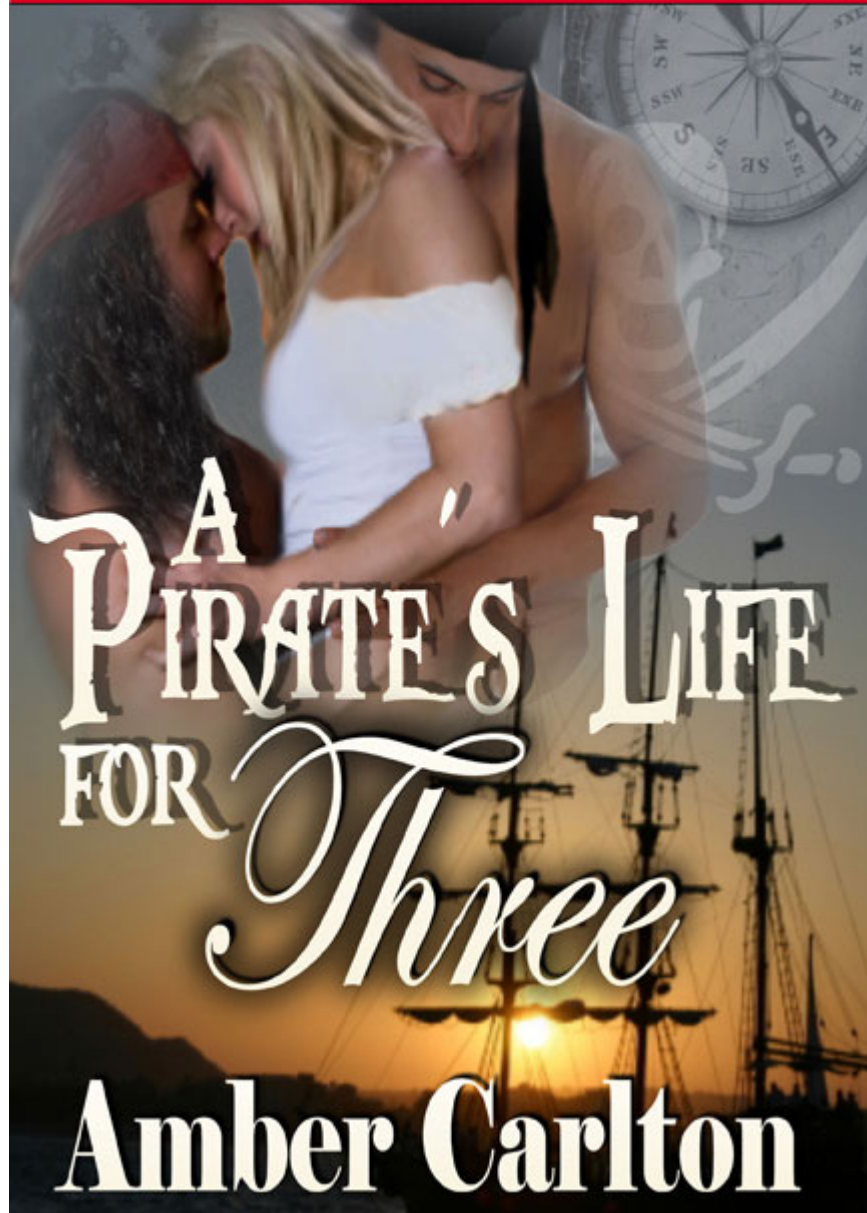


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# **A PIRATE'S LIFE FOR THREE**

**Amber Carlton**

**MENAGE AMOUR**



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# DEDICATION

To my sisters, pirate fans forever.

# A PIRATE'S LIFE FOR THREE

AMBER CARLTON  
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## Chapter 1

*Jamaica*  
*Summer, 1716*

Richard Cross sauntered across his study like he owned the island of Jamaica. Quinn Blackwell had hated him on sight, but that didn't stop him from being in debt to the man. In Quinn's estimation, any man who could be a supporter of a German toad who oozed his way onto the English throne was not a friend of his, but Quinn had long ceased to care how much muck coated his body in the last few years. Being captured by pirates did that to a man and being in debt to a man like Richard Cross only made the pile of shit deeper.

*Any port in a storm. Hope you've learned your lesson on borrowing money, Quinn.*

Cross settled his lean frame comfortably into the wingback chair on the opposite side of the table and raked back long, blond hair. The touch of gray added an air of distinction, which Cross used to his advantage. The gray spoke of longevity and wisdom, not to mention the prestige that came with being a peer of the governor and the second most important man in Jamaica. Cross's obsession with his appearance irritated the hell out of Quinn.

Quinn crossed a leg over his knee and twirled the brandy in its snifter. The blaze of summer sun streaming through the door to the verandah cast its shimmering ray through the dark amber liquid. A warm Caribbean breeze wafted through the open shutters, stirring the gauzy draperies and bringing with it soft, cloying scents of Jamaican wildflowers. Everything in this room radiated elegance and beauty, but Quinn felt like he'd fallen into hell. The smile Cross offered reminded Quinn of a snake, and he couldn't bring himself to return it. He'd rather have gone to Satan himself with this proposal, but Satan had chosen to deliver the hurricane last month, then disappear from the Caribbean.

"So, Mr. Blackwell, I assume in the aftermath of the hurricane, you're here regarding your finances. I heard several plantations sustained minor damage, yours included. How did Sugar Bay fare in the storm?"

"What blew through here seemed a bit more than a storm."

"Aye, though here at Sea Wind we came out fairly unscathed."

"Sugar Bay did not." Quinn tossed the contents of the snifter down his throat, relishing the warm burn of the brandy, but to his dismay, it did nothing to settle his stomach and only increased the pounding in his head. "My plantation barely exists at the present time. The house is ruined, the crop is destroyed, and my equipment has scattered to the four corners of the earth. A quarter of my people are dead." He wondered again why the hell he had come to Sea Wind. Cross would offer no help.

*You came because everything you own has been destroyed, you owe this man a fortune, and your life is bloody well over without his help.*

Cross took a sip of his brandy, and his eyes glimmered with something that made Quinn's jaw clench. "I'm sorry to hear that, Blackwell. That creates a bit of a problem between us."

Quinn squeezed the bridge of his nose. "I'm fully aware of that, which is why I'm here." He settled back farther in his chair and braced himself. "I've come with a proposal."

"So you're here concerning my daughter?"

Quinn's brow furrowed. "Katherine?"

Cross flicked at something on his cuff. "I only *have* one daughter, Blackwell."

Quinn's gaze shot toward the portrait behind Cross's desk. Katherine Cross appeared a vision in a frothy gown of rosy silk. The scooped neckline of her dress revealed the swell of creamy breasts, a small glimpse of heaven. Her golden hair surrounded an angelic face and curled delicately around the slim column of her throat. But all of that was another deception in this room that reflected their island paradise, because Katherine's deep blue eyes stared straight into his with a hard, glacial stare that would have stolen the nerve from another man. Her rosy lips pressed into a stern, tight line to hold in emasculating words. Quinn contained the quiet shudder that racked his shoulders.

*She looks like such a bitch.*

Cross cleared his throat, and Quinn tugged his glance away from the portrait. Richard Cross met Quinn's eyes in a hard, blue stare not unlike his daughter's. "I assumed you wanted to see me regarding a possible marriage with Katherine. Such a proposal might solve your financial problems."

*And freeze my dick off in her ice-cold pussy? No thank you, Cross. You can bloody keep your ice princess.*

"I have little to offer a wife after the destruction of the hurricane."

Cross spread his hands. "Ah, but, Blackwell, I offer you Katherine's hand and all that entails. Money, political connections, social mobility, a chance to re-build. A future here in Jamaica."

"However *viable* a marriage might be between Katherine and me, I'm afraid I'm still not interested in taking a wife."

"Then why are you here?" Cross snapped.



Quinn leaned forward and folded his hands on the table. Inside his impeccable, fashionable jacket—one of the few things he'd managed to salvage in the destruction of his home—his muscles bunched as he contemplated leaping across the table and choking the life out of Richard Cross. That wouldn't solve all his problems, but it would make him feel a hell of a lot better. If only the hurricane had traveled ten miles farther west, he wouldn't have a problem at all. He might be entertaining a proposal from Cross instead of being forced to practically beg for the man's help.

"I'd like your financial assistance to find something."

Cross rose to his feet and stalked to the sideboard. He splashed more brandy into his glass. "I think I've provided you enough financial assistance since your arrival in Jamaica, Blackwell. In fact, the idea of handing more of my assets to you is ludicrous."

Quinn leaned back in his chair. "And if you could increase *your* assets with my proposal?"

"What the hell are you talking about? Speak plain and make it quick. I have a dinner engagement tonight."

"A fortune of Spanish gold lies in the waters off the coast of Florida."

Cross paced back and forth like a caged jungle cat in front of the doors that led to the verandah. "Aye, that's common knowledge. The Spanish recovered what they could and then had it stolen out from under their noses by Henry Jennings and his band of murderous miscreants. The rest is unsalvageable in the ocean depths."

"Not entirely." Quinn ran his fingers under his chin and waited until the man's eyes came back to him. "It could be salvageable with the right equipment."

Cross came to a standstill. "Such equipment does not exist."

"I've seen a design for a contraption that is lowered into the water with divers. It's capable of going to greater depths than a man can. It funnels air down a tube and into a chamber. I believe it would work."

"And where did you see such a miraculous device?"

“In a journal aboard a pirate ship.”

“So the rumors about you are true.”

“Aye.”

“And how did you happen to be aboard a pirate ship, Mr. Blackwell?”

Quinn glanced down and studied his empty glass. He hated talking about all that, but if it convinced Cross to finance his endeavor, the discomfort would be worth it. He met the man’s eyes. “When the war ended, I set sail for the colonies. Spanish pirates captured our ship off the coast of Africa, and I spent three months aboard that hellhole no better than a slave. When they’d beaten me half to death and starved me the rest of the way, I signed their articles and acted as part of the crew for another seven months. Silas Watkins, the owner of the journal, and a man named Wood Hennessey were the only other Englishmen on the ship. We formed a loose association to survive. Silas had the journal then. I took an opportunity to escape in Florida and haven’t seen Silas or the journal since.”

“And when did this escape take place?”

“Several months before I arrived in Jamaica.”

“Ha! Nearly two years ago. So it’s probably lying at the bottom of the sea and lost to the ages. Or locked in the hold of a ship, molding and eaten by rats.”

“I have reason to believe Silas is still alive and the journal is in his possession. I met someone recently who told of encountering a strange Englishman, one who seemed touched by madness yet remained surprisingly lucid, one who dreamed of the future and spoke of grand things to come.”

Cross peered at him, his eyes narrowing. “And where had he seen this lunatic?”

“On Martinique.”

“I’m not interested in investing in the wild fantasies of some crazed Englishman.”

“He wasn’t always a crazed Englishman. At the time of our capture, he was a man of science and quite—”

Cross held up his hand. “Enough. The rantings of a madman are inconsequential. Whatever talents this man once had are long gone. But,” he glanced up at his daughter’s portrait, “just the same, I will finance a journey, Blackwell.”

“Thank you, sir, I’d—”

“On one condition.”

Quinn rose to his feet. “And what would that be?”

“Find my daughter.”

“Katherine is missing?” Quinn frowned. “When did this happen?”

Cross ruffled some parchments on his desk, staring at them as though they held some answers. “Last summer.”

Quinn’s hands curled into fists. “She’s been gone an entire *year*? She’s your daughter, man, and you’re just—”

Cross’s head snapped up. “Don’t you think I know how it looks? I’ve kept it as quiet as I can.” Cross slammed his chair under the desk. “I’ll wring her neck when I get my hands on her. She disappeared around the same time the governor ordered that pirate Henry Jennings out of Jamaica. At the time I thought she’d perhaps been taken as retribution since I’d spoken to the governor against Jennings. I have not, however, received a ransom demand. I’ve had several searches conducted, and each time I think she’s found, she slips right through my fingers. It appears now my daughter may have left of her own accord and refuses to be found. She’s always been recalcitrant and will do anything she can to ruin my life.”

Quinn stared hard at the older man. “Is it possible Katherine wanted to make her own choices, wanted her own life?”

Cross slammed his fist on the desk. “She’s not entitled to her own life. She’s my daughter. My property. And you will return her to me. Start in the Bahamas. Henry Jennings runs that den of thieves in New Providence. Jennings certainly won’t cooperate, but I assume you can be more persuasive than some. You have certain attributes that could

prove intimidating.” His gaze swept over Quinn’s body. “If you happen across your journal as you travel, you’ll have fulfilled both our desires.”

“It’s possible Katherine will not return voluntarily.”

“That’s of no consequence. Abduct her if necessary. Just bring her back to Jamaica.”

Quinn nodded.

“And Blackwell...” He took a sip of brandy and smiled his snake-smile again. “On your return, you will marry her.”

Quinn ran his hands over his face. “Is it not enough that she’s returned safely to her home?”

“No, it is not. She will bend to my wishes and deliver an heir to this family.”

“Surely there’s another man who—”

“No one will have her here,” Cross said. “Believe me, I’ve tried. She’s twenty-seven fucking years old, Blackwell. I’m running out of time.”

“I can’t make the woman marry me.”

“Ah, perhaps not, but as her father, I can. Don’t look so glum, Blackwell. Marriage with my daughter ensures your future, not only in Jamaica but in the colonies and England as well. Is that not worth a slight bit of annoyance?”

*Annoyance? Being thrown into a viper pit sounds more tempting.*

Quinn walked to the sideboard and grabbed the bottle of brandy. He dropped back into the wingchair and slouched into the cushion. He raised the bottle toward his future father-in-law before pouring some down his throat. “Have a seat. We’ll toast to my new bride. You might want to find another bottle of brandy. This one is mine.”

## Chapter 2

*The Caribbean Sea  
Near the Island of Martinique  
Summer, 1716*

Kit Savage stretched and purred like a kitten, spreading her limbs, then winding them around the man next to her. Every inch of her body felt alive. Her pussy pulsed with tiny aftershocks that swelled, then crested like an evening tide on a dark sandy shore. She hoped she never lost the peace that a good fuck could bring. She'd wasted so much time as a virgin.

James Kingsley loved fucking as much as she did, and he put every bit of energy his huge body contained into bringing her pleasure. He had perfected fucking to an art form.

"Oh, James, that was heavenly. I can't move my muscles."

He chuckled. "Then we've done it right, darlin'."

He slid his muscular arm under her body and yanked her closer, wrapping her tight against his warm, solid flesh.

She snuggled her face into his neck. The bristles of his beard scratched her skin, but she relished the sensation because it was all male and all hers, at least for now. She had no interest in beyond now. Now suited her just fine.

She loved the sight of her golden hair spread on his sun-kissed skin. She stroked his broad, hairy chest with the backs of her nails, enjoying the shivers that flickered beneath his skin. That she could make a man this size tremble thrilled her somewhere deep inside where she kept that other woman buried and locked away in secret.

Her old self would never have allowed such rapture. Expressing joy or interest meant risk. Her father could snatch anything away without a second thought and often ridiculed her happiness as frivolous and selfish with simple words. *Stop acting like your mother. Stop thinking like your mother.* She'd heard both so many times throughout her youth, she'd begun to resent her mother for having existed at all.

Katherine had learned quickly what Richard Cross considered acceptable behavior and tamped down her enthusiasm and her emotions. A rock couldn't be damaged, and a hard exterior kept her safe. Now though, Katherine Cross and the insipid, vacuous, meaningless life she'd been forced to lead in Jamaica had been banished from her thoughts forever. Katherine had no place in this place, in this life.

Kit loved the sea, her ship and crew, and the liberty that could be found with both—the freedom to be herself and live life the way she wanted. She brooked interference from no one, particularly not a man, no matter how pretty and lusty or how domineering and cruel.

The smells that came from her pirate lover, James Kingsley—smoke, gunpowder, salt spray—had heralded her into this life of adventure and conquest, trials and death and had magically transformed her, giving her new hopes and dreams. She'd never felt so vibrant, and her once shriveled and frozen soul had blossomed and filled with joy, excitement and passion. She couldn't imagine living any other way or being anywhere else.

The gentle rise and fall of the ship as it moved through the sea lulled her into a state of bliss. The swells of the waves lapped against the hull, and the sound of the spray filled her with peace. The warm, steady breeze wafting through the open casement caressed her with a lover's touch. They offered gentle reminders of how much she needed the sights and sounds of the Caribbean to draw her next breath.

She especially liked this man. He made her feel soft and pretty, yet seductive and powerful. A woman could always use a little admiration. Her fingers trailed across his chest, down the abdomen

held tight by ridged muscles, and into the nest of dark hair that held her sought treasure.

“Kit, darlin’.” James’s voice held a sleepy quality.

“Hmm?” Her hand curled around his cock, loving the way it grew against her palm.

“Have you given more thought to my proposition?”

Kit slid down the mattress until her face brushed against his cock. It jumped in her hand and she smiled. His hand settled in her hair, caressing gently, running the strands through his fingers. She lifted her gaze to his. His dark eyes glistened in the sunlight streaming through the casement, reminding her of what lurked inside this man—danger, ferocity, ruthlessness. She loved a challenge.

“Did you want to talk business now, James? I’ve found something better to do.”

“‘Tis been on my mind of late.”

“You always have too much on your mind, Mr. Kingsley. Stop thinking for an afternoon.”

She licked the length of his cock, her tongue delighting in the warmth, the silkiness, the flavor of this man. She tasted her own juices as she wrapped her mouth around the tip, sucking gently. James groaned, and his hand tightened in her hair. She pushed closer, took his entire length deep into her mouth, and his hips rose toward her.

She heard the strain in his voice. He could barely get the words out of his mouth, but he managed. Leave it to James to retain his focus. He rose up on his elbows to peer down at her.

“The wind stirs with change.”

She swallowed, her throat convulsing against him. When he drew in another breath, she sucked harder, determined to avoid this conversation. She refused to ruin a perfect afternoon discussing the politics of New Providence. Her mouth tugged and suckled, working up his cock in rhythmic gulps until she reached the tip. She swirled her tongue around the pulsing head, licking and stroking his length until he fell back on the mattress with a groan.

*Mission accomplished.*

She snuggled between his thighs, wiggling provocatively, burying her face between his legs. She breathed in the warm, musky scent of her lover's body, sighing deeply. His hips jerked up, and his cock slid farther into her mouth. She pulled up and dropped soft kisses along the hard shaft, licked the pre-cum from the tiny slit, then decided torture offered the most fun today.

Gently, she slid her nails along his cock as she watched it bob and weave in front of her face. With her fingertip, she traced around the head, drawing lazy circles under the rim. She took one of his balls into the palm of her hand and massaged gently, enjoying the feel of the sac as its soft weight rolled and tightened.

His calves wrapped around her and flexed, holding her fast. She squeezed his cock, and it pulsed, hot and tight, within her fist. Dipping her face lower, she scooped both balls into her mouth and sucked. James's hand curled in her hair and pulled her head closer. Her pussy clamped on emptiness. She pushed her hips against the mattress and rubbed her clit against the sheet. It felt good but not good enough. She'd give him a few minutes of her time, but she needed to come again, and she had better uses for his cock besides pumping it in her fist. She wanted him buried deep inside her.

He breathed a huge sigh. She finally had his complete attention. In another minute she'd straddle him and feel his thick, hard shaft—

"Nothing feels right."

She stopped sucking and opened her mouth. His balls popped out from between her lips and slapped against his body. She lifted her face and stared, her head tilted as she studied him.

"Nothing feels right? I'm not sucking to your satisfaction?"

"I didn't say that," he muttered.

She lifted up and pounced on him, climbing up his body and digging her elbows into his muscled chest. His eyes held that serious expression, the one that signaled her afternoon of fun might be over. She hated that look.



“Christ, James. How can you talk like that when I have your balls in my mouth?”

“’Tis hard.”

“And yet you managed.”

She shook her head then flounced up with a huff. She sat up, folding her legs. She raked the hair back from her face, holding it tightly for a moment before releasing it. His gaze traveled over the tumble of tangled curls, across her breasts and came to rest on her pussy before returning to her eyes. He peered up at her with a slight smile.

“You’re a beauty, Kit.”

“So you’ve said,” she muttered.

“And a damn fine captain.”

She blew out a breath. “Aye, I know that too.”

“Which is why—”

“We’ve gone over the arguments before, James.”

He rose on one elbow and ran his palm along her thigh. He inched higher, his fingers massaging and sending ripples of delight coursing under her skin. When he reached between her legs and slid his finger along her clit, she shivered. It felt incredibly good, and her pussy clenched against her better judgment.

She slapped his hand away. A little grimace crossed his face, but she ignored it. James Kingsley liked to be in charge, but that would never happen in her presence, particularly on her own ship. The day that happened she’d be hanging from a rope or lying in a watery grave. If she did meet her end on a rope, she hoped her luck held and both would happen on the same day. She’d no desire to have her corpse rotting in the sun and pecked by gulls as a signal to others—Pirates Beware.

She wiggled her ass, sliding a few inches away from him. He looked disappointed, but he could just live with it. “You’re either fucking me again, or we’re negotiating. We’re not doing both. I don’t mix business with pleasure.”

He frowned and creases spread across his forehead. He looked older when he frowned, but that didn't bother her. James must be somewhere in his thirties, though he didn't seem to know. Boys pressed into service from the streets often lost everything but their names. He was definitely older than she, and she wasn't exactly a young maiden any longer. She'd found that out when her father became determined to get her married off before she shriveled into a prunish, barren old maid. She'd stalled as long as she could before it became next to impossible to stall any longer, so she'd arranged her little exodus from Jamaica. She hadn't exactly fled. In her way of looking at things, she'd viewed it more as liberation.

She might be nearing thirty, but at least she'd manage to remove the annoying word *maiden* from her description. James had been more than happy to help her out with that, and fucked her at any opportunity. Except today. He obviously had other things on his mind today.

"Out with it, James."

"I'm good at what I do."

She nodded. "You're excellent at what you do. You have an impeccable reputation—a bloodthirsty, ruthless pirate, fierce, determined, successful."

His sun-darkened face flushed a delightful shade of pink that would normally have made her want to kiss him, but the annoyance at losing a pleasurable afternoon still rankled at her.

"Bah! I'm not bloodthirsty."

"I know that, but a good pirate story involves bloody decks and hacked up bodies and only the best stories are told about you. Despite your reputation, you've managed to achieve the almost impossible—successful raids and lucrative hauls yet minimal loss of life. I admire that. No need to spill blood if another tactic works as well."

"I don't really like to kill. Seems a senseless operation to me. I prefer to leave them alive when I can."

“My attitude as well.” She lifted her hair to feel the cool breeze. “I’ve heard you’re being groomed by Ben Hornigold to take over one of his ships. That’s quite an accomplishment.”

“Aye, but Ben has bigger fish to fry right now. Jennings is on his ass. Trouble’s a’brewin’.” James ducked his shaggy head and glanced up at her. “I don’t have to stay with Ben.”

“No, you don’t. You can strike out on your own.”

“’Tis too much responsibility. And I’m not good with people.”

Kit laughed. “None of us are good with people. People don’t seek a life on the sea if they fit into the world they’re born to. We’re all misfits in our own ways. Renegades under the law and outsiders to society.”

He lifted her hand and kissed the palm. His warm breath and beard tickled her skin. She sighed as he trailed kisses up her arm. His dark eyes lifted to hers, drawing her into his web. “*You’re good with people.*”

“And you’re good at stealing my thoughts,” she murmured.

He rose and planted kisses along her jaw. She tilted her head, allowing him greater access. His silky hair trailed over her shoulder. When his mouth found hers, she pushed him back to the mattress, straddling his hips. His cock prodded against her. She usually liked a little bit of rubbing and play, but she wasn’t about to waste time. She pushed downward. His cock drove into her wet pussy all the way to the hilt, and her muscles clamped down hard, straining to hold him there. She refused to let him get diverted again.

He grabbed her hips and pumped her against him, lifting and tugging in quick jerks. Slow, deep pulses racked the lower half of her body. Through half-closed lids he watched her.

“If I signed on with *The Black Rose*, we could do this every day,” he said.

“No,” she murmured. “We couldn’t.”

She fell against him and locked her mouth over his. She didn’t want to talk any more, not when his body could do such wondrous

things to hers. She ground tighter against him, pushing her clit into his body to rub with each stroke. He responded by gripping her harder. The clenching bite of his fingers hurt her skin, but she reveled in the pain. His movements became rougher, yet more precise, rhythmically pounding his cock into her with long, steady strokes. Damn his pride.

She pushed against his chest and sat up. She pressed her hands against his hips, slowing him down, controlling the motion. She rocked against him until his cock hit that special spot inside her. She ground against him, and a thunderous shudder rocked her. Her pussy gripped his cock in a powerful spasm. When she came, the orgasm exploded within her, spiraling like the waves of the sea until they crashed onto shore and roiled in frothy abandon. Her head fell back as her body quaked with exquisite vibrations. Shivers racked her limbs, and she clutched his hips to hold herself steady. When the feeling crested and tapered into small ripples, bathing her body in delightful sensations, and the muscles of her pussy pulsed with tiny flutters, James gripped her shoulders and yanked her down, crushing her against his chest.

He pounded his cock into her in one final thrust and held her still as his body shuddered its release. The warmth of his cum flooded into her.

Kit lay for a moment, listening to the strong beat of his heart, then lifted up. She smoothed the hair away from his brow, happy to see the frown lines had vanished.

“Isn’t pleasure much better than business, especially on such a glorious day as this?”

He gave her a lazy, satisfied smile. “Aye, kitten. But, like I’ve been trying to point out, if I came to *The Black Rose* permanently, we could do this every day.”

“Not a good idea. You know I like my independence.”

She planted a quick kiss on his mouth and then pushed away, leaving the warmth and strength of his body behind. She’d only indulge her womanly side so long, and each moment she stayed in a

man's arms reminded her that she could easily lose her upper-hand. That would never do.

She dodged his hands and escaped from the shelter of the bed, then strode across the room. She grabbed her brush from the dressing table. Though her cabin held lots of furniture, the dressing table was her one concession to her femininity. When she'd seen it in the cargo hold of *La Bella Dama*, she'd made it her first acquisition, along with the entire wardrobe she found there. She might be a pirate, but she liked to look nice.

*Thank you, Señora Mendez, for all your worldly goods.*

She yanked the brush through the snarls of her hair. She met his eyes in the mirror as she went through the arduous process of untangling the long strands. He wanted an answer—again.

"We've been through this too many times to count, James. You know I don't fuck my crew, and I have no intention of giving up the pleasures of your flesh."

Sitting up, he pushed his hair back. He rose from the bed and came to stand behind her, putting his hands on her shoulders then sliding them downward to cover her breasts. Her body betrayed her. Her nipples rose under his fingers, and he caressed them with his thumbs.

