



Angel's Master

Sandra Sookoo

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Blurb

The year is 1822 and life on the high seas just became more complicated for Ethan Williams. He's a pirate with a conscience, and even though killing and plundering are his way of life, he's searching for much more—and he's tired of being alone.

Jacqueline Massey is connected with the American Navy. It's her job to trick men into revealing they are indeed pirates. The guilt she feels about sending them to their doom is equaled only by her longing to be loved. But Jacqueline has a secret—one that has intertwined her fate with Ethan's for longer than he's known.

Can destiny bring together a pirate and an angel during the season of miracles, or will a watery death by Davy Jones locker drown their love?

Dedication

This book is for everyone on staff at Liquid Silver Books who read the story and loved it, worked on it, saw it in passing, posted content on the web, sorted paperwork and everyone in between.

Chapter One

Three days before Christmas, 1822—Florida Keys

With a swipe of a soft cloth along the dark, well-oiled wood of the counter, Jacqueline Massey gave the occupants of the bar another glance. The usual men congregated around scarred and pitted tables as they played cards or drank away their sorrows in mugs of ale or bottles of rum. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear and wondered if anything would ever change in the God-forsaken coastal village. The locals called it *Nube Voladora*, or Flying Cloud, because of the mists that obscured it in the evenings.

“What’s the news of the evening, Miss Massey?” The owner of the deep voice slipped up to her counter and sat on a stool.

“Alexander.” Jacqueline frowned. She wished he would leave her to work alone. “Why are you here?” With an eyebrow cocked, she studied the man her father wanted her to marry.

Tall, nearly six feet, and broad shouldered, Captain Alexander Caruthers had toiled his whole adult life in the Navy and carried himself as straight as one of the masts on his ship. He possessed eyes the color of an angry blue-gray sea, and wore his blond hair cut in short waves that clung to a high collar. His chin jutted out in an imposing way, but his manners were impeccable, and he’d never been less than pleasant and solicitous in her company.

Jacqueline couldn’t envision being tied to such a dull, conservative man, regardless of his looks. But he demanded an answer as his eyes bored into hers. “Nothing new to report. It’s been quiet all evening. The same as it has been for the last week.”

“Hopefully, it will stay that way.”

“Perhaps the pirates have been warned of your identity or my deception.”

“Perhaps, but it does not matter.” He accepted a pint of ale, then took a deep draw of the amber-colored brew before continuing. “The newly formed Mosquito Fleet will be down here by April at the latest. We will run the pirates out of these waters and exterminate them for the vermin they are.”

“Maybe they feel making a living terrorizing the seas is a job.” She understood the American public’s outrage at the piratical activity on the high seas, but the deep-down curious part of her sympathized with their plight. Once David Porter and his fleet of ships arrived in the islands, the age of pirates would be over. A page of history signed off or forgotten. Jacqueline sighed. It would have been exciting to meet a real buccaneer, to see what made him tick. “Besides, the merchant vessels flaunt their wealth through the seas like a red flag. I sometimes think they wish to be robbed.”

“And you can be tried for treason against the government for talk like that.”

Alexander frowned. “Remember your job, and leave your imagination for other pursuits.”

If only he knew where my imagination takes me. “Of course. Duty before pleasure, is that not correct?” Old resentment flared within her chest at being used as a listening device in her father’s game of naval espionage. She had protested, but in the end, her Father’s opinion prevailed with promises of a return to New York. “You are no better

than Father.” She glared and planted her hands on her hips. “If the Navy wants the names of pirates so badly, why do you send a woman to do the work?” Even though he was dressed as every other man in the bar and not in his military uniform, his imperious bearing compelled her respect.

He smiled—a rare occurrence. “Because men trust you. You have enough curves to tempt them to your counter and natural compassion to keep them there.” Alexander shifted in his seat. “Just do this now. Christmas is in a few days. All the parties should keep you occupied and in better spirits.” His voice dropped to a cozy whisper. “I have a feeling one of my gifts will change your life.”

Instead of the spark of excitement Jacqueline expected from an imminent marriage proposal, only cold fingers of dread kept her heart company. She longed for adventure, for thrills. The last thing she wanted was a house full of screaming, snotty children and a rule-loving husband who would be away more than he was home.

“Well, I’ll just have to wait to be surprised.” She threw the soiled rag under the counter, opened her mouth to say more, but a stranger in the doorway arrested her attention. “I haven’t seen him around before.”

“Watch yourself, Jacqueline. He could be dangerous. I’ll be in the corner if you should have need of me.” Alexander slid from his stool to take possession of a chair shrouded in dark shadows.

The only answer she gave him was a huff of exasperation. By day, the world expected her to conform to their rigid standards and proper rules of etiquette. By night, she deceived thirsty men who were down on their luck and turned them over to the authorities when the occasion permitted. Sometimes in the quiet hours of early morning, she gave into the self-loathing her dangerous game created. Never did she let the men do anything more than chastely embrace her, and knew her Kiss of Death, in which she dropped a kiss on their foreheads, would be just that for the pirates. Her gut twisted with guilt.

And all because her father wanted to rid the area of what he called sea rats.

She hated her life, and yearned to be so much more—to someone else as well as to herself. She wanted to be something more valuable than bait or an object to be admired.

Shoving her gloomy thoughts to the back of her mind, Jacqueline rounded the counter to cross the worn, wooden floor. She didn’t acknowledge Alexander as she passed. As she reached the table where the visitor settled, Jacqueline pasted a false smile on her lips. “Good evening, stranger. Can I bring you a meal and maybe some rum to wash it down?” Her heartbeat accelerated as she waited for him to speak.

“God, no rum. I am sick of the stuff.” A tanned hand lifted a ratty tri-corn hat from a shaggy mop of black hair. He laid the hat on the table, lifted eyes so dark and hard they could pass as onyx. “I’d like a cup of tea, if it’s not too much trouble.” A slow grin tilted the corners of his sensual lips upward but didn’t reveal his teeth. “And I would not say no to a nice ham steak with some potatoes maybe, and local fruit. It has been a long time since I’ve tasted pork or anything fresh, for that matter.” The sound of his voice and choice of words revealed his probable occupation.

Pirate.

“It will be a few minutes.” She openly studied him. His tanned skin, easy charm, and the comment about fresh food denoted him as a pirate as if he’d waved his hands and shouted it from the rooftop, but the absence of a beard or any other form of stubble on his

smooth chin had her wondering. He did *not* look like an ordinary seaman. “Will there be anything else?” Her gaze fell on the large, square ruby that winked under the candlelight on his left pinky finger.

Definitely a pirate with riches to flaunt.

“Not unless you’d like to keep a lonely man company in this season of miracles.” His baritone voice wrapped languidly around her and brushed along her skin in a light caress. “Being far from home at this time of year is always a trial.”

“I can sympathize.” Jacqueline sighed as she remembered her previous life in the glamorous, glittering society of New York City. “Let me convey your order to the cook and bring your tea. I can spare you a few minutes then.” She turned away when a flush warmed her cheeks. For one insane moment she was glad for the revealing bodice of her unadorned brown wool dress. Plainier than her usual gowns, it was necessary for working the bar, and showed her figure in the best light—prime garb for attracting criminals. Just as quickly, she banished the thought. Nothing would come of a chance meeting with the pirate. He’d eat his dinner and either return to wherever he came, or Alexander would lead him away in chains.

She shuddered as an image of the handsome man hanging from the gallows swam into her mind’s eye. Jacqueline hoped he was too clever to be caught, and that Alexander was too slow for pursuit.

A dirty man from another table taunted her as she walked by. “Hey, lovey, how’s about sittin’ on me lap for a bit?” She hated the drunken locals more than the alleged pirates who frequented the saloon. At least pirates had some semblance of manners. “Wot’s good for one man is good for another.” He scratched his scraggly blond beard and leered.

“The answer is no, and will always be such as long as I have breath in my body.” Jacqueline shivered as repulsion crept over her. When she attempted to step around the man, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her into his lap. “Unhand me, if you know what’s good for you.” Being the only child of a Navy officer had taught her a few tricks in self-defense. Though she’d never had cause to implement them, Jacqueline was anxious to put them into practice.

“In good time—after ye give me a kiss.” His breath smelled of rotted fish and ale, and was powerful enough to make Jacqueline dry heave. Blackened teeth only served to emphasize the gaps in his gums that once held others. “When a bird dresses like that, she’s always tryin’ to catch a man’s eye.”

“Let go.” Jacqueline squirmed in the strong man’s hold as his hand fumbled at her skirts. When it disappeared beneath the fabric to scrape her stocking-clad leg with calloused fingers, she struggled more fiercely, but he held her fast. Tears of rage gathered in her eyes. Her heart pounded so loud she was sure the whole of the room could hear it. “Unhand me at once.”

Her attacker laughed in her face and another blast of foul air assaulted her. “Or wot? Ye’ll call the constable?” He thrust his face closer. “They don’t come out this way at night if they knows wots good for ‘em. More’n one Navy cur has met ‘is maker in a dark alley ‘round ‘ere.”

Swallowing the fear that clogged her throat, Jacqueline seized a liquor bottle from the table. “I did warn you.” She brought the vessel down hard across the dirty man’s temple. “Nasty bastard.” As he slumped in his chair, dazed but not unconscious,

Jacqueline scrambled to her feet, breathing hard.

“Ye’ll pay fer that, doxy.” He lurched to a standing position, the wicked blade of a knife now in his hand. “I’ll ‘ave yer blood.” The cut on the side of his head oozed red in a thick stream.

The stranger sauntered over to them, an almost complacent attitude about him. “Touch the woman again, and it will be *your* blood that’s spilled this night.” A jewel-encrusted dagger glinted in the flickering candlelight. “One more life on my conscience will not make much difference to my chance at heaven.”

Jacqueline jumped out of the way when the dirty man slashed at the newcomer. From the corner of her eye, she saw Alexander move about the perimeter of the room, no doubt on his way to summon the law enforcement or a few of his Navy buddies. She gritted her teeth, annoyed. Would it kill him to throw protocol out the window for one moment and fight for her honor? Could he not be bothered to demand retribution of her near-molestation, not to mention the threat to her life? Jacqueline’s gaze focused on the tanned man, and her breath caught in her throat.

A fierce scowl of concentration shadowed his face as he circled the scruffy fisherman, his lips set in a tight line. As he moved closer to the wall sconces, his raven hair gleamed almost blue, his thick brows slanted down as he jabbed at his opponent.

In an instant, Jacqueline made a decision. She clutched at the pirate’s free hand. “Let him be. He is not worth it, and will just pick a new fight tomorrow.” When a muscle flexed beneath her fingers, and she immediately dropped her hand. A flutter started in her stomach and fanned outward to tingle over the rest of her body. “Oh.” The word was barely more than a squeak.

“You do not wish him to die—or at least be maimed—for attempting to defile you?” The man’s dark brown eyes burned into her. They invited her to drown herself in the mysterious depths, coaxed her to come close to learn the secrets he hid. A hint of a smile hovered on his lips.

“It is not necessary to put yourself at risk.” Her insides warmed at his attention, and then just as quickly, she pulled on his arm. “Look out.”

The bearded man rushed at the pirate, and soon the two were locked in a scuffle that upended tables and scattered chairs in their wake. Bedlam erupted in the bar. Shouts and cries mingled with grunts and exclamations of pain as the fight grew in intensity. Pockets of fighting ebbed and crashed into each other until one huge, pugilistic battle raged. Glass shattered and someone slammed a toothless man into the wall in front of Jacqueline. The sickening thud of him hitting the floor echoed in her mind.

Through it all, her eyes followed the pirate. He exchanged one fight partner for another, as fists flared and curses flew. The light was too dim and his black cape hid his body from her view. The urge to ascertain if the rest of him matched the strength she felt in his arm overruled her common sense. She moved a step closer. A gunshot echoed through the room, and the acrid smell of gunpowder perfumed the air. The door crashed open to bring her—and everyone else—to an abrupt halt. Alexander and two other men immediately waded into the fray and quickly brought order to the melee.

“Cease and desist this instant or all of you will be incarcerated and hanged at the first opportunity.” Alexander punched the smelly, bearded man then kicked him as he groveled on the floor. He gestured to a compatriot. “Round these men up, anyway. I tire of the lot. We’ll sort them later.” When he threw a look her way, Jacqueline drew in a

quick breath at the harsh lines of abhorrence on his face. “Miss Massey, I will accompany you home at once. I wish to spare you more unpleasantness.”

“You do me no favors, Alexander.” She hated this cold, impersonal side to him, and wondered anew if this was the man she’d be living with if she accepted his soon-to-be-offered proposal. She’d rarely seen him in an unguarded, light-hearted moment. “I can take care of myself, as you well know.”

“Nevertheless, I will rest easy when you are safe behind closed doors, away from these ruffians.”

“Perhaps the lady does not wish to be ordered about like a child.” The pirate’s voice sounded from behind her. “You do her a disservice by treating her thusly.” He stepped around her; the soft folds of his cloak brushed her arm as he moved.

“This matter does not concern you, stranger.” Alexander frowned and gestured with his pistol. “Your name, sir.”

The man laughed. The deep, rich sound made Jacqueline’s feminine core throb with unaccustomed and unfamiliar longing. “That is one of my last personal possessions and not available for trade, but I *will* share the moniker many have bestowed upon me in recent years.” He made a formal bow from the waist. “I am called the Black Thief of the Islands.”

“Pirate,” Jacqueline breathed as excitement shivered along her spine.

“Aye.” The man gave her a half grin that didn’t light his hooded eyes. “And I have changed my order from before.”

Her cheeks flamed under his strong scrutiny. “I do not understand.”

“There is one thing I desire much more than fresh food.”

“And that would be?” Her voice shook, but not from fear. Anticipation made her insides quake as he slipped an arm around her waist. His fingers warmed her skin through the layers of fabric. It did not occur to her to struggle.

“A woman.”

“Take your filthy hands off the lady.” Alexander’s eyes flashed a warning as he yanked her from the pirate. “I’ll not ask you again, Jacqueline. Leave. Now.”

As Alexander’s companions dragged the snarling and swearing pirates and drunken regulars from the room, Alexander and the pirate locked gazes. One man held a pistol, the other gripped a dagger. She stifled a sigh, as her gaze moved from one to the other, a contrast of right and wrong, of old-world gallantry and new-world might that caused her heart to flutter and her stomach to clench. Jacqueline wrenched away from the Navy man, and stood, wracked with uncertainty, between them.

Then, as if in slow motion, Alexander raised his pistol and leveled it at the pirate. “On second thought, I will try you right here. At least we won’t have to spend the resources to hunt you down.” He cocked the weapon, the sound almost deafening in the silence. “I find you guilty of treason against the American government and with piracy on the high seas.”

In one swift motion, the Black Thief of the Islands pulled his own pistol from beneath the billows of his cape. “My end may be near, but I rather doubt it will be tonight or by your hand.”

“This is madness.” Jacqueline stumbled out of their circle. *Stupid men and their posturing.* “Go ahead and kill yourselves. Alexander, you are no better than the pirates you despise if you kill him.”

“I can do no less than my job.”

“And mine is being a pirate.” The Black Thief fired, and the flare from the pistol was sudden and brief in the gloom. The flames in the sconces flickered.

Jacqueline shrieked when Alexander dropped to his knees with a stunned expression. “Are you hurt badly?” She knelt at his side. A bloom of red seeped through his white shirt at his left shoulder. “Alexander?”

“I will be fine.” He raised his pistol. “Move, so I might finish this.”

“Enough violence.” Jacqueline ripped the weapon from his hand and laid it carefully on one of the only intact tables. “You need a doctor.” The metallic smell of blood made her stomach pitch. “Let me run for Doc Allenson, and—”

“I don’t think so, ma’am.” The pirate interrupted her. He holstered his pistol and dagger with a wicked grin on his lips. “You will accompany *me* instead. And I always get what I want.”

The excitement from earlier turned into a cold panic as he advanced upon her. “No. I’m not going anywhere with you.” She scrambled to her feet. Her knees shook so badly, she thought she might slump to the floor. “Stay away.”

“Come willingly, and your grace and dignity will remain intact, or I can take you kicking and screaming, but either way, you leave with me.” He held out a hand, and the long, slim fingers beckoned with their offer of freedom or ruin.

Jacqueline couldn’t determine which she craved more. She swallowed and looked to Alexander for help.

“We *will* come after you, Jackie.” He winced and pressed his hand to his wound. Blood oozed around the fingers. “I’d rather you be alive and in need of rescue, than dead before me because of stubbornness. At least this way, we have a chance.”

Coward. Her stomach pitched at the fact Alexander took a bullet for her, but his smug, arrogant smile killed the emotion. Jacqueline itched to slap his face, but doubted it would do any good. She glanced at the pirate, and the mocking glint in his dark eyes made her heart race. She glared. “I’ll come with you, but if you lay a hand on me, you will be sorry.”

His bark of laughter unnerved her. “We are well beyond that, my dear.”

As she backed away, he scooped her up and threw her over his shoulder as if she weighed no more than a down-filled pillow. “Put me down!” She beat her fists against his back, noting with alarm that he was indeed as well muscled as she thought.

“All in good time.” With those parting words, he carried her through the maze of broken furniture and into the humid night.

Chapter Two

The inky blackness of near midnight couldn't disguise the toffee gleam of the woman's hair or her smooth, pale skin. Ethan Williams contemplated his prisoner as he dipped oars into the calm sea. She sat facing him on the opposite bench, one elbow on a knee, her chin resting in her hand, watching him. Her eyes clouded with unnamed emotions, their color obscured by the darkness. He wondered what thoughts floated through her head at such a time. His method of bringing her to the rowboat may have been barbaric, but it served a purpose. He'd wanted nothing more than to feel her lush curves pressed against him.

And he was not disappointed. He'd spent time with many women in his thirty-odd years, but this feisty woman caught his interest from the moment he'd entered the bar. Once she clocked the frisky fisherman, Ethan knew he had to have her. But somehow, the thought of possessing her body wasn't the driving force behind the abduction. Oh, he desired her. Since he'd pulled the *Angel's Fury* into port, he had not yet indulged in sex with one of the many prostitutes that frequented the small coastal village as was his usual wont—and the ache in his groin needed to be slaked.

Sex was not the problem. Companionship was. After months at sea with no one but deck hands and his first mate to talk to, Ethan craved the niceties of life. The soft sound of a woman's voice, intimate talk with a female after dark, or the floral scent only a woman could bring. More than that, the holiday season made him remember what he attempted to forget with every new day. Without his crew, he was alone in the world.

"I do not comprehend how you can stare at me so hard. It is almost as if you're not quite looking at me, but looking through me. I can almost see the wheels in your mind turn as you cogitate. A very odd sensation."

"I apologize." Ethan yanked his thoughts into the present. He focused instead on her round face framed by loose wisps of hair that had fallen from her coiffure. "And that is the last time you will hear the word from me. I've never been sorry for what I've done in my life, and I do not intend to start now just because a woman will be onboard."

"Lofty ideals for a pirate." She stretched out her legs and the toe of her high-buttoned boot touched his foot. He wasn't sure he liked the weird awareness that happened at her accidental prodding.

"Even pirates can be intellectual. Do not mistake my politeness for a soft heart. I've killed many men, and I've done black deeds enough to make you run screaming behind locked doors."

"You are not the only one." The words were mumbled and very low that he almost missed them.

"Let's dispense with the pleasantries. I assume your name is Jacqueline?" The steady rhythm of the oars moving back and forth gave him a sense of peace and stability that countered the frenetic *something* she created within his innards.

"Yes." She gazed into the dark water. "People call me Jackie on occasion."

Ethan shook his head. "Why destroy such a beautiful name as Jacqueline by shortening it?" The nearly full moon slipped out from behind its clouded shroud to illuminate a blush on her cheeks. His gut clenched with pleasure. "You may call me

Ethan. I would imagine saying the Black Thief of the Islands would become bothersome after the first five times or so.”

“And your surname?” She laced her fingers together on her lap.

“Williams. Under no circumstances are you allowed to call me mister or captain.” Another two strokes of the oars. “Why is that knowledge so important to you?”

“Should not a woman be given the name of her captor?” Her hands clenched together so tightly now her knuckles turned white.

“I do not consider myself your captor.” The gentle slap of the waves against the side of the boat was the only sound for long moments. “It is not my intention to ... ah...” His words died out altogether as he stared at the expanse of pale flesh above her neckline.

