my feet. It all happened so fast I didn't have time to stop him. In the middle of a kiss, he seized my necklace, struck my face, and tossed me overboard. I screamed and hollered, but no one heard me. I had no other choice but to swim until I reached shore."

He smirked. "Yer a treasure hunter. I knew it."

Charlotte laughed despite herself. Damn pirate, always thinking about treasure. "No. When my mother died, she left me her collection of precious jewelry. I don't normally wear them out, but I considered the trip a special occasion. Evidently, I made a poor choice. So no, I didn't hunt them, they were a gift. They belong to me."

He grunted. "Treasure belongs to the one who finds it."

"You're impossible." She sighed. Didn't he recognize the difference between finding and robbing? "Let me try this again. The man stole my necklace. What don't you understand?"

She highly considered reaching over and giving him a good shake when a foreign voice broke in. "Pardon me, Cap'n."

Charlotte snapped her head toward the doorway. In walked a stout man wearing clothing far less formal than Phineas. Long blond hair poked out from beneath his tattered hat, and when he turned, she admired the large gold hoop in his ear.

"Don't mean to interrupt, Cap'n, but I wondered if the lady will be joining us for supper. Cook requested I find out."

Her stomach rumbled at the mere mention of food.

Phineas sighed deeply. "I don't think the lass will be up for dining with the likes of our motley crew. Make her up a plate,

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and bring it here. Some wine too. Seems she likes fancy living."

The man gave a nod to them both. "Aye, Cap'n. I'll let you know when supper's ready."

Charlotte folded her arms and watched the man leave. The way Phineas talked made her sound like a child who couldn't speak for herself.

"Excuse me. I don't have a problem eating a meal with a bunch of men. It's rude of you to assume otherwise."

The pirate held up his hand, palm aimed at her face, and shook his head. "It's not you I worry about, lass, it's the crew. Some of them varmints are the scurviest things you'll ever see, could make you lose your appetite. While they're shoveling food in their mouths, they'll be feasting on you, with their eyes. I wouldn't want you to be uncomfortable."

She sensed a hint of protectiveness in his voice, or at least she hoped. "I'm not helpless. I can handle myself fine, thank you."

"Aye, and so far you've proven yourself quite well at that, have you? Robbed of yer jewels, thrown overboard, and taken hostage by a bloodthirsty pirate."

When he put it that way, she found it hard to plead her case. "Well, I'd hardly call you bloodthirsty."

"You've seen only what I want you to see, lass. The bloodthirsty comes when you cross me."

Charlotte thanked her lucky stars she hadn't witnessed that yet, and hoped she never would. She stretched her arms high above her head and yawned. "I think all this arguing with you is sapping my energy."

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He nearly tripped over himself to step up close to her. "Are you feeling faint? Should I get you something to drink?"

She couldn't help the smile spreading across her face. "Now, Captain, are you fussing over me? You know—the possible spy?"

There was no mistaking the perplexed stare. "What? No, of course not. I don't care if you're thirsty or not. Lay back and get some sleep."

Charlotte wanted to fight the exhaustion long enough to tell him to stop ordering her around, but she didn't get the chance. She sank back into the cot, her head comfortable on the firm pillow. The prospect of another sensuous dream beckoned to her. Through half-closed eyes, she watched Phineas grab a blanket and place it over her body. Maybe she'd been wrong about pirates all along.

* * * *

Phineas almost needed a nap himself after dealing with the feisty woman. She'd rattled him within moments of waking up. There hadn't been any fear in her eyes, only attitude. He'd been used to riding out treacherous storms and dodging cannon fire, but Charlotte was something else. He didn't know what the hell hit him. Here he'd considered her a fragile creature, but once she opened her mouth, she proved a worthy adversary. At least with words.

If the story she told were true, and a man did rob and throw her overboard, she'd certainly suffered enough already. He knew betrayal all too well, and learned it early on. Trust didn't come easy to him, and less when it came to women. It

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took only one time to have a woman con him out of a small fortune, and he vowed never to fall for a female's charms again. With a smile, he realized how much easier that promise was to keep when none were onboard.

Phineas paced for several minutes and then paused in front of the cot. He watched her sleep and listened to the peaceful way she breathed. Like a gentle wind guiding him across a calm sea. Her mussed red hair framed her face beautifully. At least when she was silent she appeared soft-spoken and innocent. He chuckled at the way she'd talked back to him. Mischief reflected from her eyes and more than once, he'd seen color bloom on her face out of anger.

Tired from standing on his feet, he took a seat on a nearby barrel. He could probably leave for a few hours, but worried she would wake and forget where she was. Phineas considered it his duty to stand guard over her.

Bart rapped his knuckles against the doorway and popped his head in.

"How is the lady, Cap'n?"

He shook his head. "She's a firecracker, to say the least."

"How so?"

"Doesn't take much to light her fire, so to speak. I'd say other than being tired, she's going to be fine."

His friend grinned. "Ah, so I take it she didn't put up with your telling her what to do?"

The pirate chuckled. "Let's just say she could easily win at a duel of words. Nearly made me head spin right off. To look at her you wouldn't think so, but she is far from shy." He stopped himself when he realized how he sounded. "Err,

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despite all that, I'm not about to let her move around freely about the ship. She may very well be a spy."

"Aye, Cap'n, if you say so. I better get back to the crew. I'll stop by later with a plate of food for her."

Phineas glanced out the porthole window and cursed himself for stepping out of character. He couldn't afford to let his crew see him go all soft over a woman. Especially Bart, who would hang it over his head forever. He had a reputation to uphold. When she woke up again, he'd remind her who was the one in charge. If he didn't pull himself together, he'd do something he would only regret later.

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Chapter 3

Charlotte didn't know how much time had passed when she woke, but Phineas was still in the room. On his face, he wore a pensive expression as he stared out the small porthole window. One leg crossed over the other, his body resting against the wall. Beneath his layers of pigheadedness, she noted his handsome features. Strong, determined, and a trace of mischief. He might have the crew fooled into thinking he had a wicked temper, but she rather liked it. Okay, so she really wasn't done with brooding strangers after all.

A smile gleamed her lips as she recalled the explicit dream she had. It felt too real and left her body in a state of need. Desire ebbed in her veins and she noticed the warmth between her thighs. She considered fingering her clit while she studied him. Imagining the touch as his. It wouldn't take much to elicit an orgasm at this point, she was far too revved up, but the fear of being caught helped tame her.

Charlotte cleared her throat and watched as he shook himself out of his thoughtful daze.

"Ah, you're awake, lass."

When he wasn't spouting his theory of her being a spy, she didn't mind his company. Perhaps it was premature to think it, but she really did believe him to be different. Right down to his strapping black boots.

"Yes. I hope I wasn't out too long."

"No, not long, but sleep is what you need most."

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A yawn escaped her lips. "Part of me wishes I could sleep for a year." She rubbed at her eyes. "I don't expect you to hang around here and babysit me all day. Don't you have buried treasure to find?"

He removed his hat and scratched his head. "My men do the digging. I supervise. How you be feeling, lass?"

The rest helped get rid of her headache. "Much better, thank you. Did you stay with me the entire time?"

He gave her a crossed look. "Of course not. I don't have time to sit around here all day. I'm a busy man with responsibilities. I only came back to let you know yer supper is on its way, but I didn't know whether to wake you or not."

Charlotte suppressed a comment about his quick to flare temper and swung her legs off the cot. She sat up and rested her elbows on top of her knees. "I'm so hungry I could eat sand, though I'm not partial to the grainy taste."

"Yer in luck. Our cook makes us hearty meals that taste damn good. For being on a ship and all. In fact, we're often spoiled."

"I thought the pirate's life was harsh and unforgiving, but you make it sound exciting."

She couldn't help but notice the way his eyes lit up. "Oh, it's very exciting. The sea is full of stories." Phineas slid a wooden crate in front of her and set a brass candleholder on top. He struck a match and lit three taper candles burned down to stubs. The little gestures were quickly breaking down her defenses. "Best I can do for a table and mood. I'll bet the ship you were on before did up a nice display."

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Briefly, she recalled the ballroom with its crystal chandeliers, velvet rugs, professional orchestra, and all the food one could ever want. She shrugged. "They went a little over the top, actually. Contrary to your opinion, my idea of a fancy dinner is sitting in front of the television wearing my pink fuzzy slippers and comfy sweats."

The moment the words were out, her face burned. Pink fuzzy slippers, could she sound anymore childish? If he noticed her blush, he didn't comment. She thought it strange that he had an opportunity to make fun of her, but he kept quiet.

Charlotte tried to think up something to fill the silence. "So um, wow, you probably don't know what a television is, do you?"

He gave a sexy little snort and folded his arms. "Of course I know what television is, lass. I'm a pirate, not an alien. I can't imagine anything as stimulating on a square box as sailing around the world."

Charlotte couldn't remember the last time she'd gone anywhere exciting. The cruise was supposed to be her big adventure, and that ended in a disaster. "You've got me there. It doesn't really interest me much; just something I do to pass the time. I can certainly live without television."

"Aye, but can you live without your fuzzy pink slippers?"

Damn, he got in the jab after all.

They shared a laugh and it helped to relax her. "Before I forget, I wanted to thank you for taking me in and being so generous."

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He'd gone back to staring at the corner of the room and then whipped his neck around, nearly losing his balance.

"What did you say, lass?"

"Nothing really, just I appreciate you giving me food and a place to rest until I'm better."