"It doesn't have to be as part of the crew."

He leaned down to kiss her neck, but she lifted her shoulder, blocking his move, then shrugged out from under his hands. He took the brush from her and ran it through his hair, bending his knees to peer in the mirror.

"Christ, James, you're worse than Trueblood. Leave my things alone."

She snatched the brush out of his hand. He reached around her to grab a ribbon from the table—one of her prettiest silk ones in an emerald green—and tied his hair back.

She rolled her eyes. "Help yourself. Don't let me get in your way."

“It matches my coat. Move aside, wench. I can’t see what I’m doing.”

Damn it, she hated people touching her things. He hunkered down to gaze into the mirror once again, grabbing a comb and smoothing it through his beard. She perused his face. With the unruly mop held away from his face, he looked especially handsome. He was a devilishly good-looking man with his big, strong body, wide forehead, strong nose and piercing, almost black, eyes. The dark beard made him look like a prince of hell—formidable, powerful, lusty and all hers for the taking—but she’d had enough of James Kingsley for the day. He could primp somewhere else.

She smashed her hip into his, knocking him sideways and went back to brushing her hair. “Don’t get too comfy in here. More than one captain doesn’t work on any ship, and I don’t intend to share *The Black Rose* in any capacity.”

He dropped into a chair and pulled his pants up his legs. “Would you share it with a husband?” Her hand froze in mid-stroke. “You could marry me.”

She burst into laughter. She knew it was the wrong thing to do, but she couldn’t help it. A scowl settled on his face as he snatched at his shirt. “I’m never marrying, James. Besides, you wouldn’t want to be married to me. I’m nothing but trouble.”

“I’m well acquainted with trouble,” he muttered.

Well, she’d hurt his feelings, or his pride, but that couldn’t be helped. How many times could she possibly tell him no?

He stuffed the end of his shirt into his pants, then reached for his weapons belt. The man seemingly had more weapons than he could carry, but she had to admit he took great care with them. Each one shone as the sunlight touched it.

She grabbed her own shirt from the floor and shrugged into it, enjoying the feel of the soft, gauzy texture against her skin. She liked her current wardrobe far more than any of the elegant and confining gowns Katherine Cross had worn. She yanked on her petticoat, then

chose a frothy skirt in a colorful blend of roses and purples. Finally she wound some ribbons around her wrist—pink, purple, and red to match her mood. James's little proposal had made her think of love and hearts and romance, and though she had no intention of falling in love with anyone permanently, she had to admit Mr. James Kingsley had gotten under her skin. She felt like indulging in a little romantic whimsy.

She wound a crimson sash around her waist, then grabbed her belt and settled the sword more tightly in the scabbard.

A knock sounded on the door and Hal's voice boomed through the wood. "Sail on the horizon."

Kit grabbed her dagger and plunged it into the belt. She strode across the planks and yanked open the door. The burst of salty sea air hit her nostrils, and she drew it in like a precious gift. She glanced at the sails. They billowed like puffy clouds—a good breeze for a swift chase. The wind tore through Hal's hair, whipping long red strands across his face, but his wide grin couldn't be hidden.

She grinned back. "What colors?"

He scratched at his beard and glanced portside. "Appears to be a French merchantman." He handed her a spyglass, and she put it up to her eye and locked on the target while she listened. "Looks promising, heavy, low in the water. A French prize could hold lots of bounty. If we get a good haul, we could strike a barter for those new sails we've been wanting."

She slapped the spyglass back into his hand. "Agreed. Run up the French flag. Aim for her, and we'll see what the day brings, shall we?"

Hal whirled around and shouted his orders. Kit turned to James with a smile.

"The French always have the prettiest things."

His gaze drifted over her clothes. "You didn't take enough from Señora Mendez?"

“A woman can never have enough clothes, James. Didn’t you know that?” She ran her hands down his emerald-green frock coat, then tapped his shining cutlass. “You’re dressed for the occasion. Care to help? I’ll give you a share.”

“I’m always in for a share.”

“Let’s go have a little fun then. The usual murder and mayhem, but let’s go easy on the murder this afternoon. I look far too pretty to get splattered in blood and gore.”

He wrapped his arm around her waist and yanked her close. “No worries, kitten. I’m mellow and sated and dying for something from a real chef.”

“No one cooks like the French. Are you hoping for veal or chicken?”

He burst out laughing. The sound rumbled against her breasts. “Anything but fish. Let’s go see what we’re having for dinner.”

\* \* \* \*

Kit dropped her weapons belt on the desk, tossed her hat on the bed, and combed the hair back from her face with her fingers. She glanced at James before dropping into her chair. He stood stock still in the center of the room like a man encircled by reef sharks, his hand gripping the butt of his pistol. She draped her leg over the arm of the chair, toying with the strings of satin on her wrist. She slid her fingers through them over and over. It helped her think.

“A successful afternoon, wouldn’t you say, James?”

James nodded, but beneath his beard, his lips tightened into a firm line.

Kit gazed out the window for a moment. “How have the French achieved anything here in the Caribbean? They drop anchor at the first shot fired in their direction. Not much challenge there.”

James grunted and said nothing.



"I must say the crew is more than pleased with the bounty. They've had their eye on some new sailcloth, and Doc's wanted some new surgical equipment. He likes to keep up with new inventions. The prize will help quite nicely in bartering for both."

James gave a little shake of his head. "You've an unusual crew, Kit."

"Aye, that I do." Kit smiled. "Did you enjoy the veal? I thought it rather disappointing for French cuisine. Slightly overdone and too much lemon. But I loved the shrimp dish. I had Cook get the recipe from their chef. I thought—"

"What the fuck do you plan to do with him?" James snapped.

"I hadn't really decided yet." Kit tilted her head and glanced toward the scrawny, little man currently perusing her bookshelves. He scampered back and forth across the wooden planks, running his dirty fingers over the bindings, his rapturous gaze devouring the titles. He made humming noises in his throat.

James spoke through clenched teeth. "You can't keep him."

Kit shrugged. "Why ever not? He seems to like me."

"*Everyone* likes you," James growled, "but that doesn't mean you should collect crazy men like coins."

"Hmm." Kit ran a finger over her lips. "I'm not sure he's entirely crazy. I think he's a little...damaged."

"Damaged beyond repair," James snarled.

She waved her hand. "You're making far too much out of this. Look at him." She watched as the older man tucked his ratty, old leather book under his arm, then pulled a volume off the shelf and pressed his face toward the pages. He breathed deeply, squinting at the type. "He's kind of cute, don't you think? He reminds me of a curious little squirrel. He's perfectly harmless."

James grunted. "Crazy people are never harmless. I smell trouble in this."

"You smell trouble everywhere, James, but I'll concede to your nose today. I have to admit the man is in desperate need of a bath."

She dropped her leg to the floor and stood up, adjusting her belt. “Mr. Watkins?”

The little man froze, then slammed the volume closed. He whirled around, blinking his wide eyes, and clutched the book against his chest. “Aye, mistress?”

“If I may ask...” Kit took several steps toward him, and he took one toward her. “After your abandonment in Martinique, you boarded *Le Belle Mer*. Captain Lavorsoire informed me he’d arranged safe passage for you to France. Staying onboard with him would have seen you far closer to home. Why did you choose to board my ship?”

His words came out in a tiny whisper. “I liked the sound of your voice.”

“My voice?”

He sighed. “It has the tone of an angel.”

“Bah!” James threw his arms up. “Crazy talk.”

The man shrank backward, nearly folding over as he clutched the book. James stomped toward the window and peered out at the open sea.

Kit smiled. “Don’t pay attention to him, Mr. Watkins. He’s having a little trouble with his nose today.” She waved her hand toward a chair. “Would you like to sit down?”

Watkins shook his head furiously and backed up until he was flush against the bookshelf. He slid down the shelf and squatted on the floor, the book cradled in his lap. He cast a quick glance toward James. “I’m sitting now. I’ll be good.”

Kit nodded. “About the *tone of an angel*. What does that mean, Mr. Watkins?”

He squinched his eyes closed, and his words gushed out in a breathless rush. “Every sound in our plane of existence has a tone. Some can be heard, some cannot. All tones have different qualities, different pitches, and different timbres. They can be high or low. They can evoke joy or sadness or they can lead to...madness. If I can harness tones, categorize them, use them, the possibilities are endless.

They could be utilized for weaponry, for disease, for communication, for curing...madness. I'd only just begun the research, but some day, in the future, I'll learn to control it. I want to locate sounds in other planes, possibly the voices of the dead, of...angels. I locked on your voice because..." His eyes shot open. He blinked several times as his gaze darted frantically around the room. "I liked it. I..." He swallowed hard then focused on Kit. "I wanted to be with you. I felt safe."

Kit glanced toward James. His shoulders slumped as he released a huge sigh. She took several slow steps toward the trembling man and squatted in front of him. She brushed some limp strands of filthy hair away from his face and gave him a smile. He smiled back, a slight rise of his lips, but his eyes sparked with a glint of joy.

"You *are* safe, Mr. Watkins."

He shot a glance toward James. "What about *him*?" he whispered.

"Don't worry about James. He's all bluster." She stood and reached down, taking Watkins's hand. She pulled the little man to his feet. "*The Black Rose* is my ship. I know most captains are elected, but I bought this ship, and my crew can leave any time with their bounty. Besides, James is not a crewmember of *The Rose*. He lives elsewhere."

James grunted.

Kit tugged the book away from Watkins's clutching hands and slid it back on the shelf. She studied him for a moment, then plucked at his dirty, ragged shirt. "I think, Mr. Watkins, we need to get you clean and have our surgeon take a look at you. You have some rather nasty scrapes that have become infected. You also look like you could use a good meal. Do you like veal?"

He nodded and whispered, "I used to love veal."

"Then you're in luck today, Mr. Watkins, because we have some."

"Call me Silas, mistress," he said softly. "That's my name too."

"And you can call me Kit."

He took a quavering breath. "Oh, I couldn't..."

“Bloody hell,” James muttered. “You’ve got yourself a new pet.”

She threw a furious glance toward her lover and tucked her arm around Watkins’s thin shoulders. “I insist you call me Kit. Captain’s orders. Welcome to *The Black Rose*, Silas.”

## Chapter 3

*New Providence, the Bahamas*  
*Autumn, 1716*

Quinn Blackwell lifted his eyes for the tenth time to stare across the smoky tavern. He ignored the raucous laughter swelling throughout the room and the bumps and jostles as patrons brushed and lurched past him in various stages of drunkenness. When an overly aggressive argument turned into a brawl, he shifted his chair to avoid a misaimed fist. If they dared to come close to him again, he'd put them both out of their misery.

He studied the woman again. He'd anticipated finding word of Katherine somewhere in this island chain, but Quinn sure as hell hadn't expected Katherine to be gallivanting in plain sight around the most notorious pirate hellhole in the western hemisphere. Surely if anyone discovered her identity, she'd be held for a high ransom, sporting a ruined reputation. Not that he gave a damn because her virtue or dishonor meant nothing to him. He'd marry the wench, get Cross his heir and be done with that.

If the woman on the other side of the room was Katherine Cross, she seemed perfectly fine. In fact, she seemed more than fine. A major surprise.

*Find my daughter. Marry her. Your financial worries will be over.*

Richard Cross's words were branded into his thoughts, but Quinn had never thought he'd stumble across her while he searched the Caribbean for Silas Watkins and the journal. He'd assumed Katherine

was long dead. Now what? Possibly finding her put him in a bit of a bind.

He downed the rest of his rum, then swept his fingers inside his jacket pocket and pulled out the miniature he'd been carrying for two months. The dark, gloomy tavern provided little light to see the small portrait, but he had memorized the face. Katherine Cross was a beautiful woman. No one could deny that, but looking at her portrait sent icy chills down his spine. He couldn't imagine another woman being more unapproachable or less inviting.

Fuck. The last thing he'd wanted to do was find Katherine. He needed to stay on target and find Silas Watkins, or at least find the journal. With the plans for that device in his hand, and hopefully the scientist as well, his financial worries would end, and Cross could be jettisoned from his life. Richard Cross didn't give a damn about his daughter, and, if this woman was Katherine, Quinn doubted Katherine gave a damn about her father. She looked perfectly happy where she was.

Quinn didn't give a fuck about their relationship. Cross had paid handsomely for Quinn to scour the Caribbean for his wayward daughter, and Quinn had done it, dutifully asking in every port of call and investigating every clue, with no luck. Sometimes people and things just vanished. Quinn also knew he could travel the seas for the rest of his life and never find Watkins or a leather-bound journal holding the mysteries of a diving chamber. Perhaps it was time to refocus and investigate this woman. Potential rewards seemed more favorable. A man could never have too much money and, if this woman was Katherine, taking her home, willingly or bound, could increase both his monetary cache and his political reputation in the Jamaican hierarchy.

His stomach churned at the thought. Katherine had been a pariah in Jamaican society, particularly among the men, and there had to be a reason for that. If canvas and oils could present such an imposing and

daunting presence on such a small surface, what would the lady be like in the flesh?

A pretty, buxom lass with a riot of deep brown curls laid down another mug of rum and gave him a wink. He slipped a coin into her hand, and she caressed his shoulder as she sashayed by. Now that little woman offered temptation with her rounded curves, pleasing smile, and cheerful demeanor. Mistress Cross, on the other hand, seemed to offer nothing but cold, hard trouble.

He glanced once again across the decrepit tavern, squinting at the lovely vision spun in the golden haze filtering through the smoke-choked window behind her. She looked like she belonged anywhere but where she was and yet seemed perfectly comfortable in this den of thieves and social misfits.

The woman, who could be Katherine Cross, lounged in complete comfort, sprawled on a window bench, resting her back against the side wall. One long leg, covered in flouncy layers of almost sheer, bluish gauze and ankle-high boots, stretched out across the hard bench. The other leg was raised, showing off an enticing display of creamy calf below a bit of lacy petticoat. Her delicate wrist, covered with golden bangles and colorful streamers, lay across her knee. The satin ribbons—scarlet, emerald green, sapphire blue, sunflower gold—wavered and fluttered with each movement of her slim body. She wore a short, midnight-blue coat over a white blouse. She appeared to be holding court, surrounded by three men of various ages who hung on her every word. This woman had shining, golden hair, very like Katherine's portrait, though she had tucked most of it under a slate-colored tricorne hat. The jaunty, blue feather tucked into the satin band dipped and swayed with every movement of her head. Several tendrils of gold had slipped out and framed the most beautiful, vibrant face he'd ever seen.

His dick lunged against the buttons of his pants. If he stared much longer, it would burst through.

Her dark eyes—he couldn’t tell the color from the distance—twinkled with a gaiety and vivaciousness entirely absent in Katherine’s portrait. The perfect rose of her mouth twitched into a smile with her companions’ conversation, and now and then her laughter spilled across the room and wrapped him in an overwhelming desire to be part of her merry court. That dangerous idea gave him a bad feeling. He couldn’t afford to lose Cross’s good graces and heavy purse strings.

The woman sipped at her own mug, glancing over the rim with those sparkling eyes shadowed by long, heavy lashes. Quinn yearned to have those eyes locked on him with such rapt attention and just as quickly pushed that desire away as well.

One of the men—a large, beefy ox with a head of wild red hair—laughed uproariously at something the woman said, throwing back his head and howling toward the ceiling. With a playful smile, she reached out and slapped at his arm. The glittering jewels dotting her fingers sparkled in the sunlight, and the ribbons trailed across the table like a rainbow. From the amount of rings on her fingers, if this was Katherine, she’d certainly found financial success in her new endeavor. When the young, slim man dressed in fashionable clothing leaned across the table and said something to her, she burst into laughter and nearly fell off her perch. But the older man with the saber-slash across his face sat impassively, as though deaf to the sounds of their fun.

This woman, who seemed so full of life and so adored, could not be Katherine Cross. She radiated life, joy, happiness. Whoever, and whatever, this golden woman was, she could not be the stoic ice queen in the portrait he held. Yet, the similarity amazed him, and he thought if he could have a woman such as this in his bed, marriage might hold a bit more pleasure than he’d anticipated.

“Bloody hell, Quinn, stop thinking with your dick,” he muttered.

He’d been to Sea Wind several times but, despite several attempts at an introduction, had never met Katherine in the flesh. Richard



Cross, however, had given him a very clear impression of his daughter, and this lovely, happy beauty did not mesh with anything Quinn had heard. Cross told him, though his daughter had admirable attributes such as intelligence, talent and breeding, she lacked emotional warmth and would provide him with a challenging marriage due to a rather mercurial nature. In Quinn's estimation that translated into bitch and, after enough brandy, he'd said so. Cross had made a sound as close to a laugh as Quinn thought he could get, never denying Quinn's accusation. Cross had also assured Quinn emotional warmth could be found in many places, a mercurial nature could be harnessed, and a handsome dowry could make it possible to have the best of both worlds. A well-connected wife, an enormous fortune, and allies in high places seemed to Quinn a fairly good trade-off for a bitchy woman he might only have to bed several times a year to provide heirs.

Despite everything he'd been told, Quinn still had his doubts and had pushed thoughts of Cross's daughter to the back of his mind. He'd been prowling through the Caribbean for two months tracing that elusive journal. All the clues had led him to New Providence, which just happened to be where Cross wanted him anyway. He glanced at the portrait again. Surely the similarity was just coincidence. Journal first, woman second.

He was searching for a particular captain now—the captain of *The Black Rose*. He'd heard they'd captured *Le Belle Mer*, and Silas Watkins may have been aboard. He'd scoured the docks earlier and found the ship in port, but the crew that remained on her seemed a scurvy lot of miscreants. They'd been less than forthcoming providing answers to his questions, but had directed him here. Once he found Captain Kit Savage, he'd determine if Savage had the journal, make an offer and...

The woman in the sunlight sat back for a brief moment, mentally assessing something her red-haired companion had said. Quinn almost choked on the liquor sliding down his throat. For one moment, he saw

a cold gleam in her eyes and could have sworn he stared at Katherine's portrait.

If this was Katherine, how could a woman change so much?

When his pretty, little serving wench passed by again, he tugged on her arm, and she spilled into his lap. She gave him a coy smile then looped her arms around his neck. She tucked her face near his ear and whispered softly.

"I'm Bridget. If you've a mind for a fuck, sir, I can leave for a moment. Charlie won't mind." She nodded toward the barkeep. "He gets a piece of what I take in."

"A tempting offer, but a distraction I can't afford. I've business today in New Providence."

Her mouth drew down in a pout, but she brightened when her gaze drifted down to the coin he held in his fingers. She wrapped her fingers around his, took a glance toward the bar, and managed to slip the coin into her bodice without Charlie's knowledge.

"Is it information you be needin' then, sir?" she asked.

"It is." He nodded toward the group at the window, his gaze lingering on the woman. "What can you tell me about them?"

Her glance swung and caught on the group. She sat up straighter on his lap, eager to please. "The crew of *The Black Rose*?" Quinn's hand clenched around his mug. Could it be this easy? "They're a good sort. What is it you need to know?"

"Anything you can tell me," Quinn said.

Bridget settled comfortably into his lap, her hand lazily caressing his chest. "The big one with the red hair is Red Hal. He's a pistol, he is." She leaned over and winked conspiratorially. "And quite the lover to hear it told, though I've not been lucky enough to have that pleasure. Hal ne'er has to pay for a girl and can't spare a glance to me. He's the quartermaster of *The Black Rose*. Supposed to have been educated in the colonies. He knows how to read and write and cipher."

His gaze roamed the dingy room and dirty scum that passed as customers. His brows rose. "I imagine that's unusual in this place."

Bridget gave him a look reserved for those drooling on the side of a roadway. "Aye, sir, most unusual."

He glanced dubiously at the red-haired giant. Big to be sure, but he didn't look so tough. Quinn thought a few well-placed drinks ought to take care of Red Hal. A man who could read and write might come in handy if looking for a particular journal.

Bridget's gaze roamed over the big man, her glance caressing him with a lover's touch. Quinn waited quietly, but his hand curled into a fist behind her back.

"The fine-looking young gentleman is Peter Trueblood, the pilot of *The Rose*. Heard tell he's of the nobility, though fallen on hard times of late." She shook her head and tsked.

"That happens all too often," Quinn said. He was well acquainted with how fast a financial tide could turn and take the future with it. He pushed that from his mind as he perused the blond dandy, noting the lacy cuffs and golden ear bobs. A few baubles might work for distraction if necessary. The man seemed to have a penchant for pretty things, and probably good-looking men as well. Quinn didn't give a fuck about his appearance, but knew his looks appealed to women and men alike.

"Trueblood's a popular fellow in New Providence, though there are those that be wonderin' why he hooked up with *The Black Rose* when any ship would have taken him. 'Tis said he's the best pilot in New Providence."

Quinn frowned. "Seems a man should be able to choose his own berth and companions." Not that he'd had a choice on that pirate ship, but Quinn had found that turning pirate was infinitely more satisfying than being a slave. "Why would anyone condemn him for signing on with *The Black Rose*?"

Bridget shook her head. "'Tis a dangerous thing to do in these times. Sides are gonna have to be chosen soon and sittin' on the fence isn't always the wisest decision. They'll all find that out in time."

The woman seemed to talk in circles, but eventually he'd get his answers. Quinn hugged her soft body closer. His cock rose against the gentle weight that settled against him. Months without a woman had taken its toll, but he'd be hard-pressed to take advantage of a whore for the night, no matter how pretty. Like Hal, he'd never paid for a woman in his life.

"And the one with the scar on his face?"

She glanced across the room and gave her shoulders a small shake. "Oh, that be Bloody Will Fowler himself. A more dangerous man you'll not be findin' in our entire city or perhaps the entire sea. He's so dangerous, sir, 'tis the God's truth he uses his own name. 'Tis been said he's killed over one hundred men in the Caribbean alone. I dare not think how many he killed before he arrived."

A challenge perhaps, but Quinn had never backed down from a challenge. His gaze slid once again to the group. "And the woman?"

"Oh, her! Well, sir, everyone here knows Captain Savage."

"*That's* Captain Savage?"

"Oh, aye. Have you just arrived in the islands then?" She shook her head and pursed her lips. "She made a bloody name for herself before the migration. She sailed with Henry Jennings, and they stole a cache of the finest gold and silver right out from under Spanish noses. 'Tis probably enough to live high 'n mighty the rest of their bloody lives, but the Captain's relentless in her pursuit of coin. I might have a cause to hate her if she weren't so good to me. I mean look at her all beautiful and bright and shiny, but she pays handsomely she does for her drink and vittles and anythin' else she's a mind for. She's a tough captain, though generous I'm told."

"That seems unusual. Why would she be so generous?"

Bridget gaped. "Well, now, she'd have to be, wouldn't she?"

He cocked his head. "Because?"

She slapped at his arm and laughed. "Are you daft then, sir? Cause she's a woman! 'Tis more'n bad luck to have a woman aboard a ship, let alone as captain of the very vessel itself. Some here in New Providence willna even give her the time of day. Pirates be bloody crazy at times."

"She's captain of a *pirate* ship?"

Bridget laughed. "Well, surely you knew that, sir. You be in New Providence. What did you expect to find, a bunch of gentry? Poor dears had been flounderin' around lookin' for a new hidey-hole since the Jamaican governor called it quits there. Though I 'spose we all have to give him a bit of thanks for allowin' us to leave at all. Coulda' been a very bad thing." She shuddered.

"The governor of Jamaica is a bit of a prick."

Bridget sighed. "Most of 'em are."

He dropped a kiss on the end of her nose and gave her ass a little push. She didn't move. Quinn's head dropped back.

*On your way, little Bridget.*

"Have a care, sir. Captain Savage, well, her crew's not a popular bunch in New Providence, especially of late. Hard times be comin', and that crew be filled with some very bad sorts."

Quinn frowned. "You said they were good sorts."

She laughed. "Well, sir, 'tis all in perception, isn't it now? I never said I didn't *like* bad sorts. But if you want a piece of advice, stay away from 'em." She jumped to her feet and scampered away as the barkeep signaled her.

Captain Savage. Katherine Cross.

Quinn continued to study the group across the room.

## Chapter 4

Kit Savage watched the stranger watching her. Not a bad looking man at all. In fact, he was very pleasing to look upon. She loved a man with dark hair, and this man had his long, black hair tied at the nape of his neck. Wide shoulders stretched tight inside a chocolate-colored jacket, molded over a large chest. He looked like a bit of sin, not quite the devil himself—that description might be reserved for James Kingsley—but definitely in the inner circle. Dark eyes stared at her with a hint of impunity as though staring at any of the denizens of The Dirty Barnacle offered no threat or repercussions of any kind, a sure sign he had newly arrived in New Providence.

*What a jackass.*

She touched the hand of the man seated next to her and lifted her chin toward the stranger. “What do you think of that man over there?”

Red Hal swung his face in the man’s direction. A broad grin split his face, and he burst into riotous laughter. “Goin’ to surely get skewered before the sun sets, if not before.”

The stranger dropped his gaze for a moment, seemingly preoccupied with his tankard. Kit didn’t doubt for a moment he listened to every word they said. She’d never seen him here before, but then the population of New Providence rose and fell with the tide. This man could be gathering information for anyone or spying for one of the faction leaders. That idea offered some possible danger. She’d done her best to maintain a fairly neutral stance in the unspoken war between Henry Jennings and Ben Hornigold, but trust levels had bottomed out in the Bahamas. She’d made her share of enemies like everyone else. She might have made more.

Another possibility disturbed her more. She'd managed to hide in plain sight, on the sea and in the Bahamas, for more than a year. Kit wouldn't put it past her father to send another search party. She'd had a devil of a time eluding the last one. If Richard Cross had sent this man, she'd have no choice but to—

She straightened on the bench. "Bloody hell, that's Quinn Blackwell."

What the fuck was the owner of Sugar Bay doing here? She'd dodged an introduction to him for months, hiding and spying on Blackwell and her father from a distance. He'd looked intriguing, but she automatically vetoed any man chosen by her father. All that effort to avoid him and now he'd shown up in her corner of the world? Well, he could just get the hell out. She rose to her feet, and her quartermaster's voice roused her out of her thoughts. "Kit? The tribute?"

She pulled her gaze back to Hal's and lowered herself back to the bench. She shook off the idea of trouble. Quinn Blackwell could be in the Bahamas for any number of reasons, and since they'd never actually met, perhaps his presence wouldn't be a problem. She'd handle one thing at a time, and they'd come to the tavern to discuss their finances.

"Right. Business. Well, gentlemen, our tribute increases every time I take a breath. We used our gifts from the *Le Belle Mer* to barter for the new sails and equipment, and now..."

"Speakin' of the *La Belle Mer*, how is your little pet?" Hal asked.

Kit smiled. "He's hardly a pet, Hal. Silas is bright, friendly—"

"And crazy as a loon," Hal said. "He's a squirrely little man. He scurries about so fast I barely get a glimpse before he's dodged back into his nest. He's stealin' things right and left, hoardin' them in that corner for some nefarious purpose. I can feel it. It smells like hell down in the hold."