“To use me for your own rutting pleasure, or do you plan to sell me to a wealthy man somewhere along your journey? I have heard rumors of the high prices that women fetch as sex slaves. Perhaps you dabble in human cargo as well?”

His jaw dropped and he missed a couple of strokes. “I beg your pardon?” This was no shrinking miss to be sure. He again wondered what went on in her brain.

“Pirates covet money above all things, and I assume that if you do not want to keep me for yourself, you would sell me to the highest bidder.” She shifted on her bench. “So, which scenario will it be? I need to decide if I should end my life before a fate worse than death can occur.”

“Tough choice, but sex is infinitely better than death by your own hand.” He worked the oars once more, bending with his task to hide a grin. “I’ll be keeping you.”

“For rape or ransom?”

“Neither. For companionship.” He must have succeeded in shocking her because she didn’t comment on his answer. “Just for the remainder of the holiday week while my shipmates are with their own families or other ... willing females who’ll warm a bed.”

“Why only for that amount of time?”

“I become lonely when Father Christmas makes an appearance.”

“You do not talk like a pirate. You sound too well educated for life on the sea.”

“And you, my inquisitive miss, appear more intelligent than the usual bar wenches.” He lifted a brow.

She huffed in annoyance. “I was born and raised in the finest schools that New York City has to offer. My father, uh, my family relocated to Florida for more pleasant weather.”

Strange, but I will accept her explanation for the time being. “Would it surprise you to learn I have schooling behind me? I did not come from a hard background, and a very nice life indeed.” Ethan laughed outright at her look of chagrin. “Have you met a pirate before?” Ahead, in the distance, he could make out the faint outline of the *Angel’s Fury* from the general darkness around them. Not nearly as imposing as it could be if the sails had been unfurled, but his chest still swelled with pride at the sight.

“Not in the usual way. I *have* seen them at the gallows.”

“I understand.” Soberness crashed into him with the force of a small wave. “Do you believe the fate for all pirates is death?”

She heaved a sigh. “It depends on varying factors, and the reasons are as different as the men themselves.” She met his gaze with no discernable fear. “I think you are merely making a living the best you know how. The killing I take issue with, but then, the American Navy has killed countless pirates, so it evens out where fate is concerned.”

“Ah, the much praised Navy, the savior of the American angst.” He dipped the oars into the water, felt the strong pull of the waves as they fought against him. His biceps burned as they did every time he completed the nearly two-mile journey through the sea. Soon, he’d be home. “We have heard rumors about the erstwhile David Porter and his fleet of fast and light ships.”

Her brow rose, and this time, fear did make an appearance in her expression. “Why should I be privy to that information?”

“You are a barmaid at an establishment which both pirates and Navy men alike frequent. I assume you would have overheard a conversation or two.” He narrowed his eyes at her nervousness.

“I see.” She paused for such a long moment, Ethan thought she was finished. Then, after a deep sigh, she continued. “The government has pinned their hopes of maritime order on him. They are quite vexed with the skill of pirate vessels. Talk around the village is that by spring life will be very different for pirates in these waters and those stretching deep into the Caribbean.” She grinned. “The firepower Mr. Porter’s Mosquito Fleet has amassed is said to sink a ship in record time.”

“Every era must fade sooner or later. It is the way of the world.” Ethan let the small boat drift as he rested. “It saddens me to know this life will end in what most likely will be a violent conclusion. I wonder what else I can find to do.” He took up the oars and applied himself to the task. Fifty more feet would bring them alongside the *Angel’s Fury*.

And then what will I do with the outspoken Miss Massey?

A soft breeze blew in from the south to tousle Jacqueline’s escaped wisps of hair. His groin stirred in response when he thought about feeling the weight of those tresses in his hands or seeing them spread below him on his pillow. Maybe he wanted the sex after all.

“Perhaps I won’t need to worry about the rest of my life. I may choose to go down with my ship as is the captain’s right and privilege.”

“What a horrible thing to say!” She leaned forward, resting her forearms on her knees. “You have four months to prepare. By that time, you could have a good head start on them. You can sail anywhere, do anything. You have the gift of freedom, and yet you want to denigrate it in maudlin talk of death.”

Very saucy, this one. “It’s ironic. The one thing you believe represents freedom, is the one thing that means my eventual imprisonment.” A handful of strokes and the boat bumped against the hull of the *Angel’s Fury*. “Welcome to your new home.”

With the inherent sense of balance that came from years spent on the sea, Ethan stood, grabbed the rope attached to the rowboat, and threaded the end through a rusty iron ring on the hull of his ship. He and his first mate would haul it up at a later time. He thumped twice on the damp wood. A rope ladder tumbled from the railing to unroll itself down the side.

“I thought you said your crew was on the island.” Jacqueline crossed her arms over her chest as if she was annoyed. “Who threw down the ladder?”

“That would be Sully. My first mate, cook, and the best friend a man like me could ask for. He refused to take time off, and who was I to decline his skills?” He offered her his hand. “Even the most hardened pirates must eat.”

“I suppose you are right.” She slipped her fingers into his.

“Ladies first.” The little boat bobbed on the sloshing waves so much that Jacqueline

couldn't quite maintain her footing. Ethan placed both hands at her waist and lifted her out of the dingy until she clutched onto the rope ladder. "Careful now. It might be slippery. Sully waits up top to help you onto the deck."

At the outset, she floundered as her foot went through the first rung so that she had to untangle herself while suspended. When he moved to help her, she quelled him with a dark look, muttering she could do it herself. He remained in place and let his eyes feast upon a trim ankle encased in a silky stocking. But then Jacqueline found her bearings and scampered up the ladder as if she were born for the sea.

The sound of triumph floated to him once she reached the top and greeted Sully. Jacqueline disappeared over the rail in a flurry of white petticoats. Anticipation spurred Ethan into action. It wasn't a matter of not trusting her. After all, where could she run to on a ship? But being bereft of her company left him with a dull ache in his chest, as if she were a wondrous toy for a child to play with on Christmas morning and an adult had just yanked it away. He made short work of the ladder, springing onto the deck as if he'd been away for months instead of a mere few hours.

"How goes it, Sully?" He glanced at the grizzled old sea dog that he'd entrust with his life. He supposed the dirty white beard, scraggly white hair beneath a battered hat and the few missing teeth would unnerve most people. Jacqueline didn't seem affected. "All quiet?"

"Aye. Wasn't expectin' ye back so soon." His gaze wandered to where she walked about the deck. "Ye don't usually bring yer females onto the ship. Bad luck in any case."

"It's a long story." Ethan clapped the man on the shoulder, feeling the bones beneath the skin. Sully wasn't as young as he used to be. "Get some sleep. I'll see you in the morning." He left Sully to reel in the ladder, while he focused on Jacqueline. "Might as well see you settled. There's not a whole lot I can show you in the dark."

"Is that all you have to say for yourself? You bring me on board your ship and now you intend to sleep for the night?" She planted her hands on rounded hips, and Ethan thought he heard a snicker from Sully's direction. "What kind of pirate *are* you?"

Irritation bubbled through his stomach. "The kind perfectly willing to not sleep, if that is what you want." Desire flared as bright as a lantern when she crossed her arms under her breasts, pushing them to further strain the limits of the already low-cut neckline of the gown. "I didn't think so, now come along."

Her heels clacked loudly as she followed him across the deck, up four steps to a door with leaded glass panes. "This is your new home." He pushed open the door then stepped aside for her to pass. As she did, the scent of lavender accompanied her, so subtle he almost missed it. Much different from the cheap perfume the prostitutes wore, he was put in mind of a peaceful meadow on a sunny patch of land. Another piece of his willpower crumbled. The next days would be a challenge not to explore her delectable body.

"Whose cabin is this?" A note of surprise gilded her voice. "It is magnificent."

Her skirts swished about her legs as she twirled around in a slow circle. He moved to light an oil lamp on the top of an oak bureau, and the acrid smell of sulfur overpowered the lavender. "Mine. The furniture came from the finest craftsmen in Virginia, and was won in a spirited game of poker a few years back." A bay window jutted out over the sea, a favored resting spot for his feline companion, while a heavy oaken bed rested beneath the window. Across from the bureau was a matching round table with two chairs. A frivolous upholstered wingback chair was wedged into the far corner between the wall

and a wooden coat rack that resembled a tree.

“Where will you sleep?” She lifted a brow and glanced pointedly at the bed as her eyes flashed blue in the dim light. Those eyes alone were worth risking her ire for.

“Here, of course.” He sat on a weathered and scarred sea chest at the foot of that piece of furniture and worked at removing a boot.

“But where will I sleep?” She caught her bottom lip between her teeth. Ethan stifled a groan.

“Also here, but if you would be more comfortable, I am sure Sully wouldn’t mind sharing his bunk.” He chuckled at her horrified expression. “Then I suggest you make peace with your living arrangements since the crews’ quarters below deck aren’t much better than Sully’s.”

“At least I would be alone.” Another glare.

“True, and you can hope the rats and mice will leave you be through the night. I’ve heard tales they can nibble a man’s toe off in a few hours.” He yanked off the second boot with a sigh of relief and stifled a grin at her look of distaste. “I guess I’m the lesser of two evils. There’s a chamber pot behind the door. You will need to sleep next to the wall in the event I’m roused in an emergency.” He unbuckled the belt that contained his pistol and dagger and deposited it on the table top. “Unless you plan to sleep in all that clothing, I suggest you shed some of it.”

Jacqueline’s eyes grew round. “I am accustomed to a maid’s help.” She visibly swallowed when he removed his cape and threw it in the direction of the coat rack. “I cannot reach the buttons and hooks since they are in the back.”

“That had not occurred to me.” *Why would a bar woman have use of the services of a maid?* He didn’t understand the vagaries of the female mind. For the space of two heartbeats, he pondered the problem. “Turn around.”

“Why?” She narrowed her eyes. “What do you intend?”

“I cannot very well unbutton the garment unless you turn around.” He stood, wondering how he’d become a lady’s maid and why he was content to do such a thing.

“You are aware this is highly improper.” Nonetheless, she gave him her back.

“We passed improper as soon as I laid hands on you at the bar, my dear.” He devoted himself to his new task as his fingers fumbled and slipped over the tiny metal hooks and slightly bigger wooden buttons. Thank the lord there were not many, and the dress wasn’t a more complicated version of women’s attire, which troubled him. Her speech and mannerisms indicated some wealth, as did the mention of a servant. “Why do you not wear a more flattering gown?”

Her shoulders lifted in a shrug. “You saw me working in a saloon. I did not wish to call undue attention to myself.”

“True, but the scandalous drape of your neckline would declare otherwise.” Ethan released the last hook. “You’re finished.” His throat went dry as she drew the garment down over her hips and primly folded it at the end of the bed.

“I suppose I do not mind staying here for a few days, but any longer than that will require a privacy screen. Undressing in front of a man is quite unnerving.”

“I would imagine, but if you stay here longer, it will not matter, because I will have already seen you without clothing.” He swept his gaze slowly over her figure, clad now in a white shift, petticoats, with a corset on top. Curiosity at what covered her hidden curls held him captive. “Women wear entirely too many clothes as it is.” Somehow, she

appeared more alluring than she had before she shed the dress. “Uh, do you require assistance with the corset?”

“Yes, please.” Once more, she presented her back to him.

This time his fingers shook as he worked the hooks and satin ribbons. “Are you always this unabashed? Most women would be cowering in terror at the real or imagined horrors a pirate would do to them.” When the stiff, fabric-covered contraption fell away from her body, he tossed it onto the chair to join his weaponry.

Jacqueline turned to face him. “I am not like most women. I find simpering and coquettish behavior a waste of time and annoying at best.” A grin parted her naturally pink lips. “This is exactly the type of adventure I’ve been looking for, but I must warn you of one thing.”

“And that is?” His brain lost the ability to think for itself when she removed the pins from her hair and the honey-colored mass tumbled around her shoulders. It was just as he’d imagined.

“I am not squeamish about killing you if you behave with anything less than gentlemanly courtesy.” She dropped hairpins on the bureau. Propping one foot on the sea chest, she drew the mass of petticoats up her leg to reveal a dagger strapped to her thigh. “It might be messy, but at least I would have the satisfaction.” Jacqueline unbuckled the bit of leather then placed the dagger on the sea chest.

“There is a flaw in your reasoning.”

One brown brow arched in disbelief. “I think not.”

“Oh, yes. You see, pirates oftentimes do not resemble anything remotely like a gentleman.” Giving into the urge, he slipped his arms around her waist and pulled her close. “Those that do are the first ones shot by your acclaimed Navy.” Her hair smelled like a flower garden, and he inhaled the scent. The top of her head fit comfortably under his chin.

“That is a disappointment because there are times when a woman does not wish a man to behave in a proper way.” She looked at him through her lashes, her eyes full of questions for which he had no answers.

“But you just threatened me two seconds ago about such an occurrence.” The heat of her skin burned his fingers. It took all of his willpower not to throw her on the bed and rip off the remainder of her clothing.

She gave him a throaty laugh. “This is not one of those times.”

With a growl, he crushed his lips to hers, willpower be damned.

Chapter Three

Jacqueline's first instinct was to stiffen in his embrace. She'd experienced kisses before in her twenty-six years, however the unleashed power behind Ethan's initial contact left her breathless. She placed her palms on his chest, fully intending to push him away, but the warmth that seeped into her fingers through the fine lawn of his shirt gave her pause. She pulled back in order to look fully into his face as the scent of oak and perspiring male wafted into her nostrils. The stark want she saw raging in his dark eyes fueled her own excitement and played havoc with her sense of self-preservation.

She ignored hesitation and damned conventions as she slid her hands around his neck and guided his mouth to hers. As much as she wished to take charge of their embrace, she quickly understood he had much more experience than she. Tiny, questing kisses gave way to nips and nibbles as if it were an instinctual acquaintance ritual. When he ran the tip of his tongue along the crease of her lips, Jacqueline's knees threatened to buckle, and a wave of white hot need coursed through her bloodstream. She pressed her body to his more firmly, opening her mouth at his invitation. He shoved his tongue inside to stroke hers, explored every inch of that dark place, as if he owned it.

The will to breathe outweighed her curiosity. She wrenched herself away to stare at him in shock. Her heart pounded and her stomach fluttered in harmony. Never had Alexander made her feel this way, as if she were untamed, free of inhibitions. She touched a fingertip to her swollen lips in wonder. "I now have sufficient reason to be afraid of you."

"You have no idea." He gave her a mocking bow then moved to extinguish the lamp. "Sunrise will come sooner than you expect. Goodnight."

In the darkness, she heard Ethan move about. Then springs creaked, a dead giveaway that he had climbed onto the bed. Jacqueline's cheeks burned as she thought of being in the same close quarters as the pirate. Her lips still tingled from their earlier kiss, but the idea of being more intimate gave her mixed feelings. Bravery only went so far.

"I will not ask again, Jacqueline. Join me now. If I have to retrieve you, I cannot guarantee your virtue will remain intact." Even though his voice was low and teasing, an unmistakable edge could be detected.

A shiver wracked her body. "I need to remove my shoes. It would behoove you to practice patience." She sat down hard on the sea chest and busied herself with unlacing her footwear. Once her feet were free, she shucked out of her two petticoats, relieved to abandon the extra weight. The shift and linen drawers provided enough modesty and besides, the darkness cloaked anything else she worried about. "Regarding my virtue, it is mine to give, and no one, be they pirate or not, will take it without my permission."

"Unless the captain of the ship on which you currently reside wishes otherwise."

She ignored the veiled threat and approached the bed, disheartened when she realized she would have to climb over him to settle in to her side. "Is it too much to ask that you move to let me through?"

"Yes. I've had a trying day."

With gritted teeth, Jacqueline clambered onto the mattress near his legs, being sure her knee landed in a sensitive part of his anatomy. His surprised grunt of pain let her

know she found her mark. "Oh, pardon me. How clumsy." Finally on her allotted area, she scrambled beneath the cool sheets, distracted by the distorted patterns of moonlit waves reflected on the ceiling.

"Sleep now. You may regret your bravery in the harsh light of morning."

She wondered if his statement would be correct. Not having an answer, she stared at the figures on the ceiling and tried to ignore the mysterious man lying beside her.

* * * *

Warm sunlight on her face nudged her awake. Jacqueline turned over, content to lounge about, until a gentle sensation of bobbing forced her eyes open. Events of the previous night flooded into her brain, a reminder she was no longer in familiar territory. And Ethan was not in the bed with her. Disoriented, she sat up and scanned the interior of the cabin. Neither was he in attendance here. Sliding out of the bed, she admired the play of sun's rays on the worn wooden floor.

After taking care of imminent personal needs with the chamber pot, she spied a basin and pitcher of water nearby. Thanking the Lord for small miracles, Jacqueline washed her face then contemplated her clothing. Away from civilization, removed from conventions, a sense of independence spiked with guilt assaulted her. She'd spent endless days longing for a change, and being kidnapped was exactly what she needed in her life. Slipping into the petticoats, she tied the strings and gave the abandoned corset a contemptuous glare. That was one item of clothing which would not accompany her on the new adventure. Two minutes more saw her into her gown, with the back gaping open. She shoved her feet into her shoes, barely taking the time to lace them.

Outside the cabin, gulls called to each other with harsh, mocking cries. She grinned, anxious to experience her first day of sea life. As her fingers touched the metal hardware on the door, it swung open to reveal Ethan, with a teapot in one hand, and a delicate china cup in the other.

"Going somewhere, Miss Massey?"

She blushed at the teasing tone in his voice. Breeches of black wool hugged his legs and showed off his powerful muscles while a loose-fitting black shirt of what appeared to be silk covered his upper half. The top few buttons were undone, and a patch of tanned skin sprinkled with dark hair met her perusal. "I want to explore the ship."

"All in good time, but first, I thought you'd enjoy a respite." He set the teapot and cup on the table. "And also, we may be pirates, but we do have a dress code, lax though it is. Women cannot go about topside half-dressed, especially when my men will periodically be dropping off supplies and whatnot."

Before Jacqueline could form a reply, he moved behind her to work the buttons and hooks. Her breath caught in her throat when his fingers brushed her back, searing her skin through the simple shift.

"No corset today?"

"With no one to lecture me on proper deportment, I choose to leave it behind." She grinned as he finished with the fastenings. The dress was snug without the stays of the corset, but it fit. She smoothed a hand over her stomach, glad for the opportunity to breathe unhindered. "Thank you." She moved to the table and poured out a cup of tea. "Now will you show me the ship?"

"I suppose I cannot refuse in the face of such eagerness."

As soon as she stepped onto the deck, a gentle sea breeze whipped her hair about her shoulders and fluttered her skirt. "What a lovely day." With her lungs unrestricted, she took a deep breath then another. "I envy you this life." She sipped the lukewarm tea. "Unfettered, carefree, going from one excitement to another."

"That is your opinion." Ethan's bark of laughter held more bitterness than mirth. "But with this life comes no roots, no stability, and no pleasantness of home."

"We are always destined to covet what someone else has." Jacqueline moved down the four steps to the freshly washed deck to gaze at the wide expanse of the ship. Tall masts rose at intervals from the planking, naked, while coils of rope dotted the deck. "Where are the sails? It is not very romantic to be on a ship without sails." The lead ropes swayed in the breeze, causing the metal hardware to knock against the wooden masts.

"Contrary to popular belief, the life of a pirate is not idyllic or romantic at all." Mockery coated the words. "Death, sickness, and near starvation punctuates our days, and we break it up with fighting, stealing, killing, and the occasional fresh meat dinner when it's available. At times there are card games and music." He took the teacup from her and laid it on a barrel, then drew her arm through the crook of his elbow. "Our sails are in the village for mending. We should have them in place by Christmas."

The mention of the holiday brought the knot in her stomach to life. Would Alexander really come after her, or had he already given up the search? If not, did she want to be found, taken back to gilded shackles and pampered chains? "You intend to resume piracy by week's end?" The thought of his imminent departure brought a flutter of panic.

"Unless an act of God prevents me from doing so. There is a three ship convoy we would like to hit as it rounds the Keys. It's rumored the cargo would be well worth the fight."

"And if you get caught in the process?"

"Well, a good pirate won't be captured. Nothing else is acceptable." A hard glint in his eye warned her off more questions, but tamping curiosity had never been her forte.

Another set of four steps led to a shorter deck. "What is this part of the ship called?" Much like the opposite end of the ship where his sleeping quarters were located, this end contained a smaller room with a non-descript wooden door with a white cross painted on the outside.

"You are on the forecastle deck. Our basic infirmary is housed in a tiny cabin here along with a very small utility closet."