"Cap'n?"

They both turned and nodded at the stout man holding a tray of food.

"Aye, Bart. You may enter."

She noticed Phineas was flustered. Or maybe it was annoyance at her. Had she said something wrong?

"I've brought her supper, sir."

"Very well, set it on the crate in front of her."

"Aye, sir. Will she be requiring anything else?"

Charlotte watched the vein in the captain's head throb.

"No, Bart. Go join the men. I'll be there in a moment."

When Bart left, Phineas stood over her with his lips downward and chest puffed out. The thought of running her tongue along his golden flesh brought warmth between her thighs. Pirate or not, she was attracted to him, enforced more when he got angry.

Innocently, she asked, "Did I say something to upset you?"

Charlotte could only imagine how many times he cursed her since they met. It seemed she pushed his buttons every time she spoke.

"Let's get one thing straight, lassie. I haven't rescued you and I haven't taken you in. I'm being hospitable, but yer not here as a guest."

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Just once, she wished she didn't need a decoder to try and understand him. "Then what am I to you?"

"My prisoner and a possible threat. Now eat, drink, and rest up. There's a nightshirt and extra blankets on the barrel behind you." Charlotte followed the direction of his finger. "You're not to leave this room or go wandering around the ship. This is no place for you."

She couldn't help herself. "What will you do if I disobey?"

His eyes blazed so strongly she felt the temperature of the room change. "One step out from this room and I'll..."

"You'll what?" she challenged.

"I'll tie you up meself."

She enjoyed the image and the heated exchange. They both seemed to push each other's buttons with relative ease. Charlotte turned her attention to the large plate of food and generous goblet of wine. Her stomach rumbled again. She unfolded the napkin and smoothed it along her lap. "Looks tasty."

The corner of his eyes softened. "Yes, yes it does. Enjoy."

Before she could say another word, Phineas walked out of the room, muttering to himself.

Pirates were a strange breed. And when it came to the captain, devastatingly handsome.

Unable to resist the smell of food any longer, she stuffed herself in a very unladylike fashion. Now if she could do something to take care of the sexual appetite brewing between her thighs.

* * * *

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Phineas stormed into the eating quarters and glanced around the table at his crew. Oblivious to his presence, they sat around eating and laughing with gusto. He plopped onto the bench at the head of the table and noisily filled his plate, but his hunger for food had subsided.

Charlotte. The name sounded sweet and she'd looked very tasty with her voluptuous figure, playing him for a fool. What happened to reminding her who was in charge? He was in a world of hurt for inviting her onboard. Even the smell of her clung to him. She might have been out tossing in the water through the night, but her womanly musk remained strong. It taunted him. Played games with his mind. Threatened to undo all he'd spent forty years to build. A reputation as a fearless pirate whom no one would want to cross.

A string of sweat broke out along his forehead and he groaned.

"You all right, Cap'n?"

"Of course I am." He swung his head toward Bart and then banged his fists on top of the table. "I'm the captain here. I tell people what to do and how to do it."

The men stopped eating and stared at him wide-eyed. Adrenaline surged through his veins. "People fear me."

"Aye, aye, sir," his crew agreed.

"I don't think anyone at this table questions your authority, Cap'n."

Phineas took a deep breath and plastered on his best attempt at a smile. "Bart, old friend, you're right. My head's in a weird place is all. It's this damn island." He brought a jug of rum to his lips and started to take a sip.

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"If you pardon my opinion, sir, I think it's the lady getting to ya."

Rum spewed from Parr's lips as he sputtered. That was the last straw. He stood and sent his chair flying back. "I said it's the island. Don't mock me, mate; you're way outta line."

He grabbed the rum and stalked back to his quarters. Anger surged through his veins. What a thing for Bart to say, his only friend, and he'd said it in front of the crew, no less. Why would his head be a mess because of a beautiful wench? She didn't have any hold over him. He was still in control here. Or was he being punished? Had he angered the sea and was she getting back at him? Sending him a siren to lure him to his death? To go so stir-crazy that by the time they set sail again he would willingly walk the plank and drown himself?

Parr sat at the edge of his cot and guzzled back half the jug of rum before taking a breath. "You're losing yer mind here. Get a grip, man."

He raised the jug back to his lips and paused. The hourglass shape of a woman appeared in his doorway. The most perfect thing he'd ever seen in his entire life.

Without thinking, he rasped, "What are you doing here?"

Charlotte strolled in, exaggerating the sway of her curvaceous hips. A hot wind rushed through his mouth and throat, making it difficult for him to swallow.

"Tell me you're happy to see me," she coaxed, her voice soft as an angel's.

"I—" He didn't know how to respond. His cock didn't have a problem, though. It strained against the fabric of his pants, demanding to have a say in the matter.

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She snatched the rum from his hands and took a deliberate swig. His gaze swept over her body. He never knew how sexy a plain old nightshirt could look. The buttons were undone partway, her nipples highly visible through the material. Almost like they were playing peek-a-boo with him. Taunting him. Begging him to reach out and pinch them. He tried to take the jug from her, but she tilted it further. A light stream of liquid ran down her chin and neck, and trailed between her breasts.

A wicked smile breached her lips. "Whoops. It seems I've made something of a mess. Do you think you can help me?"

Ah the sweet, sweet torture of it all. Her feminine charms were too damn strong to resist. Phineas unbuttoned the rest of the shirt and balked at the way he was all fingers and thumbs. The trail of rum streaked along the slight curve of her belly and made a beeline for the space between her legs. She poured a little more rum along her skin and burst out in a girlish giggle. Overcome with need, he cupped her breasts and swirled his tongue along the saturated nipples. He felt the heat from her sex rise, the feral scent of her desire mingling in the air. Intoxicating.

Phineas paused and looked into her beautiful eyes. "Lass, yer playing with fire."

Her fingers traipsed through his hair and made his head fuzzy.

"I think I'm a big enough girl to handle it."

That would remain to be seen. She had no idea the level of lust he held for her, magnified further by her close proximity to him. His mind filled with fantasies of his face against her

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pussy, and how sweet she would taste. "I warned you what would happen if you stepped foot out of that room."

She teased her nipple along his lips and he nibbled roughly. Her face flushed, eyelashes fluttering.

"Yes, you said you'd tie me up. I didn't consider that a bad thing."

Phineas wanted nothing more than to bring her onto his lap and shove his cock straight into her. Fuck her until she cried out his name, her cheeks stained pink and skin moist. But he couldn't. He just couldn't.

"Aye, I said I'd tie you up."

He picked her up and flung her over his shoulder. In the guest's quarters, he laid her on the cot and held her hands over her head. From the floor, he pulled up a rope and wrapped it around both her wrists and the cot. She smiled and watched him with a smoldering look. Daring him to take her while restrained. The scent of her sex tortured him. He could have his way at that very moment, but he was afraid. Phineas feared she'd been sent to seduce him. His head hadn't been right since he'd laid eyes on her. There had to be something to her showing up out of nowhere. Since when did a dream wash up on shore?

No, he had to start thinking with the right head. Irresistible as she was, he couldn't give in.

Phineas bent over and kissed her forehead. "There you go; I've kept to me word."

Her lips turned down as he backed away to the doorway.

"Wait," she cried. "Where are you going?"

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He sighed and shook his head. "I'm sorry, lass. I'll be bidding you good night."

She screwed her face up and pursed her lips tight. "You bastard, how dare you!"

* * * *

The jug of rum fell to the ground and made a terrible thud. Phineas sat straight up, his clothes plastered to his body with sweat. Had it only been a dream? Nay, more like a nightmare. The kind he wouldn't shake anytime soon. As if she would throw herself at him. The angel in the other room was too sophisticated for the likes of a pirate. What could he possibly offer her? Life on a battered old ship with an unsightly group of men who rarely showered? No, this wasn't a place for a woman of her stature and beauty. The sooner he put his feelings into check, the better off he'd be.

He undressed quickly, very much aware of his painful erection, and flopped onto the cot. His sleep would be restless tonight.

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Chapter 4

Charlotte awoke from an all too realistic dream of the pirate's tongue teasing her nipples. She squeezed her legs together, feeling the dampness of her panties. If she didn't think someone could walk by at any time, she'd get herself off just to relieve the urgent need. Twice now, she was on the brink of a sensational orgasm, with no one to aid her.

With a sigh, she turned to her side. All the sleep she'd gotten earlier now left her aching to walk around.

The moon shone like a beacon through the porthole window on the far wall, gently lighting the small room. Had no one from the cruise ship seen or heard what happened? Would they continue onto the next port without checking her whereabouts? Her imagination ran wild. She wondered if the man who robbed her had somehow paid someone off. Strange incidences occurred on cruises, though she never imagined herself involved in one. How would she ever get home? She couldn't stay on a pirate ship, with nothing but the ocean stretched as far as the eye could see. Could she?

To her surprise, a figure stood in the doorway. It was Phineas. Naked. But he didn't seem like his usual self. Charlotte pulled the cover up to her chin and watched with interest. He shuffled into the light, his movement slow and somewhat disjointed. At closer look, she noticed his dazed expression. Ah, so the bloodthirsty pirate walked in his sleep. She bit the inside of her cheeks to keep from laughing.