"It always smells like hell down in the hold," Will Fowler said.

“No,” Hal said. “I mean it *literally* smells like hell. Sulfur, fire, brimstone. God knows what he’s doin’ down there. Are you sure he talks to *angels*?”

“I’m afraid to go near him.” Trueblood flashed the sign of the cross across his chest. “I think he’s the devil.”

“Could be,” Hal said. “And by the sounds that come out of his hole, he’s not alone. I swear he’s got an entire litter of somethin’ in there. He’s always mumblin’ and rockin’ and croonin’ to somethin’. It’s bloody creepy.” Hal’s shoulders shuddered.

“I find him charming,” Kit said. “He amuses me, and he’s very sweet.”

“We wouldn’t know,” Fowler said. “He only talks to you and his imaginary friends.” Trueblood made another sign of the cross. Fowler gazed at her impassively, then said, “He’s trouble. I don’t know why, but I feel it.”

“No matter,” Kit said firmly. “He’s under my protection. Back to business. Our coffers aren’t as full as they used to be, and low coffers make me nervous.” She paused for a moment to sip at her rum, then winked at Hal. “I blame Trueblood.”

The men laughed, and Peter Trueblood gasped. His head snapped up, and his hands stilled as he stopped fussing with the lace cuffs of his shirt. His brows drew down.

“How is that my fault?” he cried.

She gestured toward his satin waistcoat. “You claim the finest clothing, silks, and jewels for yourself. You’re merciless at the auctions. I can’t get a decent outfit to save my life.”

Trueblood toyed with a golden band at his wrist. “A man of my station has to look his best.”

Will Fowler grunted. “No one can hold a candle to your impeccability.” Fowler’s gaze slid across the young man. “You’ll be the finest peacock dancing for the hangman.”

The group roared with laughter, and Trueblood blushed furiously. Kit reached across and patted his hand.



“Keep your ears open for any possible raids, Peter. You seem to have the best contacts.”

Fowler raised his gaze toward the ceiling. “We’re calling them *contacts* now? He’s fucked every ship’s cook, cabin boy, and powder monkey in the Caribbean.”

“I’m a popular fellow,” Trueblood said, with a smile. “My paramours like to talk to someone who listens. I’ve heard of a few possibilities. English fair game, Kit?”

“Preying on our own?” Kit tapped at her mouth with a finger. “I prefer something with fewer complications.”

“Henry Jennings doesn’t seem to give a flyin’ fuck what ships we take,” Hal said, “as long as the tribute’s good.”

“But Hornigold cares,” Kit said, “and I’ve no desire to get caught up in this conflict between Jennings and Hornigold.”

Will Fowler snorted. “Hornigold doesn’t have a prayer of stripping Jennings’s power here.”

“Hornigold’s new lieutenant is formidable,” Kit said.

Fowler laughed. “Ah, aye, the new lieutenant. James bloody Kingsley. By the noise coming out of your quarters, he’s quite formidable.”

Hal sat back in his chair. “I don’t see a reason to miss out on a good prize, no matter whose ship it is. I say we do what makes us the fuckin’ richest. With any luck someone will oust them both.”

“Someone like Charles Vane?” Fowler asked.

“Vane’s a lunatic,” Hal said. “If he gets control of New Providence, I’ll hang myself instead of waitin’ for the British to do it.”

Kit sighed. “Don’t threaten me, Hal. You know I can’t function without you.”

“The men want more,” Hal said. “English ships could give them a better retirement. Lots of ships comin’ out of Jamaica lately, and the profits could make us very wealthy men.”

Kit nodded. Her father's ships would be a bounty of treasure alone. More than once she'd thought of plundering them, but it wouldn't do well for her future should she run across a captain she knew. "Aye, but until I've reached a decision, I consider the English off-limits. I've no desire to hang under the English flag, and raiding English ships causes potential problems here in New Providence and personal problems for *me*. We walk a tight rope as it is. Let me think about it. I've other things on my mind today."

"James Kingsley seems to be the only thing on your mind these days," Fowler said. "I don't like your Mr. Kingsley."

"Keeping him on my good side is in our best interests," Kit said.

"And you need to fuck him to do that?" Fowler asked.

Kit wrapped a curl around her finger. "Of course not. I do that because I want to. I like to have fun, but I also like to know what's happening on this island, so Kingsley's connections are a bonus. He may come in handy in any future endeavors we pursue here. I meet with Jennings in two days and plan to renegotiate the tribute. I'll discuss how he feels about taking English ships. Fair enough?" Kit smiled as her glance caught each man in turn. They seemed content. She'd managed to thwart today's disaster. "Good then. Anything else?"

Trueblood lowered his head, and Hal glanced toward Fowler, giving him a nod.

"Fuck you, Hal," Fowler muttered. "You know damn well she doesn't want to discuss it. Let me do my damn job and—"

Hal leaned toward him, glaring. "It's possibly *all* our lives, not just hers."

Kit rapped on the table and all three men swiveled toward her. "Out with it."

"The black roses," Hal said. "We can't keep on ignorin' them. Doin' that is bound to bring more trouble."

Kit leaned back in her chair. "You know I haven't had a black rose delivered in months." She spread her hands. "I don't *know* who's sending them."

Trueblood flicked his lacy cuff. "There's a lot of talk, Kit. Your word isn't good enough for some. Men are disappearing, and when the black rose is found, you're being blamed."

"With good reason," Hal said. "She started the whole sorry game."

"It was hardly a game," Kit said. "Someone had to rid this place of true vermin."

"And now," Fowler said, "someone is using your own tactic to rid the place of *you*. People are nervous. They deduce based on what they know, and what they know is Kit Savage uses a black rose to make people vanish. Someone is trying to bully you into leaving New Providence or creating enemies to run you out. Eventually they're going to take more drastic measures...and be successful. Your safety here has been compromised."

"We've managed so far," Kit murmured.

Fowler ran a hand over his throat. "Barely," he muttered.

"I was truly sorry about that, Will," Kit said. "Did I not adequately compensate you?" She reached into her waistcoat, and Fowler waved his hand.

"You gave me plenty, and I survived."

"I can't imagine what the devil this malcontent wants from me, but we will figure it out. In the meantime..."

She waved her hand, and Bridget scooted out from behind the bar, running across the room. Kit flipped a coin in the girl's direction. Her eyes locked on Quinn Blackwell. He stared back. "Get us another round, Bridget, and bring one for that gentleman across the way. The stupid one who's listening to everything we say."

Kit cocked her head and gave Blackwell a smile. His dark head bowed slightly in her direction. Bridget nodded her head of bright curls then skipped across the barroom.

Will Fowler stared at Kit hard, his dark eyes narrowing. “What have you got on that mind of yours? It can’t be good with the look I see in your eyes.”

She rested her chin in her hand and leaned forward. Her brows lifted. “Do you have a problem with me having a little fun?”

Fowler shook his head, but the frown on his face caused the scar to deepen into a menacing slash. “Ah, no, Captain. I’ve no problem with it, but I fear James Kingsley might.”

“James and I don’t have that kind of arrangement,” Kit said.

“That’s not what I heard,” Trueblood said. “I was talking to one of the men on the *Elizabeth Ann*.”

Hal laughed. “Talking?”

Trueblood rolled his eyes. “Not exactly talking. Did you want the intimate details? Want to hear how well he sucked my dick?”

Hal lurched back in his chair and held up his hands. “God no!”

Trueblood huffed. “Fine then. My friend knows Kingsley quite well. He’s a mighty nice fellow from Portsmouth and has an ass—”

“Trueblood!” He pivoted at the sound of Fowler’s gruff voice. “Get your mind off your dick and focus.”

Trueblood shook his head. “Right. Well, my friend drinks with Kingsley on occasion. Apparently Kingsley can’t stop talking about our fair captain and fancies himself in love with her.”

Hal drew back in his chair. “Kingsley in love? He’d just as soon slice your throat as look at you.”

“He’s not as fierce as some think,” Kit said.

Hal shook his head. “I’m not so sure. The men who sail with Kingsley call him King James, and he’s gettin’ a reputation for being quite ruthless. Some say he kills without thought.”

Fowler grunted. “They say the same about us, and we’re not cold-hearted killers.”

Trueblood leaned forward. “Apparently, Kingsley falls in love the way other men breathe. He’s been through hundreds of women.”

Kit shrugged. “Then I’m just one of many. No worries.”

“But there are worries,” Trueblood said, “because when Kingsley’s in love, he’s *monogamous*.”

As Trueblood paused and glanced at each stunned face, Kit struggled to keep her face still. James sailed in and out of her daily life with the tide. They rarely spoke outside of her cabin, and inside there were far better things to do than converse. Sure, he’d offered marriage on numerous occasions, but she’d always viewed his proposals as a way of getting a ship and a command without taking full responsibility. Hell, no one in New Providence remained monogamous, not even the married ones. Monogamy didn’t fit into her life at all, and she certainly didn’t plan to fall in love permanently.

“One woman only,” Trueblood said. “Hard to imagine, isn’t it? I’ve heard he’s very territorial, very jealous. It doesn’t usually last long as Kingsley is as fickle as they come, but Kit might be in for a world of trouble if she’s inclined to have a roving eye.”

Kit flicked at the ribbons on her wrist, then ran a finger through their satiny strands. “James will just have to deal with it, because my eye is roving as we speak.” She glanced toward Blackwell, wondering again what he was doing in New Providence.

Fowler shook his head. “I don’t give a damn about Kingsley, and I don’t ever have a mind to interfere with your fun, Kit, but there’s something not right about that man across the way. He’s got something on his mind, and in New Providence it’s doubtful to be a good thing. Since you pay me so handsomely to—”

“Keep me alive, aye, I know. And you do an admirable job as I am obviously still here.” She spread her hand toward her face. “Alive, breathing, and...horny as fucking hell. I’m itchy today.”

Her gaze shifted to the man across the room. She didn’t care how Blackwell had come to be in her little Caribbean paradise. He could definitely take care of the itch. She wiggled on the bench as a delicious little shudder spasmed through her pussy.

Hal laughed, and Fowler shook his head, saying miserably, “Fucking’s the only thing on your mind when you get that gleam in

your eye. If you're thinking about fucking a total stranger today, it makes my job a might harder."

"Oh, he's not a *total* stranger," Kit murmured, "though he won't know that."

Trueblood suddenly swung around in his seat and stared across the room. When his gaze locked on what he obviously considered the most promising candidate, he turned back. A predatory smile flickered on his face.

Kit shook her head. "Oh, no, you don't, Peter. I saw him first. Besides, he's not your type."

Trueblood cocked his head and smiled. "I don't have a particular type. I kind of like them all and I don't always have to be the one in charge." Trueblood licked his lips, running his hands through his straight, blond hair. "For that tall, dark hunk of meat, I might be willing to make allowances. Seriously, that man is a tasty morsel. What I wouldn't give to get my hand on that dick." Trueblood flipped a coin on the table. "Let's wager on it. We can see which one of us he prefers."

Kit cocked a brow. "I've no desire to wager with you for a man's attention. Half the time I lose, but I'd be willing to stake *The Black Rose* he'll prefer me."

Trueblood spit into his palm and held out his hand. "*The Rose* it is."

Fowler leaned forward, his bushy brows drawn down in a frown, and slapped Trueblood's hand. "I might need to remind you, Trueblood, *The Black Rose* is not yours to gamble with."

"But she just said—"

"Never mind what she just said," Fowler said with disgust. "You know she talks nonsense when she's got her eyes a new cock. Her mind's on her pussy."

Kit fingered one of the curls against her cheek as her gaze drifted to Fowler's. "Stop talking about my pussy like I'm not sitting right here. I'm your captain, damn it." Kit reached into her waistcoat

pocket and tossed a silver coin onto the plank. It spun and landed in front of Trueblood. "Will is right. We'll wager a coin."

Even as Trueblood gathered the coin, he and Fowler continued to bicker. She gave a half-hearted attempt to listen, but her gaze shifted back to Blackwell.

*Definitely more handsome than I remembered. Dark, dangerous. My kind of man. But any man associated with my father can't be here for my enjoyment.*

She really liked the looks of him—the broad shoulders, the blue-black of his hair, dark eyes that might be green. She cursed the smoky haze that interfered with her perusal. Though she'd known Blackwell cut an imposing figure, she'd never been this close to him. She'd managed to avoid all introductions by disappearing into the jungle for the day.

She definitely thought Blackwell's eyes might be green. There also seemed to be promise in the way those big hands gripped the mug, and she'd watched his little conversation with Bridget. He'd been thoroughly attentive, and Bridget's little wiggle on his lap seemed to indicate all his body parts worked. A definite plus and one she'd like to pursue. She also needed to know what the hell he was doing in New Providence.

The man seriously distracted her, so it seemed clear she needed to do something about that. She'd spend a leisurely afternoon exploring...the color of his eyes. She burst into laughter, and the men gave her various types of glances. Fowler seemed less than pleased, but then he never seemed pleased with her antics. Dealing with Will Fowler offered a unique challenge in itself but she had come to trust him above all others in the last few months.

Kit refocused on her crew, trying to listen to their banter. They squabbled like jealous siblings at times, vying for her attention. Trueblood's argument had finally run its course.

"Just the same, let me get my hands inside his pants and—"

“Fuck me, Pete,” Hal said. “Keep your dick in reality. That man’s one for the ladies.”

Fowler glanced at him with another disgusted look. “Christ almighty, Trueblood. Don’t make me pound you into the table.”

Will didn’t seem in a good mood today, far worse than usual. It couldn’t be the money, the tribute, or even the discussion over what ships to capture. She decided the fault lay with her. The black roses that had been delivered throughout the town, several missing men, and six attempts on her life had worn down her friend. She’d have to investigate the rose business more thoroughly, but Will definitely needed a few days to himself.

“Now that business is over, I’m ready for a bit of fun.”

Fowler snorted. “Goes through men like other women go through hats.”

“But I only have one hat, Will,” Kit said, “so you must forgive my other indulgences.”

Fowler barked out a burst of laughter. “Indulgences? You practically eat your men alive.”

Kit winked. “I like to consider them bedtime snacks.”

Trueblood slid another glance toward the man behind them. “Kit eats more cock than I do. I’m fucking jealous at times.”

“A bloody goddamn miracle,” Hal said, “on both counts.”

Bridget slid a tray onto the table and passed the drinks around. She leaned provocatively over Hal to show him an enticing display of cleavage.

Hal breathed deeply. “You smell like wildflowers today, Bridget.”

Bridget sidled closer, her breast brushing against his arm. She pushed a tankard toward him. “And would you be wantin’ to take a walk in my garden, then, Hal?”

Her sultry glance flickered over Hal’s face. Kit pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh. Their little dance occurred several times a week. One of these days Hal might stumble right into Bridget’s



steely grip, and he'd never escape the trap. If it didn't happen soon, one of the others would be happy to push him.

Hal wrapped his hands around his mug. "No, darlin', can't today."

A little frown crossed Bridget's face. Kit reached out and took the last tankard from the girl's hand. Bridget cast a quick glance across the room and leaned closer to the table, wiping a damp rag over the surface. She kept her voice low.

"The stranger, the stupid one, was askin' about you, Captain."

*Wonderful. Just what I need right now. Damn you, Father.*

Kit's glance slid toward Blackwell who at least had found enough common sense to avoid looking toward their table. His eyes continued to peer at the mug as though it would fill by his will alone. "And what did he want to know?"

"Just ask what I could say about you. I told him the usual."

Hal pressed a coin into the girl's palm. When Bridget flounced away, Kit pushed a tankard toward Fowler.

"Go invite the stranger to join us."

"I'm to pander for you now, Captain? It's not enough I've saved your pretty little ass six times in as many weeks? If you're fucking a complete stranger, I'm going to want extra today. And tomorrow off."

She waved her hand. "Oh, fine, Will." When the other two men opened their mouths and leaned forward, she cocked her head. "Is there a problem, gentlemen? Some form of protest? Are any of *you* responsible for keeping me alive?"

They both settled back in their chairs, and Hal folded his burly arms on the table. "No, Kit, and Pete and I wouldn't take that job for all the gold in a Spanish fleet." He tossed a nod toward Fowler. "But we've saved *his* sorry ass more times than we can count. The last time almost got us both killed. The man needs his own surgeon."

"And I hired one." Kit huffed. "Seriously, you're all determined to make me a pauper. You're bleeding impossible and draining me dry. But we will figure out who's sending the roses. That I promise. Now,

Will, get over there and fetch my new toy.” She stabbed a finger toward Trueblood. “You’ll get *The Black Rose* over my dead body.”

“That’s probably going to be any day now,” Fowler muttered as he stood.

\* \* \* \*

Quinn Blackwell listened as best he could to their conversation, not overly surprised to hear the names Jennings and Hornigold. Everyone in the Caribbean knew of the power struggle between the two men. He’d actually planned to meet with Jennings since he’d known Katherine Cross in Jamaica. Now he wondered if Katherine had gotten herself mixed up in pirate politics. He’d heard Kingsley’s name since his arrival. All three men had been privateers who’d turned to the lucrative field of piracy when the end of the war caused their finances and connections to dry up, leaving them with no future financial prospects on the sea.

Bloody Will Fowler stood up and came toward his table. Fowler wasn’t an overly large man, but he exuded a level of intimidation that increased as he moved closer. Encouraging an altercation with Fowler would not be good for anyone’s health, though Quinn doubted that would stop him if it became necessary. When the man yanked out a chair and sat at his table without a word, Quinn saw the deep gash threading over the flesh of his face seemed to be the least of the damage on his body. Numerous slashes and gouges covered his bare arms, he had a missing finger on his left hand, and the tip of one ear had been cut, or possibly bitten, off. A large scar also sliced across his hairline as though someone had tried to hack off the top of his head. Quinn had seen that once before on the southern mainland, though it had been on a corpse.

Quinn’s gaze roamed the shoulders and expanse of Fowler’s chest wondering what other damage might exist beneath the dingy shirt.

This man had led a seriously violent life and yet managed to survive. Formidable.

Fowler pushed a tankard toward him, the rum sloshing over the rim and onto Quinn's hand. "My captain's bought you a drink."

Despite the man's appearance, Fowler's rough, gravelly voice caught Quinn off guard. One brow rose as he managed to keep his stare even. He shook the droplets off his hand. "Was I to wear or drink it?"

"I don't give a bloody damn what you do with it. I think it's a bad idea."

The sound of the man's voice grated on every nerve in Quinn's body, reminding him of a knife sawing through bone, and after too many years of war, he'd heard enough of that sound to last a lifetime. When Fowler lifted his chin, studying him with the intensity of a predator determined to get his prey, his graying hair swung away from his neck. A rough, jagged wound sliced across the man's throat. Judging by the look of the injury, Quinn thought it had happened only a few weeks prior.

He nodded toward Fowler's neck. "Have a little trouble lately?"

Fowler folded his arms across his chest and leaned back in his chair. "Not much. The other man's no longer talking at all. I'd call that a successful day."

Quinn's stare roamed over the man again. "It seems you've had more than your share of trouble. Not a friendly man, are you?"

Will Fowler returned the stare, studying every inch of Quinn's body. "I'm friendly enough...with friends." His gaze flickered back to Quinn's face. "Looks to me you've never seen a bit of trouble in your life. Not a mark on you."

"Maybe I'm better at what I do than you are."

A smile lifted the mangled corner of Fowler's mouth. "That's doubtful, boy. From what I can see, you don't belong here."

"I have reasons for being here."

“I imagine you believe that,” Fowler said, “but New Providence isn’t the kind of place for a man like you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, though you don’t have any idea what kind of man I am.” Quinn downed the tankard of rum. He grabbed his hat from the table and stood. “Thank your captain for the drink.”

“You might misunderstand the protocol here in New Providence, sir.” Fowler stood up and gestured across the room. From the corner of his eye, Quinn saw motion at Savage’s table. Fowler’s rough voice deepened. “Think it’s only polite you thank her yourself.”

The big man—Red Hal—came across the space and dragged Quinn’s chair across the room. He shoved it between the one called Peter Trueblood and his own. Quinn had little choice but to follow and sit when Hal’s impossibly huge hand clapped him on the shoulder, herded him across the room and knocked him into the chair. Until he’d come across Red Hal, Quinn had always thought himself a big man. He’d held his own in the Royal Navy against the largest and strongest of men who sometimes balked at being pressed into Her Majesty’s service.

Quinn had never agreed with the concept of pressing though he had to admit in time of war it gave them enough able-bodied seamen to counteract the daily losses. Of course, some of those men might possibly surround him now. Fighting men without a war tended to ply their trade elsewhere—if not for Queen Anne’s cause, then certainly for their own. Many a former Navy crewmember had turned pirate.

Queen Anne was gone now and loyalties be damned. These men might have fought for their queen, but there was no way in hell they’d pledge their allegiance to a Hapsburg, a man who refused to learn the language of his new subjects. Even Quinn had left his native England in an attempt to escape the future of Britain in the hands of a German. He’d paid the price for that. That bloody pirate ship that caught them off the coast of Africa had almost been the death of him, but he’d met Silas Watkins, and Watkins might hold the keys to his future.

He glanced around the group assembled at the scarred table. They clearly enjoyed one another's company and held a specific allegiance to the woman. But danger glittered in all their eyes, an almost maniacal glint that should have made Quinn abandon his plan and leave New Providence. Not bloody likely, no matter how many threats Fowler threw at him. Quinn had done his share of dangerous things and would probably do more. He'd never been known for restraint. Even that stint on the pirate ship had failed to teach him much about control, but he'd learned how to mask the edgy impatience he saw etched on the faces before him. He refused to let his show.

Fowler motioned to the woman. "Captain Kit Savage of *The Black Rose*."

He nodded. "Quinn Blackwell."

As the rest of the introductions were made, Quinn kept his gaze locked on Kit Savage.

## Chapter 5

Kit strode across the pristine planks of her quarters, leaving Quinn Blackwell to hover in the open doorway. As she moved, she tossed her hat onto the large table that served as her desk. She'd been running the man through her mind, trying to remember everything she knew of him. Blackwell was ex-British navy and a Jamaica transplant. He owned Sugar Bay, a plantation near Sea Wind and had become one of her father's political sycophants. There had been rumors Blackwell had sailed with a Spanish pirate vessel and had arrived in Jamaica broke, but not broken. None of that had stopped his ambition. What better way to achieve his political aspirations than to latch onto Richard Cross, the most prominent man in Jamaica outside of the governor?

She'd also figured out why Blackwell was in the Bahamas. She'd heard the last hurricane to hit Jamaica had created damage for everyone. Perhaps Blackwell had taken a larger hit and had a need to increase his finances. Marriage would present that opportunity. She shuddered at that thought.

Blackwell had to be looking for her. Whether it was to re-establish her father's control over her, or for himself, she'd yet to decide. It would be just like Richard Cross to sell off his primary non-financial asset—his daughter.

She fought the urge to turn around and watch him as he inspected her. She knew she was pretty, but it never hurt to see a man's admiration, even a man spying for her father. She knew his heated gaze roamed her long, slim legs, the soft rounded curves of her hips, the trim waist cinched tight in her waistcoat. But she knew his gaze

lingered on her hair, golden curls that tumbled down her back in disarray. Most men couldn't resist touching them and several had almost lost their hands.

"*The Black Rose* is a beautiful ship," Blackwell said.

"Aye, she is. Cost me a hellish fortune."

Kit unhooked her weapons belt and laid it across the desk. She paused as she unbuttoned her coat, tilting her head. She cast a little glance over her shoulder and a tendril of hair slipped across her eye. Blackwell swallowed. That little coquettish trick never failed.

"But," he continued, "not as beautiful as her captain."

She threw back her head and laughed. "That, Mr. Blackwell, was the perfect thing to say, and the surest way to get my attention. Though, for some reason, I doubt your sincerity."

Kit pulled off her coat, hung it on a wooden peg, and sauntered to the rear of her quarters. She leaned over the bench, giving him an enticing view of her ass, and opened the bank of casement windows that stretched across the stern. The clean salty aroma of the sea breeze filled her nostrils, and the sounds of the water lapping against the hull filled her ears like a siren's song. She wanted to get back out to sea, but first she'd indulge in a little entertainment. She had no intention of taking this man out of New Providence harbor on her ship.

Her guest cast a glance behind him where Will Fowler stood on the deck, his stiff back blocking the view.

"He won't move from that spot until I tell him to, but have no fear on that score. Will is very discreet. No matter what he hears, it stays between us. Well, most often any way." She laughed then folded her arms across her chest, fully aware of the cleavage visible where her shirt gaped. Blackwell's glance dipped exactly where she wanted it. "Apparently I've developed quite a reputation."

"I'd not heard of Kit Savage before I arrived in the Bahamas."

*Somehow I doubt that, Mr. Blackwell.*

She thrust her lip out in a pout. "What a terrible thing to say to me. You really hadn't heard of me? A woman likes to think she has a

certain reputation, that she might have been discussed...in certain circles.”

She threw him a challenging look, but he refused to take the bait. Whatever his reasons for being in New Providence, he had no intention of divulging them to her without a little coercion.

His gaze traveled down the length of her body. “I’ve not been acquainted with many pirates lately, though truly I had no idea they came packaged like you. I might have come to New Providence sooner.”

“Had you come earlier, you’d have been in my cabin sooner as well.” She winked at him. “I can guarantee you a memorable experience.” She sauntered toward him, then paused, winding a lock of hair around her finger as she studied him. “To be honest, I’m almost glad to hear I’m an unknown in the wider world. I must be doing something right. It’s not a wise thing for someone in my profession to be known. I intend to live a long and full life and having your name well known is a surefire way to get yourself killed. Believe me, for every pirate you hear of that’s captured and hung, there are two of us slipping away unharmed because we’re simply better at our jobs.”

“That’s a rather enlightened view for a *pirate*.”

“One isn’t born a pirate, Mr. Blackwell. We overcome the obstacles thrown in our path and earn our way to the title. Now, what is it you want from me?”

“I was under the impression I was on this ship at your invitation.”

She smiled. “Well, you are, but your intention to meet me seemed very clear. I’m used to men staring at me, but most of those stares have a certain measure of threat attached to them. You appeared to have something entirely different on your mind, and it seemed to match my own thoughts. I merely reduced the time we would spend playing games. Playing games is such a waste of time, and I’m a busy woman.”



She crooked her finger toward him, beckoning him toward her. He removed his hat and took several more steps into the room. Fowler immediately closed the door behind him. Blackwell's head snapped around as the latch fell into place. When he turned back, his brow rose.

"Consider yourself temporarily detained, Mr. Blackwell."

"It's Captain Blackwell."

She smiled sweetly. "Not on this ship it isn't."

"Am I being detained for any particular purpose?"

"For several purposes, but I'll start with the most obvious question. Who do you work for?"