"And whose responsibility is it to sew up a wound if there should be a need?"

Ethan chuckled. "Sully. He is the most versatile on our crew."

"I see." She moved around a massive wooden crank and spool-like structure but kept her hand on his arm. A sturdy chain of iron led away from the contraption and over the side. "And this is the mechanism which raises and lowers the anchor?"

"Yes, it requires two men to operate. The *Angel's Fury* is a sloop, much smaller than other ships. It works for my purposes and is one of the fastest ships on the seas. She can also navigate the shallows and reefs." He let go of her arm and his ruby ring flashed in the sunlight.

Jacqueline walked to the rail and leaned over to more closely inspect the oddity that had captured her attention upon arrival the evening before. Carved into the hull was the image of an angel, her feathered wings outspread, an expression of fierce vengeance on a face framed with curls. She shuddered and straightened. The carving did indeed convey

an angel's wrath. "Interesting name. Is there a reason behind the moniker?"

"Astute of you to notice, but yes. I have often wondered if it was not due to the grace of angels alone I am alive today. Through every battle at sea, or every fire I set or life I take, I always wake up the next day, mostly unharmed."

She nodded. "Why did you name the ship after a heavenly creature that could very well not be vengeful at all?"

"To remind me that benevolence can be withdrawn at any time to be replaced with celestial fury." He sat on the rail, watching her. "Do you wish to see the crew quarters or the hold? What about the brig? That is a curiosity, to be sure. Or the gun deck where the cannons are housed. The *Angel's Fury* has six."

"I'll pass." The word trailed off as something else caught her attention. "What is that?" She pointed. Maybe half a mile away, surrounded by the brilliant turquoise water, was the charred remains of a shipwreck.

Ethan closed the distance and stood by her side. "That used to be the *USS Alligator*, one of the American Navy's finest. Not long ago, another band of pirates got into a bit of mischief and lured the ship into the reef. The *Alligator* became stranded. Not willing to call defeat, cannon fire was exchanged. Both ships took damage, but the *Alligator* couldn't be re-floated. The captain decided to burn the ship so the pirates couldn't use it as salvage." His shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Like I said, it's sometimes a violent life, and only the strong and determined survive."

"What of the *Alligator's* crew?" Her eyes prickled with tears as she gazed at the blackened remains of the masts.

"Some died in the fight, others drowned. The rest escaped."

"Do you and your crew terrorize the Navy ships as well?" She turned to him, her throat tight with fear.

"Only if the Navy threatens us first. We kill when it becomes necessary, and steal because we can. We loot when we're bored, and plunder to forget that we are, essentially, outcasts. To my way of thinking, the American government has no right to tell us how to live our lives—even if we are in the wrong." He placed a finger beneath her chin and lifted her eyes to his. "We don't go out of our way to provoke them, but if push came to shove, we would fire on anyone affiliated with the Navy." His thumb stroked her chin. "Think of piracy as a business venture. We don't always go after riches and glory. There are other things that will bring higher prices, such as tobacco, sugar, and luxury fabrics."

The more time she spent gazing into the rich brown depths of his eyes, the more she wanted to learn of his life. What drove him to continue his criminal antics at sea? And what would happen when—or if—he discovered her allegiance with the very organization he held such dislike for?

"I'll bear that in mind." Jacqueline removed herself from his touch, unwilling to admit how much his nearness affected her. "Why are you anchored here, off Islamorada?" She took a fortifying breath and let her hand trail over the smooth wood of the rail as she followed it down the steps and around the deck.

"To gather supplies and make necessary repairs. I chose this particular island based on how it looks in the evening." He smiled. "It's quite spectacular. That and the fact the reefs are too shallow for most of the Navy's ships to enter. But all that will change once the Mosquito Fleet makes its way down here."

Halfway through her stroll, Jacqueline encountered another occupant of the ship. A

sleek white cat stalked the deck toward her, with one black ear and one brown ear. “Who is this?” Kneeling, she stretched out a hand, hoping to entice the animal closer.

“I call him Ghost. We docked in Virginia a couple of years ago and when we shoved off, this stowaway made his presence known. The crew tolerates him because he keeps the rodent population under control. Ghost also entertains the men by chasing bugs on calm evenings when there’s not enough wind to fill the sails.”

“What a sweet kitty.” The cat edged near enough so she could pat his smooth head. “I always wanted a cat, but my Father and Alexander cannot stand the animals. They much prefer dogs and horses.” She cast a glance at Ethan, wondering if she gave away too much.

“Ah, and I assume Alexander was the man I shot last evening?” He offered her a hand, and when she slipped her fingers into his, brought her to her feet.

“Yes.” Her skin tingled where it came into contact with his. The cat meowed then scampered in the opposite direction.

“Are you betrothed to him?”

“No.” She narrowed her eyes. “My Father wishes it to be so, but I have reservations.” When he said nothing, Jacqueline sighed and moved away. “Let us just say Alexander and I are different people who want opposite goals in life.” She leaned her forearms on the railing and gazed at the sparkling water. In the far distance, the island could be seen, hazy with gray mist. “It would be folly for two people to marry because that is what society dictates.”

“I think the need to be understood by our peers is tantamount to success in today’s world.” His words tickled her ear as he moved close behind her. “It is different between a man and a woman. Shared interests make life livable, but excitement can only be achieved when a couple knows exactly what they want and determine how to take it. If danger is involved, it heightens the end result.”

“If I were to marry Alexander, my days would be full of children and a household with servants to manage.” The flutters of earlier transformed into a horde of butterflies in her stomach when Ethan lifted her hair and placed a gossamer kiss on her neck. Even talk of Alexander couldn’t produce any such reaction.

“And you do not desire such stability?”

“I’m not sure.” The attempt to form coherent words grew murky as he trailed his fingers over her nape. She turned to face him. “The reality of doing the same tasks day after day into infinity does not appeal to me. I would grow old and fat, while Alexander would continue to live his life much as he does now. Maybe he will take a mistress. I would never know since he would be at sea for long stretches. The children will leave to live their own lives, and I will be trapped, in the same house until I die, never knowing what else the world has to offer. Or what else I can give.”

“I can see how you would feel that way.” His eyes darkened to an almost black color. “If you were mine, you could be sure another female would never enter into the picture. As it is, the sea is my mistress for the present time, and a woman would be encroaching on *her* time. Too many men choose one or the other, and if it’s the women, the sea will find a way to take her revenge. It’s not something I look forward to.” He pinned her between his body and the railing. “I sympathize with Alexander. He would be a fool not to offer for you.”

“The fact of my wedded state has no bearing now. After spending a few days in your

company, my future will be a life of confirmed spinsterhood due to ruination.” The rugged earthiness of his scent teased her nose and clouded her brain.

“Then, if the outcome is the same in either scenario, perhaps you should see how close you can fly to the sun before you are burned.” He cupped her face with a hand and ran a calloused thumb over her cheek. “I could be the perfect company on your quest.”

“Let’s see how the days progress. Then I will decide.” Unable to deny the impulse, Jacqueline stood on tiptoe and pressed her lips to his. “But thank you for the offer.”

“Think of it rather as a certainty. When an opportunity presents itself, the wise person will take the chance and repent the consequences later.” His arms went around her waist. “Life is too short to regret anything. You must live for the moment.”

Her sigh was swallowed when he lowered his mouth to hers in a gentle kiss full of promise and forbidden heat. All too soon, he pulled away, leaving her with an unresolved sense of longing. “Where are you going?”

“To help Sully patch holes below deck. I would caution against trying to escape. I’d hate to toss you into the brig. I cannot recall if we disposed of the last occupant yet.”

Jacqueline shivered. “I have no wish to escape.” She watched as Ethan disappeared into the hold. *What do I want?* She had never felt at home in her own life, and certainly the men she knew did not excite her like Ethan did. What about him drew her to follow? The life that he led or simply him? Each represented danger and adventure, but only one would ease the constant ache in her heart.

Chapter Four

The high-spirited chirp of Sully's fiddle blended with the sounds of the evening. Ethan played a flute, matching his melody to that of the fiddle. The two had spent many an evening in the same way. Jacqueline's presence made all the difference this night. She sat cross-legged on a chair on the quarterdeck, a dreamy expression on her face, humming along to the tune as he and Sully played.

As the last notes died into the sultry air, she clapped. "That was wonderful, and I very much love music. I did not know pirates were such multi-talented men."

"We are capable of doin' more than killin', lootin', and burnin'." Sully's tone was one of injured dignity. "I'll be goin' now."

Ethan grinned. The man was highly insulted. "Stick around. We're just getting started." He glanced at Jacqueline. Her hair gleamed and her eyes sparkled in the light of the setting sun. It was extraordinary, the transformation from the woman he kidnapped yesterday into the woman she resembled now. Apparently, sea air and sunshine agreed with her.

"Yes, please, Mr. Sully." Jacqueline unfolded herself from the chair to rush across the deck. "I did not mean to hurt your feelings." She laid a hand on the older man's arm, much to Ethan's amusement. "I think you play the fiddle extremely well. Say you'll stay."

Sully floundered, cleared his throat, scratched yellowed nails through his beard. "Aw, ma'am." Sully shifted from foot to foot, looking much like a lost waif in his loose, dirt-streaked clothes. "I got chores waitin' fer me in the galley. Gotta mop out the floor of the brig, too." He shook off her touch then scurried across the deck to plunge down the hatch.

"I believe this is the first time I've seen Sully blush." Ethan laid the flute on Jacqueline's abandoned chair. "Must mean he's taken to you." He was rewarded with a smile from her, and he vowed to try all the tricks he knew to keep her in good graces.

"Where did you learn to play the flute? I have never seen an instrument such as that."

"I picked it up in Tortuga from an urchin in the street. The boy was an expert in the craft so I paid him a handsome sum to teach me the basics. He did, and now I use the flute to relax on pleasant evenings."

"How fortunate for you. Do you often seek out the poor on your journeys?"

"On occasion." *How much should I trust her with?* He studied her face but saw the same compassion and curiosity she always exhibited. "When we dock, especially in the islands, I am compelled to seek out people down on their luck. In those cases, some of our treasure is oftentimes given away so families may eat and clothe their children."

"A pirate with a soul." Jacqueline lifted her face to the breeze, and her toffee-hued locks streamed behind her. "Your actions and your choice of employment contradict each other."

"Perhaps. I feel those with the means have a responsibility to help where needed. I learned the lessons at an early age."

"A noble thought indeed. I cannot help but wonder why? My idea of pirates has been compromised."

Ethan's quiet laughter did not convey mirth. "Do you wish me to tell you tales of how the dying screams of the men I have killed echo in my mind? Or perhaps how the smell of blood turns my stomach even now? For every one of the lives I end, I feel duty-bound to equal it out with a good deed."

"I will take your word for it." A smile lifted the corners of her mouth. "Whatever else you do, continue playing your flute." She meandered to the railing. "It sounds haunting, almost ethereal; other-worldly, if there is such a thing. It is unexpected."

"I've often wondered if there is life in the universe besides here, but since I've never been a scientist, I am content to wait for positive proof." He stood at her side and breathed in her faint lavender scent. Listening to her voice soothed his raw, ragged heart. He would be hard pressed to release her by the holiday. "Nowhere else in the world will you see such vibrant sunsets as in this place."

"What about this particular island caught your interest? Surely there are other islands in other locales throughout the Caribbean—or the world for that matter—where you could have dropped anchor." She settled on the wide wooden rail and fumbled with the laces on her boots. "My father only recently moved us from New York, and I have yet to find my way around even such a tiny village." She worked at the laces on the second boot.

"I have always loved this area, but this island will always hold a special place in my heart. Let me show you why, if you can tear yourself away from the fascination of your footwear for three seconds." When she gave him a quelling glance, he moved to join her at the rail. "Look, just there, at the horizon. Stare at the place where the sun will disappear and you can still see the land. Then you will know why it's known as the 'Purple Island' as well as 'Flying Island.'"

In the instant when the sun sank in a riot of gold and pink, Islamorada illuminated for a few seconds. The haze around the land was briefly stained a deep indigo then vanished with the last of the sun's glow.

"Does it do the same thing every night?" Jacqueline turned to him, wonder and awe reflected in her expression. "I must see it again."

"A rare gift from the heavens." He laughed at her childlike innocence. "Yes, it will make a repeat performance tomorrow evening, providing there are no clouds or rain." He lifted a brow. "Why do you fuss with your boots?"

"I wish to walk on the rail, and I'd rather not do that in my heels." One boot fell onto the deck with a thud.

"Walk the rail? I am afraid I could not allow that." His lips twitched. "Why do you want to try such a stunt?" The woman's intelligence and bravado caught him unaware.

"Why not?" The other shoe joined its mate. "Have you ever done it?"

"No. It's a sure way to end your day in the sea." His full attention was drawn to her legs as she drew her skirts up to the knee. "Do you plan to shed your clothing for this stunt?"

The look she gave him proclaimed him the village idiot. "The stockings are slippery as well, so logically speaking, the removal of them is necessary."

"I see." Ethan leaned a shoulder against the mizzenmast as she unhooked each garter fastening then rolled down the silken stockings, finally dropping them on the deck. He devoured her legs with his eyes, looking his fill at the pale flesh, wanting to feel those limbs wrapped around his waist. Need flared to life in his gut when she hiked her skirts

higher and stood on the rail. Why he refrained from having his way with her escaped him. In the past, if he'd pulled into port and a woman so much as smiled in a provocative way, he had practically dragged her into a dark alley to relieve the ache.

But with Jacqueline it was different.

She brought goodness and light with her to wash his black soul clean. With the meeting of this one woman, the horrors he'd committed during his career as a pirate could be forgotten—if only temporarily. He owed it to her spirit to treat her with the respect she deserved. When the time came that he did claim her body, it would be as a tribute, a joining of more than just flesh from common lust. He wanted the communion of souls, the exchange of a promise.

Anything to fill the lonely, dark void that shadowed his every waking moment.

Embarrassed by his self-pitying thoughts, Ethan clamped a tight rein on his emotions. A mere woman could not redeem a man's character any more than real miracles could be conjured just because the calendar proclaimed it the holiday season. He looked around, surprised to see Jacqueline ten feet away, her arms spread wide for balance.

His stomach pitched when she teetered. Her body twisted first one way, then listed to the sea side of the ship. "My God, Jacqueline, cease this stupid stunt before Davy Jones' locker claims you."

"If that is your argument, I choose to stay on this rail. Give me a better reason. You might be the captain but do not order me down. I am not impressed by titles."

"I can tell." He sprinted across the deck as his mind scrambled for a valid reason that would bring her back to solid ground—or deck as it were. "You could fall and break one or more limbs." She appeared unruffled as she put one foot in front of the other in a slow procession on her perch, her toes pink as they peeped from beneath her clothes. "I will not stand by to see your beauty marred by bruises."

"What care I for the state of my well-being as long as you hold me prisoner on a ship with no sails?" She looked at him over her shoulder and winked. "Try again."

"Then climb down before I die of heart failure. After all, you are my responsibility for the next few days, and even *I* know the good humor of the angels won't excuse me if you are harmed. You are no use to me dead or maimed." His voice sounded bitter to his own ears. "If a prisoner is damaged, the ransom becomes diminished."

She paused, poised on the rail, her lips pushed into a frown. "Then I am a lucrative investment to you?" The breeze whipped her skirts about her legs as if they were the flag and she the mast. She'd never looked more beautiful or more fierce.

"I have thought about it." He lifted a hand in the hopes she would take it and come to her senses. "But the thought of releasing you into Alexander's safekeeping angers me to such a point I would rather force you into the sea."

"You would kill me?"

He dropped his arm. "Perhaps, if it was the only option." Guilt stabbed through his chest at the admission. "Never forget I am, first and foremost, a pirate. I operate under no rules but my own and fear no man. Your time here is not for leisure or a tea party." If he could keep her angry and fighting, her departure wouldn't disrupt his own life much by week's end. Then he berated himself for a fool. Better to return her to the noble Alexander now. Ethan would be much less affected if that were the case.

I do not belong with her.

“Bastard.” She wiped at the sudden moisture on her cheek. “You are no better than any other man I’ve known. Because I am a female, you men think I have no rights, and my worth is in what I can bring to other men who wish to own me.” She turned, teetering. “I demand to be put off the ship immediately.” Her skirts, longer than her height without the benefit of heels, tangled beneath her feet. Jacqueline wobbled. Her arms wind-milled wildly, and her face twisted in horror.

Springing forward, Ethan caught her when she fell—thankfully on the deck side of the ship. He grunted as her full weight crashed into him, but his legs held steady. “You could have been killed.” He swallowed around the tight ball of fear lodged painfully in his throat.

“Let me down.” She squirmed in his arms. He held her fast. “I do not wish to associate with someone like you any longer.” Contempt dripped from her words.

“Is it me you object to or my profession? I’m used to such reactions to both.” Anger fueled his movements to obliterate his earlier goodwill. Every old taunt he’d received in ports around the world fed into his rage until a red haze floated in front of his eyes.

“Since you already think so poorly of me, I will make certain you remember every last detail of your incarceration here.” He strode into his cabin and dumped her onto his bed.

“You would not dare.” Her eyes flashed blue fire as she sprang up from her resting place. “Not after you gave your word.”

“The word of a pirate means nothing.” He reached behind him and slammed the door closed. Self-loathing tightened his chest when he caught sight of the fear on her face. If he did not follow through with his threat, she would gain power over him, and there would be no point in holding her on the ship.

“Do not touch me.” Jacqueline snatched her dagger from its resting place on the sea chest and launched herself at him, unsheathing it in the process. “If rape is your intent, you will not get away unharmed, because *my* intent is to separate you from your manhood.”

Her will to defend aroused him as much as the sight of her breasts straining against the low neckline of her dress. Her eyes blazed in the moonlight that streamed in from the window. Her anger seemed almost a palpable thing. He welcomed the fight. “You can try.”

Jacqueline brandished her dagger when he closed the short distance between them. The tip of her blade ripped his sleeve and nicked his forearm. Her eyes rounded and flew to his face. “That is only a taste.”

“Damn.” Ethan ignored the sting but kept his focus on her weapon. It had been a long time since anyone drew blood from him, and the fact it was *she* who did so made him desire her even more. When she rushed again, her skirts hampered her movements and she faltered. He caught her wrist, squeezed until she had no choice but to drop the dagger. It clattered against the hardwood, unheeded. “I would advise against another attempt.”

“Unhand me.” Color suffused her cheeks and her breath rasped in the sudden silence. “I beg of you.”

“You will *beg* me for so much more soon.” Ethan tightened his hold, feeling the fragile bones beneath her skin, appalled at himself as she cried out. He dropped her arm, an apology on his lips. Any new thoughts were obliterated when her palm connected soundly with his cheek.

“Bastard.”

He stared at her and put a hand to his cheek. “Well played, Miss Massey.” He welcomed the pain, glad she put an end to his cruelty. Ethan wondered if he’d have a bruise come the morrow. Would the men question the mark if he did?

An icy glare was her answer as she moved passed him to the door.

“Jacqueline...” He had no idea what to say to make the situation better. Although he led a life spotted with violence, not once had he harmed a woman. “Please do not leave.”

“Why should I stay?”

He stooped to retrieve her dagger and ran a fingertip over the carved ivory sea serpents on the handle. “Any woman who can draw the blood of a pirate captain deserves my respect.” Stowing the weapon in a bureau drawer, he moved to stand behind her. “And any woman who holds my respect should know I don’t give it lightly.” He turned her around until she faced him. “You are not property, and never doubt you are as worthy as any man.” He sighed. “I let the prejudices of the world affect my thinking, and for that there is no excuse.”

She shook her head. “No, that is no excuse. Prejudice is all around us. You must learn to live with it or ignore it. There are no other options.”

For a long moment, the only sound he could hear was the blood rushing in his ears. She would leave him, and be well within her rights to do so. “I will have Sully prepare the dingy. You can return to Alexander’s stifling embrace and your life of privilege.” She swung around before he could say more.

“God, no. My future does not lie with him.”

“Then you do not wish to leave this ship?” He stifled the hope that sprang to life in his chest. “I apologize for my rough treatment.”

“Do not think I will forget what you’ve done.” The fire in her eyes dimmed a bit. “I do sympathize with the emotion that fueled your actions. I have been that angry before, but I usually take out my aggression by beating dust from the rugs.”

His lips twitched. “Jacqueline—”

“Stop.” She captured his face between her hands. “What you are does not determine *who* you are. And deep down inside, you know this; otherwise, you would not have chosen piracy as your profession.”