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The captain continued in, taking little more than baby steps until he stopped in front of her. She enjoyed the heady sensation of him being so near. For a pirate, he was well built. Sturdy, in a run her hands all over his body, kind of way. She'd been eyeing his chest since the morning, but now, seeing him in the buff, with the moonlight illuminating his body, she wanted to touch him even more. From his muscled shoulders down to his ... Charlotte gulped. It took all her strength not to look down. Instead, she noted the strong lines of his face, firm chin, and eyes that depicted sadness behind them. His lips parted and he mumbled words she couldn't understand.

Transfixed, she focused on his mouth and wondered how he kissed. Forceful, or with restraint. Would he notice if she pressed her lips to his? Charlotte had never been around a sleepwalker and didn't know what to do. She watched and waited, her breath held tight.

Phineas turned and walked toward the corner where three large barrels were stacked up, one on top of the other. From the top barrel, he removed a brown box adorned with five gold hoops and set it on a table. He clasped the gold coin from his necklace and slid it into the tiny keyhole. A faint creak accompanied the opening of the lid and he removed a red cloth.

Curious to see what lay inside, Charlotte slipped off the cot and walked up behind him. She almost caught an eyeful when he took a step back, crushing two of her toes. Biting her lip, she kept from crying out, but the lid of the box slammed shut. Before she knew what happened, Phineas turned

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around, eyes wide open, with mouth pulled back in a scowl, and wrapped his hands tight around her arms.

"What are you doing here, wench!"

The tip of his cock pressed against her thigh and left her flustered. "I-I, this is where you told me to stay."

His grip loosened immediately and his expression softened. "Aye, so it is." He didn't realize he was naked yet, and she didn't want to be the one to point that out.

"I didn't mean to startle you, I swear. It appears you were sleepwalking."

For the moment it seemed he'd forgotten about the box altogether. "The crew says I do that, but I never believed them. Apologies if I frightened you, lass, that would be the last thing I would want to do."

Charlotte found it difficult to pay attention to his words. He was pressed so damn tight against her. If she moved just so, he'd hit her sweet spot. She had half a mind to wrap her fist around his cock to see his reaction. Much as she ached for him to free her of the pent-up sexual energy, she shifted away from him. Something had to be said. "It's hard to be frightened when you, well, because you're naked."

Even in the moonlight, she could see his face turn a deep shade of red. He glanced down, gave a chuckle, and reached for the bedcover. "My sincere apologies if I offended you."

"No, uh, not at all. Not offended at all," she stammered.

He remained close. His breath blew warm against her skin. "Here I was naked and you didn't take advantage of me?"

"Well, I—"

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His fingers pressed against her lips. "I know. It's because you're a lady."

Charlotte wanted to say the thoughts in her head since awakening on his ship were anything but ladylike. Clearly, he didn't have the same illicit thoughts for her as she did for him. She recalled the way his eyes lit up when he spoke of gold and treasures. They were his seducers. If only he looked at her with the same excitement, the same passion.

Phineas removed his fingers from her lips and swept a strand of hair from her face.

Her nipples were tight and near piercing the nightshirt. Didn't he see the desire in her eyes? Couldn't he smell the lust between her thighs? How she wished he would read her mind and have his way with her. He leaned in a fraction of an inch and her face relaxed. She readied her lips and tilted her chin. Oh God, he had read her mind. This was it! Charlotte's lids lowered halfway and she dared not breathe. At the last possible second before their lips touched, he pulled away. A cool draft quickly replaced his heat.

"Tell me the truth, lass, why did you come to this island?"

"Unbelievable," she groaned. Were they back to square one again? Impatience weaved into her words. "I told you exactly what happened. I was thrown overboard. I swam until the ocean had its way and brought me here. I don't have a hidden agenda and I have no reason to lie to you." When would he get it through his thick head?

He walked toward the window and put a finger to his chin. "But how can I be sure? If you were sent here to trick me, you'd say anything."

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Charlotte wasn't sure what upset her more. That he wouldn't believe her, or how she'd never had to work this hard to capture a man's attention. "I suppose you're right, but what does it matter? You've made up your mind to distrust me. There's not much more to be said."

"I'm driven by greed, lass. I'm afraid it's something I cannot change."

"There's more to life than treasure, you know." She expected him to bust a gut with laughter. Instead, he glanced back at her, his face stone serious.

"Such as?"

Charlotte took several steps forward and let the nightshirt fall open, baring her breasts. Maybe by exposing herself it would help him see she didn't pose a threat. "I hardly know you, but I trust you. I even trust you with my body."

"Lass, please, whatever you've built up in your mind about me, I'm afraid I'll only disappoint you."

She moved in closer until the moonlight fully lit up her breasts. "I'd rather come to that conclusion on my own. Don't you want to touch me?"

Parr snorted. "Stop. I mean it."

The more he discouraged her, the more she wanted him. "Take me. I beg you. I'm not the lady you make me out to be."

"I-I can't," he stammered.

She clenched her fists. "Are you so blinded by the need for material possessions that you can't accept something real in front of you? I'm throwing myself at you and you won't even touch me."

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"I don't deny your beauty is a sight for sore eyes, but my devotion belongs to the sea. I'd only hurt you, and you deserve better." He moved passed her and headed to the door. "I apologize for walking in unannounced, good evening."

Charlotte hurried to him. "Wait, please wait."

He turned, but refused to look at her. "What?"

She covered herself in an attempt to put him at ease.

"What about the box? When you were sleepwalking, I saw you open it. You claim you don't trust me, so how can you leave it open in here with me?"

The captain's face changed to anger. He stormed to the box, inserted the gold coin from his chain and locked it tight. "You will never bring up that box again, do you hear me? Those are my personal affects and none of your business."

It was difficult to say for sure in the dark, but she could almost make out a tear in the corner of his eye. "I-I'm sorry. I didn't see whatever is inside. I promise."

He scowled and let his words drip with disgust. "In your short time here, you've managed to disrupt everything. I knew it was a bad idea to let you rest here. Women bring nothing but bad luck aboard a ship. It's a good thing we're not out on the open sea or we'd be capsized by now. For the last time, good night."

Charlotte didn't want him to leave angry, but she couldn't stop him. Did she think she could somehow change him? A man who has spent his life on the sea? A man who valued gold and treasures over human emotion? It wasn't her place to judge. She'd made a huge mistake by dangling herself like bait. Come morning she would apologize for her behavior and

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look for shelter until help came for her. If it ever came for her. Until then, she'd stay out of his way.

* * * *

Phineas hated to see the disappointment cross Charlotte's face, but what choice did he have? The woman made him crazy enough just by being. All hope of sanity would cease to exist if he dared to act on impulse. Of course, he wanted her. The way her breasts looked, he almost caved. They were so soft and full. Perfect to bury his face between. His hands ached to caress them and his mouth wanted to roam her body in hungry exploration. She had more nerve than any woman he'd ever encountered. With her mischievous smile and hypnotic gaze, she was a dangerous attraction he couldn't afford to pursue. Now if he could convince his lower half, than all would be right again.

He'd traveled to the island with a specific purpose in mind. A longtime quest occupied his thoughts, day and night. In a short period of time those thoughts had been overshadowed by the woman's presence. Granted, he loved how she'd offered herself in an attempt to assure him of her honesty. Whether planned or spontaneous, it took guts and he admired her confidence. Maybe he should trust her. She hadn't shown him any reason not to.

Phineas stopped in his quarters to dress, and then walked around the ship to clear his head. The cool night air would do him good. He couldn't wait to set sail again and feel the sway of the ship beneath his feet. Face the elements head on. The sea was all he knew. It didn't expect anything from him. It

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didn't complicate or confuse him. He was free to be himself and no one else. Be surrounded by waters that could lull him to sleep one minute, and strike fear in his heart the next. For all its adventure and wonderment, he had to admit, there was a downside to life at sea.

It kept him from any chance of finding love. While he didn't know the right words to describe his current feelings—infatuation, curiosity, lust—he knew enough to be afraid. Charlotte roused feelings deep inside that he hoped to keep buried. He'd even gone so far as to convince himself that love was for fools. His father warned him early on that a woman didn't belong onboard. It was why his mother lived a lonely, solitary life on land. Much as she longed to go on journeys with her husband, she didn't trust the sea, and she didn't want to find out he loved it more than her. Over time, all of the wives of crewmembers grew to despise the sea. Jealous of the hold it had over their men.

It was through his father's eyes and love affair with the sea that Phineas grew to love it too, and appreciate its exotic beauty. The vast ocean satisfied his heart and gave him a surge of power, though it did nothing to slake his desires. Occasionally, he shared a bed with women when they stopped between ports, but none would have his heart the way the wide, open sea did, and none ever could. So why did Charlotte's name and her busty image command his attention?

The answer came to him far too quickly. He didn't want their interlude to be a one-time affair. For all his father's superstitions and warnings, he knew a single kiss from her

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would take him over the edge. There'd be no getting enough of her. Her scent would forever infuse into his skin. Her touch would brand his fingertips. Her breathy moans would echo in his ears for an eternity. All reasons to run—not walk away from her. Still, she'd gotten under his skin, and he would always wonder what it would be like to hold her naked body through the night.

Phineas scratched his head. He was torn and needed time to think things through. In the morning, he would apologize. The way he'd walked out on her didn't sit right. She'd bared herself—put herself out there and he'd behaved like an ass. It would be a miracle if she acknowledged him at this point, which would be for the best.

A half moon hung low in the sky, surrounded by blackened clouds. He stood at the prow of the boat and watched the fog hang over the ocean. Devil's breath he called it, pure evil ready to snare him in its trap if he didn't keep one eye open at all times.