"I hoped to work for you."

Kit tilted her head. "Indeed? The way you stared at me in *The Dirty Barnacle* made me think you might be assessing the situation for someone."

"I've just recently arrived here," Blackwell said. "I can assure you I sail for no one and have very little interest in anything that transpires in your pirate hierarchy. I'm merely interested in increasing my fortune due to some unforeseen circumstances."

"Well, *The Rose* has a full crew complement. I know you've seen that because I was told you paid a visit to the ship this afternoon and did a rather thorough inspection."

"I thought I'd been rather surreptitious."

Kit smiled. "My men aren't as dumb as they look, or they'd all be dead. What exactly would a man like you have to offer to me?"

Blackwell tossed his hat onto the desk as he moved closer. "Perhaps nothing and yet you're interested. I saw you watching me."

Kit took a step toward him. "You watched me first."

"I'm a man of many talents and experiences, with a great many nautical skills. I've served as a bosun's mate, navigator, a quartermaster. I've also had several ships under my command."

"Successfully?"

"I've seen my share of battle."

She inspected him from head to toe. Blackwell wore very fashionable clothing for skulking about a pirate haven, and the lure of his possible affluence would have boded unfavorably for anyone with less confidence. He certainly looked the part of a successful plantation owner, and offered an intriguing mark for the denizens of their town, but Kit knew how unsuccessful Blackwell had been. “It’s very curious, because an officer in the royal navy usually wears a uniform of some sort or another.”

“I’m retired from the navy.”

“I see. Your credentials are all very impressive, sir, but I’ve no need for additional crew. In fact, allowing you to join my crew would create a hardship I’m not willing to entertain.”

“In what way?”

“I don’t fuck my crew, Mr. Blackwell. That wouldn’t be healthy for any of us. It could complicate my rather happy little family here and cause additional tension we don’t need. So you see, having you on my staff is not in my best interests since I have something entirely *un-nautical* on my mind.”

Kit dropped into a chair and tugged off her boots, flinging them toward the wall where they settled in an untidy heap near a weathered storage chest. She slid lower in the chair and crossed her legs, her gaze wandering down the length of his body, bouncing her bare foot as she studied him.

“Let’s see if you’re worth keeping, shall we?”

Blackwell laughed. “What makes you think that’s your choice?”

Kit gave him a sultry grin. “You’re on my ship. My ship. My choice. Take off your clothes.”

“I’m not accustomed to taking orders, especially from a woman.”

“And I’m not accustomed to having my orders ignored. It seems one of us will have to alter our usual behavior, Mr. Blackwell, and I can assure you, it’s not going to be me.” Kit smiled. “Do you have a problem with fucking me this afternoon?”

“No problem at all, Captain.”

Blackwell shrugged out of his coat then tugged at the collar of his shirt, pulling it over his head. What lay beneath the snowy cloth didn't disappoint. As he tugged off his boots, then began unbuttoning his pants, Kit allowed her gaze to roam across the grooved muscles of his shoulders, chest, abdomen, enjoying each ridge and ripple as he moved. Not as big as James, or as imposing, but definitely a man who'd taken great care to keep his body in the best physical shape. She congratulated herself on a fine choice for an afternoon of fun. This man looked as though he could spend an afternoon scrambling in the rigging, swim a strait after dinner and have plenty of energy left to fuck well into the night. He was a perfect specimen, and if locked in her cabin, he wouldn't be able to create whatever havoc he had in mind. She'd figure that out in time, but first things first.

She stood up as he pushed the pants down his hips. When they puddled into a heap at his feet and he kicked them away, he stood before her unashamed, obviously enjoying her perusal.

"No arguments, Mr. Blackwell? Aren't you going to plead captivity, some sort of hostage code?"

"It hasn't worked for me in the past, so why waste my time? Am I a hostage?"

"Not entirely, though I've no plans to release you any time soon. Does that disturb you?"

"Not at all." He moved toward her, and his hands lingered on the edge of her blouse, his fingers sweeping down to touch the warmth inside. "Are there rules I should know? Plan to skewer me if I do something outside your comfort zone?"

"I don't have a comfort zone. At least nothing I've found yet. Perhaps you'd like to challenge me. I like surprises."

She wasn't sure how she felt when he ran his hands down her arms. Most men wouldn't presume to touch her without invitation, but Blackwell seemed to have no boundaries. He swept his hands over her waist and up until he reached her breasts. Cupping them gently, he

leaned down and whispered against her lips. “Your turn. The clothes. Take them off.”

Kit shook off his hands then untied the ribbon of her blouse. She pulled the material over her head, her hair spilling around her shoulders. He brushed at one of the curls, and the back of his hand caressed her breast causing the nipple to rise.

“Captain Savage, I think you’re the most beautiful pirate I’ve ever seen.”

Kit laughed. “Not hard to be around here. Surely you studied the population of New Providence. But I like your pretty words, Blackwell. A woman needs to hear words like that from time to time.” She undid her petticoat ties, shimmied out of them, and kicked the skirts one by one toward her boots, a pile of cobalt, dusky blue, azure, and white. “But I have no desire for words today. I’ve other things on my mind.”

She wound her arms around his neck, and when he tightened his arms around her, she lifted herself up, wrapping her legs around his waist. She stared down into his face, noting that his eyes were a beautiful shade of dark sea green. She planned to spend the entire afternoon studying them and trying to decipher the secrets inside. She knew he had some and eventually she’d discover them. She just had to do some digging.

He strode toward her bed, and they fell together onto the soft down quilt that covered it. He rolled her until she lay against him. She pushed up and straddled him, her hands wrapping around his cock.

“What a wonderful surprise. Is it for me?”

“To do with as you like.”

“You should never give a pirate carte blanche, Blackwell, but it’s just the way I like my surprises—hard, hot, and silky smooth. Positively stimulating.” She rubbed her wet pussy against the warm length, and Blackwell’s eyes lowered to watch the movement of her body. Her thighs clenched around him.

"I find it stimulating as well," he said hoarsely. He clutched her hips, dragging her even closer, and his cock tightened in her hand, hardening further. The tip glistened with a drop of fluid she found intoxicating. She wanted to lean down and lick at it, but not yet.

She placed her hands on his hip bones and slowly dragged her palms up his body, her fingers prodding each inch of flesh as she went. His skin shone with the kiss of the sun, a burnished gold that complemented the sea color of his eyes. She could drown in those eyes. When she passed his throat, she cupped his face in her hands and bent slowly toward him. She licked the edge of his mouth, then planted a soft kiss at the corner.

His hands tightened on her and suddenly he flipped her over, slamming her into the soft quilt. His body smashed against her, and every inch of her skin flared with a sizzling heat. A soft cry of protest escaped her lips before she could stop it, but she raised her eyes to his, where a spark of humor simmered.

"I think you've forgotten who's in charge, Mr. Blackwell."

"I haven't forgotten." His mouth dropped closer to hers. His breath fanned her lips, and she pulled in a deep breath. "But you're not in charge today, Captain. If this is a test, I intend to pass."

One hand cupped the back of her head as the other swept under her shoulders. When his mouth covered hers, she opened her lips and savored his kiss. His tongue pushed inside, sliding against her teeth, then sweeping through the softness of her mouth. She sucked on it greedily, pulling it deep as she wrapped her arms around his back. Her hands traced across the skin of his back until she encountered a hard ridge of banded flesh that puckered beneath her fingers. He drew in a sharp breath and increased the pressure of his kiss. Moving lower, her fingers encountered dozens of ridges of the same texture. A series of lash scars criss-crossed his entire back.

He trailed kisses across her jaw, sliding down the column of her throat and forcing soft sounds from her. She arched her back, her swollen breasts aching to be touched. Her nipples peaked against the

coarse hair on his chest. She wound her legs around his calves, and her entire body tensed as he suddenly gripped her wrists in one hand.

She opened her mouth to protest, but his body smashed against hers, and the air exploded from her lungs. He reached out with his free hand and grabbed the edge of the sheet, shoving it into her mouth. She choked and spit but couldn't dislodge it.

For one moment he shifted, and when she realized his intent, the makeshift gag smothered her muffled scream. She thrashed, but his body held her captive. He wrapped the ribbons on her wrists around the bedpost. When he finished, he leaned back on his haunches and stared down at her.

"Be a good girl and you'll enjoy this."

She glared at him as he leaned over her to the bedside table and grabbed a silken scarf. Damn him for touching her things. That was her favorite sapphire scarf. It matched her eyes, and she looked damned gorgeous in it! If he ruined it, she'd skin him alive. Twice.

She whipped her head from side to side and lifted her leg to kick him. He solved that problem by straddling her thighs. When he pulled the sheet from her mouth, she managed to take a breath and screech "You bastard!" before the scarf stretched across her open mouth, and he tied it behind her head.

He tilted his head and studied her for a moment. He stroked her shoulder over the area where she had the mark of a black rose. She shivered.

"I like the tattoo." He chuckled. "You must take your pirating seriously."

If she could have killed him with a look, he would already be dead. When she got her hand on her dagger, she'd remedy that.

His ass clenched against her thighs as he slid lower. She swallowed convulsively. Her pussy tightened and pulsed, and her hips angled upward without her permission. She might have to slit her own throat to stop this insanity. He leaned forward, and his lips swallowed one of her nipples, drawing her breast into his mouth and sucking

hard enough to make her cry out behind the gag. Her chin lifted, and she moaned deep in her throat.

He reached down and fingered her clit, tiny pinches that made her heart beat a chaotic rhythm. Her lashes fluttered as she tried to steel herself against his invasion. His mouth continued to draw on her breast, milking her as her body tensed and rose beneath him. He slid his palm across her mound and one finger drove into her. Her body arched up, pushing the finger deeper. When he chuckled, her body slammed back to the mattress, but she couldn't stop the muscles of her pussy from gripping his finger.

He lifted his head and peered into her eyes, a devilish spark glinting in his. "Think you're tough?"

*Goddamn right. Like I'd give you the satisfaction.*

She stared bloody murder at him and made incoherent sounds. He wiped a few strands of hair from her brow. She whipped her head back and forth and bucked upward, trying to get his thieving hands away from her.

His finger lifted inside of her, tracing the soft inner walls with a gentle curl of his fingertip. Her pussy spasmed, and a tiny tremor flickered through her body.

"Feels good, doesn't it?"

She shook her head furiously. He did it again, and her legs tensed beneath his as heat flared through her hips, and the first wave of her orgasm swelled within her. She tightened her hands into fists and pulled, trying to tear the ribbons, but the movement proved to be a mistake. The resulting tension primed her body for an explosion. As his finger curled again, her back arched up, and she came with a shudder. Her body shook violently, and sweat broke out on her brow. She couldn't contain the moan that wound through her throat. She crashed limply against the mattress as the pulses rippled through her pussy. Her arms hung useless in their bonds.

Blackwell shifted and slid his body lower until his head buried between her thighs. Once again he pushed into her, his finger

stroking, massaging, flickering over the spot that took her to heaven. When his tongue touched her clit, her body quaked. When his mouth latched onto the nub and began to suck, she trembled, trying desperately to control the lust that coursed through her and sought an outlet. She wanted to thread her fingers through his hair and pull him tighter. Her hands opened and closed, needing to touch something.

His cock pulsed against her leg, a warm steady beat as it jerked, looking for an entrance to explore. She wanted that cock inside her. She wanted it to slip between her wet pussy lips and bury inside her. She wanted to feel his balls tighten against the curve of her ass as he pounded into her.

He slid up her body, and his cock rammed into her, driving hard and fast and shoving her head into the board at the top of the bed. She arched her hips and wrapped her legs around his ass, pulling him closer. The slippery, wet sounds of their mating filled her ears. The slap of his balls against her flesh urged her to push her hips upward. The head of his cock pressed against her womb, and an aching grind gnawed at her. Each stroke took her closer and closer to the edge.

Her entire body tensed, and her fists curled around the ribbons, straining against the bonds. With a final yank, they tore free, and she dug her fingernails into his shoulders as he rode her. He ripped the gag from her mouth and slammed his lips over hers, smothering her cry as she came with a violent spasm that lifted them both off the bed.

His mouth consumed hers, his teeth nipping at her lips. She kissed her way down his neck and sank her teeth into the flesh of his shoulder just as his body flexed and he rammed into her one last time. The warmth of his cum filled her pussy, and the aftershocks of her orgasm milked him until she felt his swollen flesh slowly curl and drop from her body. A wet puddle formed beneath them.

*I've got to go to Bridget and get more of her potion. The last thing I need on this ship is another crazy man and a baby.*

Blackwell kissed her again, and she kissed him back as she slipped her hand between the bed and the wall.



Carefully pushing her fingers into the velvet pouch she'd concealed there, her fingers slid over the sleek, jewel-encrusted handle of the dagger. She'd lifted it from one rather haughty little Frenchman who'd gotten on her last nerve. Luckily he'd kept his life, but she'd left him in tears when she carted off all his worldly goods, including some gorgeous weapons. She gripped the handle and withdrew it, then maneuvered her arm into the tiny bit of space between their bodies.

She pressed the tip of the dagger against Blackwell's chest and lifted a brow. "I wouldn't move if I were you."

His eyes widened for a brief moment then a smile skimmed his mouth. Damn him. He had a beautiful smile.

"If you ever do anything like that again," Kit said, "I'll cut your heart out."

A bark of laughter shot from his mouth. Impossibly, his cock twitched against her hip. She stared into his eyes with fascination and incredulity. She could kill him with a flick of her wrist and he was laughing? And aroused? His cock continued to grow, its hard length pressing into her. What the hell was wrong with this man? He pressed toward her, and the point of the blade pierced his skin. A drop of blood fell on her breasts. He glanced down but didn't seem at all concerned. Instead his gaze roamed across her skin, then returned to hers.

"Captain Savage, you have such a way with words. You're really quite charming."

She stuttered for the first time in her life. "I'm—I'm—totally serious, Blackwell. I'm used to being obeyed. I *will* cut your heart out."

He planted a kiss on the end of her nose. She blinked in disbelief. "You don't need to cut my heart out. I'll give it to you. I've no need for it."

Her mouth dropped open. She'd just about decided Quinn Blackwell might be insane. She slid her arm out from beneath him,

dropping the dagger onto the floor. “Oh, just get off me!” She pushed at his chest.

He laughed and rolled to the mattress as she tried to untangle the quilt from her feet. She snatched the scarf away from him, smoothing it out in her palm.

“Do you have any idea how much I had to pay Trueblood for this? It cost me a hellish fortune and now you’ve managed to get it all wrinkly and covered in spit. I—”

Something crashed against the door, rattling it on its hinges. Kit scrambled over Blackwell as the thumping escalated and the door threatened to tear off the frame. A pistol exploded, the sound almost lost amid the scuffle of boots and the thunder of bodies slamming against the door.

“Someone’s putting up a hell of a fight,” Blackwell said.

“Just a typical day on *The Black Rose*,” Kit said as she dove for her weapons belt.

The door burst open and crashed against the bookshelves, bouncing on its hinges. James Kingsley’s huge shadow loomed in the open doorway. Kit dropped back to the bed.

*Oh, wonderful.*

The brim of his hat shadowed the expression on his face, but she suspected by the huffing and puffing noises he made, he probably wasn’t in a good mood. His body grew larger and larger as he stormed across the room with the power of a dark thundercloud.

She leaned up on one elbow. “Goddamn it, I do not need this today. What the fuck did you do to Will?”

James ignored her, his long, dark hair flying behind him like a black sail. His swords clattered against each other with the force of his steps. He held something crushed in his fist. She shook her head for a moment, wondering what it could be because it looked like a flower. Why would James Kingsley, one of the fiercest men in the Caribbean, be holding what looked like a black rose? She sure as hell hadn’t sent it.

He paused for a moment and waved the flower in the air like a magician wielding a magic wand. Petals drifted to the floor like dirty snowflakes. When was the last time she'd seen snowflakes? It seemed like lifetimes ago.

James's voice boomed in the room, pulling her back to the dilemma at hand. "I woke up to a black rose in my goddamn boot! What the fuck does it mean?"

## Chapter 6

“Good afternoon to you, too, James.” She sighed wearily. “Quinn Blackwell. James Kingsley. Try not to kill each other.”

James continued to barrel across the planks, his boots pounding out a heavy rhythm as he snarled and cursed a different fragmented thought with each step, muttering about the black rose, a contract, a betrayal. She heard several foreign languages as he ran out of English curse words. What had he gotten into his head? Did he think *she* had sent it?

When he reached the bed, his mouth snapped closed. His dark gaze swept over her naked body, then lifted to the man behind her, his eyes narrowing. His anger shifted visibly. He clenched his fist, crunching the flower, and the scowl on his face deepened, carving grooves around the sides of his usually kissable mouth. A rosy flush spread over his whiskered cheeks. She peered at his hair, looking for smoke coming out of his ears. With James anything was possible. Silver sparks flashed in his eyes, snapping at her along with his words.

“What the hell is this then? Who the fuck is *he*?”

He flung his arms up with enough breath to stir the winds into a hurricane, and the black rose fluttered to the floor. She’d managed to shock him. A bloody miracle. His voice, usually booming and powerful, softened to a near whisper that made the hairs stand up on the back of her neck.

“Kit?”

The rose appeared to be the least of her problems. He took another step forward. She slid to the edge of the bed, and Blackwell’s fingers

trailed deliciously across the skin of her back and between the cheeks of her ass. When she twitched away from him, Blackwell chuckled. The man obviously had a death wish.

As James drew back his fist to aim for the man on the bed, she stepped in front of him. She put her hands on her hips and lifted her chin. He growled a warning, his dark eyes blazing into hers.

“Get out of my way, Kit.”

“He’s a guest, James. I invited him here.”

“Well, I can bloody well see that,” James sputtered. “And we’ll deal with *that* decision later. Who is he?”

Blackwell laughed. “Obviously a surprise. And by the look on your face, not a good one.”

James roared, and his hand curled around the hilt of his sword.

“Shut up, Blackwell,” she snapped. “You’re not helping here.”

“It’s not often I get two death threats in one day,” Blackwell said. “I must say I find New Providence particularly entertaining. New experiences and all.”

James slid his sword slowly out of the scabbard. “Then you’ll like your funeral. We do them right here in New Providence.”

She wrapped her hand around his and shoved the sword back down with a sharp click. “Stop it, you two. You’re giving me a headache.”

James shot her a dirty look, but she put her hands on his chest. Considering the twisted grimace on his face and the rumbles coming from his throat, his heart beat surprisingly slow and steady. She gave him a gentle shove, but of course he didn’t budge. His weight anchored him firmly to the floor, and she didn’t have a prayer of controlling him physically, but that moved the power back to her. She had other tools that worked with James. He had stepped into her territory and needed to pay the price.

“How did you get in here, James?”

He shifted his feet, and his glance darted sheepishly.

“From the sounds I heard, surely Will didn’t just step aside and usher you in.”

James’s mouth dropped open. “He tried to fucking shoot me!”

“He’s my bodyguard. That’s his job.” She glared up at him.

“Well, I didn’t shoot back. I know you *like* him. I just pounded him on the head with my pistol.”

Kit sighed. “I’ve asked you not to do that. It doesn’t do anything for his self respect or my peace of mind when you pound him into the deck. You’ll damage him, and I rely on his brain.”

“‘Cause you clearly don’t have one of your own.” James’s black brows rose as he glanced at Blackwell.

“That’s not very gracious, James.”

He growled again. “I’m to put up with all manner of vermin finding a way into your bed? You know how I feel about that.”

Kit laughed. “He’s hardly vermin. Look how clean and tidy he is. But while we’re on the subject of your *feelings*, who I fuck isn’t your business and will never be your business. We’re talking about your manners and your lack of respect for my crew. Will knows I have a soft spot for you, and he’d be loath to kill you, but I can’t have you trying to run roughshod over him. If he says *no*, he means *no*.”

“I didn’t give him a chance to say *no*,” he murmured.

Kit pursed her lips. “I’m going to tell him it’s okay to shoot you the next time.”

He ran a calloused hand down her arm with an almost aching tenderness. “Now, kitten.”

A smile tugged at her somewhere inside. James Kingsley might be a formidable man, literally terrifying to some, but he’d never been anything but gentle with her. He touched her like the greatest treasure. But he’d gone too far, and she couldn’t stand for it again. She forced a hard look on her face and glared at him. “I mean it. Listen to what he says and do *not* hit him again. I’m going to need your word on that.”

He lifted his gaze, staring at the timbers that grazed the top of his hat. He nodded.

“Good then.” She lifted on her toes to kiss him. He jerked away from her.

“Not so fast. You’re trying to distract me. We have another problem here.”

She rubbed at the dark petals with her bare foot. “You did seem to have something on your mind. I’m perfectly willing to discuss it.” She grabbed her wrap from the bed, then brushed past him. “Blackwell, put some bloody clothes on. You’re irritating James.”

“I’m far more than irritated,” James muttered.

She stopped dead before she reached the door. “Oh, bloody hell.”

Six men stood outside on the deck, staring into her quarters.

“Did you get enough of a view, gentlemen?” She grabbed the folds of her wrap and swept it open, striking a pose in the doorframe like a doxy on the wharf. Six mouths dropped open. She rolled her eyes and shoved the largest of them in the chest. “Quit gaping at me, you debauched louts. Where the hell were all of you when James arrived? You’ve got to fucking learn to be quicker on your feet. Someone fetch me coffee and get Fowler up off the deck. I can’t have my bodyguard lying around incapacitated. It doesn’t look good for any of us. We’ll be the laughingstocks of New Providence.”

They stared at her as she tied the sash, their mouths still hanging open like gutted fish.

“Move it!”

Four men scattered, and two hunkered down on the deck to help a groaning Will to his feet. Her gaze swept to the cluster of men who hadn’t dared come too close to her door.

“Doesn’t anyone have any work to do around here? Where’s Hal for Christ’s sake?”

A small man—Two Fingers—bravely took a step forward. “Down on the dock, Captain, talking to—”

“Find him and get your orders for the evening.”

Two Fingers backed away, then took off running. Kit turned to Will who glared at her without fear of reprisal, clutching the knot on the top of his head.

“Kingsley’s a lunatic,” Fowler said.

“He’s just impetuous,” Kit said.

“Blackwell dead?”

She shook her head. “Another catastrophe averted.”

“You should throw Blackwell’s ass off this ship. A mysterious stranger arriving out of the blue is never a welcome omen. Something doesn’t feel right lately. Could be tied up with him.”

“He’s harmless, and my afternoon was more than enjoyable, albeit it a little strange.” She shook her head for a second, then flashed him her I-love-you-but-I’m-doing-what-I-want smile. “I’m keeping him.”

“Fuck it then. I can’t talk sense into you when you have that look on your face. But bid Kingsley farewell before he kills someone. Probably me.”

“He won’t do it again. I have his word.”

“The word of the most hot-tempered and emotionally unstable pirate in this godforsaken place? That doesn’t exactly inspire me with confidence.”

“Our word is all we have, Will. Gotta take what we can get and live with it.”

“It’s the living part I’m worried about.”

She tugged on his hair and gave him a smile. “Have Doc take a look at your head and get some rest. You’ve earned a night off. Besides, it seems I have two bodyguards this evening.”

She closed the door with a soft click and shot the bolt. Turning, she found the two men glaring at one another. *Men are so fucking territorial*. As she walked toward them, they both eyed her like a great white shark does a tuna. A little shiver of anticipation raced down her spine.

“I only see one way to solve this problem, gentlemen.”



They watched as she dragged two chairs to the center of the room and placed them back to back. She maneuvered Blackwell near one, pushing his naked body until he dropped down. “What the hell?” escaped James’s lips when she gripped his arm and hauled him across the room.

“Stand still, James.” When he opened his mouth to protest, she kicked him in the shin and began to unbuckle his weapons belt. She laid it on the desk, then hooked her fingers into the waistband of his pants, and jerked him toward her. “Do you want to fuck me again, James?”

“You know I do,” he murmured.

“If you want to fuck me, James, it has to be by my rules.”

He cast a glance toward the back of Blackwell’s head. “I don’t know if I can do that.”

She dragged her finger down the front of his shirt, skimming over hard muscles, a tight nipple, and when she reached his abdomen, he sucked in a breath. “I’ll be disappointed if you don’t, James.”

Blackwell twisted his face toward them and she pointed a finger at him. “Turn around. Be a good hostage.” Her gaze skimmed the length of him, happy to see his cock thickening, lengthening, and standing at attention. “I’ll get to you in a minute.”

Kit ran her palm over James’s crotch. Another equally hard and swollen cock waited for her.

“Hmm, feels nice,” she said. “I want to keep fucking you, James, but I want to fuck *him* too.”

“You already have,” James growled.

“Aye, you’re right.” She ran a finger over her lips. “But it wasn’t enough. You know how I am.”

James grabbed her waist and yanked her against him. His mouth covered hers in a kiss that devoured her lips and scoured the inside of her mouth. His cock beat against her, throbbing and bobbing, searching for an entrance. When he pulled away, he dropped small kisses on her forehead.

"I'll take you any way I can get you, Kit," James said. "Maybe I can watch."

"Maybe we can all learn to share," Kit said.

"Share?" Blackwell twisted around again. "Who said anything about sharing?"

"I did," she said. "And since I'm the captain, you'll do what I say. You're a hostage, remember? James, get undressed while I take care of Mr. Blackwell."

She sauntered across the cabin, her hips swaying, allowing the wrap to dip off her shoulder. She opened the drawer to a small chest and ran her hand through the collection of silk scarves.

"What's your favorite color, Blackwell?"

"I'm not sure I want to play your little game."

"Pick a color, or you won't be." She glanced over her shoulder and pursed her lips. "And you'll be very sorry."

Blackwell sighed. "Blue."

"Blue it is." She pulled out four scarves and went to stand in front of him. She leaned down and gave him a leisurely kiss, her tongue caressing his, her lips nibbling at the corner of his mouth. When his hand came up to cup her breast, she moaned softly and leaned toward him. He pinched her nipple through the satin of the wrap, and she looped one of her scarves around the arm of the chair and over his wrist, tying a quick knot.

He lurched backward. "Oh, no."

"Oh, aye." She grabbed his other arm, slammed his wrist to the chair, and wrapped a scarf around it. "Now, relax. You'll like this." She lowered herself to her knees and tied each ankle to the bottom of the chair. "James, what's your favorite color?"

His hands tensed on the arms of the chair. "I'm not sure I want to play this game either. I'm really not comfortable with—"

"Damn it, James. Just pick a goddamn color!"

"Okay, Kit. Gold. Always gold."

Blackwell glanced over his shoulder. “There’s the difference between us, my friend. I chose blue, the color of her eyes. You’re a selfish bastard and chose the color of coin.”

James grunted. “Her hair’s gold, you dumb bastard.”

Blackwell’s brows drew down and spots of color appeared on his cheekbones. “Oh, right.”