Absolution never sounded so sweet until it fell from her lips. He grasped her fingers, kissed each soft palm. “Thank you.”

“I did nothing except make an observation. Now, if you will kindly work the hooks, this interlude has exhausted me, and I wish to sleep.”

Images of her naked body tangled in his bedding crowded into Ethan’s mind, but he did as she requested. Once the dress gaped open, he coaxed it from her shoulders until it dropped with a whisper to the floor. “Forgive me when I tell you slumber is not possible at the moment.” He pressed his lips to her bare shoulder. When she shivered, he grinned and used his tongue to draw a moist path to the nape of her neck. Blowing gently on the spot where his tongue had just been, he grunted in satisfaction as she sucked in a surprised breath.

“Three days until Christmas.” Her whispered words were barely audible.

Jacqueline’s head rolled back, and her masses of windblown hair flowed over his hands. The heat of her skin and her scent intoxicated him like the finest wine. “Will you turn me off the ship then?”

“That is a conversation for another time.” Ethan nipped at her earlobe. He slipped his hands around her waist, pulled her backside flush against him in an attempt to ease the ache of his erection. The woman brought him to a frenzy of desire, yet his brain cried out a warning.

“Ethan, I wish to live while I am on this ship. However, do not think you can force me into your bed. I want to be with you in that way, but I will not be coerced. You may ask me, tease me, or use whatever seduction skills you have, and I will gladly comply. You do not need to sink into your darker self.”

He groaned at her open invitation, and still he hesitated. She represented goodness and happiness, a total eclipse to the evil he thought of himself. It was almost as if the angel on his hull had become animated and dropped into his life to tempt him. Ethan shook off the fantastical thought. His hands drifted up to cup her breasts. Their fullness fit his palms as if she was made expressly for him alone. With his thumbs, he teased her nipples until the buds grew hard and tight in anticipation. Her moan of pleasure almost brought him to his knees.

Caution overrode his earlier desire to take her by force. She deserved better. Jacqueline was the kind of woman a man wished to spend the rest of his life with. *A woman to cherish.*

“Tomorrow, my angel, I promise you *will* be mine.” He swatted her rear. “Right now, I’m promised to Sully for patching holes in the planking. Some of the crew will arrive tomorrow with supplies. Some of the work must be done by then.”

“I desire you tonight.” She turned, her hands planted on her hips. He waited for her to stamp a foot. When she did not, he smiled.

“Yes, but just think of how primed you will be tomorrow after a nice meal and the ship to ourselves. Sully plans to overnight in the village.” He tugged on a lock of her hair. “The more I can accomplish tonight, the less I will need to do later. Which means you can have your wicked way with me for as long as the darkness remains.” *I cannot promise more than that.*

Her eyes glowed a deep sapphire blue. “I will hold you to it.”

Chapter Five

“It is a wonder you have come through your adventures without being ill from starvation. This food is terrible, although I cannot classify it as actual food.” Jacqueline gulped a few mouthfuls of tea to rid her palate of the salty, stale taste of the dried pork. “Would it be too much to hope that Sully could create scones or even a decent meal of some sort of fresh fish?”

“I would remind you we haven’t brought all the supplies onboard at this time.” Ethan’s lips twitched as he drank his own tea. “And Sully is a poor fisherman.”

“Then perhaps you?” She arched a brow.

“I am much too busy for that.” He grinned. “My ship can accommodate nearly seventy-five crewmembers, but I employ fifty. We are very efficient at our tasks. As you can imagine, it takes a huge amount of food to feed them all. More staples will arrive today. Once we are underway, some of the men do indeed know how to ply the waters and bring up a fair catch.” He dropped a couple of orange segments on her plate. “In the meantime, eat these. It’ll ward off scurvy.”

“I have been on the ship for two days. Somehow, I think the threat of that sickness is remote at best.” But she popped a piece in her mouth and chewed. Sweet juice exploded on her tongue, and she sighed. “Thank you.”

“As I have said before, the life of a pirate is not as idealistic as you seem to believe.” He drained his cup. “At times, we add lemon juice to rum as a scurvy preventative since citrus helps. The water we bring onboard does not last through long voyages. To combat this, we often pull into port every two months. If luck is with us, we can obtain live poultry or the occasional goat. As long as the chickens remain alive and uneaten, we’ll have eggs. The goats will also provide milk, but those times are rare.”

“Goat?” A shiver of revulsion shook her body. “No wonder pirates are angry. Drunken cavorting and hunger are not conducive to complacency.”

“Sully does his best with what he has.” Ethan’s lips pressed into a tight line.

“My intention was not to offend.” She nibbled on a piece of hardtack after softening it in her tea, but it was still a tasteless affair. “How do you intend to provide an adequate meal this evening if the proper supplies are missing?”

He shrugged. “We always manage.”

The flash of red from his ring caught her attention. “Tell me about your ring. Does it hold a sentimental value to you?”

Ethan removed the piece of jewelry and held it up for inspection. “You believe it is a piece of treasure, yes?”

“The thought occurred to me.” The pirate fascinated her to such an extent she would gladly forfeit years from her life to discover his secrets. “Am I wrong?”

“Extremely.” He fit the ring on his pinky. “My father gave this to me when I first struck out in the world on my own as a good luck charm of sorts. He had intended me to further my education then perhaps take over running the estate. We made a fair living raising tobacco, but I knew that life wasn’t for me.”

“And you left.” She ran a fingertip around the rim of her teacup. “Did something terrible happen?”

He nodded. "Shortly thereafter, both of my parents were killed by a band of angry plantation workers. The rebellion was put down by my uncles, but I blamed myself. If my father hadn't been distracted by my departure, he would have been prepared for the disaster."

"Oh, Ethan." She gripped his hand, surprised when he held tightly to her fingers.

"None of that matters now." His dark eyes bored into hers. "My destiny is with the sea, and all the trials such a profession brings. I can do nothing to change what I am or what I have done."

Another sip of tea, then she tapped a forefinger against her bottom lip. "If the dark side of piracy bothers you so much, why do you continue to do it? Why not dock permanently in the West Indies and join the world of industry and commerce there? Plenty of riches are waiting to be made, and you can be a different sort of pirate."

"I have never thought about anything beyond being on this ship. It is as much of a penance as it is my job now." He blinked, paused to swallow hard as if the mere thought of being somewhere else soured his thoughts. "Although, you make a convincing argument. Something to consider, especially since piracy will no doubt become an extinct profession in the days to come."

"Aye." Jacqueline giggled at the word she'd heard used about the ship.

She studied the man who lounged across the table from her in his cabin. Black, windblown hair hung to his collar. Strong, slender fingers held the delicate china cup. His dark eyes stared back at her as if in challenge with no trace of regret. The white lawn shirt he wore this day fell open to mid-chest, and she experienced a pang of longing so intense she bit her lip to keep from crying out. The mat of black hair on his torso beckoned, called to her now chilled fingers to explore, to determine if it was soft or coarse. That journey into the unknown curled her toes. What kind of treasure awaited her at the end of that path?

"Would your perusal be easier if I undressed?"

The sound of his voice, both mocking and inviting, jarred her out of her steamy contemplation of his anatomy. "No, or rather yes, but not at this time." She crossed her arms over her breasts as her nipples pebbled in remembrance of his hands on them. The promise of further pleasures when night fell caused her breath to catch. "I do not fancy languishing in this cabin all day while you are busy with repairs. Please give me a task. I want to help. I am not accustomed to having idle hands."

A slow grin parted his lips and sent liquid heat rushing to parts of her body she didn't know could feel. "You could mend the tear in my shirt from last night. There is also swabbing the deck." He stood and drew her to her feet. "Or we could begin your seduction now."

"Perhaps you should explain what swabbing the deck entails." A sigh escaped when he ran a fingertip along the neckline of her dress. Whispered tales of ravishment by pirates bounced through her mind. Her curiosity grew, but the sound of loud male voices on the deck near the opened porthole brought a cold dose of caution. "I would rather not be bedded with an audience."

Ethan's rumble of laughter brought an answering smile from her. "I agree." He blew out a breath. "Do whatever your heart wishes. There are no forbidden areas on my ship. I will advise you not to provoke the crew. Although they have most likely slept with the first available woman they saw upon landing, one or two nights is not enough to assuage

the thirst for soft flesh and hot sex.” His hand twisted in her hair, drawing her head back so she met his gaze.

“I will give them wide berth.” Her heart hammered against her ribs as flutters filled her stomach. “I promise.”

He nodded. “Good. You belong to me and no other man will enjoy you. That is *my* promise.”

This time, Jacqueline was ready for his kiss. When his lips touched hers, she wrapped her hands around his neck and pulled him even closer. She opened for him, thrust her tongue into his, pleased at his surprise. With a boldness she couldn’t explain, she explored his mouth, seeking something she didn’t understand. Her tongue stroked the sweet smoothness of his and she tasted the last vestiges of the rum-laced tea he’d had with breakfast.

Fires of need erupted, licked through her blood as she sucked his bottom lip into her mouth, invoking a groan from him. Jacqueline nibbled his lip, taunted him with quick kisses along his stubble-covered jaw, thrilled with victory when she teased a sensitive spot on his neck. She licked at the salt-tinged skin until he grasped her waist and held her away. She shook her head. “I am not finished.”

“No, but I may be if we don’t put distance between us.”

“Ah.” She cast a glance at the bulge in the front of his pants. Heat suffused her cheeks to see how much he desired her. Jacqueline desperately wanted to see what his arousal looked like, what it felt like, if it would grow larger in her hands. “Then, you should run like a scared rabbit, or you might find yourself the first pirate in the history of the world to be taken advantage of. Imagine what would become of the reputation of the Black Thief of the Islands if that were to occur.”

His sigh seemed to come from the very depths of the sea. “An interesting notion, to be sure.” Ethan raked a hand through his hair. “Two days will not be enough time.”

Sadness sank into her chest to disrupt her bloom of happiness. “Do not remind me.” Jacqueline opened the door and shoved him through. “Keep yourself occupied, pirate. But remember, the night belongs to me.” When he stumbled down the four steps, she closed the door and leaned her forehead against the cool glass. How could she go back to her previous existence when she only felt truly alive in his company?

* * * *

Sitting cross-legged on top of the captain’s cabin, Jacqueline laid her mending in her lap and flexed her shoulders to relieve the tension. A long line of fat, fluffy clouds hid the sun and provided temporary shelter from its intensity. Every so often, a crewmember would appear from the hatch, empty-handed, to return after a bit, toting barrels or crates that they’d deposit into the hold. Jacqueline wondered what those containers hid, but she adhered to her promise not to interact with the men. Even still, she saw the curious glances and bold stares they threw her way, and wondered what they thought of her.

What do I think of myself?

Wearing the same clothes for three days was not attractive in the least. She would gladly sell her hair for a soak in a steaming bath. She looked at her dress, smudged with dirt and grime from being on the ship, to say nothing of her under-things and petticoats. Her stomach cramped at the thought of smelling less than lady-like for Ethan this evening. Would he notice? And if he did, would he be offended? Insecurity threatened to

overwhelm her until Jacqueline squelched its rebellion. Obviously, he didn't mind her appearance if their previous embraces were any indication.

Not able to stand the conflicting thoughts, she scrambled from her perch, tossed her mending in the cabin, then walked the main deck. Her bare feet slapped against the sun bleached wood. If given the chance, she'd never wear shoes and stockings again. Jacqueline shoved a few pins into her upswept hair, glad when it was off her neck. The heat on the open water addled her brain at times. Glad for the activity, her mind returned to the subject of her obsession. Ethan the pirate and Ethan the man. Which persona did she favor? Could he be categorized so simply? Did she want him to be, or was she willing to accept him as two parts of a greater whole?

In the grand scheme, it didn't matter.

Climbing the steps to the forecandle deck, she breathed in the tangy air and shaded her eyes against the glare. The *USS Alligator's* charred, ghostly remains drew her attention. *Why were men compelled to sail the seas?* Whether they were Navy-men or pirates, the water was common ground for them both. And what of the women who cared for those men? Were they destined to be left behind, grieving on land for a love that may never return? Or would the men prefer their women to accompany them on their travels?

A headache loomed, either from eye strain or her jumbled thoughts. Jacqueline leaned as far over the side as she dared to look at the angel on the masthead. She sympathized with the carving, and wondered if it was better to wait for news of a loved one's safety or see the trouble firsthand. She suspected each scenario brought its own problems.

"If you fall into the sea, I'm sending One-eyed Jon in after you. I have no desire for a swim this day."

She whipped around and nearly toppled over the edge from shock. Ethan stood before her, naked to the waist. His bronzed skin gleamed from sweat. A butterfly pattern of dark hair covered his chest and lay damp and glistening. Her jaw dropped as her eyes caressed the sculpted planes and ridges of his torso, followed a jagged white scar over his ribcage. Another, smaller scar marred his left pectoral and a red scratch glared from his right arm—a souvenir from their fight last night. Unexpected tears stung her eyes at the endearing imperfections. She wanted to hear the stories behind each. "You are beautiful." No painting in a museum could capture the life and vibrancy he represented.

"Thank you for the admiration, but pirates are not beautiful—or men for that matter."

The simple act of breathing took every ounce of Jacqueline's concentration. Her knees buckled, and she clutched the railing to remain upright. "What brings you topside? I thought you were busy stocking the hold." She clasped her hands together lest they explore his gorgeous chest of their own volition.

"I wanted to take a break to find out what you've been doing with yourself." He withdrew a smudged rag from a pocket and wiped off his face. "Finish the mending?"

"Yes." Her eyes followed the cloth as he ran along his upper body. "Either put on a shirt or go below deck. You are a threat to my common sense."

"Excellent information to be privy to." Ethan closed the distance between them, shoving a corner of the rag into the waistband of his pants. "Tonight, I plan to be a threat to your maidenhood as well."

"Oh." Her back met with the hard edge of the rail as he leaned into her. The sharp smell of sweat mingled with the faint aroma of oak and the sandalwood soap he used. Her

question regarding personal hygiene was answered since she didn't feel repulsed by his scent. "I..." The word stumbled then died. She licked her lips and tried again, and nothing would do but the truth. "I want you." She reached out to stroke his arm. Ethan shuddered at her touch, and she felt an answering quake deep within her core. Jacqueline smiled. She affected him as much as he did her.

A sense of power rose within her. Life had just taken an interesting turn, and she needed to explore every bit of it.

"I have more work to finish." His lips pressed against hers in a quick kiss. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." He caressed her bottom lip with his thumb. "Do not remain in the sun much longer or you will burn. I would rather not see your perfect skin blemished."

"As soon as I finish my stroll, I will take a nap." She frowned as a new thought occurred to her. "No sign of a Navy vessel?"

"Not that I have seen." His eyes darkened and became shuttered. "Do you expect guests?" All hints of teasing and innuendo vanished from his voice, replaced with wariness.

"Of course not. I was curious as to whether they would mount a rescue mission." She hoped her father and Alexander had forgotten about her.

"They would have a hard time of it since we're docked in the shallows on the opposite side of the island. They will run aground if they attempt a pursuit." Anger, and a strange hint of vulnerability, shadowed his face. "Do you wish to be rescued?"

"Ethan." Jacqueline ached to kiss him, take his pain into herself, until it melted away. "Let me be very clear." She pressed her body against his. Tiny thrills tickled her insides when his arms came around her like steel bands. "If the American Navy were to pull alongside us and threaten with cannon fire, I would gladly, and with no regrets, go down with the captain of this ship." She teased one of his flat, brown nipples with the tip of her tongue, and the feeling of power returned when it pebbled from her ministrations.

"You will be the death of me." Instead of the kiss she expected, Ethan tucked her more firmly into his embrace and held her close. "And it is an ending I look forward to."

Her heart lurched at the unexpected intimacy. Tears welled in her throat to prevent a reply. She burrowed her face against his shoulder, listening to the steady beat of his heart, content to remain in the shelter of his arms until he pulled away. "Back to work?"

"It is a necessary evil if we are to sail on Christmas Day." He smiled. "Until dinner, Miss Massey." Ethan gave her a bow then turned.

"Wait!" A tattoo on his back arrested her attention. "What exquisite artistry." She traced the blue ink drawing between his shoulder blades, biting her lower lip when he flinched at her touch. An angel in flowing robes and a serene expression occupied the space, her unfurled wings spanned a good five inches of his golden flesh. One hand held a lantern, the other clutched a sword. The words "Angel's Master" scrolled beneath. "It fits you."

"Thank you." He swung around to look at her. "I had it commissioned fifteen years ago, before I owned this ship." An embarrassed grin parted his lips. "I have always had a fascination with angels. The tattoo and the ship are an unconscious tribute to them."

The admission and high emotion reflected in his eyes made Jacqueline's stomach quake with something stronger than sympathy. "And yet you picked piracy as your career over the ministry." She chuckled. "Your faith will carry you through the dark times in

your life. You have a pure heart and solid motives. Never doubt you are a good man.”

“I wonder if you could see into my soul, would you revise your opinion?”

A cloud of sadness settled on her shoulders at the pain mirrored in his eyes.

“Everyone has secrets and things we are ashamed of. It does not mean we are bad people, or should be judged because of the circumstances.”

“I pray you are right.” He held her gaze for long moments before he broke the connection and turned away. “Somehow, I don’t think Hell will be as accommodating.”

Ghost, the cat, pranced up to her as Ethan’s form disappeared into the hatch. He deposited a dead brown mouse at Jacqueline’s feet. “You naughty boy, bringing me a present and it isn’t even my birthday.” She scooped the cat into her arms, held him on her shoulder as if he were a baby, then kicked the mouse carcass into the sea. “Why don’t you keep me company for awhile?”

When a steady purr came in place of his answer, she grinned and stroked his soft coat. “Perhaps I should tell you my secret. I know you will not judge me.” Tears pricked her eyelids as she wondered what Ethan would say when she revealed she was little more than pirate bait. Because eventually she *would* tell him. Holding the information inside did her no good and caused nothing but heartache.

But would her heart be able to withstand the fallout from his wrath? Or worse, the loss of his attention?

Chapter Six

“Close your eyes.” When Ethan strode into the cabin later that evening, his steps wavered. “You look ... different.” Her hair was once again in its upswept fashion, but her dress had been altered. “What happened to your sleeves?” Her arms, now bare, seemed to cry out for his touch, however, he abstained, not trusting his restraint.

“My mending this afternoon covered more than your shirt.” Jacqueline twirled. The skirt of her dress had been deeply slit at both sides to the thigh, revealing the ruffled petticoats beneath. “Since I didn’t have the luxury of a new wardrobe, I created one.”

“Your intelligence is only surpassed by your creativity.” Truth be told, he preferred the new version of her dress, which allowed him to enjoy the sight of the smooth ivory skin of her arms. His gut churned with anticipation at the thought of baring the remainder of her body for inspection. For the time being, temptations of the flesh would have to wait, no matter the hardening of his groin had other ideas. “I have something to show you. Close your eyes.”

“Can I trust you?” Her smile wobbled then fell from her face altogether.

“You have been on my ship for two days. My integrity has been without question.”

“Then you have conveniently forgotten your attempted rape of earlier?” She planted her hands on her hips. He’d been in her company long enough to know the gesture signified a fight was imminent.

“I beg your pardon for that, but I did warn you I am a pirate above all things.” He tugged her into a loose embrace. “Will you accompany me?” Her freshly scrubbed skin smelled of wildflowers, and he inhaled with appreciation. “Where did you find soap?”

“Sully gave it to me along with a lace-trimmed handkerchief. He said it was a thank you gift for praising his fiddle playing.” She cupped her hands around his neck. “Do you like it?”

“Most assuredly.” He made a mental note to give his long time friend an extra day’s wages. “Now please. The crew has something they wish to present to you.” Excitement ebbed through him when her smile returned. “They have been incredibly patient and wish to return to the island for dinner and entertainment. Close your eyes.” He pressed his lips to the shell of her ear. “Don’t make me ask you again or the consequence will be swift and quite ... torturous.”

“Very well.” A shiver wracked her body. Ethan’s temperature rose a few degrees. “I’m ready.” Jacqueline dutifully closed her eyes.

The dark fringe of her lashes stood out in stark contrast against the paleness of her cheeks. He brushed her lips with his, then wrapped an arm about her waist. “Do not peek until I tell you.” He hadn’t looked forward to a single event so much since long ago childhood Christmases. “Here we go.” Swinging the door open, he guided her onto the deck. “Now, angel, behold a pirate crew’s Christmas gift to you.”