Phineas grabbed his spyglass and looked out. Something waited out there. Biding its time. He could feel the eyes of Fowler watching him, always watching and following close. So far, he'd been fortunate and outrun the other man, but he knew his time would come. His attention needed to be on locating the treasure not the pleasures of a woman so pure and divine, it threatened his very being. At the moment, he wasn't sure what he feared more. Fowler's jagged nails through his heart or Charlotte's spellbinding advances.

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Chapter 5

The thunder of footsteps above jostled Charlotte from an agitated sleep. From what she could gather, the crew had woken. Garbled voices and the clatter of dishes helped distract the thoughts in her head. What possessed her to bare herself to Phineas? Since when did she stoop to such desperate tactics to garner attention? And to top it all off, he'd denied her. It was such a slap in the face, and she couldn't shake it. How could she ever face him now?

"Knock, knock," came a voice she recognized.

"Come in." Charlotte sat up and pulled the blanket to her chin. She smiled as Bart entered with a large black box in his hands.

"Morning, lass. I trust you slept well?"

She sighed. "I'm afraid not well at all, but to no fault of anyone."

"I see." His brows furrowed briefly. "Well, perhaps this will brighten your mood. The cap'n requested I give you this."

"I see, and do you do everything he says?"

"I don't fight him, Miss, if that's what you be asking." He set the box down in front of her and walked to the middle of the room.

She liked Bart. He seemed good company for the captain. "Wouldn't you rather be commanding a ship and telling others what to do?"

He chuckled. "I don't have commanding in my blood the way Captain Parr does. His father and his father's father were

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all pirates and could navigate ships in their sleep. It's ingrained in his bloodline. Don't be too hard on him, lass; he hasn't had an easy time of things. Especially if he doesn't find the treasure."

Charlotte wanted to ask more but thought better of it. She'd ask Phineas himself.

The stout man gave her a salute followed by a gentlemanly bow. "I'll leave now. When you're ready, there's food in the dining hall. It's not much but it will hold. The men have eaten so you won't be bothered."

She smiled. "Thank you."

"Only following orders," he replied with a wink, and left her to inspect the contents of the box.

She ran her hands along the smooth edges and lightly shook it. A tiny silver key stuck out of the heart-shaped lock with an ornate iron handle. With a gentle twist, she heard it click. Her heart pounded with curiosity. She couldn't remember the last time she received a gift. When Charlotte opened the lid, she gasped. The inside contained a folded pile of beautiful dresses in elegant shades of blue, green, and tangerine, each one more breathtaking than the next. Her hand went to her mouth.

"I hope you don't mind. They were a gift for my mother."

Charlotte's body vibrated at the sound of the captain's voice. She glanced up at him and noted how handsome he looked in the morning light. "But I thought you said she didn't sail with your father."

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by Ann Cory

"He bought them for her, on his last journey out. They've never been worn. I don't know why, but I've kept them all this time."

Though the dresses were beautiful, she was hesitant. "Are you sure you want me to wear them?"

"Why not? There aren't any other women onboard. Besides, you could use them since your other dress is torn."

Charlotte completely forgot she didn't have any other clothing with her.

"You're right, I could use them. Thank you." She unfolded the tangerine knee-length dress and held it to her body. "Do you think this will look nice on me?"

He shrugged but she sensed a smile. It would do. "I'll take that as a yes." She clambered from the cot, barely able to contain her excitement. Bart had been correct; this certainly brightened her mood.

Charlotte looked over her shoulder at the pirate, surprised to still see him standing there. "Out you go, a lady needs privacy when she dresses."

His eyes crinkled in the corners. "Pardon? Last night you claimed you weren't a lady, and you didn't seem to mind what I saw."

Charlotte wagged her finger at him. "Yes, and you chose not to look. Now if you don't mind, I'd like to put on this beautiful dress."

"Oh I saw plenty, lass. Don't you be thinking otherwise. However, I will give you your privacy. The crew and I will be around scouting for treasure."

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by Ann Cory

Heat fanned her face. She didn't know what changed his attitude from last night, but it made all the difference in the world. Here she'd stressed over how to act in front of him, and he'd managed to make her comfortable again. "I'll come find you when I'm dressed, that is, if I'm allowed to leave the ship."

Phineas nodded. "Aye. I look forward to it. Oh, behind those boxes in the corner is a mirror."

Charlotte bit her lip. "I hope I do the dress justice."

"With or without garments, you're still a vision," he mumbled and left the room.

Her eyes blurred with tears. He'd said exactly what she longed to hear, and what she knew to be true. Beneath the layers of his so-called bloodthirsty pirate exterior, lay hidden a romantic side.

She waited until the sound of his boots faded and thrust off the nightshirt.

Charlotte slipped the dress over her head. The silken fabric slid down over her body like a cool caress. From the corner, she pulled the boxes away to reveal the mirror. She stood back and eyed herself from head to toe. Her hair was still a tangled mess, something she hoped to take care of later, but the rich material cradling her body was paradise. The soft-flowing fabric complimented her figure and played up her best assets. She felt like more of a queen now than on the cruise ship, minus a hot shower.

Eager to show off, Charlotte ran barefoot to the dining hall, stopping long enough to pop a handful of grapes in her mouth

Unchartered Territory
by Ann Cory

and grab a crust of bread. She picked off small pieces and chewed on them as she made her way across the sand.

Everywhere she looked men were digging, sweat streaked across their faces. They smiled as she walked by. The captain had been wrong about his crew. While not the picture of health, their looks didn't offend her by any means.

She spied Phineas staring at a scroll while talking animatedly with Bart. Casually she made her way toward them. "Hello, boys. What do you have there?"

Phineas closed up the scroll and squared his back to her. "None of yer business. You just be on yer way."

Charlotte couldn't figure him out. He ran hot and cold with no telltale sign of the switch until he opened his mouth. Miffed he hadn't bothered to look at her, she grumbled, "Well, that's a nice way to talk to a lady."

Bart glanced over and let out a long, low whistle. "And might I say what a lady you are."

* * * *

Phineas couldn't concentrate with all the chatter distracting him. He'd finally been able to focus on the treasure again, and then lo and behold, Charlotte came along. He was about to tell the rambling woman to go back to the ship when he turned and caught a look at her in the dress.

For a moment, his tongue twisted up into knots. A raw ache started in his groin. "I-I didn't. What I mean to say, er, it's just a silly old map. You, lass, be a stunning vision."

"Thank you." She twirled in the sand and then curtsied.

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by Ann Cory

Every time he saw her, she looked more beautiful than before. His cock pressed tight against his breeches and he pulled his coat tighter. This woman did something to him. Wound his heart up tight and sucked air from his lungs. Any sense of control he might have talked himself into, up and vanished. His father's warnings alone should have been enough to make him want to keep his distance, but the more he tried to resist her temptations, the more he wanted to give in.

"The dress is simply beautiful," she added. "They all are, and I can't wait to wear each one."

"Aye, the dress suits you," he added. "The color brings out yer eyes."

He ignored the look Bart gave him and felt heat rise around his neck. He'd hear about this later. "I'm glad the dresses didn't go to waste."

His comment didn't diminish the radiant glow from her face.

She walked to his side and flashed him an impish smile. "So you said it's just a silly old map? Do you mind if I take a look at it?"

Phineas hesitated. If she were a spy, it would be the perfect opportunity to take the map and consequently claim the treasure as her own. He wished the stupid notion would leave his mind, but he had to keep his guard up. Didn't he? His gaze moved from her outstretched hand to her green eyes. They were like jewels in the midmorning light. Nothing about her gave him the impression she was less than genuine.

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by Ann Cory

"Please? I'm curious, that's all. You can hold onto it while I look if it makes you feel better," she reasoned.

Now he felt like an idiot. What harm could she possibly do? If she ran off, where would she go? "No, it's fine. Have a look. I can't seem to make heads or tails of it anyhow."

She brushed her hand along his and then grasped the map. He watched the way she studied it, her lips moving as she silently read. Her mouth turned up into a pretty smile and then she gave him an incredulous look. "Are you serious? You don't understand the map?"

"I'm afraid I don't." It bothered him more than he wanted to admit that she still had it. His fingers ached to feel the texture of the scroll again.

"I've never heard of a pirate who can't read a map. Isn't that supposed to be part of the job?"

To hear it from a woman he wanted to impress only made him more ashamed. "I can navigate a ship with me eyes closed, lassie. It runs in me blood. But me navigational skills on land are lacking."

Her brow arched. "Did you think to ask someone to help you?"

His fingers shook, craving the feel of the map between them. "I'd rather throw myself overboard and drown first. You don't call yerself captain and not deliver the goods, lass. That's mutiny on my ship."

Her eyes searched his. "But it's your ship."

"There are rules you don't understand. It's not my ship, it's my father's, and there's a name and reputation to uphold."

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by Ann Cory

She rested her hand on his arm and he broke out into a cold sweat. "I think you're too hard on yourself. There's nothing wrong with asking for help when you need it. Seems all men are incapable of stopping to ask for directions, even pirates."

Phineas pushed back the animalistic urge to kiss her. God he loved her wicked sense of humor. "This comes from a woman who is as stubborn as they come."

"I admit that I have my moments."

She laughed and turned out to look at the ocean, her gaze switching from it to the map. "So I'm holding an authentic treasure map, aren't I?"

"Aye, but you can hand it back to me anytime, lass."