Kit chucked James under the chin and gave him a little kiss. After she tied him to his chair, she stood back to admire her handiwork. “I’ve never seen such beautiful hostages. Now, to take my pleasure. Who shall be first?” She stood at their sides and ran a hand down each of their chests, over the ridges of hard muscle, hot skin, and down to the warm, pounding cocks that lurched toward her hands. She wrapped a hand around the base of each and gave a tug. The movement caused each man to groan, and when she skimmed their balls with the palms of her hands, their heads fell back and smacked against each other’s. Both men grumbled.

Kit laughed. “We’re getting along fabulously.” She moved around to stand in front of James and dropped her wrap. “I think I should suck you first, James. I’ve known you longer.”

She knelt between his legs and put her hands on his thighs, widening them as she dipped her face into the nest of damp curls. She inhaled and nuzzled against his skin, then licked the length of his cock from balls to head. Running her tongue along the ridge, she wrapped one hand around him and pumped slowly, then took the head between her lips, sucking gently. James arched his hips upward, his cock sliding a few inches into her mouth.

She pulled away and shook her head. “No, no. Hostages can’t move. Now you’ll have to wait.”

James groaned as she ruffled his hair and left him to stand in front of Blackwell. Sweat dotted his brow, and his cock jerked toward her the moment she dropped between his legs. She ran her hands up his calves, squeezing lightly, and over his knees until she reached his thighs.

“Do you like your cock sucked, Blackwell?”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Can you sit very still?”

He winked at her. “You’ve no idea.”

She lowered her head and licked the pre-cum off the tip of his cock. She savored the taste for a moment, running her tongue over her lips.

“Would you like me to kiss you so you can taste yourself?” she asked.

“Aye.” He never moved a muscle. She planted her hands on his chest, touched his mouth with hers then plunged her tongue between his lips. She kissed him thoroughly, and he accepted her lips and her tongue. Only the rapid rise and fall of his chest and the cock lurching against her hip signaled his desire.

She kissed her way down his face and throat, her hand sliding between them to rub against his cock. “So hard. Pulsing. Hot.” She pressed her mouth against his ear. “I want you inside me again. But first I want to suck you.”

She went to her knees and engulfed his cock with her mouth. His hands tightened against the arms of the chair, the wood creaking against his fists. She pumped her face up and down, her nose pressing into his groin with each downward movement. She swept her hand between his legs, and his balls tightened in her grasp. She squeezed gently and heard him swallow convulsively. She slid her finger downward, sliding toward his ass, and his cock swelled in her mouth. His body began to tremble under her hands. As she swallowed, his hips jerked upward and a shot of cum exploded in the back of her throat.

She heard the sound of ripping cloth. Blackwell raked his hands into her hair and yanked her upward, capturing her mouth with his. She melted into his kiss.

“Goddamn it!” James shouted. “I felt him move. This isn’t fair. Get your ass over here and suck my cock, Kit, or I swear I’ll tear this fucking ship apart.”

Kit pulled away from Blackwell reluctantly. “He’s such a *pirate*.”

Blackwell laughed, and James rattled his chair.

Kit decided to take pity on him and rose, slowly walking into his sight. He twisted his face to look at her. A flush spread over his cheeks and disappeared into his beard.

“You’re getting yourself all worked up over nothing, James. I’m right here.”

“Right here *not* sucking my dick,” he grumbled.

She trailed her fingers over his shoulder, and he shivered. “But we can fix that right now. Hmm, look how hard you are. I’ll bet it aches a little, doesn’t it?”

“You know goddamn well it does. My balls are about to explode here.”

She leaned down and reached between his legs. She squeezed gently, and James nearly came out of the chair. His arms strained against the bonds.

“Kiss me, Kit.”

She leaned down and rubbed her mouth across his. “Is that what you want?” she whispered. “Or do you want this?” She ran her finger from his balls up to the head of his cock where she swiped the pre-cum from the tip. She stuck her finger in her mouth and rolled her eyes. “Delicious, James. Can I have more?”

“Christ in the rigging, you’re killing me here.”

“So you’ve decided sharing might be acceptable?”

“I’ll share any goddamn thing you want with any goddamn person you choose. Just take my cock in your mouth and suck.”

She lifted one leg and placed it between his. Her pussy ached, clenching on empty air. Her clit throbbed. She straddled his thigh and rubbed back and forth against his skin, trying to appease the hot, antsy feeling that flowed through her.

“Blackwell, come here.”

His cool shadow fell on her back.

“Touch my clit. I’m burning.”

She leaned back against him, and he reached around her. While she rubbed her wet pussy on James’s leg, Blackwell stroked her clit, his long finger drawing tight circles against the hard nub, then dipping to slide between her wet pussy lips. Her body shuddered with a delightful tension. Then she arched her back and came against his hand. Her pussy clenched on the tip of his finger. It wasn’t enough. She’d definitely need more very soon, but it took the edge off. Blackwell continued to rub as the tremors bathed her body in tiny shivers. She let her head fall back against Blackwell’s body, and he brushed sweaty strands of hair from her face.

“Now to see to James’s discomfort.”

She slid between his legs and, inch by inch, devoured his cock between her lips. She licked and sucked, his cock throbbing and swelling to fill her mouth and throat. He tightened his thighs around her, his body going rigid under her hands, and he bucked upward as his cum squirted down her throat. He dropped his head forward and, after she’d lapped at the last drop she could find, she lifted her face. She dropped a kiss on his forehead.

“You need to learn patience, James.”

“Aye, so you keep telling me.” He clenched his fists and tore the bindings from the chair. He lifted one of the scarves in his hands. “What ship did you raid for this piece of shit cloth? ’Tis very poor quality. You deserve far better.”

## Chapter 7

After the boy set the tray on the table, Quinn noticed he gave James Kingsley a wide berth as he scrambled from the room. James gave Kit a questioning look.

“You make him nervous, James. You make everyone nervous. Most people think you’re slightly crazy.”

“I might be,” he said, “but I don’t make *you* nervous.”

She lifted his hand and held it to her cheek. “Because I know your craziness is all part of your strategy. It’s probably going to be your legacy as well.”

Quinn leaned forward and sniffed at the delicious aroma coming from the pot.

“Where on earth did you get coffee? I haven’t seen coffee since I left England.”

Kit and James glanced at each other and burst into laughter. “What exactly do you think I do for a living, Quinn? I’m a bloody pirate for God’s sake.”

“But coffee isn’t grown in the Caribbean,” he said.

“Unfortunately not. Perhaps I’ll look into it when I retire.”

Quinn laughed. “In my experience, pirates don’t usually *retire*.”

“True enough. I plan to be the exception, and coffee just might be a worthwhile endeavor. Perhaps I’ll barter for some extra beans and do a little experimentation. Quite a few crews come through here, from all parts of the world. Travel to the next island and you can find anything your heart desires. Ask James. He goes there quite often.”

James nodded. “My captain, Ben Hornigold, has a partner that trades for just about anything. Doesn’t matter if it comes from a pirate, smuggler or legitimate merchant. He makes a hellish fortune.”

Kit poured the coffee, and Quinn wondered if he’d died and gone to heaven. Perhaps James had killed him when he burst into the room. He certainly looked capable of it.

“Ben and his partner are also making quite a few enemies,” Kit said.

James nodded his shaggy head. “Not hard to do in this place. But if you’re going to catch yourself a few enemies, might as well have the money to go with it.”

Kit poured the last cup, then reached into a small wooden chest, extracting a tiny bottle of fluid. Quinn eyed it, ignoring that slight flicker of anxiety that tried to crawl up his spine. What would be the point of drugging him? She could have easily stabbed him in the heart earlier.

She splashed several drops into two of the cups, then glanced at him. “Did you want some?”

“What exactly is it?”

She waved the bottle beneath her nose and a dreamy expression passed over her face. When she held out the bottle, he sniffed tentatively. It smelled better than coffee.

“It’s the extract from a plant called *vainilla*. We add it to coffee and bake goods. The Spanish cultivate it on the western continent and occasionally I’m lucky enough to find some in their cargo. Most raiders ignore it because it’s just plant pods, but I always take it. It took my cook a while to find the right process to extract the oils, but it flavors things most excellently. If I can get a larger haul, I’m going to have him make a batch so we can do some bartering with Ben’s partner. A little extra tribute money is always a good thing. Try it.”

She put a drop on her finger and held it toward him. Quinn ran his tongue over her flesh, enjoying the sweet, smooth, heavenly flavor as well as the rather decadent look on her face. When he nodded, she



splashed a drop into his cup. James grunted and settled back in his chair with his cup.

"You two are making me sick," he said. "Can we get to my problem please?"

Kit ran her fingers through the black rose petals on the table. "You were angry when you found this."

"Damn right."

"Angry enough to kill someone."

James cocked a brow. "Angry enough to kill *you*."

"Exactly," Kit said. "Why would you think I sent this to you?"

"'Tis a bloody black rose, Kit. Who else would have sent it?"

Quinn set his cup on the desk. "What do you think it means?"

"I don't have to *think* anything," James said. "I know what it means. 'Tis her calling card. It means Kit's not happy with you, and when someone gets a black rose, they disappear."

She huffed and threw herself back in her chair, draping her wrists over the arms. "You think I have them killed?"

"I wouldn't put anything past you, Kit."

"I'm not a killer, James. You know me better than that."

"Then what happened to Louie?"

She waved her hand in dismissal. The ribbons on her wrist fluttered. "Louie knew he wasn't long for New Providence. He moved from ship to ship, literally stealing everything he could get his hands on. I did everyone here a favor by simply lighting a fire under his ass to get him to leave the Bahamas."

James peered at her, his eyes narrowing. "So he left the island on his own?" His mouth, almost lost in the black bristles of his beard, hardened in a firm line.

Kit met his gaze square-on. "I don't know what happened to him. I sent the rose as a clear signal he wasn't welcomed here any longer, but I gave no orders to have him killed. I can only assume he took the hint and left. I don't believe my actions displeased any of the other captains here. They seemed happy enough to get their goods back. If

someone had a bigger grievance with Louie than I did, anything could have happened to him.”

“He stole enough to purchase his own ship,” James said. “Seems a bit odd he left it all behind, wouldn’t you say?”

“It’s hard to flee into the night with enough booty to fill a cargo hold. We earn what we get, James. Louie was a leech and needed to be cut off this island.”

“And me?” James asked. “What have I done to warrant the same treatment?”

Kit launched out of her chair and slammed her hands down on the table. Her cup rattled, and the tiny bottle of liquid bliss rocked precariously. Quinn reached out and caught it as it tipped. Her dark blue eyes blazed, boring into James’s. He squirmed in his chair, his big bulk sliding downward. For one moment Quinn saw Katherine Cross, a hard, stern, unyielding wall of ice. As formidable as James Kingsley was, this woman was more so.

Her voice cut through the balmy air. “I did not send you that rose.”

James glanced at him for support, but Quinn didn’t want that look on her face directed at him. He put the bottle of *vainilla* back into the wooden chest and avoided James’s silent plea for help. Kit sat back down but continued to glare at him, daring him to open his mouth. James seemed to have a death wish.

“You’re not exactly without an agenda here, Kit. Ben Hornigold and I know you’re sitting on the fence, but we also know you’re sure to topple off onto Jennings’s side.”

Kit huffed. “So you think I sent you the rose as a favor to Jennings, to boost his power here?”

“Well, the faster Jennings can get Ben and me out of the Bahamas, the faster he’s crowned king of the bloody island.”

She tilted her head. “I know Jennings is a thorn in Ben’s side, but the man did offer me harbor when I needed it. I owe him, but I’m still trying to stay out of their little feud. And we all know no one will be

crowned king of this bloody island. It's just a matter of time before the king sends a governor."

"We don't need a fucking governor," James snarled. "We're goddamn pirates. All we need is a place to tie up to live through the night and lately that's becoming almost impossible. I never thought I'd have to worry about *you*."

"You don't," Kit snapped.

"Someone thinks I do." James rubbed at his beard. "Or someone wants you dead."

Quinn leaned forward. "So you think someone sent you this rose to prompt some form of retaliation against Kit?"

"I don't know what I think," James said, "but I've got a reputation—thoroughly unwarranted I might add—and a bit of a temper. 'Tis possible someone thought I'd burst in here and just skewer her. No questions asked."

Kit smiled, and Quinn noticed the tenderness in that smile. For all his bluster and rashness, Kit had a soft spot for this giant.

"Does seem like something you might do," Kit said. "I can see why someone assumed it would work. When I first got the idea of the black rose, I did it as a way to increase my reputation. I thought being labeled dark, dangerous, and mysterious would work in my favor."

"Dark, dangerous, and mysterious sounds like a good way to get yourself killed." Quinn stared at the coffee pot. He wasn't sure where this little adventure in New Providence would lead yet, but she'd given him a fairly good idea on how to fix his finances, with or without a lost betrothed, and with or without a lost journal. He'd just about decided he wanted to keep this woman in his life. He'd never met anyone quite like her. Forcing her back to Jamaica probably wasn't the way to win her trust or heart. It might be a way to get a knife through his.

The idea of planting coffee intrigued him. If he could get a successful crop, there would be a very substantial market for it. He

could make a bloody fortune. He noticed them both staring at him. “I’m sorry. What did you say? I must still be in a sexual haze.”

He smiled. James growled low in his throat, and Kit rolled her gorgeous blue eyes. She mouthed “troublemaker,” then turned back to James.

“I didn’t send this flower, James.” She lifted the petals and sprinkled them. They drifted softly back to the table. “For one thing, I had to create the black roses. Currently I have none. My father taught me—” Kit pressed her lips together and rearranged her skirts. “It takes a lot to cultivate roses, but these would have to be created, dyed actually, from existing flowers. It’s quite a lengthy process. Feel free to look around the ship. You won’t find any flowers here.”

“Didn’t really think I would.” James cocked his head. “But there have been a few other disappearances in the last few weeks. Have anything to do with those?”

“No.”

“Everyone assumes the roses came from you. If they didn’t, then someone is setting you up. Who might want you dead? Besides half of New Providence.”

“Good question,” Quinn said.

James’s gaze snapped toward him. “Any particular reason we should trust *you*? Fall from the sky, did you? Mind telling us what ship you arrived in? Where you came from? What you’re doing here?”

Quinn folded his arms across his chest. Questions made him antsy and questions that came with the hard stare James focused on him made him irritable. “I came from Jamaica to recoup my losses from the last hurricane. Things have gone from bad to worse, and I stand to lose my property. I’d heard a man could turn a tidy profit here if he played his cards right or hooked up with the right people. I arrived last night on the *Sea Witch*. The captain was gracious enough to dare your waters as a personal favor. After meeting some of the occupants of this place, I’m surprised he wasn’t blown out of the water.”

“And you see no reason why we shouldn’t question your arrival? Your interest in Kit?”

Quinn lunged to his feet. “What is it you’re trying to say to me, Mr. Kingsley?”

James stood and took a step toward him until he was close enough for Quinn to smell the coffee on his breath. “I’m saying the surest way to get Kit killed is to piss me off enough to kill her. And you’ve managed that quite nicely. With or without a rose.”

The door burst open, and a disheveled little man rushed in, carrying a dainty china teacup. He raced across the floor on bare feet and skidded to a stop in front of the table. He held the teacup toward Kit, smiling happily.

“I smelled the coffee. I brought my own cup!”

Quinn stared, not quite believing his eyes. He’d found the missing scientist. Silas Watkins had always been a small man, but this tiny shell of a man seemed more like a waif. Despite his shriveled and shrunken appearance, Quinn would have recognized those bright brown eyes anywhere. They were the only thing that seemed truly alive about Silas Watkins.

Kit jumped up and hugged the little man. “Silas, I’m glad you came.” She cupped his face and tilted his head upward. “Hal told me one of the saltpeter kegs has been tampered with. Know anything about that?”

“Maaaybeee.”

“When the angels tell you to do a dangerous thing, you must say no, okay?”

He nodded and held out his cup. Kit started to pour coffee and the little man’s gaze flickered over James with a slight apprehension, then fell on Quinn. He drew back sharply, jerking his cup away. The coffee poured on the floor. He uttered a little squeak, then dropped down and began to mop the spill with his shirt. In a flurry of movement, he swiped at the stain, his gaze darting occasionally upward to meet Kit’s eyes.

“Sorry, sorry.”

Kit knelt on the floor and put her hand over Silas’s, stopping the movement. “It’s okay, Silas. We can clean it up later. Sit down and have your coffee.”

Watkins kept his gaze on the floor and shook his head furiously. “People.”

“You know James,” Kit said.

“Not James,” he murmured, shaking his head again. “Memories, memories. Good? Bad?”

“The other man is Quinn Blackwell, newly arrived in New Providence. A friend.”

Watkins’s head snapped up, and he tilted his face. His gaze moved over the ceiling, as though hearing things no one else could hear. He suddenly lurched to his feet and ran across the room. He grabbed the sapphire scarf from the edge of the bed and held it aloft.

“Can I have this?”

Kit nodded. “Of course.”

“He doesn’t usually ask,” James muttered.

Watkins crumpled the scarf into a ball and shoved his fist into his pocket. He scurried to the table, grabbed his teacup, and vanished as the door banged behind him. James dropped back into his chair, leaned back, and stretched out his legs.

“I’ll never get used to him. He makes me nervous.”

“He likes you,” Kit said.

Quinn stared at the closed door for a moment.

“Ha!” James said. “We tolerate one another because we both love *you*.”

The word “love” made Quinn’s head snap toward James.

Kit’s eyes widened. “You *love* me, James?”

“Bloody right I do. Haven’t I been saying as much for weeks now?”

Quinn listened vaguely while they discussed their love life. Having another man in love with the woman he’d been planning to

abduct or woo—which was the right thing to do?—severely dampened his plans, but he'd deal with that later. Silas Watkins was right under his nose. His source in Martinique had been right. Now he had to find the journal and get them both away safely without arousing Kit's suspicions and staying in her good graces.

"Who was that curious little man?" Quinn asked.

James snorted. "That's Kit's personal pet."

"He rather adopted me," Kit said. "We found him when we raided *Le Belle Mer*. I confiscated their cargo and most of their personal possessions, but I allowed the captain and crew to keep the ship. They'd found Silas in Martinique, left for dead by a Spanish pirate vessel, and offered him safe passage. Silas hopped aboard *The Black Rose* and refused to leave my side. He's quite entertaining company...when he's not hearing his voices."

"Hmm," Quinn said. "Voices are often a sign of genius."

"He's mad," James said. "A stark-raving madman. Ever been on a Spanish pirate ship? They don't treat their hostages well."

Quinn pressed his back against the chair. He knew all too well what happened on a Spanish pirate ship.

"I can't believe you just let him run amok over this ship," James grumbled. "He's been in a bloody saltpeter keg? Good luck to you then. You'll be seeing less of me around here."

"There's no need to fear him. Silas amuses me. I've grown quite fond of him over the last few months." Kit tapped her finger against her lips. "But he does distract me from time to time. What were we talking about?"

James ran his hand through the rose petals. "This."

"Of course." She settled back in her chair, all business.

James tilted back in his chair. The man was huge, and Quinn was glad Watkins had played a small part in calming him down. His size alone would be enough to spark terror in the hardiest of souls, but with his wild black hair, long beard, and burning eyes he was a force to be reckoned with. This man in charge of his own ship could cause

some serious havoc. His deep voice rumbled through the room, but the tone had calmed down considerably.

“A crew member on the *Angel of Mercy*, name of Hennessey, disappeared a little while ago,” James said. “I ran into him one night at the Barnacle. He blathered on to anyone listening about a man who’d sailed out of Bristol with him, headed for the seas. He wanted to find the man because he thought his friend might be in danger. I paid little attention. He was just another loon. Said they’d been captured by pirates. I’m telling you, that man was crazed too.”

Quinn nearly choked on his coffee. He knew Wood Hennessey as well as Silas Watkins. He’d watched them both from the corner of his eye each time the lash fell on him because they’d seemed the closest he could get to home. He steeled his face, refusing to give anything away until he had more answers. Hennessey had been more than curious about Watkins’s leather-bound journal. “Anything else significant about him?”

“Have no idea,” James said, “but there was a black rose on the deck of the *Mercy* and the man was gone. Heard tell of another man up in Harbour Island. They found a black rose in his shop. The shop had been ransacked, and the owner was not to be found.”

“And what did he do for a living?” Quinn asked.

James shifted his gaze toward Quinn. “He supplied things to Ben’s partner in trade. He doesn’t pirate, but he’s none too choosy about who supplies his goods.”

Quinn leaned forward. “And what did the missing man sell?”

“Nothing of real value. Books. Documents. Papers.”

“Maps or charts?”

“No charts. By the time the merchandise gets to him, nautical charts have been long confiscated. No man who lives on the sea can resist a chart.”

Quinn nodded. “So if they went to the shop, chances are they were looking for a book.”

“Why would someone be interested in a book?” James asked.



“No telling.” Quinn glanced around Kit’s quarters. For the captain of a pirate ship, who should want her ship sleek, fast and easily maneuverable, she seemed to not worry about the weight of books. Shelves covered the wall that connected to the deck and those shelves overflowed with books. When she met his eyes, she raised her brows.

“What?”

“Why do you have books, Kit?”

She glanced around as though seeing them for the first time, but something flickered in her eyes. She frowned slightly as though trying to remember something. When she caught him studying her, she waved her hand breezily.

“I’ve always liked books. I like them because they’re pretty and full of adventure. Same reason I like you.” She stood up and came around the table. She took his hand and pulled him to his feet. “If we’ve determined I’m not a murderer, I’m tired of talking. Let’s fuck.”

James dropped his legs to the floor, and the chair tipped over when he lurched forward.

“Over my dead body.”

Kit winked at him. “You were going to share, James.”

“And just how are we both going to fuck you?”

“You can take turns...or I’m pretty sure I can handle both of you.”

James shot a glance at Quinn. “We’ll fuck you together? One in the pussy, one in the ass?”

“I think that will work,” Kit said. “If it’s okay with Quinn.”

Quinn nodded. “I’m not fussy. I’ll take either.”

“So, James,” Kit put her hands on her hips, “you can participate. Or you can watch. Which would you rather do?”

He shot another glance at Quinn. “Participate. I’m not fussy either.”

\* \* \* \*

Kit rammed the bolt on the door. It didn't take the men long to get out of their clothes. They ripped them off and left a wake of fabric as they moved toward her. James untied the top of her shirt while Quinn slid the skirts down her legs, their hands trailing deliciously over her bare skin and leaving sparking tingles of desire in their path. Each touch reminded her how wonderful it felt to be a woman, but more importantly, how wonderful it felt to be in charge of her own destiny.

When James pulled the shirt over her head, he dipped his face, and his lips locked on her nipple, his mouth warm and wet and creating intoxicating sensations that spread from her breasts to the heated itch between her legs. Her pussy pulsed with the movement of his mouth, eager, moist, wanting to be filled.

Quinn cupped her mound and plunged two fingers inside, pushing deep and forcing her up to her toes. He wrapped an arm around her back to hold her steady as he fucked her pussy with his fingers, his palm rubbing hard against her clit. She shivered as the orgasm began to swell through her pelvis, and she tightened her legs, afraid she'd collapse to the floor. Her body jerked in Quinn's arms and waves of pulsing pleasure poured through her groin and burst outward like the strong current of a roiling sea. The sensations crested then swelled repeatedly, a pounding surf against the shore. She tried to lift her arm to grab his, but it fell back limp to her side, and Quinn took advantage of her distraction.

He traced a finger between her ass cheeks. She clenched involuntarily, then relaxed under his questing hand. He prodded her small hole with the tip of his finger, pushing it slowly inside up to the first knuckle. He slid it in and out very gently.

"Ever been fucked in the ass, Kit?" Quinn murmured against her ear.

She lifted her face toward Quinn and threaded her fingers through James's hair, tugging him closer. His mouth continued to suck on her nipple, sweeping it with his tongue. "Mmmhmm," she murmured. "James is very adventurous."

Quinn gave a small smile. “Then he won’t mind if I do it this time.”

James pulled away, and his brow rose. “You’re getting awfully comfortable around here, Blackwell. I’m not sure I like it.” He rammed two fingers into her pussy, his thumb flickering over her clit. She barely listened, concentrating on the in and out movements of both men’s fingers.

“I’m not sure it’s up to you,” Quinn said.

Kit pressed her hips backward against Quinn’s finger, pushing it deeper into her ass. “It’s not. It’s up to me. Use two fingers. Stretch me. And do it harder.”

Quinn didn’t hesitate. She heard him spit, and he shoved two fingers inside. Kit nearly slumped in his arms at the exquisite sensations that poured through her. James’s thumb on her clit drove her crazy.

“I want you both. Right now.”

She wiggled, dislodging their fingers, and moved to the bed. She spread out on the quilt, propped up on one elbow and opened her thighs wide. She smiled as their gazes locked on her pussy. She reached between her legs and rubbed herself, gently tapping her clit and dipping lower to slide the tip of her finger between her pussy lips.

“See how wet I am?” she murmured. “My pussy is glistening. My finger glides in and out sooo easily.” She pushed it deeper and gave a little moan. She brushed her clit with her thumb and shuddered. With another few strokes, she could make herself come, but she wanted them to do it.

“Are you going to stare all night? Or fill me up?”

She rolled over and lifted to her hands and knees, shoving her hips back and shaking her ass. Both men lunged toward the bed, and she laughed. Quinn gripped her hips, yanked her to the edge of the bed, and swept the head of his cock over her pussy, coating it with her juices.

He slid into her and pumped hard into her for a few strokes, and she dropped her head to the bed. James's hand cupped her ass and pinched her skin hard. Her pussy clenched as fire shot through her nerves, and Quinn rammed into her harder, shoving her a few inches across the bed. Her clit throbbed, begging to be touched, and she reached between her legs. James grabbed her hand and tugged it away.

"No touching. We'll make you come." He curled her hand around his cock. "Squeeze me, Kit. Make me harder."

She squeezed, her hand fisting around James's cock as Quinn thrust into her again and again. The hot, antsy feeling increased until her pussy walls fluttered and her clit felt swollen and aching.

Quinn slid out of her pussy and brushed his cock between the cheeks of her ass. She felt her own warm, wet fluid coat her tender skin, and when he paused, she tossed a glance over her shoulder.

"Don't stop. Take it."

She pushed backward, forcing his cock between her cheeks and deep inside. Her groan mixed with his as she felt his balls slap against her hot pussy. Quinn plunged in and out several times, and Kit rubbed her ass up and down his crotch, feeling the bristling hairs scratching her skin.

She squeezed James's cock and tugged it. He settled on the edge of the bed beside them and leaned back, bracing himself on his elbows. Kit lifted her leg over his. She and Quinn slid sideways, and Kit grabbed James's cock again. She rubbed it over the flushed, throbbing skin of her clit, enjoying the tiny spasms that rocked her, then moved it to her pussy. She lowered herself down inch by inch, engulfing it with her flesh. She leaned forward, and he caught her against him. She lay against his warm, solid flesh and rubbed her cheek over his chest hair, grinding her clit against his groin.

