



Pirate Rules

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Dedication: For all the pirate lovers.

Chapter One

Ryder eyed Heather's lush body with thinly disguised boredom.

"It's great you stopped by, baby. But I've got a ton of work due." He seated himself firmly at the desk. Then pushed back, flashing a crooked grin. "Why don't you go shopping, buy yourself something sexy? I'll let you make it up to me next weekend."

"Come on, don't be so cold." She climbed across his lap. "Feel that, honey? I'm sooo wet for you," she whispered as she stretched close to his ear. "I'm not wearing panties."

Yeah, he'd noticed. So had his cock. But he really did have a shit load of homework he needed to tackle and an early practice tomorrow morning.

He moved her off his lap, keeping his manner regretful. "You're hot stuff, baby. Give me a break here. I need to study."

Then Heather reached into her backpack and pulled out a pair of handcuffs. His cock leapt to full attention.

"What's this?" he said, working to sound cool as she handed him the key to the cuffs.

"I've disappointed you. I need to be punished." Heather fastened one cuff, and then held out her wrists, keeping her head bowed.

Ryder snapped the other cuff in place then slapped the key on his desk. "On your knees, slut," he barked.

Shit, she'd gotten to him. Again.

Carefully he eased his zipper down, freeing his eager cock. "Open your mouth."

Heather complied instantly, licking him enthusiastically.

He held her head, guiding her and setting a pace he liked while she sucked strongly, bringing him closer to climax. His thoughts drifted to Friday's game and his orgasm receded.

Frantically, Heather suckled more strongly, ramming her face harder into his crotch.

He grasped her head more firmly, forcing her to stop. Since, she had been bad, he wasn't ready to reward her. Plus, he knew how much she got off on being bossed around. "Go over to the window, bend over, and hold on to the sill."

She lurched to her feet and hurried to obey his demand. Her large breasts bounced as she ran, quivering inside her shirt when she bent forward from the waist.

Because she tried hard to please him, he spoke harshly to her. "You forgot your bra again, you little slut. How many guys did you fuck before you got here?"

"None, Master. I swear I only fuck you," she panted, licking her lips and wriggling, making her big tits jiggle.

Ryder figured she was ready to cream from the verbal abuse alone.

He rammed two fingers into her dripping cunt, and then slowly withdrew them, sniffing his wet hand. "No spunk, but the bastards could've worn rubbers. Tell me the truth, you horny bitch. How many guys did you fuck today?"

He didn't wait for her answer, ramming his hard cock into her wet pussy, and making her tits bounce again.

"None, Master. I swear." She ground her round ass against his groin, meeting his thrusts and sobbing. "Please fuck me harder."

Reaching around her hips, he found her engorged clit and began rubbing it lazily in time with his strokes.

She creamed instantly, crying his name.

Then he pounded into her until he was ready for release, giving the spoiled cunt a second climax while he was at it. Pulling out of her grasping pussy, he grabbed her by the ears, and then turned her around. He slammed his cock down her throat, forcing her to suck his cum like a good slave should.

To her credit, Heather tried harder and harder to please him. But, the problem wasn't anything she could fix. He was bored with her.

When she'd licked the last of his cum from his softening cock, he tucked himself into his jeans. He didn't waste any time retrieving the key or releasing the cuffs. Dropped them and the key into her backpack, he handed the carryall to her.

"Christmas isn't that far away," she said tentatively.

Ryder resented the vulnerability in her tone and the hint. Her folks had more money than God, while he attended college on a scholarship.

"I'm on kind of a tight budget," he said stiffly.

Horrified eyes met his. "Oh no, I didn't mean, that is..., I wasn't asking for a present." She studied the floor while her words stumbled out of her mouth. "It's just that I thought the Christmas party would be a nice time to announce our engagement."

Fuck! Ryder wanted to bang his head off the desk. He should have seen that coming. Was she knocked up? Was it his? He was royally fucked. Shit, he'd have to marry her.

"Are you pregnant?" The words came out too harsh and she looked at him funny.

Heather giggled nervously. "How would I get pregnant? You never come except in my mouth." She averted her eyes, talking even faster. "Besides I'm on the pill, remember?"

Genuinely perplexed, he asked. "Then why do you want to get married?"