Phineas thought he'd go stir crazy if he didn't feel it in his hands soon.

"So the black slashes are paces, right?"

"Look, you have to know how to read a map. I don't have time to explain it to you."

She pushed his hand aside. "I do know how to read maps, thank you very much. I'm just asking about the slash marks. It's all self-explanatory, really."

He clenched his hands and frowned. "I mean no disrespect, but what would a simple woman like you know about reading a treasure map?"

Her stare turned icy for a split second. "I may be simple, but I'm also educated. I studied cartography in university. For a while I made my living checking the authenticity of maps and historical documents."

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by Ann Cory

Phineas' jaw went slack. The lass was full of surprises. "Yer a strange and intelligent woman. I like that. Maybe you can help me."

When she smiled her eyes lit up like tiny stars. "I'd be happy to." She took a step back into him and repositioned the scroll so they could both see it. Her scent made his pulse drum. "Now, these circles here, they represent boulders, correct?"

His eyes followed the curve of her back and the sensual slope of her shoulders. He'd done well by giving her the dresses. The gesture left him wanting to do more for her.

"Phineas?" She glanced over her shoulder and he snapped to attention.

"What was the question, lass?"

Her lips formed a knowing smile before she turned back to the map.

"These here, they're boulders, yes?"

"Aye. I figured this small mound here to be a cluster of trees," he added and pointed to the upside down "v" shapes grouped together, "and then counted out the paces in each direction. The treasure's not there."

She put a finger to her lip. "Maybe someone else has already claimed it."

The thought alone made his blood run cold. "Impossible," he growled. "I feel it in me bones that it's here."

Charlotte faced him, a grim look about her delicate features. "What happens if you're wrong?"

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Beautiful as she may be, Phineas didn't care for her implication. He'd never been wrong. "I'm not," he snapped and snatched the map back out of her hands.

She reached out and rested her hand on his forearm. "Okay, sorry. I believe you."

Adrenaline surged through his veins. He couldn't be wrong. He just couldn't. Phineas regained his composure and wiped at the sweat above his brow. "Only Fowler has seen this treasure map, and I won't let him have it."

The corner of her lip twitched. "Who is Fowler?"

Phineas studied her expression and concluded she was not a spy. Deep down he'd known it all along, but the sincerity in her question set it in stone. "Shadrach Fowler. The monster who murdered my mother and father."

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Chapter 6

Charlotte shivered at his words. What a terrible ordeal to go through as a child. Without anything else needing to be said, she immediately forgave him for any moments of unkindness he'd shown her. "I'm sorry, Phineas. You were so young. What happened?"

"Fowler went to see her after he killed my father, expecting to find the map with her," he began, his face visibly pale. "When she didn't hand it over, he took her life with his blade. She didn't have it, but the scum doesn't have a conscience. It's my fault she died."

She wanted to reach out and hold him tight. "Don't say that."

His eyes bore into hers. "Aye, it's true, lass. After I watched Fowler kill my father, I took the map from his quarters. He wouldn't have wanted Fowler to have it. Here I figured it was safe with me, but then Fowler went to see my mother."

A tear rested in the corner of her eye. "You couldn't have known."

He turned his gaze downward. "There is much I would change about that day."

"Would you have given up the map?"

"If it meant me mother still being alive, aye. I need to find the treasure, lass. For her."

Charlotte couldn't imagine the guilt that consumed him. Her own parents perished in a car accident, but she'd been

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too young to remember the impact it had on her. Afterwards her grandparents raised her until they too passed away. She noted the anguish on the pirate's rugged face and wanted to help if she could. A sudden surge of strength ran through her body. "Let's see if we can't find the treasure, together. May I see the map again?"

With obvious reluctance in his tone, he handed it to her. "Aye."

She moved her finger along the slash marks and studied all the symbols and objects. Even the smallest detail meant something. Several years ago, she'd helped the government locate a safe of gold from an old shipwreck. Charlotte decided against telling him, knowing full well he wouldn't understand why she didn't keep it.

She continued to study the map. "What's this line here?"

He shrugged. "It's just a crease, the map is very old."

Charlotte frowned. His explanation didn't seem right. The map was far more intricate than she'd expected. "No, I don't think so. It's prominent, like it's meant to be there. I'd almost call it a river, but that doesn't make sense." She glanced closer, "No, wait, I think it's showing an indent, maybe a layer, or hold on, I think it's supposed to represent a change in elevation. I'll bet that's it. The treasure is located at a lower level somewhere."

Phineas shook his head. "Impossible. It's a land map. It's all one level."

She had a gut feeling about it and wasn't about to be swayed. "Maybe not. You have to remember, the ocean has

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changed the layout of the island many times over. I think I know where to look. Follow me."

They backtracked to a small scattering of stones and explored the island. As they walked by a group of piled logs, Phineas' boot sank and he started to fall over. Charlotte gripped his arm to help keep his balance.

"Easy there," she joked.

He winked. "Thank you, lass."

"No worries. You saved me once, remember?"

"Aye, that I did, lass. And it's a good thing too." He paused and turned his attention to the map. "This here slope is just like you said—another level. The treasure has to be here, I can feel it in me bones."

Charlotte checked the map as well and nodded her head. "Same here." She felt like a little kid in a candy store.

The captain closed his eyes and walked around before falling to his knees. He cupped his hands and used them like a shovel, digging through the sand just below the logs. "If I'm not mistaken, I'd say these logs were put here for a reason."

She reached forward to take hold of one. "Should I try and move them?"

Phineas held out a hand and shook his head fiercely. "No, don't touch them, lass. You never know, it could be a trap." He removed his sword and laid it on the ground.

Charlotte frowned. What did he expect her to do, stand around and watch? Without her help, he wouldn't know where to look. She knelt down beside him and thrust her hands into the sand.

"Yer dressed too pretty to be digging, lass."

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She had enough of his ordering her around. "Oh stop it. I'm too curious and I don't have all day to wait for you. We'll find it faster if we work together."

"Aye. Then what are you waiting for, lass? Put yer back into it."

She broke out into laughter and immediately he joined in. They dug side by side, with the heat barreling down on them. Every once in awhile his arm brushed against hers and sent tiny jolts of electricity throughout her body. Warmth spread across her face when he'd sneak a peek at her between handfuls of sand, his eyes bright and youthful. They were working together, like a team, and it felt right. Forget the cruise she'd been on, digging for buried treasure was far more of an adventure. She couldn't remember the last time anything meant this much to her. And to know the captain's true reason for wanting to find the treasure. Not out of greed, as she'd originally thought, but for his mother. Though the backs of her arms ached and she'd broken into a sweat, she refused to stop.

Charlotte stopped to move her hair from her face, and heard a thump as Parr's hands hit something. He turned to look at her and she sucked in her breath.

"Lassie, I'd say we've found what we're looking for."

He rapped his knuckles against something solid and then brushed away the sand until the top of a chest was visible. An actual treasure chest like in the movies. Only better because they'd discovered it. She felt bad for giving him grief before. There really was something to this treasure hunting.

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Without thinking, Charlotte threw her arms around him. "We did it, Phin, we really did it," she squealed.

"Aye."

Her heart pounded. "Should I go and get the crew to help us pull it out?"

Phineas shifted and rested his hands on her bare shoulders. "In a moment, lass. First things first."

He leaned into her, his hand light against her cheek. "I've been wanting to kiss you since I watched you sleep. Would you object to my kissing you now?" The predatory glint in his eye made her lightheaded.

Charlotte swallowed against her nerves, unable to speak. She shook her head and waited in breathless anticipation.

When his lips touched hers, an explosion of emotions burst straight through to her core, bringing her to full awareness. She half expected a marching band to start playing and fireworks to go off. It didn't matter to her they'd only known one another a short time. To her it felt like she'd been waiting ages for this kiss.

The kiss deepened, and she could barely contain herself. All the erotic moments from her dreams flooded her mind and swept her up in the moment. He drew her in tight and she let her lips part, swallowing down his searing breath. His tongue gleaned over her teeth and stroked the sides of her mouth. A fire erupted low in her belly and extended both to her head and to her toes. She needed his kiss like she needed air. Her hand moved along his face and then fisted his hair. The heat between them became too much for her to handle. She broke away, torn between lust and insecurity.

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"What's wrong, lass?"

Charlotte didn't know how to explain, so she blurted it all out. "I can't let you kiss me like this if you're only going to deny me. I don't want to get burned again."

He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. "I'm sorry for the way I behaved last night. It wasn't right."

She bit her lip. "Yeah, it kind of stung. I thought you didn't want me."

"Oh I wanted you," he growled. "You bet yer fine, provocative bottom I wanted you."

"Then why did you walk out?"

Phineas brushed his knuckles across her cheek and jaw. "It didn't feel like the right time. I had to work things out in me head first, and acknowledge my trust in you. I promise it was all me, and had nothing to do with you. Will you forgive me?"

She considered making him work for it, but realized she didn't have that much patience. "I can think of a few ways to coax me."

"I'm game to try, lass."

He gently lowered her down and slid his hand underneath her dress. Charlotte parted her thighs, needing the stroke of his fingers to temper the flames he'd ignited. His hand blazed a path along her inner thigh and then cupped her silken clad mound. Sly as a fox he pushed the material away and swiped his finger along her clit.

"How's this for a start?"

She whimpered and tilted her pelvis in response. He held her gaze and pulsed two fingers deep inside her pussy. She trembled violently. "Yes, Phineas."