"Fuck her, Blackwell," James said. "Make us all feel it."

Quinn's cock slid from her, then rammed back in. The movement forced her against James, drawing his cock out of her and rubbing her

clit over his body. The feeling was incredible, and her pussy clenched around him to hold fast while Quinn gripped her hips and rocked her back. A slight withdraw and he rammed into her again. His balls slapped against her tender flesh and sent a quiver through her.

He built up a steady rhythm, and his fingers bit into the skin of her hips. Kit listened as James's heart slammed against his rib cage. Her face grew warmer as perspiration dampened his skin, and their sweat-slicked bodies slid smoothly against each other. Strands of her hair blew with her fast breath as she struggled to draw in gulps of air, concentrating on the sensations that spiraled from her pussy and her ass and swelled through her entire body.

Quinn yanked her backward one last time, pulled out all the way and drove into her hard and fast. She felt the pulse of his cum inside her just as James groaned and released. Her body trembled, and with one final rub against her clit, her body shattered in a blissful, heavenly wave of pleasure that shook her to the core. The orgasm thundered through her, rolling like a storm and slamming into her with the violence of a hurricane, leaving her breathless, boneless, and wondering why it had taken so long to fuck two men. She could never go back to just one.

James fell back on the bed. She snuggled into his shoulder, his cock still buried inside. Quinn slowly withdrew from her body and slumped to his knees by the side of the bed.

"Sharing isn't all that bad," James said. "Let's do it again tomorrow."

## Chapter 8

A thunderous pounding rocked the cabin door. Kit's eyes flew open, but she couldn't move her legs. She tried to roll over and sit up.

"What the hell?" she muttered.

She struggled for a moment, wondering what bound her to the bed, then realized Quinn's arm had securely wrapped around her, holding her fast to his chest. She twisted her face and glanced toward the other side of the bed. James lay on his back, his large furry chest rising and falling with the breaths of a very deep sleep. His leg draped across hers. She squirmed against Quinn, trying to dislodge his arm and kicking her legs. This was exactly why she'd never let any man sleep in her cabin. And two men was beyond ridiculous. What had possessed her last night? She had lost her mind entirely.

She gripped Quinn's wrist, flung his arm away and scissored her legs. Both men murmured some sort of protest, and Quinn tried to pull her back, but finally the pounding must have penetrated his ears because he released her. When she smacked his ass, he bolted upright. She lurched out of bed, driving her knee into James's stomach. With a loud oomph, his eyes snapped open.

She grabbed a wrap lying at the foot of the bed. She shoved her arms into it, then tied the cord around her waist. Flinging open her trunk, she blindly rummaged through satins and laces, skirts and gowns. Her fingers locked on several silky wraps. She tossed them behind her, hoping for the best. Any port in a storm would do, and God knew where their clothes were.

She slapped the surface of the desk, her hands desperately feeling around for her pistol. James found his sword easily in the dark. He

drew it from the scabbard at the same time Quinn found her cutlass. The raspy sound of sliding metal slithered around her. Irritation burst through her, but she had more important things to worry about right now than someone touching her weapons. She'd deal with that later. Male heat enveloped her as they moved closer. When her fingers finally gripped the pistol handle, she aimed it toward the other side of the room just as the door slammed open and smashed against the edge of a bookcase.

Kit squinted against the sudden light that spilled inside when Will Fowler burst into the room, carrying a lantern. Her hand dropped to her side, and a blast of air whooshed from her lungs.

"Bloody hell, Will. Save the heart attacks for day time."

Fowler took a tentative step forward. As the wick flared with his movement, the flame cast a rapid pattern of shadow and light that flickered eerily across his stark face. Will wore an expression she'd never seen on him before. His eyes blazed dark and wide, and his scarred mouth twisted in something that resembled a tremble. A tremble on Will Fowler? He stood stock-still, his body rigid, barely breathing. What the hell was wrong with him?

He looked sad in the lamp light but that had to be her imagination because it was impossible. She shook her head, trying to dislodge the cobwebs of sleep and find some rational reason for the distressed, almost sick, look on her friend's face. She rubbed the heel of her hand over her eye, flinging open the powder box sitting on the edge of the table. It might be wise to actually load the pistol in the event of a real problem.

She muttered as her hands scoured the inside. "Jesus, Will. We're sitting in the fucking harbor. What can possibly be wrong? Has the entire Spanish fleet appeared on the horizon? This better be real trouble or—"

"Kit."

She froze and snapped her mouth closed. Something in his voice didn't sit right with her. The gentle, almost paternal, sound made her

heart race. A sudden apprehension shivered through her. Fowler never bothered her when she entertained. In fact, more than once she'd returned to deck to find any numbers of problems had been dealt with swiftly and judiciously by either him or Hal.

She tightened the belt on her wrap, suddenly very aware of the transparency of the material. Sure, Fowler had seen it all before, but for the first time since purchasing *The Black Rose*, she felt exposed, vulnerable. She hated that more than anything. She grabbed a blanket from the edge of the bed and swept it around her shoulders. It helped with the chill but couldn't protect her from what he would say. She knew it.

Fowler's gaze darted to Quinn and James. Kit straightened up, determined to survive whatever came out of his mouth.

"Never mind them. Just spill it."

He swallowed hard, and the scar across his throat rippled. This just got worse and worse. "It's your little friend."

*Silas?*

She adjusted the blanket then raked her hair back. "It's the middle of the goddamned night, Will. What's he done now? Is he bothering people? Has he carved out another nest? Has he stolen something valuable?"

"No, no." Will's tentative whisper chilled her to the bone. Despite the balmy breeze blowing through the casement and the soft woolen cloth around her shoulders, she shivered.

She shook her head. She would stop this nonsense now. "I saw him this evening. What's wrong? Is he sick? Does he want to leave?"

"He's been attacked."

"I will slit someone's throat!" She reached for her dagger as Fowler set the lantern on the desk. "He's *mine*. Under *my* protection. I warned everyone not—"

Fowler put his hand over hers. "He wasn't attacked on the ship, Kit. It happened on the dock."



“No, that’s not possible.” She frowned. “He won’t leave the ship. Why would he leave the ship? Where is he?”

Fowler nodded toward the windows. “He’s still on the dock. Hal’s with him.”

She strode toward the door, vaguely aware that Fowler followed as the other two men pulled on their pants. She paused in the frame and wiped all expression from her face. Some of the crew hovered on the deck in small circles, murmuring among themselves. Others had just come topside, their hair sticking up in spikes, their eyes blurred from too little sleep or too much grog. Their gazes touched her briefly, then darted away, allowing her privacy.

As she strode down the gangplank she heard the whispered speculation, the shocked mutterings, and the disbelief of the community. Her bare feet pounded across the dock, and when the warmth of the sea air brushed her skin, she remembered the gauze she wore left little to the imagination. Fuck them. She dropped the blanket and ignored the stares as she passed. Something hurt in her heart but she ignored that too.

*I told him he was safe.*

Several lanterns cast enough light for her to see the small group huddled over a bundle of rags. Not a bundle of rags. A man. Silas.

She lifted her chin and continued down the dock. Jaw clenched, she had a hard time forcing the word from her mouth. “Move.”

Most of the crowd stepped back, creating a passageway through a wall of bodies. When she reached the center, Hal leaned over Silas, his hands bloody and his shirt streaked in scarlet. He lifted his pale face and shook his head.

“Captain, he’s hurt pretty bad.”

She saw the blood on Silas’s face and nodded. She also saw the single black rose lying beside him. She leaned down, smoothed Silas’s hair back from his face, then picked up the flower. The petals dropped to the deck like accusations. She heard the whispers behind her, around her, in front of her.

“A black rose.”

“She’s tried to kill a member of her own crew.”

“Death’s coming to New Providence. And it’s not a hangman’s gallows. It’s a cursed woman.”

“Devil take her.”

She gestured to several of her crew behind her, grinding out the words between her teeth. “Take him home. *Gently*. And get Doc.” She grabbed the man nearest her by the scruff of the neck and hauled him close. “What did you see, Swinburn?”

“Nothin’, Cap’n. Really. I was just—”

She shoved him to the dock, and Swinburn squealed. “Cease your lies. Don’t make me gut you. I am in a very bad mood.” She rounded on the spectators and several lurched backward. “Quit your gawking. And get your stories straight because I’ll be talking to you in good time.” She rounded on another man trying to slink away. “Oh, no, Trap. Stay where you are.”

The man straightened, dropped his eyes and sighed deeply. She returned her attention to Swinburn and kicked him with her bare foot, smashing into his kidney.

“So? Getting your memory back?”

Swinburn’s head bobbed on his neck and spit flew from his mouth as he struggled to find words. “A man, Cap’n. Talkin’ to Silas. Then he hit him several times. Before I could get here, Silas dropped to the dock. The man took off down the alley toward the Flying Cloud.”

“And what did this mystery man look like?”

Swinburn shook his head, and Kit kicked again. The man gulped in air, pressing his hand into his back. “He looked like any other man, Cap’n.” When she swung her foot, he lifted his hand. “No, stop. He was medium height, bulky, brown hair. I think—” He pressed his lips together.

“You think...? Go on.” She waved her hand, but Swinburn closed his eyes as he waited for her foot. “Will, take care of this problem for me.”

Fowler took a step forward, and Swinburn shouted, “No! Wait. It made no sense ’cause he’s been missing for weeks. I think it was Wood Hennessey.”

\* \* \* \*

Kit paced. Her shadow followed, criss-crossing the weak bands of light slanting through the open window. Her boots pounded across the wooden planks, punctuating the quiet morning. Besides the crew of *The Black Rose*, only the gulls seemed awake this early. Their raucous cries spilled through the open window as they screeched and fought for tidbits dropped during the night.

“I won’t stand for this, gentlemen.”

As she moved, her glance touched on each of them—Trueblood, James, Fowler, Hal and Quinn—but most avoided her gaze. Only Quinn, who lounged against the wall, slightly outside her intimate circle, met her eyes. His gaze hadn’t left her since they’d moved Silas back to *The Rose* and that single fact alone kept her focused. The others avoided looking at her as best they could, but Quinn watched her, and she was glad for it. If she thought no one watched at all, she feared she’d cry. She’d come to love the little man, and Doc thought he might never wake up. Silas was in a deep coma. So, she gratefully accepted the watchful eye of the stranger.

*No, he’s not a stranger, not any more.*

James stared at the ceiling, rocking his chair back on two legs. He combed his fingers through his beard and appeared lost in thought.

Hal hadn’t said a word since they’d returned to the ship.

Trueblood sat quietly, twisting the rings on his fingers. Every so often he sighed and that small sound wound through her heart and threatened to tear apart the dam she’d constructed to hold her feelings at bay.

Sitting on the window bench, Fowler stared through the open casement, seemingly entranced with watching the gulls vie for scraps.

But Kit knew differently. Foster's mind never stopped working. He lived in a quiet world by his own choosing. He never missed a thing, until tonight.

Fowler twisted on the bench. "Goddamn it, this is my fault. I watch him like a hawk on this ship. I last saw him asleep in one of his nests, but for some reason he got up in the middle of the night and left this ship. Why would he do that when the angels told him to stay onboard?"

James's chair legs slammed to the floor. His dark stare focused on Kit. "Bloody hell, if the damn angels told him to stay, why would he leave? He always listens to the angels."

"Perhaps he went down to help someone else on the dock," Trueblood said.

"No one else was involved." Kit rubbed her fingers across her scratchy eyes. "Had there been a disturbance, Will would have heard it. Silas apparently went willingly to talk to this Hennessey."

"How would he know Hennessey?" Hal asked. "He barely talks to anyone but you or Two Fingers. The rest of us...well, he makes me damned uncomfortable. I was talkin' with a man on the dock this afternoon, and Watkins was spyin' on me through a knot in the wood. Did you know he has another nest in the gunwale? That makes three that I know of. He's got hidey-holes all over this ship."

"Who were you talking with down on the dock?" Quinn asked.

Hal snorted. "A man named McGuire. Claimed to be from Henry Jennings and had a question regardin' tribute."

Kit frowned. "Why would Jennings send an emissary? If he questioned our tribute, he'd come to me personally."

"The man demanded to see our logbook," Hal said. "Like I'd fuckin' let him look at it."

"What does the logbook contain?" Quinn asked.

Hal leaned forward and clasped his hands together. "Every article and bit of treasure we've acquired in the last year, the disbursement of those articles, and what remains in our hold."

Kit paced to the end of the room and came to rest in front of the dressing table. Before she could turn, she caught her reflection in the mirror. She barely recognized the pale woman in the glass. She looked like a sad, lost child who had no place on the deck of *The Black Rose*.

"They wanted the logbook because they're looking for something specific," Quinn said.

The woman in the mirror frowned, and Kit whirled around, suddenly filled with questions. Fowler leaned forward and peered at Quinn.

"What makes you think that?"

"Someone thought this logbook was valuable enough to attempt to coerce it from Hal. Why? Because the logbook contains a list of articles, and each of those articles has a crew name attached to it. He knows what and who he wants. He just wanted to make sure they were here. He didn't give a damn about the risks."

"Any idea what they might want?" Trueblood asked.

Quinn's gaze darted toward the window. Kit put her hands on her hips, waiting for a response. "Kit's right. Silas went willingly. If Hennessey came here...Let me think for a minute."

Kit turned back to the mirror. That woman had to go. She grabbed the brush from the table and yanked it through her hair. "I'm going to slit someone's fucking throat. They planted a black rose to make it look like I'd ambushed my own crew."

"I'm not really surprised," Fowler said. "We've been seeing this pattern for weeks."

A frown creased James's forehead. "Fuck, Kit, this has been happening for weeks? There's more than Hennessey and the shop owner, and you didn't tell me? What am I? A bucket of chum?"

Kit shrugged. "I have a bodyguard, James. I don't need you mothering me too."

James leapt to his feet. His boots thundered on the planks. "Damn it to bloody hell! I'm fucking in love with you!"

"I didn't want you in danger, James," Kit said.

"I can take care of my goddamn self."

Trueblood shrank into his chair, and Hal stared at his hands. Fowler stood, anticipating trouble, and Quinn moved forward. He shoved James back into his chair.

"Focus, James," Quinn said. "We've got bigger troubles right now than your broken heart. Someone's trying to make the good Captain here either leave this island or this ship."

Fowler nodded. "Enough people think you're involved in these disappearances and assaults, you're going to have a hard time keeping that noose off your neck. We may live in a community filled with cutthroats and miscreants, but we don't murder our own. You're not going to be a very popular captain around here, Kit."

Quinn nodded, seemingly in agreement. She should have banished Quinn from *The Black Rose* because none of her crew trusted him, but she couldn't seem to do that. For some reason, other than the men in this room, she felt he might be the only one she *could* trust right now. He had been in her bed, and Fowler had verified he hadn't left the room. Fowler had also pointed out that didn't exonerate him completely. He could be working with anyone to gain inside knowledge of the ship, her crew or cargo, but Kit didn't think so. She trusted her instincts. Quinn might be in New Providence for a purpose but she suspected it was her.

"So someone wants something on this ship. Anyone express an interest in obtaining *The Rose* recently?" Hal asked.

Kit stopped pacing in the center of the room and whirled around. "Aye. Charles fucking Vane," Kit growled. "He's wanted this ship since I bought it. I will kill him myself."

"Kit." Fowler laid a hand on her arm as she reached for the pistol on the desk. "You can't take on Charles Vane without proof. That will start a war on this island."

Kit clenched her jaw. "I'll skewer him alive."

Trueblood leaned forward in his chair, planting his elbows on his knees. "It's not Charles Vane. He was with me last night."

"Vane could have hired this McGuire," Hal said, "and be in control of this Hennessey fellow. Kingsley said Hennessey disappeared weeks ago, and now he's apparently resurfaced."

"If Trueblood's said it's not Vane, then it probably isn't," Fowler said. "Besides Vane might be a heartless bastard, but even he wouldn't beat up an innocent old man."

Quinn stared up at the ceiling beams for a moment then ran his hands across his face. "It's not Vane," he said softly.

Kit turned toward him.

"Damn it," Quinn murmured. "The fact that Hennessey was here means Silas wasn't drawn into this accidentally. He was the target all along. Silas wouldn't leave the ship for anyone else. Fuck. I should never have gone to him. I should have known better than to trust him."

Kit shook her head. "What are you talking about, Quinn. Who is *him*?"

"Your father."

"My father? What's he got to do with any of this?"

"Cross is deliberately stirring up ill will toward you because he's trying to get you out of New Providence to make his search easier. The black roses—"

"Father taught me how to create black roses. It was an amusement to him."

"They've paid off because you have more enemies than you can count. The man has an agenda here. The roses, the missing people, the attacks on you and now Silas. He even managed to implicate the one man who could possibly get Silas to leave this ship. Silas, Wood Hennessey, and I were captives together several years ago. Silas never liked Hennessey, but he reminded Silas of home."

Kit clenched her jaw. “But none of that makes sense. Why would my father be involved in any of this? Didn’t he hire you to bring me home?”

Quinn nodded. “Aye, he sent me. I thought you might have figured it out. The problem is I’d gone to him with a possible investment. I shot off my mouth, and now Cross knows about Silas Watkins and his journal.”

“His journal?” Hal asked. “What the hell could Silas have that’s so important? Silas isn’t exactly—”

“Silas wasn’t always like he is,” Quinn said. “I knew him before the Spanish pirate ship, and he was a brilliant man. His journal contains plans for an underwater diving apparatus. If the device works, people can dive to greater depths, and it could make someone a bloody fortune in salvage. Cross wants the device so he can acquire all the treasure for himself.” He paused for a moment and glanced toward Kit. “Oh, and I’m ordered to marry you when we return to Jamaica.”

“Christ in a crow’s nest,” James snarled. “That will happen over my dead body.”

“Over mine too,” Kit said. “I’ve no plans to marry. There are laws against marrying two men.”

“Since when did you give a fuck about the law?” James asked.

“Even I have my limits.”



## Chapter 9

Dozens of faces swiveled toward the sudden blast of light, and when they stepped into the tavern, the crowd fell silent. As Kit strode through the curtain of smoke, she felt the heated gazes of dozens of men skim her body, then dart away. She shook off the discomfort as she would a dirty blanket. When she moved toward their customary table, she saw it had been occupied by several men who refused to meet her eyes.

James and Quinn made a move around her, but she held them both back. She drew her sword and stepped closer, flicking it over the table, then jabbing it toward the largest man's throat. He froze and swallowed as the tip nicked his skin. His gaze darted up to her face. She gave him a smile.

"You're in my seat, Jardienne," she said sweetly. "Might want to go elsewhere before I get pissed."

"Hennessey's dead, bitch," Jardienne snarled. "They found a black rose near the body."

"I hadn't heard," Kit snarled. "And that concerns me in some way?"

"Last place he was seen alive was at *The Black Rose*."

"Aye," Kit said, "beating an old man half to death. I'd say he got what he deserved, but it wasn't by my hand. Get out of my seat."

She pressed the sword to his throat as he slowly rose to his feet. He dodged around the table, sliding his hands along the surface to keep his balance. When he found a clear avenue of escape, he and his companions scurried to the bar. Slowly, the silent room filled with

whispers. Kit turned to face the patrons, the sword held against her shoulder.

“Anyone else have something they wish to say?”

Her glance touched on several men who shrank farther into their chairs. A few men became fixated on their mugs. One man opened his mouth, then snapped it closed just as quickly. He downed his drink and headed for the door.

She pushed the sword into the scabbard, slid onto the bench and heaved a sigh.

“This is going to be tedious and a pain in my ass.”

Bridget hurried across the room and slid a tray of drinks onto the table. As she passed them around, she pressed her face close to Kit’s.

“These are on the house. I know why you’re here.”

“Hal said you came to *The Black Rose* yesterday with a man who wanted to talk with him.”

Bridget nodded, her luxurious curls bobbing against her cheeks. “Aye, Captain. Though I set up the meetin’ with two men and only one—McGuire—went to the ship.”

“Hal’s told us what he remembers,” Kit said, “but we’d like to see if you have any more information. Can you tell us what they looked like?”

“McGuire was medium in every way, medium height, medium build, light brown hair. A nondescript sort of fellow. No visible distinguishing marks.”

Quinn looked at Kit. “How many nondescript men can there be in New Providence? Everyone here has a distinguishing mark.” He nodded at the tattoo on her shoulder. “Including you.”

Kit glanced at the black rose, visible where her blouse dipped off her shoulder. “Every pirate needs a way to identify the body if things go wrong. Like you said, I take my pirating seriously. This one seemed like a good idea at the time, though with recent developments, it might come back to haunt me.”

James lifted the cuff of his shirt to display the tattoo of a golden crown on his forearm. His face flushed. "A crown for Kingsley. My choice seemed like a good idea at the time too, but I'm starting to wonder if I want a reputation at all. The wind's changing in New Providence."

Bridget bobbed her head. "'Tis a necessity on the sea though." She held out her arm to show her own, a small green shamrock. "I don't go out plunderin' o'course, but you never know when you'll need to do a little runnin'. I like to be prepared. You should think of gettin' one, sir. Lucky Jim does a gentle job with no pain afterward."

"No need," Quinn said. "I have enough distinguishing marks to last a lifetime, courtesy of my *last* pirating experience."

Kit slid her hand along his and squeezed. "What can you tell me about the other man, Bridget? The one who didn't come to the dock?"

"He set up the meetin'. 'Twas obvious he was in charge. He didn't tell me his name, and only said he needed to get in touch with the quartermaster of *The Black Rose*. I said I could take 'em there when he offered me a gold piece, though the elegant gentleman declined to follow."

"Had you ever seen either of them before?" James asked.

"No, sir, though the man who didn't give his name was a majestic sort of fellow. Tall, well-built for an older man. Blond hair with a slight bit of gray. Very well dressed. Offered him a free fuck 'cause I'd never seen such a fine gentleman. But he turned me down. Imagine that." She plunked her hands on her hips. "Who turns down a free fuck?"

"No one in their right mind," Quinn said with a smile.

"Just as well," Bridget muttered. "Probably had a prick made of ice."

"Did he mention anything about a man named Silas Watkins?" Kit asked. "Anything about a journal?"

"No, Cap'n. Just wanted to see the quartermaster. I thought it odd, but I made the introduction and stood off to the side. Charlie tells me I

eavesdrop too much. Bugger him. Never hurts a girl to know what's goin' on, and there can be a bit of profit in it as well. But for once in me life I took Charlie's advice and look where it got me. I have no information for you. To be honest, I was really hopin' to catch a bit of Hal's time." She heaved a huge sigh. "Didn't get a bit of notice. Would have given him a free fuck too. I'm sick of waitin' for him, so he'd better decide if he wants me soon. Tell him I said so."

As Bridget flounced away, Kit took a long pull from her drink. When she set it back down, James took her hand and squeezed it.

"Is there any need to ask what your father looks like?" he said.

"No." Kit sighed. "It seems Richard Cross is in New Providence."

She raised her tankard. When the others knocked their mugs against hers, Kit quietly said, "Fuck my father. This ends here. Drink up. I want to get back to the ship and check on Silas."

\* \* \* \*

He lay on his side, his small body curled up like a contented child. The bruises on his face and arms testified it wasn't a quiet sleep, but a possible journey into the realm of his angels. Kit dipped the cloth into the warm water and gently wiped the sweat away from Silas's face. The fever had increased as the bruises darkened and spread. She saw Doc had changed his shirt and the bandages on his scratches and cuts. There wasn't anything else to do but wait.

"Silas," she whispered. "I am so sorry I didn't keep you safe. All this trouble, all this pain. We don't even have what they're looking for."

She reached toward the bowl again and paused. She glanced at the still form.

"That first day...you had a book, a small leather-bound..."

She dropped the cloth, then unwrapped the silk sash from around her waist. It was one of her prettiest, a light blue the color of the sky.

It reminded her of heaven and might bring Silas's angels back to help him wake up. She tucked it into Silas's hand.

"I know you had the journal when you arrived, Silas. I'm going to find it and make sure it's safe for you. Sleep and get well."

She left him in Doc's care and ran to the stairway. She flew up the steps, grabbed Fowler near the wheel and told him to stay with Silas. She barreled into her cabin to find James and Quinn pouring over charts. She spun in a circle then stopped, her arms stretched toward the bookshelves.

"It's here! Quinn, you've seen it better than I have. What does it look like?" He gave her a puzzled look. "The journal! What does the journal look like?" She angled her hands, trying to judge the size. "About like this? Battered and cracked leather? The color of a walnut?"

"Well, aye, but, Kit—"

"It's here!" She thrust her arms toward the shelves. "He came aboard with it. He was studying the books while James and I talked."

James nodded and walked toward her. "He did. He had something in his hand. He tucked it under his arm and then..." He frowned. "I don't remember seeing it again."

Kit turned to them. "He's hidden it, probably among these books. All we have to do is find it."

James and Quinn began to pull volumes from each side of the bookshelf, dropping them on the floor with loud thuds, while she tackled the center. Silas was smaller than she was so she peered straight ahead, then lowered her eyes. She studied the books, trying to look for something the color of walnut. So many of the leather-bound volumes were brown, but Silas had been looking at another book, a large one...

She reached out and plucked a volume from the center shelf. When she laid it on her hand, it bulged upward. She took a deep breath and flipped it open. Tucked inside was a ratty, leather journal.

“I’ve got it,” she whispered. Both men stopped hurling books in mid-fling and came toward her. She dropped the large volume to the floor and held the journal in trembling hands. “My father has killed a man for this and was willing to kill another.”

They moved to the desk, slid into chairs, and Kit laid the book down. She slowly opened the cover and began to turn the pages. The three of them stared with wide eyes at the elaborate drawings and odd mathematical formulas. Diagrams and pictures were interspersed with cryptic writing that seemed like another language. They found a diagram of a fork-like object studded with holes that held tubing leading to a box, another of a clock that seemed more like a compass, others that resembled navigational instruments but were enhanced and modified in bizarre and incomprehensible ways. Finally they came to a drawing of a bell. In that bell sat two men, and by the perspective used in the drawing, it seemed clear they were many feet under the water, breathing through a tube-like structure attached to some kind of pump on the surface.

“That’s the diving chamber,” Quinn said.

“He’s a fucking madman,” James whispered.

“He’s a fucking genius,” Quinn said. “I saw hints of it throughout our time together, but most of it had been beaten out of him. They drove him mad, but he never lost his mind. He kept it safe all this time in his journal.”

“Do you think that diving contraption will work?” James asked.

“I’ve no doubt about it,” Quinn said.