For the span of two heartbeats, Jacqueline’s surprised inhalation was the only sound. “It’s the most marvelous thing I have ever seen.”

Ethan released the breath he hadn’t realized he held. Joy fought for dominance with pleasure in the blue depths of her eyes as she gazed upon the glory of the *Angel’s Fury* with all her sails unfurled. From the grand main sail to the flying jib to the topsail, the

gentle breeze filled each cloth with just enough wind to present a spectacle worthy of admiration. He looked from the wonder of her expression to the silly, embarrassed grins of the ten crewmates who had mounted the sails. His chest swelled with pride that this one little thing which seemed so commonplace to him could elicit so much happiness for one woman.

He squeezed her fingers. "Was it worth the wait?"

"It's the best thing anyone has ever given me." She threw her arms around his waist and hugged him. His erection came insistently to life once more, and warned him of imminent mutiny. Jacqueline lifted her face and smiled. "Thank you."

A hint of moisture sparkled on her cheeks under the light of the lantern that hung on a hook near the door. "Why the tears?" There were many things in the world he would gladly undertake, but a woman's tears were not one of them.

"I am incredibly grateful." She wiped at the wetness. "This gift ... this thing that you've given me is too much ... I feel so ... special." The last of her words fell away in a hiccupping sob. "Thank you."

Before he could react or even offer her comfort, Jacqueline bolted down the steps and crossed the main deck until she reached the line of his crewmembers. Ethan watched in amazement as she gave each man a tight hug and a kiss on the cheek. His chest tightened and his heart thumped painfully, as if it had been reawakened from a long sleep. In two days he was expected to return her to the island from his own promise. He had serious doubts in his ability to actually go through with the plan. He couldn't give her up. From the tip of her silky head to the toes of her bare feet, he had come to adore her.

If she consented to leave, Ethan hated to contemplate what would become of his own life, and wondered if even death would be enough to make him forget.

Shaking himself from his momentary depression, he watched as Jacqueline finished thanking the last man in the line. He vaulted down the steps to join her on the deck. "Gentlemen, I want to commend you on a job well done. The mild weather and calm winds should hold through the evening. We will leave the sails like this and bring them in first thing in the morning. You may go about your business."

If Ethan detected a suspicious amount of moisture in the eyes of his crew, he wisely overlooked the detail. Somehow, Jacqueline had the power to reduce the most hardened seaman to the strength of a bowl of porridge. He understood completely. As the men filled the largest long boat, he and Sully worked the ropes and pulleys to lower it over the side and into the water.

"Still plan to spend the night on land?" He looked the older man dead in the eye. "You are welcome to stay."

"That's a bloody lie. Since *she's* been here, it's nigh impossible to catch yer attention."

"True." What would be the point in denying his distraction? Sully had known him too long for games. "You will return with the men in the morning?"

"Aye." Sully climbed into the dingy. "Now lower me down, boy. Dinner's in yer cabin. Chicken and potatoes and a bit of pastry for a sweet—not that ye'll need it. And keep the bird happy lest she fly away. I don't like women on the ship, but that one's different. Brings a spot of happiness with her, she does."

Ethan silently agreed as he worked the ropes. Once Sully's oars hit the water, he saluted his friend then turned, starting when Jacqueline touched his arm.

“Why did your crew do this for me?” Confusion clouded her eyes.

“They like you.” Ethan drew her arm through his and led her across the deck. “Which is amazing enough in itself. Women are not tolerated on sailing vessels, due to prevailing superstitions.”

Jacqueline halted their progress. “They do not know me.”

Damn fool woman was too intelligent for her own good. He met her gaze. “They know you make *me* happy. It has been a long time since such an event has occurred.”

“And why did *you* orchestrate this? I overheard some of the men say the sails were not supposed to go up until Christmas Day.”

“Because I knew this one small thing would make *you* happy.” When her lips tilted upwards in a smile, he made a promise to keep her always in such contentment.

The canvas flapped gently in the breeze, the rigging thumped against the masts, but the one sound he strained to hear was her affirmation or her praise. Either sentiment would do as long as she continued to look at him with affection mixed with something much stronger. He wanted to learn what that other emotion was.

“Did I make the correct choice?”

“You know the answer to that question.” Her gaze could melt the soles of his boots with its intensity. “Shall we do justice to Sully’s dinner, or would you rather skip to more sensual delights?”

“Is that a challenge, Miss Massey?” He’d never desired a woman like he did Jacqueline. She brought a level of intelligence and cunning to word play that fed his need like a bellow to a fire.

“Do you want it to be?” She rose on tiptoe and pressed her lips to his. The teasing gesture sparked a bonfire within him that stirred his groin and knocked every thought from his head except taking her to bed.

“Most assuredly.” Ethan scooped her into his arms, hefting her weight as if he’d done it all his life. “You and I have been destined for this moment since I walked into that saloon.”

Her throaty laugh washed over him like a soothing balm. “I hope your skill as a lover lives up to your bragging.”

“I have never heard any complaints.” He nudged the door to his cabin open then laid his precious bundle on the bunk. “Are you sure you do not wish to partake of nourishment?” Ethan shut the door firmly and threw the lock. He blew out the lantern and waited while his eyes adjusted to the darkening atmosphere. “Jacqueline?”

“There is only one thing I want, and I can assure you it is *not* food.” She padded across the room, a determined glint in her eyes.

He had known a fair amount of women in intimate ways, but none had the power to singe him with one look, or control his body without even a touch. Jacqueline had taken possession of his soul, and he refused to ask for its return. She held it in her hands like one of the celestial guardians he had such affinity for, breathed goodness into the blackened lump, and made it whole. He owed her everything and nothing all at once. It was unexplainable.

The pink tip of her tongue darted out to moisten her lips. His eyes followed every movement. “Show me the side of piracy that people are afraid to talk about lest it be from behind locked doors.”

“It will be a pleasure and an honor.” Unable or unwilling to be parted from her

another minute, he pulled her into his arms and pressed his lips to hers. She mewed, a tiny sound like Ghost made when he'd been a kitten, and Ethan was lost. He ran his tongue along the outline of her lips, deepening the kiss until she invited him in. His fingers worked the hooks at the back of her dress as he plunged into her mouth, branding her as his alone. When the last hook came undone, he held her away long enough to shove the unwanted fabric from her shoulders.

"Hurry." Her hands fumbled at the buttons of his trousers. She nipped playful kisses along his jaw to drive him slowly insane.

"Steady now. Savor every moment as if it were the last." He worked at the ties that held her petticoats on, grunted in satisfaction when they slipped to the floor. Through the thickening darkness he saw the buds of her nipples as they strained against the fabric of her shift. "Make yourself comfortable on the bed. I shall be but a moment."

Never had the task of removing his boots seemed to take such endless seconds. After an eternity of wrestling with the stubborn footwear, Ethan whipped his shirt over his head, grateful for the cool air that took some of the fire from his skin. A glance toward the bed showed Jacqueline watching him with over-bright eyes. He took a steadying breath to remain calm, then just as quickly realized it was an impossible task. She did not inspire idyllic thoughts.

"Ethan, come."

He was powerless to disobey. Climbing onto the bed beside her, he groaned when she touched his chest with shaking fingers. "Let me show you." Ethan trailed gentle kisses from her velvety lips to the column of her throat. Her pulse fluttered wildly there and he tickled the spot. She stirred beneath him, but he continued with his seduction. Her floral scent wrapped around him, urging him closer with invisible threads, as desire became his guide.

"Your skin is so soft, so smooth." At her incoherent reply, he shifted slightly, closing his lips over one hardened nipple, sucking the bud into his mouth. He circled it with his tongue. His arousal grew ever harder at each new mewling sound Jacqueline made. Ethan showered the same attention to her other breast, drunk with lust, and splayed the fingers of one hand against the swell of her stomach.

She squirmed, a vague smile on her face. "So far, pirate, I am not overly impressed. I think the rumors were only make-believe tales to tell children at bedtime." But her voice sounded breathless and unstable.

"When I am through with you, the dreams you will have should never be told to anyone younger than your grandmother, and even then, I would urge caution." Her teasing spurred him onward. He pushed the hem of her shift up around her waist, trailed his fingers over her bared skin until he cupped her breasts in his hands. The round fullness warmed his palms and he kneaded her flesh, gently pinching her pebbled buds until she cried out, her back arching. "Sit up for me. I want to see every inch of your sweet body."

She complied with his order, and Ethan freed her of the garment with more force than finesse. Her breasts jiggled from the movement. Jacqueline threw her head back, took her weight on her elbows, and gazed up at him from beneath her lashes. "You have my permission to come aboard, captain."

"Dangerous words, love." His hands skimmed up the length of her legs, charting the curve of her hips as if they were the most complicated of maps. The siren song of

mermaids held no fascination as he unlaced the ribbons that held her linen drawers on. A few tugs and the fabric slid easily down her legs, leaving her body bare for his inspection. When she attempted to cover her womanly parts with her hands, he captured her wrists and pinned them to the bed. "Do not be embarrassed. You are beautiful. I wish to taste you."

"It is highly likely you tell every woman you bed those very words." She strained against his hold but he held her fast.

"Only you, and I never lie." He bent his head to trail a moist path of kisses between her breasts. Letting go of her wrists, Ethan grasped her hips, inhaling the sweet scent of her womanhood. His lips went lower to discover the wonders of her stomach, and the curls between her legs tickled his chin.

"Ethan, you torment me for no reason." Her hands clutched his shoulders in an attempt to pull him up the bed.

"Oh, there is a reason." He nipped at the soft flesh of her thighs. "Tell me, has the exalted Alexander ever done this to you?" Ethan teased her feminine opening with a finger, drawing forth the first drops of her moisture. He heard her intake of breath, felt the tiniest of tremors in her core. "Or perhaps this?" With two fingers, he explored her, moving in and out of her canal until they were coated with her sweet essence.

Jacqueline's hips bucked against his hand. He grinned. "You are the first man to ever touch me there." Her ragged voice echoed in the cabin.

"But surely such a man has pleased you here?" He teased her feminine nub with his tongue, and was rewarded with a delighted gasp from her. He stroked the tiny bundle of nerves as his fingers continued their quest, harder and faster in her core. He suckled her sex, caressing it with his tongue, putting his own arousal out of his mind in the search of her pleasure. Jacqueline's inner muscles contracted around his fingers and he withdrew only to assault her nub with those same fingers.

She cried out, pressed his hand against herself. "Oh, Lord, help me."

"And this is just the beginning." Ethan left the mattress for the few seconds it took to remove his trousers. Pleasure snaked through his gut when he saw her eyes focus on his arousal. "Look as much as you like. We have all night." He swallowed when she came off the bed. If he didn't pace himself, the seduction of his angel would end too soon with the disappointment of them both.

"Turnabout is my weapon of choice."

Before he could stop her, Jacqueline sank to her knees in front of him. Her fingers skimmed down his hips, the outside of his thighs, then she brought them up the inside. The light touch chilled his skin, made the hair on his legs stand to attention. When she caressed his penis, he nearly died from need.

"I never knew it would be so soft, almost as if it were made of silk, but strong like iron."

He heard the wonder in her voice, but his brain refused to register her words as white, hot pleasure spiked through his body when her lips closed around his tip. "Jacqueline, you must be careful." Her mouth slid farther down his shaft, her tongue stroking his length with a tentativeness that brought tears to his eyes. As inexperienced as she was in the bedroom arts, she tried to please him. "Like this, but gently, else the game will end before we have been satisfied." Ethan guided her head, thrust once into her mouth, then again when she seemed to be able to accommodate him. He groaned. Torture

should never feel this good or sinners would never seek repentance.

When he pulled away, Jacqueline dug her nails into his buttocks and suckled at the head of his penis, then swirled her tongue over his tip. His vision blurred. "Enough play." Her pleased chuckle concerned him as she rose to her feet, but not as much as the almost savage way she shoved him onto the bed. Determined to take control of the situation, he pounced on her, pinning her to the mattress, a knee between her legs. "I cannot wait any longer. I need to feel you around me."

Jacqueline gave him a very feline smile. "Then why are you still talking?"

Chapter Seven

Jacqueline clutched Ethan's muscled shoulders, kissed any part of him that came into contact with her mouth. He had given her a taste of what ecstasy could feel like, but she wanted more—much more. Her core pulsed with mysterious need. The tremors he invoked within only enhanced the terrible ache she couldn't name.

Conscious that he held his weight above her on his arms, when he shifted she maneuvered her hands between them to stroke his hardened shaft, wondering how that wondrous appendage would fit, more so how it would feel, within her. She recalled how easily it slipped into her mouth and craved that unleashed power with her most secret of places. "Teach me. I wish to pleasure you."

A ragged breath escaped him to stir the damp tendrils of hair on her forehead. "Being near you is enough. Enjoy this." He nuzzled the spot of her neck where it met her shoulder. Shivers danced over Jacqueline's skin, blending with the exquisite torture as the hair on his chest brushed against her sensitive nipples.

Her whimper hung in the sultry air when his arousal stroked her throbbing nub. "I need you." Never in her life had she desired anything as much as she did now. Like an empty vessel, she waited to be filled with his essence, his heart, his soul. She wanted to be possessed by him, owned, so that perhaps he would ask her to stay on after the Christmas holiday passed.

It was useless to contemplate the future otherwise.

"Soon." His lips blazed a path over her fevered skin, suckled her nipples as his hands fondled her breasts.

She bucked against his body, blindly seeking what he could give. "When?" Jacqueline inhaled his unique scent, committing it to memory as her fingers slid over his sweat-damp skin, tracing the silvery white lines of his scars. Pressure built like a living entity within her, to drive her toward an unknown brink. She needed something to take away the voracious longing. Tears gathered in her eyes. "Please..."

For long moments, Ethan looked at her as he rested his forehead against hers. "I can deny you nothing."

Her soul trembled in perfect harmony with the race of her heart, and she wished time would simply stop so she may live in this place of wonder forever. Then the pirate coaxed her legs wide, and she focused on the man who held her in the balance with only a hint of fear to temper her excitement.

Jacqueline saw his face loom over her, felt his hands grasp the soft flesh of her thighs, and when his erection rested at her entrance, she smiled. "Why do you hesitate?" "Do you wish to change your mind?" He nudged himself a bit further inside.

Tiny ebbs of pleasure flowed from their joining. "Never. Ruin me, pirate. Make me yours." She stirred restlessly beneath him, laughed when he moaned.

"As my lady commands."

She wasn't prepared for the complete implication of his intent, but she lifted her hips to receive him. He pushed himself all the way into her canal and a sharp stab of pain derailed her pleasure. She bit her lip to keep from crying out. Ethan stilled, pressed his body into hers, his breath ragged.

“Your virginity now belongs to me.” A hint of supreme male satisfaction coated his voice.

“Yes, and I would gladly give it again.” As the pinpricks of pain faded, Jacqueline became aware of a new sensation. He was fully lodged inside her. The pressure remained, a constant, steady pulse that refused to be denied. “Ethan, continue before I perish.”

“You will not die, innocent, but you will swear you have flown to heaven when we are done.” He claimed her lips in a deep, searing kiss that set her heart racing in a primal rhythm. “Now, I will finish your seduction.”

She wasn’t given the opportunity to answer. He drove into her, withdrew, then entered again. Jacqueline gasped as threads of need spiraled through her body to accumulate where the two of them joined. She clutched the bedding in her fists, holding her breath as he thrust again. Spreading her legs wider, she lifted her hips, met his next stroke, and encouraged him on his quest. Heat flowed through her veins, transforming mere blood to liquid fire as need was swallowed by ancient hunger.

The pattern of thrusts and retreats blended in a natural cadence with her sighs and whimpers, taunting the ache deep within, until Jacqueline was sure she would transform into a grasping creature, who craved more than he could give. She tangled her fingers in the hair on his chest, seeking blindly for anything to stave off the wave that threatened to sweep her away.

“Ethan.”

“Not yet.” He lifted her legs around his waist. “Cross your ankles, love. Let me drive deep within you, feel your wetness around me.”

She did as he instructed. His thrusts grew more insistent, impatient. Jacqueline found the new position to be to her liking. It gave her leverage to rub her mound more securely against him. She pushed back, met his every drive, his every stroke. Desire consumed every pore of her body, fanning her need until her energy was as frenzied as his. Ethan pounded into her again and again. She sobbed, cried out for his sweet torment to end so that she could die in peace. Her head bumped against the wall as the force of his drive moved them across the bed.

Just when she was sure she couldn’t bear anything else, waves of pleasure washed over her as her secret core throbbed and pulsed around his erection. Brilliant white light exploded behind her eyes, and she sighed. Warmth poured into her womb as he spilled his seed then collapsed to one side of the bed, his legs tangled with hers. Tears welled in her eyes to spill onto her cheeks as her body seemed to float, held suspended on nothing but a sensation of fulfillment, the likes of which she’d never known before.

“Why do you cry?” Ethan wiped at the moisture, concern in his voice. “Did I hurt you?”

“You did not hurt me. I finally know...” She stumbled to a halt, unsure, expecting censure. “I am content, as if I found what I have searched for all my life.” She knew her words failed to convey exactly how she felt. “It’s almost as if I’ve been transformed somehow.” Ashamed at her inability to explain, she buried her face in his chest, finding comfort in his solid reality. “I am the same woman, but yet I am different. Free.”

His conceited chuckle created shivers over her skin. “You are much more eloquent than I.” He wrapped her in his arms and pulled her against his chest. “I fear I will not regain the will to move for some time.”

Warm satisfaction settled over her in a dark cloak. Jacqueline pressed her lips to his

shoulder then her eyes fluttered closed as exhaustion seeped into her limbs. “When I return to the island, I intend to ask my father to pardon you from the Navy’s pursuit. If I need to battle your condemnation or his, I choose yours.” She rubbed her cheek against his furry torso and breathed in his unique scent. “I can live without my father, but lacking you, I will surely die.” With a sigh, she drifted into sleep.

* * * *

Jacqueline came awake with a contented sigh. Remembered scenes from the previous evening flitted into her mind. As she turned onto her side, the cool sheet scraped across her still sensitized skin. Stretching her arms over her head, she opened her eyes, and frowned when she didn’t see Ethan anywhere in the cabin.

Struggling out from the tangle of bed clothes, heat suffused her cheeks when she realized she was naked. Her legs ached from the unaccustomed exertion of lovemaking. Jacqueline allowed herself a grin. Being ruined was a delicious experience, and one she wished to repeat many times with her pirate lover. The thought made her pause in the act of donning her discarded drawers. *Was* Ethan now considered her lover? Did one toss in bed with a man gain her lover status? Her fingers shook as she encouraged the rumpled shift over her head.

Today is Christmas Eve.

Only two days remained with him unless she could convince him otherwise.

Quick tears sprang to her eyes and she blinked them away. She had no time to wallow in self-pity or events which had yet to come to pass. Ignoring the tightness in her throat, Jacqueline fastened the petticoats about her waist. Reluctant to depend on Ethan, she worked the buttons and hooks then finally shrugged into her stinky, dirty dress, glad when the fabric settled over her curves with little hassle. She would happily forfeit clean clothes for months on end if the act would buy her extra minutes with him. But something felt wrong, deep in her soul. The cocoon of joy that surrounded her after their joining dissolved to leave uncertainty to crawl through her stomach.

Angry male voices outside spurred her into action. She wrenched open the door to the cabin then faltered slightly to see a cluster of crewmembers jockeying about Ethan and Sully. Fists flailed, blows connected, and curses flew as she sprinted down the steps. This morning, the sails had been reeled in, their freshly laundered brilliance white against the snake-like ropes that bound them to the masts. The sun-warmed planking soothed her bare feet. Jacqueline ignored the small creature comfort as her eyes searched out the pirate. When he met her gaze, the fierce anger simmering in the dark depths chilled her skin.

Nausea pitched her stomach when she vaguely recalled the last thing she whispered to him. *He knows of my connection to the American Navy.* And he was furious. Jacqueline pressed a hand to her lips, desperate to thwart retching on the deck. Before her coherent thoughts could form from the frantic soup in her brain, Ethan barked a string of commands with an authoritative voice she had never heard before.

“Enough!” He jumped to the top of a barrel, raised a hand for silence. Clad all in black, he looked every inch the pirate captain. His shirt rippled on the gentle breeze to reveal the strong column of his throat for her hungry gaze. “We shove off tomorrow, and only half the work has been completed. The time for excuses is over. You will return to the island, find your fellows, and drag them here with the remainder of the supplies or

else you will answer to me. For the time being, haul your asses to the hold and take inventory while I deal with another issue.” His gaze encompassed the whole company. “It would behoove you to note I am not in a benevolent mood. Betrayal has left a bitter taste in my mouth.”