"That's what is supposed to happen now." She stared bleakly at a patch of wall over his left shoulder. Gradually, her voice took on new confidence as she explained things to the poor kid from the shitty neighborhood. "You fall in love with me and we get married. You go to work for Daddy. We get a nice house. Then later on, you know, we have a couple of kids. It's the way it works." She darted a glance at him.

"I don't love you." Ryder pointed out what he considered to be the fatal flaw in her plan for the rest of their lives.

Heather gaped at him. "But you have to love me. I do everything you want. You love to fuck me."

"We've had a great time, Heather," he exaggerated tactfully. "But, I don't love you," He moved closer to the door. Hell, he'd never said anything about love and if she loved him, it was the first time he'd heard about it.

She pleaded. "You have to marry me."

"No, I don't." He opened the door. "Time for you to leave."

Heather swayed toward him. "You'll be sorry. You'll beg me to marry you." Her hand flew toward his face, long nails poised to rake.

He caught her wrist. "Threats, Heather?"

She tugged on her arm, twisting away from his grip.

Once he'd released her, she hung her head in penitence.

"I'm sorry—," she wheedled.

Her mercurial mood shifts and the situation were ludicrous. His laughter erupted, cutting

off whatever apology she intended to offer.

“You’ll pay for that,” she snapped at him before bouncing out of the room.

Her skirt was caught up in back, exposing her bare ass. Ryder started to call a warning. But, she’d disappeared down the stairs before the words formed on his lips.

He leaned against the doorway, staring at the spot where Heather had vanished. He replayed their conversation for a few minutes then shook his head. Pushing all thoughts of Heather aside, he returned to his studies. That was what he was at Duke for, even greater than the thrill of playing championship basketball, was the priceless gift of a first-class education.

* * * * *

Twelve years later

Zara rose from the warm deck of the restored schooner. After four days in the Caribbean, her base tan was decent. Even so, she didn’t want to overdo it. The cooling breeze made it hard to judge the sun’s intensity. A burn would only add new injury to an already disappointing trip.

The impulsive decision to seek her inner vixen on a singles cruise sounded good, in theory. Reality turned out, not so great. Not that she took the mistake personally. Well, not too much. Stubbornly, she still hoped to find and free her inner wild thing.

Her mission wasn’t going well. How could she have known the women on these cruises outnumbered the men by four to one? Or paraphrasing the situation into Carefree Cruise lingo--the wenches to rogue ratio was a bit wench-heavy. The other wenches, uh women connected fine with their party-animal side, leaving her feeling like the ugly cousin at a cool kids’ party.

The all-male crew did their best to fill in, especially the Captain. But that was another problem. Captain Smiley took her polite refusals as signs she needed more forceful persuasion. Privately, she renamed him, Slimy because of her skin-crawling reaction to him.

Although, the captain was attractive enough in his own oily way. He just didn’t do it for her. The more she saw him, the less she liked him. Besides, he was shorter than she was, by a good two inches. Call her shallow--but she liked wearing heels while looking up at her dates.

The more she demurred--the more aggressively Slimy advanced. Worse, he was turning her into a coward. To avoid another confrontation with the way too enthusiastic Captain, she’d risked sunburn by deliberately waiting until the rest of the passengers, and all but a skeleton crew, went ashore before going below deck.

Slimy ambushed her in the dimly lit narrow passageway when she was still half a dozen steps from her cabin.

Saying nothing, he eyed her appreciatively, closer to leering, actually.

Her already daring bikini seemed to shrink further under his gaze, making her increasingly uncomfortable.

He planted his cuffed suede boots wider apart and flashed his too-good-to-be-natural smile. Finally, he said, “Aren’t you coming ashore for the treasure hunt?”

“Perhaps later. If you’ll excuse me.” She gestured vaguely toward her quarters.

He wagged a finger in warning. “You’ll miss your chance to be kidnapped by a handsome rogue.”

The stuffed parrot on his shoulder lurched as the ship shifted.

Smiley braced his arms on the brass handrail, blocking her way.

She almost took a step away from him. But then, her temper flared. He wasn’t going to ruin her vacation. Instead, she pushed herself deliberately closer. Inches from Slimy’s pointy nose she stopped--drawing her imaginary line on the deck.