Kit closed the book and stood up. “Then we’re going to make Silas a very wealthy man. There’s a fortune to be had in the depths of the sea.” She walked across the room, tucked the journal back into the bigger volume and placed it on the shelf. One by one, she slowly picked up the other scattered books and placed them back on the shelves thinking about the poor little man sleeping in Doc’s surgery.

Quinn and James began an argument about the merits and dangers of using the diving chamber. They could argue their opinions into

infinity, but Kit ignored them because she'd already made up her mind. They were going to build the chamber, they were going to learn to use it, and they'd all be wealthier than kings.

Her first priority, however, was to get Silas well and keep him safe. She adored the little man and she refused to allow him to languish in a coma. If Silas hadn't woken up by the time they resolved things with her father, Kit decided she would sail *The Rose* to the colonies, maybe Boston or Philadelphia, and find someone to help Doc take care of him. Entering colonial waters was risky, but Silas had become very important to her. She wanted him back.

"And I'm getting him back."

At the sound of her voice, James paused in mid-sentence. He and Quinn glanced toward her, and she smiled.

"You look...happier," Quinn said. "Haven't seen you smile much since Silas got hurt."

"I *am* happier. I've decided one way or another, no matter what it takes, we're going to get our Silas back. In the meantime..."

Finding solutions and making decisions made her feel powerful. Feeling powerful made her horny. Suddenly all she could think of was the heat that poured from her pussy, and she wanted to play. She pursed her lips as she let her gaze sweep across both men. God, they were both so gorgeous and all hers. What should she do with them?

She tilted her head and patted her lip with a finger. "Stand up, come over here, and face the bookcase."

They gave her dubious looks but slowly stood and did what she asked. She strolled back to the desk, quietly opened a small chest, and extracted a gold coin. She slipped it into the knot of the ribbon in her hair.

"You can turn around now."

Both men turned and glanced around the cabin as though anticipating some sort of nasty surprise. Kit sauntered toward them.

"We've plans for our future, but now it's time to hunt for treasure of a different kind. Thinking about gold and silver makes me hot and

antsy. Doesn't it make you simply burn with desire?" She slowly gathered her skirt and held it at her waist to display her swollen pussy and the dampness that glistened on the golden hairs. She skimmed her hand over the curls on her mound and allowed her finger to drift downward between the folds of her pussy. "I can't remember ever being this hot, this throbbing. It's like my body caught on fire."

She shoved her index finger into her pussy. James swallowed thickly and unbuckled his weapons belt. As he leaned down to drop it to the floor, Kit glanced between his legs to see his cock lunging against the fabric. Quinn yanked his shirt over his head and tossed it behind him, then hopped on one foot as he struggled to remove his boot.

"Mmm...that feels so good," Kit murmured. "But not as good as large, hard, swollen cock. Ravish me, gentlemen. I'm in a good mood, and I'm all yours."

Kit let her eyes drift closed but peeked at them through her lashes. Both pairs of pants hit the floor at the same time, and they nearly knocked each other over trying to get to her. Quinn slid his arm around her waist and covered her hand with his. He forced her finger deeper. His cock pulsed against her, thrumming in a steady rhythm that made her pussy clench on her finger. It felt nice, but fingers offered no substitute for the real thing.

Quinn tugged at her hand and lifted it up. Her finger glistened with warm fluid, and he leaned down and drew it into his mouth. Her pussy convulsed and beat with the suction of his mouth. She reached down and cupped his balls, squeezing lightly. Quinn lurched against her.

"Lick me, James," Kit said. "I want to feel your tongue on my clit, in my pussy, lapping my juices."

James dropped to his knees and grabbed her hips. The first quick swipe of his tongue sent a shudder and a wave of heat through her body. The second nearly made her melt into the floor. He ran his tongue slowly across her pussy, dipping inside, then over each lip,



sucking them into his mouth. When he reached her clit, she trembled violently and thrust her hips tighter against his mouth.

Quinn moved behind her and cupped her breasts, squeezing and pinching her nipples through her blouse. The rasp of the fabric against her tender skin made them ache and swell, eager for the draw of his mouth. He leaned down and kissed his way up her neck, sucking gently. She tilted her head to give him better access, and he swept the blouse off her shoulder and dropped several long, warm kisses along her bare skin. A tingle spread down her arms, and her hand clutched convulsively on his cock. It pounded in her palm and grew harder, larger, inflamed with heat.

James sucked on her clit as Quinn rolled her nipples between his fingers. The combination of the hot mouth and rhythmic hands stole her concentration until the only thoughts in her head revolved around shattering in a blissful wave of orgasmic delight. James's tongue stroked the wet, swollen flesh between her legs. His teeth nipped at her aching pussy lips, and his mouth devoured the itching, burning nub of her clit. She threaded her fingers through James's hair, tugging him closer, pushing his mouth tighter. Her body tensed, and she squeezed Quinn's cock until he groaned with the pressure.

Her back arched, and she came with the power of a gale-force wind. It ripped through every fiber of her body, a powerful tempest that spiraled higher and higher. She quaked and trembled until her legs buckled under the onslaught, and she fell limp and exhausted into Quinn's arms. And still the waves of pleasure rolled through her, cresting and falling. James kept his mouth on her until her pussy fluttered with the tiny aftershocks of the storm. When he finally looked up, she could barely open her eyes. Her skirt drifted down her legs.

She smiled lazily, thoroughly sated. "Did you find any treasure down there?"

"All kinds of treasure," James said.

"Any gold?"

James's brows drew down.

Quinn laughed. "Sounds like Kit's in the mood for a little treasure hunt."

"There's nothing in her pussy," James said. "Believe me, I inspected it thoroughly."

"You did indeed," Kit said.

Quinn spun her around. "Hmm, well, it has to be here somewhere." He slipped his hands beneath her blouse, sliding them slowly up her body. He ran his thumbs under her breasts, then dipped into her cleavage, and skimmed his fingers across her nipples. He snapped the shirt over her head, grabbed her shoulders, and held her at arm's length. "Beautiful, but no gold."

James pulled the skirt down her legs, and she stepped out.

"I'll have to keep looking," Quinn said. "I have an idea. Get on the bed."

She dove toward the bed, rolled, and flung her arms over her head. She watched as Quinn went to her desk, opened a wooden chest and withdrew her tiny bottle of *vainilla*. She pursed her lips and lifted up on her elbows. James gazed between them curiously.

"You're going to have a snack?"

"No, I'm searching for treasure." Quinn sat on the edge of the bed, pulled out the stopper and tipped the bottle on his finger. He slowly spread the liquid on her mouth, his finger caressing her lips and dipping lightly between them. Her tongue peeked out for a taste. He wagged his finger. "Oh no you don't. That's for me."

She tilted her head and waited. Quinn stared into her eyes. She blinked several times, unsure of his intention.

"Can you sit very still?" he asked.

She winked. "You've no idea." Her heartbeat sped up.

He leaned toward her and licked the edge of her lip. "Mmm, you taste so good." He pressed light kisses on her lips, then angled his face and locked his mouth over hers. Slowly, leisurely his mouth devoured hers, his tongue sweeping inside. She sucked it in eagerly,

and her heart pounded against her chest as he cupped her shoulders and slammed her to the bed. He crushed his body against hers, rubbing his throbbing cock over her pussy, back and forth until she thought she'd go mad. His lips continued to roam over her mouth and she instinctively arched her hips upward. He made a little noise in his throat. She froze and accepted the torture, her pussy clenching and spasming on emptiness, and her hands clenched against the mattress.

He drew away slowly, his lips pressing soft kisses against hers. His tongue swept out for one final lick.

"Tasty," he said, "but no treasure."

Her eyes widened. "You can't leave me like this. I'm horny as fucking hell."

"You started the game," he said. "You can deal with the rules."

James threw back his head and laughed. Kit shot him a dirty look. She huffed as Quinn sat up and reached for the bottle. "Roll over."

She flounced up and fell back to the bed on her stomach. She cupped her chin in her hands and stared at the wall, mumbling. "I *hate* games."

James sat on the edge of the bed. "You only hate games you haven't devised."

"Same thing," she muttered.

When she felt a drop of cool liquid on her back, she shivered, and her upper body slumped to the mattress. Tiny dots splashed down her spine and the wonderful scent of *vainilla* filled the air.

"Take a taste, James," Quinn said.

She felt a tickle as James's hair drifted over her back, then the slide of a tongue over her spine.

"This stuff is addicting," James murmured in appreciation.

Soon two hot tongues lapped her skin, the moist warmth sending rivers of anticipation through her body. She tingled all over and ground her pelvis into the quilt, trying to put a little pressure on her clit. When that didn't suffice, she reached beneath her and fingered

herself, rubbing and stroking her clit to match the slide of their tongues.

Another drop of liquid splashed against the base of her spine and others followed, creating a path down between the cheeks of her ass. She moaned and thrust a finger into her pussy.

“Let me do that for you, darlin’.” James slid his hand beneath her and touched her clit, massaging with tiny circles while she rocked against his hand.

Quinn licked the trail of liquid, his tongue sliding from the cleft of her ass down between her cheeks. A finger followed and thrust inside. Her pussy clenched hard.

“I can’t wait any longer. I need cocks in me now.”

Quinn stretched out beside her, tucked an arm around her, and rolled her onto his body. He reached between them, and she felt his cock head probing her pussy lips. He thrust up and slammed his cock into her. Kit clung to his shoulders and pressed her forehead against his chest. James straddled their legs, dipped his cock downward to gather her juices, then gripped her hips, tilting them up toward him. He swept the head of his cock between her cheeks and slid inside her ass with a groan. She moaned at the sensation and pushed back against him while Quinn’s arms tightened around her back.

Together they moved slowly, rocking against one another with the rhythm of the ship, a steady, excruciating swaying that tantalized the nerves of her body and brought her closer to madness with each stroke. The feel of their cocks sliding in and out brought her to the edge of an abyss where she clung tenuously, waiting to hurl herself with abandon into the void of pleasure and pain.

James’s thrusts sped up. He pumped into her mercilessly, plunging into her hard and rough, and driving her against Quinn with enough force to rip the breath from her lungs. Her clit scraped against the coarse hair on Quinn’s groin, torturing her with pulses of pleasure. James squeezed her hips, his fingers digging into her skin. She relished each stab of pain as it punched through her, twisting with the

frenzy of the pleasure to crest into a swell of rapturous sensation. Quinn's cock slid against her upper wall, and she tensed, waiting for a dizzying moment until her world crashed, and she flung herself over the edge and spiraled into the abyss.

Her pussy seized Quinn's cock, squeezing and spasming, milking it, demanding that he hurl himself over the edge. He came with a shudder, and the hot jets of his cum shot deep inside her. She relished the feel of it as her pussy continued to pulse around the hot, throbbing cock inside her. James rammed his cock into her one last time. He balls slapped against her, and she felt them tighten. He jerked, and his hips bucked as he came, flooding her ass with the creamy warmth of his cum.

James slowly withdrew from her body and fell to the bed. She lay quietly for a moment, trying to catch her breath. When she lifted her head, Quinn cupped her face and captured her mouth in a kiss.

"I didn't find any treasure, but I enjoyed the hunt."

James's chest rose and fell as he struggled for breath. "She's a goddamn tease. There's no treasure."

Kit pounced on him. She dug her elbows into his chest. "I never tease about treasure, Mr. Kingsley." She reached into her ribbon and pulled out the coin.

James's eyes widened. "Well, I'll be damned."

She held up the coin, and the gold sparkled and twinkled in the rays of the sun. "Is it my fault you get so easily distracted?"

Quinn rose to one elbow and ran his hand down her back. "Any more we should hunt for?"

"Not at this moment." Kit spun the gold between her fingers. She glanced at each and gave them a smile. She thought about the journal tucked on her bookcase. "But, thanks to Silas, we're about to embark on a hunt for treasure no one has ever imagined. I can guarantee we'll be swimming in gold in the near future. I think all our lives are about to change."

"I kind of like this one," Quinn said.

Kit winked. “It’s going to get even better.”

“Any *vainilla* left?” James asked. Quinn nodded. “Good. I have a sudden craving for coffee.”

## Chapter 10

They weighed anchor two days later at dawn as the sun peaked over the horizon and hid behind dark, gloomy clouds. Most of the crew went about their routine quietly without the usual banter and good cheer that followed the course out of the harbor.

The wind blew into the sails with perfect gusts, and Trueblood set a course southeast through the island chain. The French plied those waters, their ships filled with the goods from the rich plantations of Saint-Domingue. A possible bounty awaited them if they managed to intercept a French merchantman loaded with tobacco, sugar, or indigo, but that wasn't their goal. They followed her father's ship, the merchantman *Jamaican Wind* and planned to take her and everything on it.

Even that knowledge failed to arouse much enthusiasm in the crew. She knew what image hung in all their minds—the wounded body lying in Doc's corner of the hold.

Throughout the last few days, the crew members had scrounged bits and pieces of rope, metals and ceramics, trinkets and baubles, and brought them to the hold. They'd created a small nest in the corner, hoping if Silas woke up he'd be comfortable. Things had been very quiet without his constant murmurs, rushing feet, and insatiable desire for coffee. She missed his bright brown eyes and hesitant smile.

Kit leaned on the ship's rail and watched the Bahamas retreat into a foggy bank of gray mist, grateful to put some distance between her crew and the disgruntled citizens of New Providence. She planned to use this voyage to finish this with her father. When *Jamaican Wind* left harbor, they'd followed, and when she met him on the high seas,

she'd take his ship and his pride. He'd be lucky to leave her sight with his life. Any other raid would be a bonus, and she hoped once Richard Cross and his cohorts were taken care of, the men would be able to find their usual free-spirited abandon.

Quinn's voice roused her from gloomy thoughts. "Please don't leave me alone in a bed with James again." Kit laughed and turned as Quinn planted his elbows on the railing beside her. "The man snores like a wounded alligator."

"Acquainted with wounded alligators, are you?"

"Intimately. My life's not been as sheltered as you might think, Captain Savage."

"I've never seen an alligator, though I've heard stories of them and saw a drawing once. It's been said they practically run herd on the Spaniards. Anything that keeps the Spanish at bay can't be all bad."

"Alligators are definitely a deterrent to exploration. They're all over the southern part of the mainland."

"I've never been to the southern part of the mainland."

"Really? I assumed you might have been born there."

Kit shook her head. "Virginia, actually, but we only lived there a short time. My father—" She snapped her mouth closed, then decided it made no difference. Apparently she no longer had secrets from Quinn and she wasn't sure she wanted any. "My father wanted a new start, more power. When Mother died, my father packed up one of his merchantmen, and we left for Jamaica. She was barely cold in the grave. Richard Cross is a heartless, callous man." She brushed the hair from her face. "James goes to the mainland quite often. He's enamored with South Carolina. Plans to live there some day."

"Given his rather volatile nature, I can't imagine James Kingsley co-existing harmoniously with the good citizens of South Carolina."

"Perhaps not, but James plans to retire some day and become respectable."



“Ha! It’s nice to know he dreams big. How long do you think we’ll sail before our encounter?”

She glanced up into the sails. “A few days. I plan to let my father get far from any welcoming harbor. We’ve trimmed the sails, because with this wind, the head start we’ve given him will disappear fast. *The Black Rose* is a fast vessel. Sleek and graceful.”

“Like her captain,” Quinn murmured.

“There you go with those pretty words again. I’ll miss them.”

“No need to miss them.” He curled an arm around her shoulder. “I find you captivating, Captain Savage. You’ve opened a whole new world to me. Perhaps we could discuss some kind of more...permanent arrangement.”

“Not marriage,” Kit said.

“Doesn’t have to be marriage.”

“More than one captain on any ship doesn’t work, Quinn.”

He gazed out over the swells of the waves. “I’m retired, remember?”

“And I have a full crew.” She held her breath.

“I’d be happy to fulfill any role you’d like to give me.” He glanced toward her. “Got anything in mind?”

Kit smiled. “Perhaps Silas will need help building his contraption.”

“Then I’ll help, but Silas may not wake up, Kit.”

“He’ll wake up,” she whispered. “He has to. I’m going to see to it.”

They stared at the sea quietly for a few moments, then Quinn took her hand. “Tell me, Captain Savage, what drove a woman like you to the sea?” He laughed. “Besides Richard Cross’s unstable personality.”

“The same things that drive everyone else I imagine.”

“And if I ask these men? What would they tell me?”

Kit shrugged. “They’d each tell you a different story. Believe me, some of them would give you nightmares. Having seen your back, I imagine you have your own.” She glanced toward the open hatch of

the cargo hold. "From what you've told me, Silas's story is different than most."

"They treated him worse than a dog. They threw him into the dankest holds, tossed him scraps, denied him human companionship. They sensed something different about him. His mind isn't like any other I've ever encountered. I was awed by his presence. And he was also the kindest man I'd ever met. By the time they allowed him to mingle with the crew he was like you've known him. When I signed their articles, I hoped to help Silas, but he'd gone beyond my help. I'm really not sure how he managed to keep hold of his journal, but I do know he moved it constantly from one nest to the next. The night I slipped away in Florida, I begged him to come with me, but he ran into one of his holes and refused to come out."

"He recognized you the day he came into my quarters."

Quinn nodded. "He remembered *something*. I'm just not sure how he remembered it. I know how I remember it, and I'll never forgive myself for leaving him. He was lucky to find you."

"I feel lucky to have found *him*. He makes me feel...good about myself. I've discovered I'm capable of compassion. After living two very disparate lives, I was never really sure if I had any."

"You have more than most." Quinn turned to her with a smile. "So, what's your story, Captain Savage?"

Kit stared into the crystal blue water that lapped against the hull, then raised her face and smiled. "My story involves a lonely little girl and her need to feel something. Perhaps, when this is over, I'll tell you my story and you can tell me yours."

"It's a deal."

She glanced into the rigging then headed toward the wheel to relieve Trueblood.

\* \* \* \*

Two Fingers skidded to a halt, nearly plowing into her as she headed toward her cabin. “He’s awake, Captain. Doc sent me to get you.”

She whirled around and practically slid down the hatch stairs on her ass. Shouldering her way through several crewmen piling barrels, she dodged crates and chests and pushed her way to the back of the hold to the little niche Doc had carved out for his surgery. She grabbed the door jamb and careened into the room. Doc patted her shoulder.

“I’m off to get him some coffee.”

Doc ducked his head and vanished, leaving them alone.

“Hi, Captain,” Silas said softly. A wistful smile spread across his face as he twisted her blue scarf in his hands. He blinked several times in the gloom.

“Oh, Silas.” She took two steps forward, her heart pounding in her chest. She lifted the lamp from Doc’s desk and placed it on the small table near the cot. Her gaze traveled every visible inch of his body.

Silas sat up in the cot, his back propped against two of the fluffiest pillows she’d ever seen, his body covered in a soft linen blanket. His bandages were pristine, and his skin glowed with the salve used to treat his superficial wounds. Doc had been taking excellent care of him.

“How do you feel?”

“Good, good,” he murmured. He lifted his hand and traced the bandage on his forehead. “New hat?”

“A temporary one,” she said. “When you feel better, we’ll go through the trunks and get you a nicer one.”

“Good, good.”

She sat on the edge of the cot while he lowered his head and ran his fingers over the silk scarf.

“Memories, memories. Good? Bad?” he murmured. He raised his head, and his gaze darted around the room. He touched the side of the

hull, tenting his fingers against the wood. He closed his eyes and tilted his head. "We sail."

"Aye, Silas. We're hunting the men that hurt you."

His hand fluttered upward toward his bandage again. "Memories..." He brought his gaze back to hers. "I saw Hennessey."

"Hennessey hurt you, but he can't hurt you again. He's dead."

"He's a bad man. Always was." He studied her face for a moment. "Blackwell is a good man. Always was. I remember...he tried to help. I hid and made him leave. Glad the 'gators didn't eat him." He smiled.

"Me too."

"Blackwell loves Kit." He gave a little shudder. "James is scary, but he loves Kit too." He studied her face for a moment. "Kit will be happy."

"Aye, I hope so." She blinked back tears. "I'll be happier now that you're awake."

"Deep sleep. Good dreams." He sat up straight and gripped her hand, staring through her. "Saltpeter, sulfur, paraffin, quicklime, coal tar...My journal! Where's my journal?"

"In my cabin. It's safe. You tucked it into a book."

"Good, good. Safe. I knew it. Where's my cup? I want coffee."

"Doc's gone to get it for you."

Silas glanced around the cabin, and his gaze came to rest on the rags, scraps, and odds and ends tucked in the corner. He smiled. "Ah, my friends have been here."

She took his hand, and her fingers traced over his rough skin. "Everyone's been worried about you."

"No need. No need. The angels said it was time. Can I have soup? And my journal?"

"Of course. I'll get them now. There are quite a few people that would like to see you. Would you like some company? Two Fingers has been waiting outside the door for you to wake up. I can barely get a decent hour's work from him."

“Works hard. Good man. Like to see him.”

She rose as Doc entered the room with a steaming cup of aromatic coffee in a dainty china cup. He placed it in Silas’s outstretched hands.

“Hmm...” He breathed deeply. “*Vainilla*. My favorite. Future coin in that. Oh, aye, definitely future coin. Kit?”

“Aye, Silas?”

“You’re my favorite angel,” he whispered.

“And you’re my favorite scientist.”

He took a sip of coffee, making humming noises. He gave her a little wave.

\* \* \* \*

Hal’s voice thundered through the open door with the warm rush of Caribbean air.

“Target sighted off the port bow! Prepare for engagement!”

Kit shoved her hip against James’s thigh. “Get out of my way, you big ox.” He smirked at her in the mirror, and she rolled her eyes. “A girl can’t even get near a mirror on her own ship.”

Quinn laughed. “You’re a little more than a girl, Captain Savage.”

Kit reached for a black ribbon to tie her hair back. “We are definitely going to need a bigger cabin just the same.”

James’s hand paused in mid-brush stroke. His eyes widened, and he spun toward her, lifting her in his arms. “Music to my ears, kitten.”

She dropped a kiss on his smiling mouth. “It’s getting congested in here.”

“We can extend the quarterdeck,” Quinn said. “Separate the quarters into a sleeping cabin and an office. More privacy that way.” He winked at her.

She wiggled in James’s arms, and he dropped her to the floor. Her gaze shot toward Quinn as he pulled on his boots. “That’s a good idea.”

“Or we could just capture a bigger ship,” James said.

“I like *The Rose*. It’s home. But you two are just too damn big.” She snatched her brush out of James’s hand. “And stop touching my things.”

“So you prefer the restless, scurrying type?” Quinn asked. “A small man with a brain the size of a man-o-war who converses with angels?”

She shook the brush at him. “Don’t tease me about Silas. I mete out punishment for talk of that kind, Mr. Blackwell.”

“Looking forward to it, but that will have to wait.” He nodded toward the open cabin door where Fowler leaned against the jamb.

“Planning to lead the raiding party, Kit, or too busy primping?” he asked.

She slid the ribbon through her hair, tied the knot, and grabbed her hat. “What do you think?” Looping her red sash around her waist over black trousers, she tied it quickly then shrugged into a black waistcoat. “What’s Silas up to? Has he scared you away, Will?”

Fowler grunted. “He’s slunk off to one of his hidey-holes with Two Fingers. Doc’s keeping an eye on them, at least as close as he can get. Watkins smells like the devil today, like he’s taken a bath in sulfur.” Fowler shook his head. “Can’t you do something with him?”

“I like him the way he is,” Kit said. “And he’s happy.”

James stared into the mirror, running his fingers through the bristles of his beard. “Do you think I should put lit fuses in my beard like Edward Teach does?”

Kit rolled her eyes. “I want you to look formidable, James, not downright insane.”

“True,” James said. “I do look formidable enough. Besides, Teach is a crazy man. Ben Hornigold calls him Blackbeard now you know. Teach has gotten quite the reputation, but mark my words, he’ll be dead within a year.”

The sound of an explosion rocked the air. The thunderous blast echoed through the cabin, and the ship shuddered violently. Kit

lurched across the cabin and fell on her ass. Glass rattled and shattered, and the mirror cracked. The open windows banged against the casements. Several items flew off the desk, and the contents of her dressing table crashed to the floor. The hull creaked and groaned as the ship listed portside. She gritted her teeth and clenched her fists against the planks as the cracks and snaps of the wood threatened the integrity of the structure.

“Hold together,” she muttered. “Hold together.”

With a sudden whoosh of air, the ship righted itself and swayed back and forth.

“What the *fuck*?” James said.

Quinn released his grip on the edge of the desk. “Jesus Christ, someone blew a hole in the goddamn ship.”

Kit cast a glance toward Fowler who braced himself against the cabin door. She picked herself up off the floor just as Hal burst through the door, knocking Fowler aside.

“What the hell was that?” Hal shouted. “We’ve not loosed any cannon fire and the *Jamaican Wind* hasn’t turned. There’s no fucking way we ran aground. We’re in the middle of the goddamn ocean! Trueblood!” He whirled around and raced down the deck.

Kit slammed her cutlass into the scabbard and flipped open the powder box. “This is *not* how I wanted to start the day.”

“Captain!”

She whirled around to find Two Fingers doubled over in the doorway, his hands on his knees, pulling in huge gasps of breath.

“’Tis... nothing,” he panted. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Nothing to worry about?” Quinn said. “We damn near capsized.”

Two Fingers took another breath. “Just a little miscalculation.”

“Miscalculation, my ass.” James strode across the room and gripped the small man’s arm, hauling him upright. Two Fingers tried to lunge backward, but James gave him a little shake. “Speak plain.”

“An experiment. Too much saltpeter. Nothing damaged. Just a *boom*.” He jerked his arm up and made an explosive sound.

James glanced at Kit. “That was more than a *boom*. What the hell is he talking about?”

“I’ve no idea.” Kit shoved her pistol in her belt. “Is Silas okay?”

“Aye, Captain. Just a little...dirty.”

James grunted and released Two Fingers’s arm. The man backed a few steps out the door.

Kit grabbed her spyglass. “Tell Silas to stop experimenting for the day. I need this ship in working order. I’ve got a merchantman to capture. Did he find a hat he likes?”

“Oh, aye, Captain. A nice one too. He’s more than pleased. Found a coat too.”

“Jesus Christ on a yardarm,” James muttered. “Is this a pirate ship or a haberdashery?”

Quinn laughed. “Some days it’s hard to tell. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Nor would I,” Kit said. “Two Fingers, get back down in the hold before Silas kills himself or blows us out of the water. Keep him *away* from the saltpeter.”

“Aye, Captain. But ’tis hard when—”

Hal knocked against Two Fingers as he rushed into the cabin, and the little man took the opportunity to whirl around and race toward the staircase.

“The *Jamaican Wind* has spotted us. The explosion spooked her. She’s unfurled more sail trying to outrun us.”

“She can certainly try.” Kit turned toward James. “Take command, Mr. Kingsley. Hal will be your second.”

James drew back. “But ’tis your ship.”