Fear stabbed at Jacqueline’s heart as his words confirmed her suspicion. She worked shaking fingers through her hair as the band of angry pirates filed past. Every one of them avoided looking directly at her. *Do they know my secret as well?* Pushing everything from her mind, she approached Sully, reaching out a hand to the older man. He flinched away as if she had the plague.

“Miss Massey, do not talk to anyone on my crew.” Ethan hopped from the barrel, his eyes no less hard, the set of his jaw determined. “Sully, ready the dingy. I will have use of it soon.”

“Boy, yer not thinkin’ straight. I’ll toss ye into the sea to get yer head back.”

“I have no issues with putting a bullet through your meddling heart. Leave us.” Ethan’s violent gaze swung to her. “And you, Jacqueline Massey, daughter of Commodore—and commanding officer for the Caribbean forces of the American Navy—Samuel Massey. You should be flogged for your crimes. Even that will not set right the enormity of what you’ve done.”

Dread held her with icy tentacles. “You have done your research, but my lineage is not a well guarded secret.” She lifted her chin. If he wanted a fight, she would give him one—if only to defend her place at his side.

“That is not the subject of my discontent.” He leaned a shoulder against the main mast. “Why did you not come forward with your identity sooner?”

“You didn’t ask. You only assumed I was some common doxy in a bar, a woman to warm your bed.”

“Then how fortunate that you became a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Jacqueline’s cheeks burned as if he’d struck her. Her mouth worked but her mind refused to form appropriate words. She ached to wrap her arms around him for comfort, and in the process reassure herself. She hated the new awkwardness between them.

“No words to your defense, no fantastic story?” Mockery returned to his voice as he made her a bow from the waist. “You certainly had plenty to say last night.”

His jest of their night together finally freed her tongue. “My family connections have no bearing on what is between you and me.” She moved a few steps toward him. “Yes, my father installed me in that nasty bar as a spy. Yes, I charmed pirates into revealing their names. Yes, I turned each and every one of them in and was instrumental in their arrests and subsequent deaths. I felt guilty every time, until I thought it would eat me alive.” She swallowed the lump of fear lodged in her throat. “Meeting you solidified my decision. I ask for your forgiveness on their behalf.”

“You expect me to believe you had some sort of spiritual awakening that turned your mindset?” He glared. “No wonder you were so desperate for my surname and an explanation of why the *Angel’s Fury* could navigate the shallows and reefs. Let me be the first to congratulate you on such a thorough inquisition. I’m sure your precious Alexander will be promoted and will wed you in gratitude.”

“Bastard.” Her hand shot out and she slapped him, the sound of the connection as loud as a gunshot. “How dare you attempt to judge me, pirate.”

Pain registered in his brown eyes then disappeared, replaced by rage. “Above

everything, you cannot bring yourself to forget *my* pedigree.”

Jacqueline emitted a sound of disgust, itching to slap him again. “That’s a bloody lie.” She jabbed a forefinger into his chest and stole herself against the desire that blossomed through her body. “I want the man, not the façade he hides behind. I hoped you, at least, would understand what it feels like to hate yourself, to not comprehend how or why you exist in certain groups of people let alone the world.”

Ethan held her gaze. No hint of the man she had come to know and admire shone through. “I was a fool to bring you here, and for that lapse in judgment, I will suffer.” He turned on his heel. “Get in the boat, woman. I cannot stomach the sight of you any longer.”

“No! You must listen to me.” Her knees wobbled as if she stood on shifting sand. “I refuse to leave after everything ... since we...” Out of her element, she stumbled over the words.

“Shared a night of mutual sex?” Ethan swung around. His eyes glittered with loathing. “Take refuge in flattery if you must. You are nothing more than any other prostitute on the island or any seedy port in the world. As for your refusal, may I remind you that I am captain of this ship, and my word is law?”

Tears stung Jacqueline’s eyes when he grabbed her arm. His fingers dug into her flesh, his skin cold, his eyes hooded. “We shared something special. I thought—”

“One more word and I will throw you from the ship.” He propelled her across the deck. “You must be proud of yourself, the only person in twenty years to know the true identity of the Black Thief of the Islands.” His hands grasped her waist and he dumped her into the dingy. It swung gently from wooden suspension beams.

“Ethan, please listen to me.” Jacqueline leaned over him, touched her hand to his cheek. “I will never reveal your name, to my father or to anyone. It will go to my grave.” She stifled a sob when he pulled away. “Your persona as a pirate represents freedom, bravery, and a dying way of life. I would never take that from you. It is what first captivated me about you. It is one of the things I admire.” For one brief moment, she thought she’d melted his reserve, changed his mind. She murmured a quick prayer.

He cocked his head as a mixture of hope and pain shadowed his face. Then, as if he argued with himself and lost, his shoulders drooped and his scowl deepened. “None of that matters now.” Ethan climbed into the boat and worked the ropes and pulleys which lowered the dingy into the sea. “Once broken, a soul cannot be healed, and I’m too much of a sinner to expect a miracle.”

“You do not believe that.” Tears made silent tracks along her cheeks to wet the fabric of her skirt as they fell. “The man I knew would never declare defeat unless there were no other options.” Her eyes followed his every moment as he bent to the oars. The little boat glided through the gentle seas but did nothing to calm Jacqueline’s rising hysteria at her imminent separation from him.

“There are no other options.” His voice sounded flat, dead. “My ship and I will leave Islamorada tomorrow. If the wind is with us, we’ll be well away from here before your father can rouse a ship of his own.”

“And if there is no wind?” She laced her fingers together to hide their shaking.

“Sully and I will set fire to the *Angel’s Fury*, and we will die with the ship rather than have the Navy claim us. After all, according to the American government, the only good pirate is a dead one.”

Her shoulders shook with the force of her sobs. Either way, she would lose the one man who brought joy into her life and love into her heart. If she had only refused to play her father's game of espionage. Now she would spend the rest of her days forever reminded of her part in the deception. Why had she not acted with her own free will and stayed in New York? Then she would never have come to the Keys, never met Ethan, never been hurt.

Never loved.

The rest of the trip to the island was a much different voyage than her first time out. Ethan kept his eyes focused straight ahead, over her left shoulder, and did not meet her gaze. Jacqueline spent her time staring at her bare feet, newly golden, as was the rest of her skin that the sun touched.

When the shoreline came into view, ever closer, her stomach lurched. She fought the urge to retch over the edge. Swallowing a few times, she leaned forward and clutched one of his hands to halt his rowing. "Ethan, please don't do this. I cannot leave. I belong with you, on your ship. I do not know how else to explain what I feel, but you must believe me."

"Why?"

"I love you." She gave him the simple truth, without guile, without compromise.

The craft pulled alongside an empty dock of tired, weathered wood. Ethan's stare was devoid of any emotion. "That is not a good enough reason."

Chapter Eight

Blue, pain-filled eyes brimming with tears haunted Ethan's mind as he rowed across the sea to the *Angel's Fury*. In the face of Jacqueline's obvious heartbreak, he nearly turned the dingy around to retrieve her, beg her forgiveness, and demand she stay with him. Fierce pride prevented him from doing any of that. She had deceived him with the intent to turn him over to the authorities. Her actions were motivated by something other than emotions or even passion. No matter that he desired it for himself, forgiveness did not come easy. A deep ache filled him, and he thrust all thought of her from his mind. Ethan tied the dingy to the ship's hull then swiftly climbed the rope ladder, welcoming the bite of the rope on his palms. At least it distracted him from contemplating the state of his heart.

Organized chaos met him as he climbed over the rail.

Crewmen hauled heavy barrels and crates down to the hold. Burlap sacks of grain, open crates and bags filled to the brim with oranges and other tropical fruit made their way onboard. His mouth watered in anticipation of eating such treats. They would dine well for several weeks before the need for dried and preserved food came about. From somewhere deep in the belly of his ship, he heard the squawk of chickens and occasional bleat of a goat. Fresh meat and eggs. They had found a great bounty on Islamorada.

Shouts rang down the length of the main deck as still other men scurried about, securing tools and coils of rope. A gentle breeze filled the foresail. Ethan's chest tightened. His throat grew raw with the effort of holding back anger that simmered just below the surface. He threw a gaze around him, nodding as men of all colors and nationalities whizzed by, intent to finish their tasks. The blows of hammers echoed as rough patches in the decking were repaired. Here and there, a young crewman toiled with a mop and pail of sudsy water. Ethan grimaced. Preparations for tomorrow's voyage were nearly complete. The sooner the ship left the area, the better off he would be. Recent events left a foul taste in his mouth, and a deep well of emptiness inside that he couldn't—or refused—to explain.

Bah! He had survived this long without her, and he would continue to do so. She was nothing but trouble. He had neither the time nor the patience for that sort of woman.

I do not need her.

Striding into his cabin, he slammed the door closed behind him then assessed the quarters. Though Jacqueline was gone, Ethan could still detect her presence in little ways. She'd arranged his comb, shaving implements, and a handsome wood and glass clock on the bureau top in a tidy manner. The bed was set to rights with the corners of the quilt just so. Scowling, he swept the contents away, satisfied when they crashed to the ground and hairpins flew in all directions.

Anger and sadness held him in the depths, but he didn't stop to analyze why. Spying the delicate English china teapot and two cups on the table, he strode over and threw the porcelain to the floor. Tiny shards of white and blue littered the planking and could have been the pieces of his heart. He refused to grieve over a woman. It was a silly, pointless exercise. His heart squeezed with agony when he saw one of her impractical, high-buttoned boots peeking out from beneath his reading chair. His head pounded as he

attempted to hold back the waterfall of memories.

It was impossible. Nothing again would be the same. How had the advent of one female stirred his life into such a state that he became convinced he could not live without her?

When he caught sight of the frilly, feminine handkerchief Sully had given her, Ethan snatched it from the edge of the bed and brought the fabric square to his nose. It smelled of the fancy soap she used and the more subtle scent of her skin. For the first time in many years, tears filled his eyes. He sank to his knees, regardless of the porcelain-littered floor, and rested his head on the bed.

Jacqueline. Her name whispered through his mind, laid his soul bare. Ethan clutched the handkerchief in his hand as if he could stem the rising wave of emotions she invoked within him. But like the inexorable power of the tide, they came anyway. Moisture soaked the quilt as he mourned for the one thing he never knew he wanted but found in a chance visit to a village saloon.

God, I miss her. Her enthusiasm for life, her moments of fierce bravado and determination, and her gentle goodness which balanced his black deeds, he yearned for all that reminded him of her. His stomach clenched. He could almost feel the softness of her curves in his hands, and smell the lavender scent of her hair. He let her go without fight, without argument, without explanation. And the hurt in her eyes would haunt him until his dying day.

Ethan wondered if he would be strong enough to survive after all.

* * * *

“Enjoy your last night on land. I expect you onboard at dawn’s light tomorrow.” He dropped a few gold coins into the remaining crewmember’s waiting palm, an equal part of the last cache of treasure they had plundered. A holiday bonus. “Go on. The longboat won’t wait forever. I’m sure parties and revelries beckon.”

“Aye, sir. Happy Christmas.” The burly man pulled at his knit cap then loped away in the direction of the last of the waiting men, anxious to join the night’s celebrations.

Ethan fought against the bitterness that welled within him then gave up the battle. Christmas—or any other day—would never be merry again. He trained his gaze on the horizon as purple clouds and pastel colors crowded the sky. A regal way to usher out Christmas Eve night and proclaim the advent of the Christ child. He brought a bottle of rum to his lips and swallowed a mouthful. In this season of miracles, where was an act of divine intervention in his life? Why did a company of the heavenly host not make an appearance to him, to guide him through life’s pitfalls, to counsel him regarding Jacqueline? He collapsed onto a coil of tightly wound rope and contemplated the approaching darkness above his ship.

When he was a young man still in school, the Christmas holiday on his family’s estate in Virginia always entailed house parties with relatives and friends, too much food and spirits, parlor games and outings to find evergreen trees and mistletoe. The evening revelry ended gathered around a pianoforte, singing traditional hymns and carols of the season. Cups of wassail warmed the body before long treks home through wind and snow. On special occasions, his uncles would pull the boys aside and regale them all with gruesome tales of sea monsters or stories of daring adventures of sailors the world over.

Ethan owed his love of the sea to those stories.

Although schooling came easy to him, he never forgot the stories, and struck out as an apprentice on his first merchant ship at eighteen. Shortly thereafter the ship had been attacked by a pirate vessel. For whatever reason, the captain saw promise in the young, gawky boy Ethan had been, and kept him on. Eventually, Ethan replaced the man, and sank into piracy as if he'd been born to the life.

He had been supremely lucky.

Until now. Another swig of rum brought thoughts of Jacqueline to his mind. For two and a half days, he possessed the rarest of all treasures, only to have it ripped from his grasp. He glowered at Ghost as the cat stealthily approached. The woman betrayed him, insinuated herself into his heart, wrenched that organ out of his chest in a gesture as callous as a mermaid's tale of old, to taunt him with it. And he had been blind-sided by her attention.

Setting the rum bottle on the deck, he fumbled in his pocket and withdrew his flute. In moments of extreme conflict of the mind, he turned to music to help him think. While the connection to his long ago past gave a strong pull, the endless promise of his future tugged harder. Why did he need to be reminded of that vast stretch of emptiness which would take years of hard work to forget? Never before had his expectations presented themselves as such a murky quagmire of confusion.

"So this is wot the love of a good woman has done to ye, then?"

"Bah." Ethan raised his eyes as his first mate settled himself on a barrel, his fiddle across his lap. "Love has nothing to do with my current dissatisfaction with life." He scratched Ghost behind the ears. Not even the gentle purr from the cat could raise a grin.

"Liar. I can see yer miserable without her."

"I've done many things in my life that can be termed hideous and vile. Affection for a woman has never been one of them." He smoothed a finger over the molded contours of the flute. "I do not intend to shackle myself to that sort of heartache." He took another swallow of the liquor and welcomed the burn.

"I should flog ye, but out of respect fer the Savior, I'll give ye pardon. I know wot it feels like to be laid bare by a female."

"When have you cared for religion or theology, Sully?" Ethan scratched at the few days' growth of stubble on his chin. "The closest you come to discussing that sort of thing is when I've had too much ale and babble about angels."

"Aye, this old sea dog grows sentimental at Christmas. And a man needs something to believe in. Ye keep yer angels, boy. Who knows when ye might see one?"

"I doubt even the seraphim can help me." Dark sadness swirled in his mind like a nameless sea monster intent on his destruction.

"Bitterness will blacken a soul faster than violence and hate."

"Spare me the lecture." He watched the stars as they made their appearance in the velvety sky. "My destiny lies with the sea, outrunning those who wish to kill us all, stealing what does not belong to me, committing acts of violence against innocent people. Tell me why I should not be bitter."

"Because of her."

Ethan scoffed. "Because of her we are in imminent danger of being shot out of the water. Regardless of how blessed this season is the Navy will not rest until we are dead. We have plundered these waters enough to have garnered their ill will." He lifted the bottle but at a dark look from his friend, replaced it on the deck. "Soon there will be

nowhere a pirate can hide.”

“Drop the excuses, boy. Ye love her.”

“You slander me. Love cannot be found in three days, and is impossible for a pirate no matter if he looks for it the whole of his lifetime.”

“Aye, and so was a virgin birth.” Sully plucked at the strings of his fiddle. The discordant notes floated on the gentle breeze then were swallowed by the slapping waves against the hull. “If an angel from God himself appeared before ye, ye’d accept it without question. Why not Jacqueline?”

The utterance of her name brought fresh stabs of pain to Ethan’s heart so strong he caught his breath in surprise. “Bringing her here was a mistake.” He wondered where she was, what she was doing, if she was with Alexander. The thought of the woman in another man’s arms caused rage to boil within his chest. He hurled the bottle of rum into the sea. “But letting her go will become my condemnation that only the sweetness of death can relieve.” He frowned as Ghost scampered across the deck in search of adventure, and suddenly envied the cat his carefree ways.

“Suicide is not yer answer.” Sully tucked the fiddle under his chin. “Forget her, then. Ye’re not worthy to grovel at her feet with that attitude. She can make ye respectable again, but ye don’t want that. Ye’d rather wallow.”

“Leave me.” He hated when Sully knew his thoughts.

“Not until I play for a spell. *Ye* can drown in pity but *I* want to celebrate the holiday.” Sully shot him a grin. “We sail tomorrow. Islamorada can take yer troubles and yer memories, but music can soothe yer soul.”

The haunting notes of a hymn filled the air. Ethan shivered though the night remained balmy. Strains of music resonated within him to blend with his angst. He ran his fingers through his hair. “Jacqueline took my soul.” The words were low, almost as if he now argued with himself instead of Sully. “I almost owned redemption while she stayed.”

“Aye. She loves ye even if ye can’t love yerself.”

That threw Ethan into a vortex of confusion. *Did* Jacqueline love him? Her confirmation of the fact earlier shook his insides. “How do I know if she tells the truth?”

“Ye have to put yer faith in her, and trust yer own instincts.” Sully snorted. “The easiest way to tell is to look into a woman’s eyes. If her lips say one thing, her eyes always tell the story of her heart. Happy is a man if they both agree.”

“She’s with her own people now.” Desolation attempted a stranglehold, but he shook it off. “I doubt she’ll want to remember me.” Ethan removed himself from the rope coils to pace the deck. “She will tell her father everything about me and this ship. What else can she do?”

“Ah, but wot if she keeps her promise?” A scraggly gray brow lifted. “Go after yer woman. Fight for her. The Black Thief of the Islands would never back down from a challenge.”

“Aye. That was before she gave me back a bit of humanity. Now I know the cold wind of uncertainty and it cuts to the bone.” Ethan turned to the man who resembled more of a father figure than a first mate. “She will reject me.”

“Then convince her with a stronger argument. Ye can be charming at times.”

“I doubt even that will be enough.”

“Search yer heart for the answer.” Sully ambled over and clapped Ethan on the

shoulder. "Forgiveness doesn't only last for the season."

"Perhaps, but neither does loneliness."

* * * *

The broken and battered clock chimed the midnight hour, regardless of its previous ill treatment. Ethan groaned. Christmas Day had arrived, and even the most miraculous of days could not take away the guilt that clawed his insides like a restless beast. He spent the evening hours in contemplation of the ceiling, reliving every detail of his time with Jacqueline. Finally, when the chatter from the crew quieted, Ethan swung his legs over the edge of the bed, determined.

At the first light of dawn, they would pull up anchor and leave the Keys behind. Never again would the *Angel's Fury* dock at Islamorada. *This island holds too many memories I do not wish to remember.* He wondered if there would be any place in the free world where he could go to forget.

He pulled on his boots then yanked open the door, but upon stepping on the deck another round of depression sucked him in like quicksand. There was no wind to speak of. The foresail hung limply on its mast. A choked calm settled upon the ship, blanketed by the star-sprinkled darkness. "Damn." They were effectively stranded unless the weather changed.

"Not wot ye had in mind?"

Ethan swung around to stare at Sully. "Fate has conspired against us."

"Not us, boy. Ye are the one she hates." A grin parted his lips to reveal a golden front tooth. "Half the men are onboard now. The other half will arrive at dawn. Wot do ye propose to do if the wind still be absent?"

"I have no idea."

A cackle of laughter escaped the first mate. "It would seem the angels ye put yer hope in have decided to hear yer confession at sea today." He clapped Ethan on the shoulder. "Ye look as bad as a dead corpse, cap'n. Get some rest, unless yer dreams be haunted by a blue-eyed vixen."

"One way or the other, we *will* shove off. I have no desire to stay." He glared at Sully's retreating back. "My mind will remain firm on this issue."

"Aye, and I'll be mistaken fer Father Christmas this year."

With a heavy sigh, Ethan returned to his cabin to wait on the dawn in the same foul temper of the previous day.

Chapter Nine

“You may ask a thousand times and I will repeat the same answer.” Jacqueline glared at her father, Commodore Samuel Massey. “His name and location are my secret alone. You only want to kill him.”

“Of course I do!” The Commodore brought his fist crashing onto the tabletop, rattling the dishes and crystal. “I am still your father and have your best wishes in mind. I will avenge your ruination myself.”