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An animalistic roar escaped his lips. "You be as wet as the sea, lass. I want to take it slow, but yer making it difficult."

Slow? She wanted his cock inside her like yesterday. There was a time and place for slow, but now wasn't it.

"Don't you dare make me wait," she insisted with all the authority she could muster.

"Are you sure, lass?"

To further prove her impatience, she made quick work of his pants and wrapped her hand around his erection. The size of his cock brought a sob from her lips.

"Does this answer your question?"

"Aye. Loud and clear."

Phineas yanked her panties out of the way and rested his cock at her slick entry. Charlotte tried to watch through her half-lidded gaze, but she was too dizzy with excitement. She longed to feel him spread her wide.

"Please," she whispered.

He taunted her with the tip of his cock. "Please what, my beauty?"

"Please, take me, hurry. I want to feel your cock inside me."

"Am I forgiven?" he teased, with mischief in his eyes.

She raised her hips. "Yes, you're forgiven."

"Good."

He hoisted her legs up and draped them over his shoulders. She faintly tasted the salt from the sea, and caught a glimpse of blue sky before he thrust into her. What a rush.

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Charlotte cried out as each inch of his length pushed away all her self-doubt and anxiety. Eyes closed she pictured them back aboard the ship, rocking to and fro, the rhythm he spoke of, the rhythm of the sea.

At some point, she quit thinking about her movements and just followed his. Like a dance, where he led. The warm sand felt like velvet beneath her, cradling her back while Phineas devoured her body. Her eyelids fluttered and she caught flashes of his hips grinding into her. Flashes of his sinful smile and fixed gaze. Could he read her thoughts? Did he know how happy and content she was in that moment? How close to the edge he'd taken her with steady thrusts that stretched her wide?

His groans grew louder. His thrusts, faster. If she didn't feel the sand between her fingers, she would have sworn she was floating. So close.

"I can't be holding back much longer, lass."

"Nor can I," she whispered and tilted her head back. He'd found her ultimate pleasure point and freedom was seconds away.

Phineas circled her clit with his fingers while driving his cock into her.

"Come on, lass," he prompted.

The climax came fast and furious. She dug her nails into the sand and called out like she was Jane of the jungle. Phineas pulsed a couple more times before unleashing his own battle cry. He collapsed beside her and nuzzled his face into her neck. She finally found paradise.

* * * *

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by Ann Cory

"How do you feel, lass?"

Charlotte's body continued to spasm. No man had given her such an intense orgasm. "I can't feel my legs, but I'm not complaining. You were amazing. All is forgiven. How about you?"

"If there were any clouds in the sky, I'd be on one."

She rested her head in the crook of his arm and sprawled her trembling legs over his.

"I'm curious. Why aren't there many women pirates?"

His lowered voice was soothing. "I wouldn't presume to know. My father believed women couldn't ever love the sea the same as a man. The way it calls to a man, luring, seducing."

She reveled in the feel of his fingers running up and down her arm. "Do you believe the same?"

"I don't rightly know. I believe one can find passion in anything. Makes no difference whether as a man or woman. You've opened my eyes, lass. I'm seeing things with a different perspective. Had you asked me the other day what I thought about women onboard a ship, I'd have told you they don't belong."

"Actually, you did mention that once or twice. How have I opened your eyes?"

"I be liking your company, is all. It's a lonely life. I can't deny I've wondered what kind of woman could make me sway from the sea. I may have found her."

His words were music to her ears. "What do you find so fascinating about the sea?"

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"It's freedom, mystery. It's rhythm. The unknown. Not unlike what I feel about you at the moment."

Charlotte giggled and traced the gold coin that lay on his chest. She remembered how he'd used it as a key. "You were very close to your father, weren't you?"

"Aye, and my mother. I was torn between choosing whom to spend more time with. They were rarely in the same place for long. With his love of the sea and her need to keep her feet on land, I felt my loyalties were always split."

"You dealt with a lot when you were young."

"Aye. I don't remember much of a childhood. One minute I was eating the cookies my mother made, and the next I was sneaking onto my father's ship. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that she loved me, but I thought I had something to prove to my father. So many times, I watched my mother cry. I'd listen to her sob and beg for him to pick her over the sea, but my father left anyway. He was very superstitious, had strange ideals about women. I think their love would've had a chance if he let her go with him."

"But you got to sail with him."

"Sometimes, only on the short trips. At the time, I only pretended to enjoy the journeys. I thought he'd love me more if I showed the same love for sailing."

She turned the coin, watching it reflect against the sun. "Did it work?"

"I didn't get the chance to find out. He saw me for only a brief moment before he died."

Charlotte rose up to her elbow and looked into his eyes. "Oh, that's awful, I'm so sorry." She wanted to cry for him,

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right then and there, but a collective cry of voices interrupted the moment.

"Captain! Captain!"

"Ah, sounds like the crew can't live without me for long. Stay here with the treasure, and I'll return swiftly."

Phineas planted a kiss on her forehead and thrust his clothes back on. He picked up his sword and placed it in its sheath, adding slyly, "The things you do to me, lass. I should have you walk the plank."

Charlotte smiled as he left to check on his crew. His manly musk smell lingered on her skin. She breathed him in and sighed deeply. How could she have fallen so hard for a pirate, of all things? The need for him had churned its way around in her body, but she never thought it possible he would give in. Especially not after the way he'd walked away from her last night. She felt alive and renewed. Made whole again by his touch.

She didn't expect him to declare his love and give up his life on the sea for her. They'd shared an intimate moment as consenting adults. She didn't figure he'd be very happy strapped with some day job in an office. Though her only adventure on the sea—being thrown overboard—hadn't quite made for the best first impression, she wouldn't completely discount the idea of life on a ship. But would he let her?

Charlotte shook the crazy notion right out of her head and got to her knees. She leaned over the hole they'd dug together and admired the beauty of the treasure chest. Her imagination raced with what could be inside. Antiques? Jewels? Gold? Clues to another treasure? Perhaps piles of

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beautiful gowns once worn by a famous queen? The wait was killing her. Where was Phineas?

She stood and brushed off the sand from her dress. Carefully she walked up the slant and stood on her toes. Using her hand as a shield from the sun, she tried to see what all the fuss was about. To her horror, she spied an enormous pirate ship with crimson sails nearing shore at an alarmingly fast rate. Men with daggers between their teeth were swinging off the side ropes and charging through water up to their waists. Charlotte could barely make out what Bart was shouting.

Then she heard a name that made shivers sprout up along her back. Fowler. She watched as the ship cut through the water like a razorblade. Charlotte panicked. If she stayed and someone saw her, they'd surely find the treasure. She couldn't do that to Phineas. To the best of her ability, she filled in the hole. Not knowing what else to do, she turned and fled.

Charlotte hadn't gone far when she heard a strange sound. She stopped and held her breath. Several minutes passed without another noise. Her heart raced, but she needed to keep her wits about her. She moved slowly along the sand, readying herself to sprint toward *The Fortune*, when a big calloused hand wrapped around her mouth. She was thrust into a rock-solid body reeking of sweat and sea. Wild coal-black eyes stared at her from behind a mop of stringy brown hair.

"Well, what do we have here, boys? If it ain't a pretty little maiden all alone."

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Charlotte tried to scream, but the captor's hand held firm against her mouth. She worried his grip would crush her bones.

"Fowler, what do you want me to do with her? Say the word and I'll kill her slow."

A burly man stepped forward, his face gruff with whiskers. His eyes, those of a demon shark, pierced through her soul. He stroked his chin, with claws for nails, embedded with what looked like blood. "You'll have to kill her later. For now, she'll be of use to us. Women make good bargaining chips."

An odd-looking man with hungry eyes grabbed at her hair and sniffed it. His face was long and drawn, as if he hadn't eaten in months. "I get dibs on her hair. Smells like heaven." Several more men surrounded her, all calling out which part of her they wanted. Their putrid breath made her stomach clench.

A large man with a bulbous nose stepped forward and wiped away a string of saliva from his mouth. "She smells of fresh sex. I watched her fucking Captain Parr. Seems she knows a thing or two about how to satisfy a man."

To know she'd been seen naked by the likes of him made her want to retch.

A shorter man with yellowish eyes gripped her chin and squeezed her lips into a pucker.

"Bet you've never had eight men at once. What do you say to a pirate orgy?"

Bile crept up her throat. Moments ago, she'd been happy and carefree. Literally on cloud nine with her body sated

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beyond all belief. Now her fate rested in the hands of all things ... bloodthirsty pirates.

Fowler stepped forward, his voice brusque in its command. "Enough, as if she'd have the likes of you rotting maggots. She will be the one to show us where the treasure is, so you'll keep your hands off."

Charlotte tried to twist herself out from the man's grip, but he held steadfast. Where was Phineas when she needed him? How did she find herself in one bad situation after another? She would seriously need to reconsider her judgment, especially when it came to men, they were becoming hazardous to her health.

Fowler handed a rope to several of the men. They bound her hands tight behind her back. The vile monster put his face up close to hers, his breath stale and fishy. "Now, wench, you show us where the treasure is and we'll consider keeping Parr's head connected to his body after we've killed him."

Charlotte bit her lip and hoped Phineas would forgive her for giving up the location of the treasure chest. She was no match for these dangerous men. If she showed them where the treasure was, she might be able to win their trust, and save Phineas at the same time. It seemed like a long shot, but it was the only chance she had.