“You need to take command some day. If you won’t take it, I’ll force you into it.” She took his face between her hands and kissed him. “You’re the best naval strategist I’ve ever seen, James. I need you to do this. I want the *Jamaican Wind*, and I can’t afford to lose this ship.”



“And you won’t.” He turned to Hal. “In accordance with the captain’s orders, prepare to overtake and board the *Jamaican Wind*. Have Trueblood turn the rudder ten degrees port. Loose those sails and let’s catch a bit more of this wind before we come at her. Cannons at the ready. We’ll take the shots before she can turn and train her cannon on us. Once in range, swing to starboard and fire three shots into the rudder. We’ll disable the bitch and watch her flounder.” He shrugged, glancing at Kit. “It’ll be fun.”

James strode out the door as Hal shouted orders to the crew. Kit turned to Quinn, slapping the spyglass into his hand. “Come with me, Mr. Blackwell. We’re going to watch my father squirm. I can guarantee you a fun morning. Richard Cross hates to lose.”

## Chapter 11

James's strategy worked like a charm. When James gave the signal, Trueblood piloted *The Black Rose* smoothly through the smoke and debris toward her bobbing target. The ship cruised along the starboard side of *Jamaican Wind* as Kit's crew scattered into the rigging to gather the sails and others dropped the anchor. A dozen men swung the grappling hooks. They tore into the railing of the disabled *Jamaican Wind*, and the men hauled the boat until it slammed against *The Rose*. The advance party boarded, corralled the crew and disabled the cannon, while others lashed the ships together to hold them steady.

After Hal ordered the boarding platform to be hoisted between the vessels, Kit strode across the plank and hopped down onto the deck of the *Jamaican Wind*. Quinn, James, and Hal followed behind with two dozen armed men. Several of the men stood near the rail, their firearms trained on the officers, as others collected the cache of weapons and carried them to *The Black Rose*. Hal shouted his orders, and the rest herded the captured sailors toward the hold to begin the off-loading of cargo and any valuables. Through the haze of the cannon smoke, Kit saw her father lounged against the wall of the quarterdeck with another man, seemingly two men on a pleasure cruise. She ignored him as she supervised the transfer of the goods from one ship to another. Quinn kept a pistol trained on Cross. James led several men to search the captain's cabin, then below decks to the passenger quarters.

When the ship had been ransacked, the food stores collected, and her father's personal items confiscated, Hal returned with most of the

crew to *The Rose* and they gathered at the rail. Their firearms pointed toward the crew of the *Jamaican Wind* who huddled in a circle near the main mast. Kit strolled toward her father, flanked by Quinn and James. Richard Cross held a glass of wine and raised it as he spoke to the man next to him.

“Captain McGuire, meet my daughter, Katherine. The pirate queen.” He grimaced, his handsome face drawing down in a frown.

“I’m successful, but I’m hardly a queen, Father.”

“And hardly an example of what a father hopes his daughter will achieve.”

“And what exactly would that be? A marriage with someone in the royal family? More estates? More money? A land grant beyond the mountains of Virginia? What would have made you happy, Father? It certainly wasn’t Mother and it sure as hell wasn’t me.”

He ignored her questions as his gaze skimmed her body from top to bottom. “You’re looking well, Katherine.”

“As are you. I can see you haven’t pined away from worry.”

“I had an inkling where you were.” He glanced toward *The Black Rose*, then pushed off the wall. “Just as I suspected that you’d probably sunk this low. You always were a difficult child and too much like your mother, full of fanciful ideas about justice, equality, and freedom. You will never learn, Katherine, that the world holds no place for any of those things if some of us are to prosper.” He swept his arm toward *The Rose*. “None of this surprises me, though I must say, I’m rather surprised to see *him*. I underestimated you, Mr. Blackwell.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Quinn said.

“I see you’ve not only found my daughter, you’ve managed to become one of the inner circle of misfits. Congratulations. I thought you had higher aspirations.”

“I’ve managed to capture the attention of a queen.” He slid his arm around Kit’s shoulder. “Can you say the same?”

“No, I cannot, but then I set my sights higher than *vermin*.”

Quinn's hand tightened around her shoulder, and James took a step toward her father.

"You'll regret saying that," James snarled, but paused when Kit laughed.

"Father prefers his vermin to come from noble German stock."

"Not a very gracious statement about our sovereign, Katherine. A man must sway in the direction of the wind or he breaks. That is something you've never accepted, *Captain Savage*, and it could bring you to an untimely and gruesome end." Her father took a sip of wine. "And, Mr. Kingsley, you were once one of the most promising officers in Her Majesty's Navy. How the mighty have fallen."

"I prefer to fight battles of my own choosing," James growled.

Cross made a tsking noise. "Another unenlightened soul, and surely you'll pay for that attitude as well. In a matter of days, I will be back in Jamaica seeking a private audience with the governor concerning the pirates in these seas. We apparently have trash to dispose of."

Kit took a step toward him. "But that won't be today, Father, as it appears your ship is somewhat...dead in the water."

Cross waved his hand. "No matter. I have many ships in this area."

James slid his cutlass from the scabbard. "They'll have trouble finding you at the bottom of the sea."

Cross took a step toward him and growled, "I will happily see the three of you hang."

"He's coming! Get off the ship! Quick! Get off the ship!"

Kit whirled around to see Two Fingers leaning over the railing of *The Rose*, waving his arms furiously.

And that's when all hell broke loose.

\* \* \* \*

Silas appeared on the boarding ramp, wearing a wide-brimmed hat that nearly shadowed his entire face. A feather dipped and swayed in the wind as he strode across the plank. He wore a purple frock coat that nearly overwhelmed his body, and Kit saw her light blue scarf wrapped around his waist. The sword dangling from his hip dragged across the planks as he moved. He looked like a child playing cavalier. She had only a moment to wonder at his appearance when she saw the leather straps across his shoulders. They cradled some sort of ceramic jar on his back. He held a long copper tube clutched in his fists and, when he reached the railing of the *Jamaican Wind*, he dropped down lithely and stopped in front of Richard Cross.

"You're not nice," he said. "I listen. I know."

"You must be the brilliant Silas Watkins." Cross shook his head. "This motley collection gets more curious by the minute."

Silas tilted his head. "Only a minute left."

He strode toward the center mast. He smiled at one of the crew members.

"Gonna get hot. Might want to go for a swim."

He tilted his copper rod skyward. Kit heard a click, a whoosh, and a stream of fiery liquid shot from the end of the tube, exploding through the air with a thunderclap. An inferno of fire ripped through the sailcloth, consuming it in a blazing torrent that snaked up higher and higher and licked at the wood of the mast. Silas laughed as the crewmen near the mast screamed and fell backward, crashing into one another as they tried to escape the heat.

"I told you! I told you!" he shouted. "Off the ship!"

Kit barely heard the sounds of the splashes as the men hurled themselves over the railing and hit the sea. Silas scampered down the deck, sweeping his rod back and forth across canvas and shrouds, torching hatches and ropes. His sword trailed after him like a forgotten toy.

Captain McGuire raced across the deck and shouted to Cross. "I'll get the pumps working! Grab some buckets."

“Won’t help!” Silas shouted. He shot his stream of fire into the rigging of the foremast. “Quicklime. Quicklime. Water makes more fire!”

Cross grabbed a bucket and tossed the water toward a blazing pile of sailcloth. The canvas exploded, the torrent of flames lapping at the planks of the deck like a molten river and spiraling upward to lap against the hull. Cross hurtled backward and slammed against the deck, beating at his burning sleeve. Silas continued to weave his way across the deck. Sparks rained from the end of the copper tube, and each time he aimed, another explosion ripped through the air, erupting into a conflagration. The deck became an ocean of fire that sizzled and spit and flared with each plank it devoured. Each drop of water it consumed began an inferno of roiling smoke and fire.

From the stern, Kit watched Silas move closer to the bow, spreading his arcs of fire, destroying everything in his path.

She grabbed Quinn’s sleeve. “He’s cut off. If he jumps into the water with that weapon, he’s going to set the sea on fire. I’ll lose him.”

“We’re not losing him.” Quinn stripped off his weapons and thrust them into Kit’s arms. “Get off the ship.”

She dropped the pile to the deck. “No, I’m going to get Silas.” She’d taken several steps when she heard Quinn say, “James, grab her.”

James gathered her against him, and Kit slammed her boot heel on his foot. “No! Goddamn it, this is *my* raid. He’s *my* friend.”

“He’s *our* friend,” Quinn said. “All of ours. Do what I say, Kit. James, get her off this ship.”

Kit continued to push against his arms. “No, James. I swear I’ll gut you if you move!”

James swung her up in his arms. “You gave command to me today. Live with it.”

“Have Trueblood take *The Rose* to a safe distance.” Quinn stripped off his coat.

While James jumped onto the rail and started across the plank, Kit shouted, “Quinn, no!”

“We’ll make it, Kit,” Quinn said. “I promise.”

Kit squirmed and fought harder than she’d ever fought before, but James’s arms held her like steel bands. She had no choice but to glare over his shoulder, shouting her protests, and watch as Quinn jumped into the cargo hold.

\* \* \* \*

Quinn squinted, trying to see anything in the smoke-choked hold. Above him, sparks burst and tendrils of fire licked between the planks and through the knotholes.

“I hope we got all the gunpowder off the ship,” he muttered.

He dropped down, took a breath of semi-clear air and began to crawl along the damp floor wondering what would happen once the tendrils of fire reached far enough to touch the moist, swollen wood under his knees. Silas’s excited words filled his head.

*Quicklime. Quicklime. Water makes more fire!*

He’d seen the consequences of that. He shook that thought from his mind and moved faster, crawling through passageways and across door frames, weaving around broken crates and unwanted cargo, coughing as the smoke drifted down and settled in his lungs. After what seemed like hours, he’d almost reached his destination—the bow. He gazed upward with a heavy heart and saw the smoking and glowing planks of the deck.

“Couldn’t have headed toward the stern, Silas?” he muttered. “We’ve got a hole the size of a whale in the stern.”

A small sliver of light glimmered a little farther down to his right and several streaks of glowing light winked through the deck above the bow.

Squinting in the haze, Quinn saw a small shadow drop through the streams of light and the thud of boots. The shadow scurried forward, darting farther into the bow. Away from him.

“Goddamn it,” he muttered. He drew in a breath, trying to find his voice. “Silas!”

“Aye, aye.” The chirping response drifted through the hold on a whisper of smoke.

“Are you...” A cough burst from him, and Quinn tried to get a breath. “Are you hurt?”

“No, no.”

“Where’s the fire weapon?”

“On deck. Bigger fire soon. Nothing left.”

*Wonderful.*

“Kit sent me to get you, Silas.”

“Kit okay? She’s nice.”

“Aye, Silas, but she wants you back on *The Black Rose*.”

“Escape, Blackwell. Go now.”

Quinn heard a weak cough through the crackling of the blaze above. The underside of the planks blazed with fire. He only had a few more moments.

“I’m not leaving without you again, Silas.”

“No time. Go. Escape.”

Quinn grabbed hold of a support post and pulled himself up. He took the deepest breath possible and shouted into the hold. “Kit orders you back to *The Rose*, Silas. Get your ass over here now!”

He waited with bated breath until he heard the sound of rags scraping across wood and the scurrying of booted feet. A small body appeared in front of him through the smoke. Quinn let out his breath in a whoosh. Silas’s face was streaked with soot and small burns dotted his skin.

Silas smiled. “Captain’s orders?”

“Aye,” Quinn said. “She told me to bring you back. No escape without Silas Watkins. That’s what she said.”



Silas frowned. "No time."

"They're *orders*."

"Okay. Good, good."

"Can you swim, Silas?"

"No!" he said brightly. "Can you?"

"Fortunately I can." He shook his head. "Though it may not make a difference." He slid the sword out from Silas's scabbard and ripped the coat off him. When Silas frowned again, he said, "We'll get you a better one. A blue one."

"Like heaven?" Silas asked with a smile.

"Exactly like heaven." Quinn yanked off his boots and crouched down. "On my back, Silas. We're going for a swim."

"Good, good." Silas clamored on his back and wrapped his legs around Quinn's waist.

Crouching down, Quinn angled toward starboard, heading for the small slivers of light, hoping he wouldn't have to hack his way through some rotted wood. He doubted he'd be given enough time for that. When he reached the light, he realized he stood in front of a gunport. He gripped the edge of the swollen hatch and yanked with all his might. The door flew open and nearly knocked him on his ass, but he staggered for a moment and found his balance. Silas laughed.

"Any 'gators out there?" he asked.

"No 'gators. And hopefully no sharks."

"Never seen a shark up close," Silas said.

"We'll save that for another day, okay?"

"Sure, sure. Let's go swimming."

Quinn dipped down. "Lie as flat as you can and watch your head when I go through."

Silas positioned his arms in a death grip around Quinn's neck and hung on for dear life, but Quinn had gone without air for so long he barely noticed he couldn't breathe. He reached through the gunport, and wedged his shoulders into the opening. The weight of Silas's body hung limply across his back and seemed no more than a child's.

Quinn dragged his upper body through, hearing the scrape of Silas's shirt against the wood. Silas snuggled closer, and they both took a large gulp of air. As Quinn prepared to slide out the hatch and drop into the sea, he heard a whoosh and an agonized rumble.

*Gunpowder.*

The air shivered, quaked, then *boomed*, and the world exploded in a roar of thunder and excruciating heat. The ship erupted into an agonizing inferno.

Silas screamed as the fires of hell engulfed them in a scorching wave of flames. *Jamaican Wind* disintegrated around their bodies. Quinn's eardrums seemed to shatter, and the world went silent. They hurtled through the air as the shock wave launched them with terrifying speed over the water. A molten sea of roiling, churning fire bubbled beneath them like an ocean of boiling lava. They tumbled in the air, and the colors around him shifted from blue to red and back in a dizzying onslaught of sensation. Through the gut-wrenching terror that consumed him, his mind focused as the weight disappeared from his back, and Silas vanished. Quinn's heart lurched.

*I've lost him, Kit. I'm sorry.*

In a wash of fire, the volcano swallowed him whole. Water rushed at him like a tidal wave and enveloped him, bathing his burning body in a cool blanket of mercy. Everything went black.

## Chapter 12

“He moved.” A whisper of a voice found him in the darkness.

*Go away.*

Other sounds surrounded him, a muted, vibrating cacophony of yelling, shouting, crying, and ripping cloth. He tried to tune out the din, but several voices, filled with anxiety and pain, vied for his attention. He didn’t have the strength or energy to answer. The sensation of hands roaming over his body hurt like a son-of-a-bitch. They traveled over him without mercy, patting his skin, tugging his clothes.

“Be careful. ’Tis stuck to his skin.”

*What the hell does that mean?*

Every touch flared like the stab of a torch against his skin. He wanted to pull away but felt paralyzed. He lay in some kind of puddle, and he seemed to be drenched in both fire and water. He felt like he’d fallen into a volcano, then drowned but had somehow survived.

*Stop touching me. It hurts like a fucking bitch.*

“Please, Quinn, please wake up.”

*That’s Kit’s voice. She sounds like an angel.*

He forced himself to struggle upward through the darkness, searching for her. He ignored the agony of his body and the lure of the quiet. Cool drops rained down on his face interspersed with warm ones. Each one burned and sputtered like hot grease splattering on his skin. He ignored the pain because he needed to find Kit.

He tried to draw a breath and sputtered and choked. His eyes shot open to a blaze of blinding light, and a fierce pain ripped through his head. His stomach clenched in a vicious spasm, and he twisted

sideways. The movement bathed him in unholy rivulets of fiery pain. He spewed gobs of seawater onto the deck.

A warm body smashed against his back and arms wrapped around his chest. The weight and contact sent a trail of agony winding through his body.

*Kit.*

He couldn't decide if she was trying to help or trying to strangle him, but he thought he felt tears falling on the back of his neck. He spit several more times, drew in a large gulp of fresh, clean air, then rolled to his back to meet Kit's eyes. He'd been right about the tears. Tracks of tears smeared the dark traces of soot on her cheeks. Several of her golden curls had been singed. She'd never looked so good.

She threw herself onto his chest, sending more pain spiraling through him, but he kept quiet because the fear of never seeing her face again had been more terrifying than the ocean of fire. Her mouth covered his in a hot, wet kiss that stole what little breath he'd managed to gather in his lungs.

"Feel better now, Kit?" James asked. "He appears to be alive. A little worse for wear, but alive."

Kit nodded furiously against his shoulder. Quinn blinked, struggling to keep his eyes open, but he managed to lift a brow. James's cocky voice seemed to infuse him with strength. "Are you sorry about that, James?" His words came out with a hoarse, raspy sound that reminded him of Will Fowler. He put a hand to his neck to check for damage, but his throat seemed to be intact.

"Not a bit." James hunkered down beside them. His soaked clothes spit water in Quinn's direction, and water dripped from his hair creating more sizzling heat. James stroked his wet beard and studied Quinn's face. "Was a bit worried about you myself. Rather surprised by that."

Quinn tried to sit up but found his body wouldn't obey. Every muscle and bone hurt like hell. Quinn gritted his teeth when James

curled an arm around his shoulder and helped him up. He turned his face toward Kit, slowly and with a lot of pain. "Your father?"

"We didn't find him in the water. The ship turned to ash in front of our eyes. We were so worried about you. I thought..." She closed her eyes for a moment, hiding the tears. When she opened them, they were clear, bright, and resolved. She ran her fingers across the stubble on his jaw. "I meant nothing to my father. He meant nothing to me. We never understood each other. We managed to pull most of the crew out of the water before the explosion. But you...God, Quinn, don't ever do that to me again." A fresh trail of tears tracked through the soot on her face.

Quinn turned his face and kissed her palm. "I won't. I promise." He lifted his gaze beyond James to see the small group hovering nearby. Hal, Fowler, and Trueblood stared at him with worried faces. He steeled himself to ask the one question he didn't want to ask. His fingers wrapped around Kit's. "Did you find Silas?"

Hal stepped aside, and Silas Watkins scurried forward. Quinn's heart lurched, and his hand clenched on Kit's.

"Here, here." Silas smiled. "I'm here, Blackwell."

With his heart in his throat, Quinn stared, frowning, trying to understand and afraid to believe his eyes. Silas's clothes hung in wet, scorched shreds over raw, painful-looking skin, but he was alive.

Quinn imagined he looked worse. He felt worse. He couldn't imagine standing up. Despite the discomfort Silas had to feel, his bright brown eyes focused on Quinn, alert and eager.

"Silas saved your sorry ass," James said. "He held you up until Hal and I could get in the water to retrieve you."

"But..." Quinn shook his head.

Silas laughed. "Memories, memories. I can swim!"

"Your angels tell you that?" Quinn asked.

"No, no, just remembered."

"You look...okay." Quinn didn't think he'd been lucky enough to look okay. He swallowed hard. The smell of his skin alone told him

what he'd see, but he forced himself to glance down the length of his body. What little clothing hung on him was charred and ripped. Every inch of his flesh glistened a dull shade of rose, and several layers of skin on his lower legs had been destroyed. His calves oozed with blood and throbbed with a burning heat. He clenched his hands, and Kit smoothed the hair back his brow. "I didn't fare as well."

Silas shook his head sadly, then looked up at the sky. He cocked his head. "Weight affects range of movement when pushed with the same amount of force. The velocity of the explosion sent us different distances. Lighter weight, greater distance. I sailed beyond the danger. You descended into the sea of fire." Silas blinked and stared straight ahead for a moment, then he smiled. "You okay, Blackwell?"

"I'll be fine." He gulped again "Eventually."

"Good, good." Silas glanced toward the sky again. "The angels helped me help *you*. But then they left. Bye, bye. I live on *The Black Rose* now." He turned to Kit with a bright smile. "Right, Kit?"

"Absolutely, Silas," Kit said. "You're one of our most valued crewmembers."

A murmur rustled over the deck, and the crowd divided. Doc ran through, shifting a wooden case in his arm, followed by two men carrying a plank of wood covered in a blanket. Doc hunkered down beside him and gave him a cursory glance, lifting ragged bits of cloth and peering at his wounds with a dour face.

"Well, Mr. Blackwell, I'm up to my eyeballs in wounded men, but you've just been given priority and shot to the front of the line." He glanced over his shoulder and focused on Hal and Fowler. "I'll need plenty of fresh water, Hal. Whatever we've got. Lots of clean cloth. Raid Trueblood's chest if you have to. Will, we need to get him below decks to my surgery. The sooner the better. I've got lots to do here. You holding together?"

Quinn nodded as Doc flipped the latches on his case and flung it open. He extracted a small bottle of fluid and pulled the cork.

"Open."

Quinn opened his mouth, and the surgeon splashed several drops of the liquid on his tongue. "Putting me out of my misery permanently?"

"No, no, but you're going to sleep for a little while. The good news is you'll live."

"And the bad?"

Doc smiled. "Your legs aren't going to be pretty anymore."

"I'll be happy with the living part," Quinn said.

As they gently maneuvered him onto the makeshift stretcher, Kit stood and turned to Silas. "Doc will take care of you when he's finished with Quinn."

"I'm hurt? Not sunburn?" Silas reached up to touch his face, and Kit lowered his arm.

"You're not hurt too badly, but don't touch. You need to be patient a little while, then do *exactly* what Doc says. Captain's orders."

"Sure, sure. Captain's orders."

Kit reached out to cup his reddened face then her fingers curled and she pulled her hand away. She gave him a gentle pat on the shoulder. "When you're well, we need to have a talk about rules. Two Fingers tells me there's gunpowder everywhere downstairs. He'll get it cleaned up while Doc fixes you."

"Aye, aye, Captain!" Silas saluted, then turned and ran across the deck.

"Gunpowder," James muttered. "Fucking hell. We're all doomed."

Quinn closed his eyes and decided he wouldn't worry about anything for a little while. The pain had receded somewhat, and the darkness had started to creep back around him. He thought James could handle things while he took a nap.

## Chapter 13

*New Providence*  
*Spring, 1717*

Kit took a sip of her rum and glanced around the table at her crew. Hal, Fowler, Trueblood, James, and Quinn leaned intensely toward one another, discussing the breathing contraption, which Silas had dubbed “Angels’ Breath.” She’d checked in with him before they’d left for the Barnacle, and the little man beamed when he said it was just about ready for testing. She twined some pale blue ribbons through her fingers as she listened to the men discussing their dreams of gold and the treasures to be had from the depths of the sea. Maybe after a few salvage operations, they should retire. Maybe to a nice little cottage in South Carolina.

“Silas told Kit we can test in a few days,” Quinn said. “He and Two Fingers are working on the final adjustments today.”

“The blind leading the blind,” Fowler muttered.

“He’s come a long way in the last few months,” Quinn said. “He’s almost...*right*.”

“I’m not sure he was ever *right*,” Fowler said.

James shuddered. “I want to know who’s going to be the lucky man who places themselves in Silas’s care for the test.”

Trueblood raised his hand. “I’ve volunteered. Unlike some of you,” he shot a glance toward James, “I have confidence in Silas.”

“He didn’t blow the ship you’d just vacated to kingdom come,” James muttered.



"He comes close to it every day," Fowler said. "We should seriously think about locking things up. You'd never get me near anything he's built."

"I trust him," Trueblood said, "but if things go terribly wrong, I can hold my breath the longest."

Hal laughed. "Lots of practice sucking cock in the surf. How's Charles Vane these days, Peter?"

"Getting crazier by the day," Trueblood said. "I've moved on."

"Good for you, Peter," Kit said. "You deserve better."

"If the test is successful," Hal said, "I'm tellin' you, we should start on the Florida coast. The Spanish have long since given up tryin' to salvage more."

"They still have a fairly large contingent based there," Quinn said. "We're bound to run into a garrison scouting the coast. How's it going to look if *The Rose* is caught anchored in their waters?"

"Bah!" Fowler said. "The Spanish are losing their edge here. Besides we could outrun them easy."

Trueblood studied the pearl ring on his finger. "My friend told me a French merchantman went down in a storm off St. Lucia."

"He's a drunk," James said. "I ought to know. I spent a lot of time with him."

"He's sworn off the grog," Trueblood said.

James waved his hand. "Good for him, but he's still wrong. That ship went down off La Desirada. I already got the chart from Ben's partner."

Trueblood shrugged. "Either way, the French have the best cargo."

"Cargo that will ruin in seawater," Hal said. "The Spanish have *gold*."

"Hal's right," Fowler said. "We have to plan for retirement. Word's spreading there'll be a governor soon."

Quinn slid his hand over Kit's. "What do you think, Captain?"

“We should test out the diving apparatus in the shallowest waters first. Peter might be talented, but I’d still rather be safe. We’ll collect the charts, go over the depths, and make our decision then. Agreed?” At their nods, she smiled. Her gaze slid over Quinn, then James. “I think I’m done with business for today. Since the construction is now done, it seems to me we should go see if our quarters are back in order, and perhaps *relax* a little this afternoon.”

“Relaxing sounds good to me,” James said.

“Fucking hell,” Fowler growled. “All the three of you do is *relax*.”

Kit smiled. “We could weigh anchor, sail out, and see what crosses our path. Maybe intercept a French merchantman. Would that make you happy, Will?”

“More than listening to the sounds coming from your quarters. At least I’d have something to do.”

“Good then, that’s the plan for the day,” Kit said. “Besides, Trueblood deserves something extra for volunteering. Maybe some nice pearl ear bobs to match the ring? My gift.”

“I’d like a new waistcoat, too,” Trueblood said. “Silk.”

“Done.” Kit placed her palms on the table. “As for the rest of you...well, counting the treasure in your imaginations should keep you plenty busy until we find a target.”

Fowler slammed his hat on his head. “She’s got that gleam in her eyes, fellows. You know what that means. It’ll be impossible to talk to her like this.” He rose. “We’ll get ready to sail. An afternoon in some warm waters, a little sun and sea air, and we’ll see what comes.”

He headed toward the door, and Trueblood followed him. Hal ambled over to the bar and kissed the back of Bridget’s neck. She giggled and slid back against him.

Kit reached out and took James’s hand, then reached for Quinn’s.

“Up for a little murder and mayhem this afternoon?”

“Always,” Quinn said.

“After the fucking, of course,” James said.

“Captain’s orders.” Kit laughed. “Last one back to *The Rose* has to convince Silas to take a bath.”

Kit leapt from the table and nearly knocked them over as she raced for the door. She burst out into another sun-bleached Caribbean day, wondering if anyone had a life more perfect than hers. When she heard their laughter behind her, she had her answer.

## THE END

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amber Carlton's love of romance began when she read *The Passionate Adventures of Angelique*. Amber is entranced by all things historical, but has a special fascination with English and American history. She lives in the present but loves to write about being "elsewhere". She especially loves pirates.

Her obsessions include the writing of Stephen King, Philip J. Fry and his friends on Futurama, the world of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and watching cheesy movies on Syfy.

Amber has two sons and currently lives in Ohio with her boyfriend and dog.

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