“Finally, some responsibility on your part. If you had not insisted I spy for you, I would never have met the man to begin with.” Her lips quivered as she studied her father. Six feet of lean strength, the Commodore’s face wore more lines than a needlework sampler. Thick black hair shot liberally with gray, bushy eyebrows, and a strong Roman nose gave him an appearance of perpetual anger, and on occasion his wrath could provoke God’s own vengeance.

“What would lead you to believe I was ruined? Just because I spent nearly three days in the company of a man does not mean the supposed worst has happened.” She willed her cheeks not to heat at the remembered pleasures she and Ethan shared. To do so would bring a fresh torrent of tears, and she had little time for that. Jacqueline pushed a bit of ham steak around her plate. Three days ago she would have given her right arm for proper food. Now, the smell of the breakfast fare made her stomach protest. She had no desire to eat when her future was still undecided.

“I know the look of a woman who has been with a man in that way.” The Commodore’s voice softened to a low growl as he speared a piece of pineapple. “Your mother looked very much the same when we ... ah, ahem.” His eyes darted to the door of the breakfast room.

Jacqueline followed his gaze. Her heart sank to see Alexander standing there, a mixture of disbelief and anger on his face, his left arm in a sling fashioned from a length of white cloth. “Good morning, Alexander, and happy Christmas.” While she meant the greeting, her heart did not reflect the same. The only man she wished to pass the holiday with had already set sail for unknown ports. There was every possibility she would never see him again. Her chin trembled. “I trust your arm is feeling better?”

“Commodore, Jacqueline.” Alexander’s reply was curt as he nodded to them both then took his customary seat at the table across from Jacqueline. “My arm grows stronger every day.” He looked at the Commodore. “Did she give you a name?”

Before her father could reply, Jacqueline tossed down her fork. It clattered onto her plate then came to a rest on the white lace tablecloth. “*She* has a name, and if you wish to converse on this subject, you may ask your questions directly to me.”

“Fine.” He poured a cup of tea, his storm-gray eyes flashing. “How is it that you spent nearly three days with the Black Thief of the Islands then you suddenly reappear on the beach as if nothing happened? You looked a mess, dirty, unkempt, and shoeless. What are we supposed to think? His appetite for women is renown, and who can say what other depravity he is capable of.”

“He is not depraved, but he *is* very much misunderstood.” A shrug lifted her shoulders. “What you think makes no difference to me.” She dabbed at her lips with a

linen napkin. “Nothing does.” Her whispered words quavered as she blinked when tears threatened. She remembered the cold, hardness of Ethan’s voice when he put her out of the dingy.

“My God, Jacqueline, you let the man defile you, touch you, do unspeakable things to your body.” Alexander stood so quickly his chair toppled to the floor. “And you are not ashamed or even upset. At least exhibit some sort of repentance.”

Repentance! She blinked at Alexander. The only redemption she could find was in Ethan. She opened her eyes wide. She did not belong with these people.

“So, it is true, then?” Commodore Massey’s voice rose. “Tell me the name of the cur that dared put his hands on my daughter.” Angry red splotches spread over his face.

“Yes, it’s true, but you will never know his name.”

Her father’s hands curled into fists. “How could you do that to yourself? You are disgraced, and your future is destroyed.”

“Why should I care for that now? My life is over, either way.” She rose to her feet. “I do not regret anything I have done. You will never understand how I feel. The two of you have no interest in me as a person.”

“No more of this talk, daughter. You will ruin the meal.” The Commodore frowned.

She let out an exasperated breath. “Father, you want me to spy for you. Do you understand how many men I was responsible for sending to their doom? I can no longer live with that knowledge.” Anger coated her words. Jacqueline’s chest heaved as she turned to Alexander. “And you, Alexander, desire me only to worm your way into my father’s good graces, a shortcut to promotions within the Navy. Neither one of you has asked *me* what I want from life. Do you know what will make *me* happy? Do you care that *my* heart is broken?” When her breath hitched, she pressed knuckles to her mouth, resisting the urge to bite down in frustration.

Her father started to sputter and Alexander held up a hand. “Sir, if you will allow it, I wish to speak with Jacqueline alone.” A significant look passed between the two.

“Very well. In the meantime, I will have the *Fair Weather* readied for pursuit. She’s the lightest of the three we have around the island. Bring Jacqueline with you when you finish. If she caught him once, we can use her again.”

As her father strode from the room, Jacqueline stared at Alexander. “I am done with your game, and I will not apologize.” Her heart ached for Ethan’s dire circumstances. She crossed her arms over her breasts to hide her budding nipples. Just the remembrance of the time spent in the pirate’s arms caused her body to react. Her throat constricted with unshed tears, and she pushed them down. She could not afford to let Alexander see her distress.

“I did not expect you to be remorseful. You have been distant and preoccupied for months now, here with me physically but mentally millions of miles away. This debacle with the pirate has merely twisted your mind further. While I am well aware I cannot effect your happiness, I will make my offer just the same.” He withdrew a small object from his jacket pocket. “This was my grandmother’s engagement ring. I’d like it to be yours.” He held up a silver band encrusted with dark red rubies. “I am willing to overlook your indiscretion, but in turn you will need to give me his name. I cannot let him slip away unpunished.”

“A chance of a respectful marriage for my confession and his betrayal? And what kind of a life would I be expected to lead then? How many times will you tell me you

forgive what I have done before I go mad?” Jacqueline scoffed. “That is hardly a fair trade. What do I gain from that arrangement?”

“I will let the pirate live out his days in prison instead of executing him upon capture. At least then you can be comforted he will remain alive.” His jaw worked as if he debated with himself. “If I feel generous, I will let you visit him once a year, with a guard of course.”

She gasped. “No prison. Let him and his crew sail away from here.” Jacqueline wiped her sweaty palms on the front of her green velvet dress with embroidered petticoats of the finest silk—her only concession to the holiday. “Locked up, he will go out of his mind. He does not deserve such a fate.”

“He *deserves* torture then a slow, lingering death.”

“No.” She rubbed a hand over her eyes. “I betrayed him once. I refuse to do it again.” Jacqueline stared at Alexander as his fingers closed around the ring. “I cannot marry you, but you already guessed that. We would never suit. I value my freedom too much to make you a proper wife.”

He nodded. “You have changed, Jackie. You are beyond my reach.”

“I feel ... reborn somehow. As if I left my former self behind and have embraced the woman I have always been destined to become. Love is a very powerful emotion.”

“How can you know love in the span of a few days?”

A smile parted her lips. “I have asked myself that question, and the answer is the same. I have no answer. The feeling happened without conscious knowledge or thought, and it is almost spiritual in its fierceness.”

Alexander closed the distance between them to stroke her cheek with a finger. “I envy you the peace you have attained. I wish I could find the same thing.”

“Thank you.” His easy acceptance of her refusal shocked her. “Ethan is ... unexpected.” Flutters danced through her stomach when she spoke his name out loud.

“So, his name is Ethan? Would it be too much to hope that you would tell me his surname?” Alexander dropped his hand to his side. “I cannot have your father grant him a pardon without it.”

“I do not trust you.” She narrowed her eyes. “Why would you suddenly change your mind and wish to help his cause?” Cold waves of apprehension skittered down her spine. “Ever since I have known you, you have hated pirates.”

“What can I say?” He shrugged. “It is Christmas, after all. Do you really want his demise on your conscience at this time?”

For one long moment, Jacqueline teetered on the edge of indecision. Would it harm Ethan’s cause to give up his name if Alexander did indeed mean to grant him a pardon? If the pirate did not want her, the least she could do was ensure he could pass through Navy patrolled waters unharmed. Her chest tightened with grief. But if he were to be captured, she could at least have one more moment with him. Her thoughts chased around her mind like hungry tigers.

It was an impossible road, and one she knew too well. Ethan would rather die than be caged, and she sympathized with his plight. If his salvation rested in her hands, she would gladly give it. At least he would be free. Her life would be empty without him, but he could continue to do what he loved.

Jacqueline met Alexander’s expectant gaze, then heaved a sigh. “His name is Ethan Williams. His ship, the *Angel’s Fury*, is anchored off the far side of Islamorada in the

shallows, but he planned to leave the area early this morning. I doubt you can catch him.” She laid a hand on Alexander’s good arm. “Thank you so much for this kindness.”

“Naïve girl, there was no wind at dawn. He could not have gotten far.” With a quickness that belied his infirmity, Alexander grabbed her wrist in an iron grip. “I knew all along who he was, I merely wanted you say it. Your father’s ship will blow your lover to bits, and I want you to witness his demise as punishment for your treachery.”

Her heart pounded as fear chilled her skin. “Let me go.” She attempted to tug free, but he merely tightened his hold. “How dare you double cross me? You are no better than the pirates you despise.”

Alexander’s face twisted with hatred. “How dare *you* debase yourself with a pirate but turn down a respectable suit from me? I’ll be a laughing stock among my men.” He dragged her toward the door. “I will not have that. Once Captain Williams and his crew sink to the bottom of the sea, you and I will be wed, and you can spend the remainder of your life thanking *me* for not killing you as well.”

Tears wetted her cheeks as she had no choice but to follow him from the house. *What have I done?*

* * * *

Jacqueline stood on the gun deck of the *Fair Weather*, watching as Alexander prowled among the twelve cannons. Compared to Ethan’s ship, the Navy vessel appeared almost sterile in design. Sleek and sophisticated, the schooner could navigate the shallows as well as Ethan’s. She bit her bottom lip, praying the *Angel’s Fury* had already left its port, imploring the heavens to grant him safe passage.

“Stand ready, men. We are chasing pirates today.” Alexander’s voice rang loud and strong as he paced between the lines of cannons. “Ready the guns. We will use them all.” He swung around to face her. “Wait above deck. Maybe you can buy yourself enough time to tell your lover goodbye.”

“I hope he gets off a round of shots first.” Jacqueline stormed up the ladder of the hatch to emerge onto the main deck in the warm sunshine. They had been underway for an hour. A stiff breeze blew in from the southwest to fill the sails and propel the ship through the water at record speed. Deep down, she knew Ethan would have no chance against the Navy craft. Alexander was too determined, and very annoyed.

Moving to the smooth wooden rail, she gazed out over the choppy water. How could she live with the knowledge that his death would be on her hands? Tears clogged her throat. She swallowed them, unwilling to use energy to shed them in full view of the crew. Jacqueline considered if drowning was very painful. Perhaps if she and Ethan died together, they stood a better chance of meeting in the afterlife. Sunlight sparkling off the turquoise waves distracted her from thoughts of death. She had to fix the situation, make it right.

“Pirate ship!” The warning cry split the air. “Off the forward port bow!”

Her heart hammered, and Jacqueline glanced up at the top mast where a crewmember hung on the rigging. *Was it Ethan’s?* She strained her eyes but the ship was still too far away to determine anything.

“Pull with everything you have, Mr. Beesom,” Alexander ordered his first mate as he raced up the ladder and onto the main deck.

“How can you live with yourself?” She glared as he came near. “Just let him go.” As

she watched, a muscle twitched in his jaw, and his eyes gleamed with a fanatical light. “He is one of many pirates in the area. Why must you persecute him?”

“This has now become a personal vendetta. He took something of mine, so I will take something of his. It happens to be his life. The added bonus of being your husband makes the pot sweeter.”

Cold fear coated her stomach to mix with disgust. “May God have mercy on your soul, Alexander. He will go down fighting.” She held out her hand. “Give me your spyglass.”

He did as she asked. “I do not know which I want to watch more, his ship sink or your face while it happens.” His grin was a twisted mask of hate and anticipation.

“Consider it a wedding gift, and the first of many pirate deaths in the coming years. It would never have been possible without your help.”

“Bastard.” Jacqueline spat at his feet then climbed on the rail. Wrapping an arm through the thick, braided rope, she extended the brass spyglass and trained it on the distant ship. She would recognize the *Angel’s Fury* anywhere, even if she hadn’t seen the carved masthead. Sully manned the wheel while Ethan stood nearby, a booted foot propped on the rail, a scowl on his face as he looked through a spyglass of his own.

“Ethan.” As she gazed upon his endearing face, her stomach quaked—not in fear but with love. She lowered the glass in order to grasp the rope as a strong gust of wind buffeted her skirts about her legs. Yes, she admitted it to herself now. She loved the pirate with every particle of her being. He was the reason the blood pumped through her veins, the force that made her hope for the future, yearn for so much more than what Alexander could give her.

One more look. Raising the spyglass, she focused on the ship again then nearly dropped the instrument. Ethan stared directly at her, but no grin graced his lips, no light of recognition lit his melting brown eyes, his stubble-covered jaw set at a determined angle. If she had to put name to the emotion that held him in its grip, it would be fear. He gestured and one of the crewmembers hoisted a black flag to the top of the main mast. As it unfurled, bile rose in her throat when she saw a white skull and crossbones emblazoned against the blackness. “My God.”

In a daze, she handed the spyglass to Alexander. “They mean to fight until all of us or all of them are dead.”

“Excellent. Perfect day for a skirmish.”

The breeze that had been so gay and playful before changed directions. Now it came in from the north at an angry, brisk pace. It clawed at her skirts and ripped the pins from her hair to unfurl the tresses about her shoulders. Fat, gray clouds rolled across the sky, blocking out the cerulean blue of earlier, and the heated temperature dropped, chilled with a moist mist. Jacqueline inhaled deep. “We’re heading into a storm.” She twined her other hand through the rope, refusing to leave the rail when Alexander ordered her to do so. The sails snapped in the wind and the rigging clanged and thumped against the masts. Navy men shouted orders and encouragement, while the *Fair Weather* sliced effortlessly through the waves. The powerful pull of the rudder guided the ship closer to the *Angel’s Fury* as the hull ate up the length as if the task were child’s play.

Jacqueline kept her gaze trained to the dark outline of the ship ahead, a prayer of safety and forgiveness on her lips like a litany. Her stomach pitched with the choppy sea. “At least the weather will hinder your progress.” She spared a glance at Alexander. “He

may yet escape.”

“No matter how far your beloved goes, I will follow him, even to the gates of Hell itself.” He fingered the pistol at his side. “He will not have you.”

“Perhaps he will never know my body again, but my soul is his alone. That is something you will never understand.” Despite her fear for Ethan’s safety, anticipation tickled her insides as the ship drew nearer. No matter the outcome of the imminent fight, she would throw herself on the mercy of Ethan’s good humor. She would convince him they belonged together, and if that meant a few moments as the *Angel’s Fury* was being bombarded by cannon fire, then so be it. She loved him. That was all she needed.

A few errant raindrops splashed onto her cheeks. Jacqueline wiped them away but kept her eyes on the fluttering pirate flag. Soon, now. They were close. Alexander’s lighter ship zipped through the sea with the force and skill of a water creature, as if it, too, looked forward to a fight. She could recognize the features of the various crewmen who lined the rail of the *Angel’s Fury*. All were dedicated to their captain, and all would defend him with their last breath. She gasped, the sound torn from her throat by the wind. About one hundred feet separated the vessels now. Cannon fire would decide their fate.

“Ethan.” His name blended with her constant prayer, so soft only she and Alexander could hear. “He’s here.” She could feel his presence as if he stood right in front of her. She saw Alexander draw his pistol, its metallic barrel ugly and cold. Bile rose into her throat and she quickly swallowed it down. “Please, do not shoot him.”

“Get into the captain’s quarters, Jacqueline, and wait for me there. This is no place for a woman.” He cocked the pistol. The whip of the wind dwarfed the sound .

“I thought you previously ordered me to watch him die.” She hopped down from the rail and read doubt in his eyes. It gave her hope and made her heart soar. “You are afraid he will win, and once more, the name of the Navy will be sullied by the cunningness of pirates.”

“Whether I declare victory today or not, eventually the American government will know success. The sea rats will be overcome and wiped out.” He leveled the pistol as the ship drew as close as fifty feet. “It’s time to usher in a new era.”

“No!” Jacqueline threw her weight against him, anything to distract the man from his deadly intentions. He lost his footing and dropped the gun in surprise. It skittered away, twirling on the freshly-scrubbed planks. “Reverse your orders. Tell the crew not to fire the cannons. Please do this one last thing for me.” She clutched his arm, stared into the impassive mask of his face, “For the sake of the holiday, Alexander.” She hated her blatant groveling tone, but she was beyond civilized conversation. “Take pity on him.”
Let him live!

“Your attachment to him is pathetic, Jacqueline. Leave me.” He shook off her arm. “This does not concern you any longer. Now, get inside.”

She stumbled as he shoved her. Her foot caught in a coil of rope and she fell hard on her backside. Tears stung her eyes as tendrils of pain jarred her spine, but she scrambled to her feet. “If you ever lay a hand on me again, I *will* kill you myself before the pirate can get off a shot.”

“I look forward to your promise. At least then you will show some spark of interest in our relationship.” He threw her a look, so full of distaste that it resonated deep in her chest.

“Bastard. Death will be too good for you.” She focused on the *Angel’s Fury*. “Good

luck, Ethan.” The wind swallowed her words, but she hoped he could hear her whispered plea.

Chapter Ten

“Bring her about, Sully.” Ethan shouted the order as he strode to the hatch. “Going below.” He vaulted to the gun deck and grimly assessed the six men that manned the cannons. He had the damn Navy after him, and to further complicate the issue, Jacqueline was aboard the ship. When he saw her in his spyglass, his heart almost stopped. What the hell was Alexander thinking? Her life was in danger on that ship. It couldn’t be helped. Ethan had no choice but to go ahead with his plan to fire on the enemy vessel.

If he backed down now, not only would he lose face in front of his crew, but once the floodgate of emotions opened, he was afraid of what he might say—and that terrified him more than the upcoming battle. Jacqueline held some invisible power over him, reduced him to little more than a shaking bag of bones with one look, and he was not ready to give in—not yet.

The sharp scent of gunpowder hung heavy in the air and recalled his mind to his task. Ethan stepped around small piles of black cannon balls. “Wait for my signal, men. As soon as the first rounds are fired, reload as fast as you can.” Firing the cannons was a last resort since they could easily backfire or blow a hole in his ship. Most times, the threat of the cannons was enough to entice surrender. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead. He removed his tattered hat and wiped at the moisture. This would be the most difficult fight he had encountered. He hoped he would not survive the battle, for if he killed Jacqueline, his life would be over anyway. Ethan replaced his hat and took a deep breath. “Do not fire until I give the word.” He clapped the shoulder of the nearest crewmember then clambered up the ladder to join Sully.

Ethan gripped the rail until his knuckles turned white as a persistent rain fell around him. “Steady, Sully. We are in range, but I want a better look.” He strode to the forecastle deck where the first mate was located. “We need to make the shots count. Quick and painless.” *Please God, let the ship sink fast and without incident.* Drowning was not an enviable death.

“Wind’s stiff right now, sir. Keepin’ ‘er will be a challenge.” He fought the wheel as he turned it beneath his hands. “Firin’ the cannons is folly.”

“Perhaps, but we’ve no other choice.”

“Take yer woman and leave these seas. The fight is between ye and her, not the Navy.”

“I settled this already.” He refused to look at his friend.

“Aye, but I’d bet a year’s pay she has not.”

Ethan ignored the man. He moved back across the main deck, paused at the railing, and peered through the rain at the oncoming ship. “Bring the cannons into position. Get ready to fire, men!” He gestured to one of the crew. The man scurried into the hatch to relay orders on the gun deck.

Anticipation made his nerve endings dance and his heart pound. As before any battle, he closed his eyes and murmured a silent plea to his guardian angel to keep him and his men safe. By the time Ethan opened them again, the *Fair Weather* drew alongside the *Angel’s Fury* with silent stealth. Navy men lined the deck, expressions of eagerness on their faces, all identical in their dark, somber uniforms. Drawing fortifying air into his

lungs, he jumped onto the rail, holding onto a rope for balance.

“Steady men. Hold your positions.”

Shouts from the Navy vessel rang out as the deck swarmed with frenzied activity. His own ship buzzed with movement. Crates rolled across the worn planks, crewmen called to each other as they scrambled into position, daggers and pistols drawn. Wind battered the wet sails, the fluttering muffled to dull thuds from the rain. This was what he loved most about sailing—when the decks were full of life and sound. Slowly, the *Angel’s Fury* slid into the perfect position. Mere ten or so feet now separated the ships.

The captain sneered from the rail of his ship. “By the governance and power of the American Navy, I’m officially taking control of your ship, pirate. Stand aside.”