With a deep sigh, she nodded her head in the direction from where she'd come. "It's back that way." The men tugged on the rope and half pulled, half dragged her along.

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Chapter 7

Phineas couldn't believe the one time he let his guard down, who showed up unannounced. After giving orders to his crew, he'd led Fowler's men on a wild goose chase. When he thought he'd lost them, he quickly backtracked to where he'd left Charlotte all pink and trembling from their secret rendezvous. At least he knew she'd be safe.

His fingers still burned from her touch. He never knew a woman could be so responsive. Her soft whimpers continued to reverberate in his ears. She hooked him whether she meant to or not. In many ways he was glad no one had yet come to rescue her. It would give him more time to be with her. He'd ravish her each night until she begged him to stop.

Phineas realized he was getting ahead of himself. First, they needed to get the treasure safely onboard and then they could set sail before Fowler caught up to them.

He hurried his pace, not wanting to be away from her another moment. When he arrived at the treasure site, his heart skipped a beat.

"Charlotte?"

Phineas called out and looked around but didn't see any sign of her. An eerie feeling washed over him. The same feeling he had when he'd found his mother dead. What a fool he'd been! He should never have left her alone. She meant more to him than the treasure. Then he noticed the hole covered up, partway. Why would she conceal the treasure chest?

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"What have you done, lass?" he whispered aloud. The question hung in the air like a bitter chill. He worried she hadn't left by her own accord. His stomach turned into knots as he imagined all sorts of horrible things that could befall a woman captured by the likes of Fowler's men.

A bevy of voices broke out and he nearly choked on his spit when he saw Fowler himself approach with Charlotte, dragged like some kind of rat by his crew. He'd always feared the day when he came face to face with his sworn enemy, but now that fear was quickly replaced with rage. How dare Fowler mistreat the woman he cared for?

"What have you done to her? Let her go this instant," he demanded, spit flying from his lips.

Fowler sneered and showed his blackened teeth. "Relax, she's unharmed, for now."

His fists clenched. "I said, let her go."

Fowler turned to his crew and they laughed in unison. "Hand over the treasure, Parr, and she's yours. We don't have to shed innocent blood this time. Haven't you seen enough death, when you were a boy?"

Phineas couldn't stand to see the look of horror on Charlotte's face. She didn't deserve any of this. Everyone dear to him had come to an untimely death, over treasure no less. He couldn't risk her life too. No treasure was worth the pain.

"Aye. We both know I'm the one you're after. The one who got away with your treasure map. You've dreamed of killing me; admit it. You can't stand the fact you were outwitted by a child."

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Fury reflected from his enemy's eyes. "I can't deny I'd love to know how it would feel to slice your throat with a slick blade." He made a slitting motion across his neck with his long fingernail.

"And maybe you'll get that chance, but first I'd like to make a proposition to you."

Fowler grunted. "I suppose I can humor you. I'm listening."

Phineas had to think fast. "We split the treasure thirty-seventy. You of course, get seventy. You have my word. What do you say?"

He could practically see the mind of his foe reeling, trying to figure out the catch.

"You disappoint me. Your father would never negotiate those terms."

"I'm not my father."

"No, you're a worthless and cowardly version of him. Enlighten me, why should I take your word?"

"Because you've taken everything away from me that means something, but I refuse to hand over all of the booty. It's mine; I was here first."

Fowler crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. "You still hold a grudge for ridding you of a neglectful father and the stupid woman he abandoned for the sea? Have you learned nothing over time?"

Phineas had learned to bottle up his emotions and stuff it away for years. His blood swirled at the way his enemy spoke of his parents. For all their faults, they had been good people who didn't deserve the death they were served. "You know

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nothing of the heartache you caused. You left me a bloody orphan."

"Then there's nothing else I can hurt you with."

He shook his head. "No. You've taken care of everything."

Fowler strode close to Charlotte and tugged hard on the rope. "What about this woman? My men saw you two together. Are you going to tell me you feel nothing for her? That her life is worthless?"

Phineas swallowed hard. He hoped Charlotte trusted him enough with what he was about to say. "Women bring nothing but bad luck onboard, and you know it. I admit my manly urges got the better of me. She's such a ripe-looking beauty, but no, I don't feel anything for her."

A gasp laced with pain escaped Charlotte's lips and it felt like a dagger to his heart. "You bastard," she hissed. "That's all I am to you, a conquest? Another notch on your belt?"

He didn't dare look at her. If only he had the chance to tell her the truth. The truth that he had fallen in love with her. Hard. But he had to keep up the charade. It was the only way he knew to save them both. In time, he hoped she would forgive him. If not, he would suffer the consequences.

Fowler released the rope and inched closer to the captain. "How touching, but I don't buy it. The treasure you claim as yours, is mine. You stole my map out from under me, the very map your father stole from me. I am its rightful owner. As for the woman, she'll make a nice gift for the crew until they tire of her. If you turn around and get back on your father's ship, I'll consider sparing your life."

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It would be the last thing he did. Phineas would die first before allowing them to take Charlotte away. He frowned and shook his head. "I'm not giving up all the booty without a fight. I was being generous, giving you the better end of the deal. Why don't you take it?"

"There be a black spot on your soul, Parr, and I'll be damned if I let it affect me too."

"You were born with a black spot on your flesh," he retorted.

Fowler pulled out his sword and lunged. Phineas dodged, but not without feeling the tip of the blade cut into his arm. He withdrew his sword and took aim. A powerful surge rocketed through his body, and for a moment, he swore his father's spirit was guiding him. He stepped forward, but only swiped air. Fowler was known as a master swordsman, and hadn't lost any agility or speed over the years.

"Give up, Parr," his enemy growled. "It's not about the treasure anymore. It's about finishing what I started. The only thing I want is to see your head flying in a different direction than your body. I didn't spend all these years tracking you to watch you walk away with my loot."

Phineas turned his wrist and brought his sword down hard against Fowler's, and the clang of metal rose to a deafening pitch. He adjusted his stance as they crossed their blades, parrying with the very demon he had nightmares about. "If you don't want to watch me walk away, then I suggest you close your eyes." Phineas circled his blade, countered the swift parry, and caught Fowler's sword at the hilt in the process, sending it over his head.

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Before it registered that his adversary stood before him unarmed, Phineas lunged forward and sank his sword into flesh. Blood bubbled out of Fowler's mouth and his eyes rolled up into his head. With a thud, the entity he'd both feared and hated fell to the ground.

In a frenetic swarm, Fowler's crew dropped their weapons and the rope they'd bound Charlotte with, running off before they too were killed.

He stood silent a moment, watching the blood run down his arm and drip onto the sand. Over too quickly, but he wasn't sorry in the least. The bogeyman had finally been slain.

Charlotte rushed to his side, and wrapped her arms around his waist, tears streaked across her cheeks. "Oh my God, you're hurt."

"It's blood well spilled. I'll be fine." He stroked her hair with his other hand. "Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

"I'll be okay."

His body shook. He'd been so close to losing her, and he didn't want to go through that again. "I hope you know what I said back there, about not caring..."

She silenced his words with her fingers against his lips. "I know. I didn't believe you for a second. I was acting too. Now let me get the crew to help carry the treasure onboard. I don't want you lifting it with your injury."

Phineas did his best to look serious, but couldn't make his tone follow. "What makes you think I'll listen to anything you say?"

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Charlotte set her hands on her hips and pursed her luscious lips. "You aren't the only one around here capable of giving orders. Now do as I say and don't move."

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Chapter 8

"Mm, your cook sure knows how to make a celebratory feast. The food was simply delicious." Charlotte patted her belly as she sipped the last of her wine.

Phineas set down his goblet and pushed himself away from the table. "Fancy a walk around the ship? It should be a full moon."

A walk sounded like the perfect thing to help her stomach settle. And a good excuse to be alone with him. "I'd love to." She slipped her hand into his and followed him outside. "By the way, how's your arm?"

"It be fine, lassie. Bart will make sure of that."

"He's not the only one capable of taking good care of you."

Charlotte recounted the events of the day as they walked along the prow. The crew had helped carry the treasure chest filled with gold coins and jewels to the ship and prepared to set sail. Bart tended to Phineas' wound, and told her she was good luck for the captain. Then they enjoyed a hearty meal in celebration of Fowler's death and finding the loot. This after a morning of making love, finding buried treasure, and being kidnapped. She didn't realize how exciting life as a pirate could be.

Looking out to sea, she took a deep breath and let go of her last bit of tension. The waves were gentle and sparkled like diamonds beneath the bright glow of the moon. She felt more content than ever. A ship didn't sound like an ideal home before, but she could certainly see it as one now. It

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by Ann Cory

would take some getting used to, but if Phineas would have her, she'd stay for as long as he wanted.

"You're much too quiet." He slipped his arm around her waist and kissed the top of her head. "What thoughts be going 'round in your head, lass?"

"I thought of when we first met. I told you I wasn't a spy and you didn't believe me. You were so damn paranoid."

A sheepish grin streaked his face. "Aye. I figured something as beautiful as you couldn't be real."

She scrunched up her nose. "But to think I'd have anything to do with a monster like Fowler?"

"It was stupid, I know, but it was only a matter of time before he caught up to me. The fear of facing him messed with my good judgment. I apologize if I came on too strong."

Charlotte smoothed her hand along his arm. "No need. That chapter of your life can finally be put to rest."

He sighed. "It has been a long time coming."

"I think you're very noble and brave. A lesser man would have crumbled. You stood your ground and honored your parents at the same time."

"I knew if Fowler took my life, he'd hurt you, and eventually discover the real treasure I have hidden in me ship."

She cocked her head to the side. "What do you mean the real treasure?"

"Here, come with me."

Phineas led her into the guest quarters. He went to the corner and brought out the decorated box she'd seen him open when he was sleepwalking.

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by Ann Cory

"This here holds a special treasure to me."

She watched him use the gold coin from around his neck to open it. He slowly opened the lid and removed the red sash. "These are the wedding rings of me mother and father."

Charlotte could only stare at the two timeless pieces sitting atop a velvet cushion.

"You see, lass. My father asked me to watch over my mother, but I didn't listen. It's my fault she's dead."

"Phineas..."

"Let me finish. I could have saved her, but instead I stowed away on my father's ship—leaving her to fend for herself. All I have left to remember either of them by are the tokens they gave one another. I didn't want to be a pirate in the beginning, but it's how I preserve my father's name and my mother's memory. This ship, *The Fortune*, was named in honor of my mother. My father once told me in confidence that she was the greatest treasure of his life. He said that while gold and jewels were a nice find, it never amounted to the fortune she'd brought to his heart."

Her chest tightened. "That's beautiful. You're going to make me cry."

"He was a passionate man, my father. There were times when my mother's love was the only thing that kept him going. I cherished the stories he told when he did come home. They were always about love, and rarely about his adventures."

"The way you talked about him earlier, I thought he felt marrying your mother had been a mistake, but now I see he felt the opposite."

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Phineas nodded. "He acted tough, around his crew. When you've got men looking up to ya, putting all their faith in yer every word, it changes how you are. I didn't always understand what love meant, but now I do. In our short time together, I've come to care about you, and I can't imagine a future without you. I guess I'm saying ... I've fallen for you, lass."

She smiled. "I've fallen for you too."

"I can breathe easier now. The things that matter most to me are safe. But things aren't as meaningful if you can't share them."

Phineas removed the gold ring with a large ruby stone, and held it in front of her. "Will you honor me by wearing my mother's ring?"

Charlotte stared at the dainty jewel with its brilliant red hue. The gesture warmed her heart. "I don't know what to say." She lifted her head and met his gaze.

"I know it doesn't take the place of your stolen necklace, but perhaps in time it will become special to you as well."

Her eyes brimmed with tears. "It's special to me now." She slipped it on and delighted in the perfect fit. "Thank you. I'll treasure it always."

He reached up and scratched his forehead. It almost seemed he was nervous. "There be another matter in need of discussing, lass."

"Oh?" She worried he would tell her she couldn't stay with him.

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"Aye." His hands rested on either side of her face, his thumbs stroking her skin. "I wondered if you'd be willing to give up your land legs and sail around the world with me."

Charlotte gasped. She couldn't take all these surprises at once. "You want me to accompany you on your journeys?"

"Not accompany so much, as be by my side. There is uncharted territory I'd like to scout out. Islands yet to discover. Treasure to dig up. We make a good team, and I could always use a good map-reader on the crew."

Charlotte laughed. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't you say women weren't to be trusted onboard? Something about them being bad luck."

She watched his face turn several shades of red. "Well, you see lass, you aren't a woman."

What the hell? Had she heard him right? She thrust her hands to her hips and raised a brow. "Excuse me?"

Phineas chuckled. "See here, you didn't let me finish. I was going to say that you aren't a woman, you're a lady, and the curse specifically states a woman."

Charlotte shook her head. "There you go making up the rules again."

"Aye. The perks of a captain."

"I guess my title will be Lady Map Reader, then?"

He reached forward and pulled her close. "Nay, you'll be the captain's lady. It's the most important title there is, with far more perks."

She liked the sound of being his lady.

"So do you have a specific course in mind, or will we let the sea guide us?"

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"First, we'll make a stop at Port Burgess to stock up on supplies, and I know of a certain lady who needs a new wardrobe. Afterwards, we'll set sail for wherever your heart desires."

His words aroused her something fierce. Charlotte ran her finger down his chest and then slowly unbuttoned his shirt. She smoothed his shirt away from his body and pulled him toward the cot. A rope hung from the wall and she gestured to it with her chin. "About those perks. Do they include special requests?"

A coy smile spread across his face. "Aye, they do."

Charlotte didn't hesitate. She pulled the silk dress up over her head and shimmied out of her panties. This time she refused to be walked out on. "This lady should like to be restrained and pleased."

He gazed at her with hunger in his eyes. "Then the captain has no choice but to comply with the lady's demands."

She pressed into him, her nipples tight against his chest. "Take me."

His hand rested at the back of her head and he pulled her face close. She breathed in his manly scent and pressed her lips to his.

The kisses were deeper, and far hungrier than before. More passionate, too. Her hands slid to the waistband of his pants and she fumbled with the buttons. Shivers of pleasure rippled along her body when she felt the strength of his erection against her thigh.

He broke from the embrace and grabbed the rope. "Have you ever been tied up, lass?"

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"No," she answered in earnest. "But I trust you."

"And I'll never give you a reason to not trust me. Now lay that voluptuous body on the cot so I can bind you properly."

Charlotte beamed at the authoritative tone in his voice. She laid down and watched him wrap the rope around her wrists and secure them to the cot. "Make sure I'm tied nice and tight."

"Don't you worry none, lass. You'll be safe and secure. I don't plan to let you go anytime soon." He winked and then moved lower to bind her legs.

She tried to be patient but it was near impossible. To help, she focused on his strong physique. The way his muscles bunched and flexed as he worked the rope. Light from the moon accentuated his sturdy shoulders and illuminated his steel blue eyes.

"There, that should hold."

Charlotte considered telling him to get the fuck on with it, but decided against it. She was at his mercy now, and she couldn't deny how much it turned her on.

He nestled between her legs and brought his face to her sweet spot. His gaze stole over her, eyes possessive, reflecting lust.

"You're beautiful," he said softly. "The way you're open and vulnerable for me. I can't wait to taste you."

Before she could speak, he laved his tongue along her wet folds. Her body jerked in response.

"Yes," she whispered. "Taste me."

"Mmm," he groaned so deeply it resonated against her clit.

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"Oh God, yes!" she called out, uncaring if anyone heard. Each flick of his tongue sent electric jolts through her. Made her delirious with need. She raised her hips to meet the demands of his mouth. He slipped his hands beneath her bottom, allowing his tongue to delve deeper. One sensation after another bombarded her body to the point she couldn't see straight. She'd never been brought to pleasure this way, ever. Charlotte pulled against the restraints, wanting to push his face farther into her.

He rolled his tongue around her clit and pushed a finger inside her pussy, then another. Charlotte moaned, her cheeks crushing the pillow as she thrust her head side to side. He was driving her mad with desire. God how she needed to come. So close, so close to that blessed release, but it remained just out of her reach.

"Please ... Phineas," she panted.

In response to her pleas, he suckled intently at her clit while his fingers fucked her pussy. At last the dam broke.

Charlotte gritted her teeth as the first wave of the orgasm hit. Her hips bucked and she cried out, a long guttural cry that echoed around the room. His lips continued to suckle at her clit until she couldn't stand it any longer.

"Quick, untie me," she begged. "Let me taste you, right now." His tongue lapped along her pussy for several agonizing seconds longer while her legs shook with a mind of their own. "Please, let me."

When the last spasm subsided, he lifted his face, her juices framing his mouth. "Easy, lass. There's no rush. I'm not looking for personal satisfaction tonight."

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"But—"

He rested his finger against her lips and she could smell her scent. "Shh. I've only just started, and the night is young."

She flicked her tongue against his finger for a taste. He smiled knowingly and brushed his hand along her jaw and down to her chest. "You're delicious."

Charlotte pulled against the rope and pouted. "Do you intend to keep me tied up all night?"

He nodded. "I intend to pleasure you until the sun rises. It has been a dream of mine to have you beside me at first light."

The idea suited her just fine, though she longed to know the taste of his cock in her mouth. "We have a lifetime full of sunrises to look forward to."

"Aye."

Phineas cupped her breasts and licked at her nipples until they were taut beads. The warmth of his breath made her body tingle. Already she craved his touch again. To fill her up and explore all the points of pleasure she didn't know existed. Here she'd gone looking for adventure, and found love along the way.

Charlotte looked forward to the journeys ahead. Their days spent sailing to uncharted territories. And the nights filled with passion.

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About the Author

Born with an overactive imagination, Ann Cory has always had a love of words and putting them to paper. With the loving support of her husband and son, she is able to devote her time to the very stubborn and demanding muse.

Ann enjoys writing erotica and erotic romance where she delves into the dark realms of paranormal, vampires and shape-shifters, and brings tantalizing fantasy, historical, and contemporary erotic romance themes. From strong female leads to hunky bad boys, she likes to strip them down and flesh them out, so to speak.

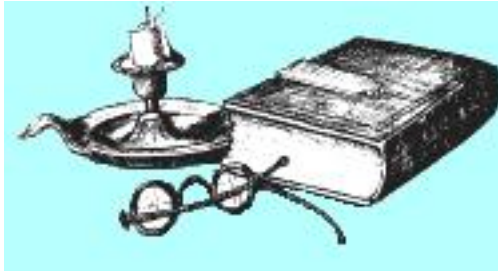
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