“I respectfully refuse.” Ethan stared through the gray veil of the rain at the man who’d spoken. He recognized the man he had shot in the bar a few nights past—Alexander. The ships were close enough to make out every line of anger on the man’s face. “If I were you, I would seriously consider defending your ship, sir. The *Angel’s Fury* has taken on larger opponents and won. It is *you* who will be boarded.” He cracked the knuckles of his free hand as he waited.

“Last chance to surrender, Black Thief of the Islands, or should I say Ethan Williams.”

Cold dread snaked through his gut when he heard his name. After all her reassurances and pretty words, the damn woman had revealed his identity. He hardened his heart against all remaining soft thoughts of Jacqueline. She had lied to him twice, and as far as he was concerned, she could die with the others. Betrayal seemed to be his lot in life.

The ship lurched sharply away from the *Fair Weather* so he was obliged to raise his voice.

“The Black Thief of the Islands has never surrendered before. I do not intend to do so now.” He tightened his grip on the rope, his body tense, his nerves strung as taut as the bowstrings on Sully’s fiddle. Ethan felt rather than saw a band of men press around him in a semi-circle. His loyal friends and crew. His family. “Patience men. A few minutes more and you can spill all the blood you want. We’ll plunder what remains then burn the ship. No survivors.”

“But cap’n, what ‘bout Miss M—”

He cut the protest short. “No. Survivors.” He didn’t care anymore.

“If I were you, pirate, I would reconsider. I have a bartering tool you’ll want to see.” Mirthless laughter from the Navy vessel recalled Ethan’s attention to his rival.

Before Ethan could reply, Alexander reached behind two of his men and drug Jacqueline forward. His heart lurched at the sight of her bedraggled appearance. The disillusionment regarding the woman fell away and left the raw wounds of his need behind. In that moment, he forgave the lies. He could not see her at the mercy of the Navy man for another moment. She needed to be at his side, her rightful place.

“Jacqueline.”

“Forfeit to me, and the lady will live. Fight, and I will slit her throat myself. Your choice.” He shoved her to the rail and her hair tumbled around her shoulders.

She stumbled then fell against the wood. Tears filled her expressive blue eyes. Red splotches marred the beauty of her pale face, and Ethan’s chest tightened with anger—from Alexander’s treatment or his own feelings he could not say. *The man would die for*

the rough handling.

He had a whole ship full of lives he felt a responsibility to—including hers. He vowed to never leave her again, but he would have to resort to his best trickery to save them all. A shrug lifted his shoulders. “It matters not to me. I have no more use for the woman.” He steeled himself against the hurt on her face but it was the only way. “Sully, swing us close enough to fire the chain shot.” Ethan grinned when Alexander’s face blanched. “Let’s take down their sails first, men.” He made a mocking bow from the waist then saluted the Navy man.

A rowdy cheer sounded behind him to fuel Ethan’s instincts. He jumped from the railing and drew the pistol from his belt. Another glance toward the deck of the *Fair Weather* chilled his blood. The weapon dropped from his suddenly lifeless fingers to thump against the deck. A reverent hush fell over his crew, and Ethan continued to gaze at the other ship.

The angel from his masthead stood on the rail with a coil of rope wrapped around one wrist.

He blinked to clear his vision. In reality, the apparition was Jacqueline, but the resemblance was strong enough that anyone could make the comparison. The rain died down enough to make the identification possible. Wind clawed at her long hair, whipped it into caramel ribbons and pulled at her green dress. Ruffled lace petticoats frothed around her stocking-clad legs. But what caught Ethan’s attention and made his throat go dry was the vengeful scowl on her lovely face and the blue lightning in her eyes.

My God! She was an angel’s fury personified, alternately beautiful and terrifying all at once. *Heaven save me from her anger.*

“Get down, Jacqueline, before you hurt yourself.” He lifted a hand to shade his eyes as the sun peeked out from behind a cloud to gild her frame. “Please.”

“No. You and I have unfinished business. I refuse to die as you men fight like children without discussing a few things with you first.”

With some level of fascination, Ethan watched as Alexander lunged for her, but came away empty handed. Jacqueline swung from the deck of the *Fair Weather*, dangled in the empty space between the two ships for a few agonizing seconds from the rope in her hands, and then crashed into his chest. They hit the deck in a tangle of limbs. Pain exploded in the back of his skull while his lungs struggled under the sudden weight.

“Captain Williams, the *Fair Weather* is movin’ close with cannons drawn.”

A wheeze was Ethan’s only answer to Sully’s warning. A round of chuckles erupted from the crew that circled around him. With one glare from him, they scattered in all directions. Shouts and orders from the Navy ship filled the air. Then, an explosion of cannon fire split the brief period of deafening quiet. He steeled himself for the impact. A large splash in the water near his ship told him the Navy vessel had missed. *Thank God.*

Finally he drew enough breath into his chest to form words again. “Woman, get off.” Ethan blinked up at the clouds before focusing on the object of his annoyance.

“Not until we talk.” Her breathing was ragged and erratic, her breasts strained against the low neckline of her gown.

“We have nothing to say to each other.” In spite of his words, Ethan’s groin hardened when she squirmed against him. No matter they were in the midst of a crisis, his body cried out for hers.

“We do.” She grinned as she straddled his waist and her skirts flowed around them.

“It is your fault we are in this mess to begin with. You rejected me and sent me to that Navy infested hell.”

“Because you lied to me about being associated with that same branch of maritime law.”

“The lie was necessary since you are so sensitive about your status as a philanthropic pirate with a soul you swear you cannot own.”

“Fine.” Ethan groaned and laid his pounding head on the deck. “What do you want from me?”

“I can help you dispose of Alexander.” The grin she bestowed upon him was no less gruesome than he’d seen on the faces of his crew. Chills raced down his spine.

“How?”

She lifted an eyebrow. “I need your promise you will not lock me in your cabin.”

“Damn.” He glanced on her lips then looked away. “I promise, now remove yourself from my person before your beloved blows apart my ship.” As the words left his mouth, another cannon roared and this time wood splintered from the direction of the quarter deck. “Bloody hell, woman, I need to attend to my ship!”

“Alexander is nothing but a pompous ass who deserves anything you give him.” Jacqueline struggled to her feet but her gaze never left his. “There is only one man I want in my bed.” She smirked. “We will discuss *that* at a later time.”

The world as he knew it ceased to exist, and in its place grew a land of molten hot desire that left his knees weak and his gut clench. “Help me with nautical issues then we will talk.” Ethan heaved himself into a standing position. “Your plans, madam.” He grinned then bent to recover his wayward hat. For the first time in two days, he looked forward to the future.

“Move one of the cannons to the forecandle deck. Be very sure it is only loaded with chain shot. I want to take down his main mast if we can, but I will settle for any of the others.”

He nodded. A tiny part of his brain protested taking order from a mere woman, but he throttled it before he spoke the doubt aloud. “Anything else?” He rapped his hat on his head, waiting.

“Bring another cannon to me. No cannon balls, only burning embers from Sully’s cook stove. As extra insurance, we will burn his sails, unless they are too wet. Also, I require a man to sneak onto the *Fair Weather* to disable the rudder. That is a crucial part of my plan. Alexander will be stranded in the sea, and we will be able to sail away.”

“Brilliant.” His heart lifted with love. “Jacqueline—”

She planted her fisted hands on her hips. “Now! We do not have all day!”

He never wanted her more than he did in that moment. The authority she exuded buoyed his spirit. “Aye, lass.” Excitement spurred his steps as he grabbed two random crewmen on his way down the hatch. “Boys, we’re in for more than choppy seas with this one.” Ethan met the eyes of each one of his crew on the gun deck. “Put your superstitions aside, men. Follow whatever order she gives. That woman will save us all if we let her.”

* * * *

“Roll it into position, just here.” Jacqueline stepped out of the way as two sweaty men pushed the soot-streaked black cannon onto the main deck. She threw a glance to Sully. “Get her as steady as you can. I have only one shot.”

“Aye, ma’am. Doin’ my best.”

She gestured to the *Fair Weather*, stumbled slightly when the ship pitched. “On my mark, crewman.” She held her bottom lip between her teeth. Ethan had volunteered to swing aboard once the cannon fire distracted Alexander’s crew. He stood nearby at the rail. A grappling hook dangled from his hands. “Come back to me, Ethan. I cannot live without you.”

“Yer wish is me command, lady pirate.” He winked and leaned close.

“Please, do not jest.” Tickles of pleasure skimmed through her stomach at his nearness. “I—” Her words were cut off when he pressed his lips to hers.

His dark gaze held her own. “I will strive for quickness and stealth.”

Another nod, but her throat closed at the concern mirrored on his face. She looked away and tapped the cannon. “Now, crewman.” She covered her ears with her hands as the fuse was lit and the cannon’s contents exploded out of the barrel. Red-glowing coals hurtled from the *Angel’s Fury* to be caught by the main and fore sails of the *Fair Weather*. They immediately smoldered with a slow, smoke-filled fire.

“Excellent shot. Hopefully, the wetness won’t be a hindrance.” She touched the man’s arm, smiling in amusement when he reddened and slunk away. Jacqueline looked at the pirate captain. “Godspeed, Ethan.” Before she could add more words, he heaved the grappling hook across the chasm between ships. The metal claw attached to the rail of the *Fair Weather* with a heavy thump. She watched Ethan as another man tied his end to the main mast. Within seconds, the pirate and his compatriot shimmied on the rope to blend with the melee on the deck. Clouds of acrid black smoke hung about the decking like an evil presence.

Regardless of the bravery that gripped her, Jacqueline emitted a squeak of alarm when grappling hooks from Alexander’s ship flew over and attached to the railing.

“Sully, turn the wheel hard about. We need to move as fast as we can!”

“I’ll sure try, ma’am.”

She glanced at the first mate as he and another man wrestled the wheel, fighting against it and the wind. Jacqueline ran the length of the main deck to skid to a halt as two more hooks clattered against the slick deck. She pitched them into the sea before they were pulled taut. What could she do about the ones already affixed? As if the heavens answered her question, the *Angel’s Fury* sliced away when the wind gusted in their direction. The men who clung to the ropes hung suspended. The ropes frayed, quivered and finally broke apart under the force of the separating ships. The men fell into the churning sea. The sails billowed, and the Jolly Roger snapped.

Jacqueline breathed in deep and sighed in contentment. The sea was where she belonged, and always had.

A deep boom from the fore-castle deck commanded her attention. A puff of white smoke circled that end of the ship until she could no longer see Sully. The second cannon. She grinned. The sound caused her blood to race and shivers prickled her skin.

“Well done boys!” At the last moment, she refrained from jumping up and down in her glee as the main mast of Alexander’s ship groaned and swayed. “Fall, damn you.” Even though the words were whispered, the crewmember nearest to her snickered in response. Perhaps her prayer worked or the mast gave in to the struggle with the breeze. Whatever happened, a tremendous groan rent the air. The thick, wooden mast swayed then snapped in the middle. It fell like a drunken colossus in a flutter of smoke and

burning embers.

This time, Jacqueline cheered and threw her arms around the nearest crewman, much to his chagrin. She released him when he growled, but the smile that stretched her lips wouldn't be denied. "How wonderful to be a pirate, Sully!"

"Truer words, Miss, have ne'er been spoken." He shouted back and saluted her. "Best see that the cap'n and Burt are dragged up. The wind's movin' us faster than expected."

With a stifled cry, Jacqueline ran the length of the main deck, ignoring the chaos on Alexander's ship. She would give practically anything to see the look on his face when the rudder stopped working. Nothing would pry her from Ethan's side again. Not even petty revenge. Stumbling onto the quarterdeck near the captain's cabin, she poked her head over the side. Several empty seconds went by before a painful lump settled in her throat at the sight of two dark heads bobbing in the water. She fumbled with a coil of rope at her feet.

"Ma'am, let me." A burly crewman nudged her gently out of the way and removed the rope from her hands. When she started to protest, he grinned, and a mouthful of yellowed, rotten teeth greeted her. "I got more muscles."

"Then by all means, carry on."

* * * *

"You, in my cabin, now." Ethan grabbed Jacqueline's wrist as soon as he was hauled aboard and flung the drenched hair from his face. He strode across the deck, ignored the squelching sound of his wet boots, and dragged the maddening woman behind him. Never had he encountered a female so stubborn, argumentative, charming, or beautiful before, and he hoped he never did so again. Loving one such woman in a lifetime was enough.

"Ethan, you are sopping wet. I want to hear about your adventure." She plucked at his fingers, but he held her fast. "Or at least dry yourself."

As soon as he pulled her into his quarters, he slammed the door shut and threw the lock. "No more words." No matter that he was wet and exhausted, Ethan crushed her in his arms and claimed her mouth. Salt and something sweet he couldn't identify met his questing tongue as she opened for his advances. Her lips were soft and yielding, and he drank from her goodness as if she were the Holy Grail, barely cognizant of her hands fumbling at his belt. It fell to the floor after a sharp tug. Her boldness excited him into a frenzy as lust encouraged his erection, but it was the warmth that swelled his insides that gave him pause. "Jacqueline, wait."

"I have waited too long already."

"Bloody hell." Ethan's arousal strained painfully against his pants as she rubbed her fingers over him, stroking him through the wet fabric. His fingers shook so bad that he could not work the hooks on her gown.

"No time." Her hands went under his damp shirt, hot enough to heat his skin. "Drop your pants."

"But—" His mind reeled when she hitched her skirts up and removed her fancy, lace-trimmed drawers, taking the garters and stockings with them. "We should ... ah, damn." Ethan gaped at her when she perched on the side of his bed and spread her legs. Her curl-shrouded mound beckoned and her sweet scent drew him forward.

Boots and trousers were shucked off in record time. “Since I made the mistake of letting you go, I have thought of nothing else but burying myself in your goodness.” He moved to the edge of the bed opened her legs wider to look his fill at her pink folds that he imagined were wet and waiting for him. “Do not blame me if your cries reach the heavens this day.”

“Still the braggart.” She lifted a brow. “We shall see.”

The open challenge in her eyes ignited his blood. When she reclined on her elbows, Ethan lifted her legs and plunged deep inside her. Warmth surrounded him as her velvety darkness closed around his shaft. Her soft sounds of pleasure encouraged him onward as her eyes grew sapphire bright with passion. Letting the need that raged within take control, he thrust into her, gripping her knees to go deeper. Her mewling rose to become more desperate pleas. Sweat broke out on his forehead as he plunged into her core, over and over, as if to convince himself and her they belonged together, to bind them together into one entity.

Pressure twisted his insides, demanded satisfaction, signaled his release was imminent, but he continued. He needed to hear her acceptance, wanted to know she was his. In the end, he was simply not strong enough to wait out his brain. As soon as Jacqueline’s eyes closed and she cried out her pleasure, he slammed himself into her one last time, fighting to keep his feet as his seed poured into her body.

Never had a woman made him go from the depths of despair to the heights of ecstasy in the span of mere heartbeats. For this one woman, he had pledged death and risked his life just to hold her one last time. Drained, Ethan collapsed on the bed as his heart hammered against his ribcage. In the few days of knowing her, his life had changed.

“I love you, Jacqueline Massey.” He threw an arm over his eyes. “I cannot promise I’ll live much longer as a pirate in these dangerous times, but I want you by my side for however long that will be.”

“I have waited an eternity for you to say those words.” She snuggled next to his body. “I have loved you for years, Ethan, you just never knew it. Maybe I didn’t either, since I only came upon this revelation for myself.”

“What do you mean?” His contentment drowned in a sea of sudden apprehension. He struggled into a sitting position as a brilliant white light filled his cabin. “What the bloody hell is that?” The more he attempted to leave the bed, the heavier his limbs became. His eyes drooped, and he wilted onto the mattress as a warm peace held him captive. The white light surrounded Jacqueline’s body, shielding her from his view. He tried to reach out, to cradle her to him and keep her safe, but his body refused to obey his mind.

Eventually, the light faded, and Ethan threw an arm around her hip as Jacqueline rested her cheek on his chest. Whatever the phenomenon was, he knew it wasn’t human-made. “Jacqueline?”

“Ethan.” Her voice was threaded with wonder and amazement. “Something incredible just happened. I—”

A banging on the door to his cabin shattered their newfound calm. “Sir, the angel on the hull is gone. Disappeared. Wood is smooth as the day the ship was built.”

Ethan chuckled at the concern in Sully’s voice but made no move to open the door. “Give me a few minutes.” Satisfied that his first mate left them alone, he tucked a lock of Jacqueline’s damp hair behind her ear. “You are my angel, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” She smiled against his skin and the muscles of his abdomen tightened. “You

said a few days ago that only an act of God would keep you here. Who am I to argue with what God decrees?"

"Perhaps the real act of God was to give you to me so that we may remove ourselves from the pressing danger here?" He pressed her against his side. "I was prepared to die if I couldn't be with you, which is significant in the fact that I have never pledged myself to a woman." Ethan hauled her across his body to press his face to her breasts, and inhaled her faint lavender scent. "Why did you wait until now to show yourself?"

"You did not need me before." She nipped a line of kisses along his jaw. "Angels are all around. Most of the time humans never call, never fully believe, so we must remain in obscurity to watch them bumble through their lives. We can keep them safe, but we cannot interfere, destined only to toil in a half-life alongside our charges."

"Yet you are here with me, as real and solid as I am." The wonder of the bright light washed over him again, and he breathed deeply of her scent as his hands tangled in her hair. "And very much made for carnal desires of the flesh."

A blush stole across her rounded cheeks. "It was my time. I have been with you all along, Ethan. It is why you have a preoccupation with angels. You see me sometimes in your dreams."

Dread lodged in his throat. "Will you disappear now that you have made known your secret?" He stared into her guileless blue eyes and lost his soul into her safekeeping once again. "I will not give you up, even to the Creator, no matter that it will incur His wrath." Interminable seconds ticked by as he waited for her to speak, fearing what she would say.

"I am as human as you. I gained mortality the moment the light touched me. The moment I said I loved you."

"You traded an eternity in the court of God for a life with me?" When she nodded, his skin chilled with the knowledge. *She is truly mine.* Emitting a cry of joy and triumph, he rolled Jacqueline onto her back and cupped her face between his hands. "My very own angel, keeper of my heart, owner of my soul." He brushed his lips against hers. "Will we sail the seas in an attempt to outrun the ever-increasing navy, or shall we try to strike our fortune in the West Indies?"

"Does it matter?" Tears sparkled in her eyes then spilled into her hair.

"No, you are mine. I want nothing else. My life is complete." For a few moments, he explored the silky softness of the skin of her neck, the beautiful curve of her breasts he'd admired for so long. "I do not deserve such a fine gift."

She brushed a hand through his hair. "Ethan, I would not be here with you if you were not worthy, if you were not redeemable."

"But all the things I have done..." He stared, taken aback by the force of the love shining in her face. She glowed, and he wondered if it was residual supernatural power or just ordinary happiness. Either way, just knowing her high emotion was for him caused his throat to close with tears a pirate dare not shed.

"You have been absolved of your crimes, pirate. After all, it is a season of miracles."

"True." He removed the ruby ring from his pinky finger and slipped it onto her forefinger. "You are mine, Jacqueline. My treasure."

She lightly bit his earlobe.

Fire coursed through his veins at her touch. "I will need to rename the ship. Perhaps the *Angel's Hope*."

"Leave it as it is. It shall be a constant reminder to you that I will be very angry if

you attempt to part from me again.” She stirred beneath him. “There are some things even I cannot explain, and my love for you is one of them. Just accept the gift, pirate.”

“Oh, I will accept anything you want to give me.” He skimmed his hands over the smooth, warm skin of her thighs, stopping short of her still damp core. “The question that remains is how many miracles am I entitled to before midnight?” His arousal twitched to life as he teased her with gentle fingers.

Jacqueline rubbed her hips against his hand. “Let’s find out.” Her lips on his throat nearly broke him. “For a pirate, you talk entirely too much.”

With a silent prayer of thanks, Ethan pulled his angel close. The life of a pirate was one thing, but the chance to hold an angel was something else entirely—and lucky was the man who could do both.

The End

About the Author:

Sandra is a writer of romantic fiction. Her portfolio includes historical, contemporary, and paranormal romances and she’ll sometimes blend genres.

After catching the writing bug at the young age of ten, she’s gone on to grow her unique writing style. She’s a regular contributor for the Paranormal Romantic’s blog, and is busy with countless projects around the web.

When not immersed in creating new worlds and interesting characters, Sandra likes to read and travel. Her favorite place to spend vacation hours is Walt Disney World. It’s where dreams come true, and that suits her just fine.

Writing is her ultimate dream job.

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