“Intimidation and kidnapping just don’t do it for me. Go ahead, color me inhibited.

Now, please get out of my way,” she said icily, pretending the hot color on her cheeks was from too much sun.

“Hey, take it easy,” he protested, taking a long step away from her. “Excuse me all to hell for trying to do my job and make sure every spoiled, stuck-up, scrawny cock tease has some fun on this trip.”

Zara glared at him. “What an amazing humanitarian. Consider your work here done. All I wanted was a chance to get away from the office and catch a little sun before tax season.”

“Your loss, bitch,” he grumbled loud enough for her to hear as he walked away.

After the captain’s departure, her surge of temper ebbed. She sagged against the smooth teak, feeling sick--a delayed reaction to the confrontation.

This time the Captain had backed down. Like most bullies, he retreated when she’d turned the tables on him and had gotten assertive. But, his resentment would fester and next time he wouldn’t be as easily intimidated.

For men like him, the word ‘no’ acted like an aphrodisiac. Pushing him wasn’t smart--there was much too great a chance he would see her as an irresistible challenge. She needed to avoid alone time with him.

There was another factor included in her resentment, Slimy’s words had hit too close to the truth. She’d booked this trip hoping to jump-start her sex life after finding out her ex-lover was married, with children.

She wanted a hot distraction from the humiliation, loneliness, and pain. Preferably, in the form of an exciting and wildly romantic affair. She wanted reassurance that she was desirable.

Even more humiliating, something she would never admit to anyone in a hundred years--she did have a secret pirate fantasy. Her personal preferences had definitely influenced her choice of Carefree Cruises. Their romantic tall ships and their ads stressing sexy pirate escapades had hooked her good.

Now, faced with the reality of the Captain’s leering and his sagging, stuffed parrot--Zara couldn’t go there.

The disappointment and fresh humiliation of Slimy’s insults had left her more depressed than ever. And worse, ashamed of her silly wishful thinking.

She scurried back to her room to cower behind the covers of her favorite book, an erotic pirate fantasy. An escape made all the more pitiful, since she’d paid good money to cower in her quarters. Though, she was locked inside the tiny cabin, not even her most reliable sexy romance held her attention.

Taking stock of the situation did nothing to cheer her. She’d lost weight after breaking up with Jason. Now, she was skirting skinny rather than slim. The day spa she’d splurged on before the cruise had been a total waste.

What good were smooth legs, a groomed bush, and polished toes if she was the only one who noticed them?

With only three days of vacation left, she needed to climb out of her comfort zone, eat something decent, and snag herself a rogue. Preferably in that order.

Her small wardrobe held nothing suitably wench-like. No broomsticks skirts, no peasant blouses, and of course, no flattering laced vests. The red tube dress would have to do. The top was tight enough that she could get by without a bra. She pulled on a red lace thong, the perfect choice for a wild woman’s undies.

Perhaps she was a little inhibited. But she sure as hell wasn’t going to dress the part.

The delicate diamond heart Jason gave her for Christmas winked at her from the lingerie

drawer. Gathering up the fine chain, she opened the porthole window and tossed the necklace into the Caribbean.

The splash was barely audible.

The tiny act of rebellion felt like a giant leap of independence. No more punishing herself over the stupidity of falling for a liar and cheat. She made an understandable mistake. Jason was attentive, romantic, and oh-so charming. She'd never looked past his excuses for why he couldn't see her on weekends or holidays.

Trustingly, she'd accepted his explanation that his OB-GYN practice kept him too busy. She'd believed every lie. Right up until the Beautiful Homes spread featuring the country estate of Dr. and Mrs. Jason La Noir and their two lovely daughters hit her mother's mailbox.

She shook off the memory. Enough crying, enough regretting, and enough wasting her time on a man who didn't deserve her devotion.

Zara scuffled into strappy bronze sandals that highlighted her delicious-apple-red pedicure. Flirty gold hoop earrings played well against her dark brown hair. She put extra effort into getting the eyeliner and taupe tinted shadow smudged just right to highlight her best feature-green eyes. A transparent coat of honey-flavored gloss gave her too wide mouth extra shine. A final spritz of Submission added fragrant allure to her arsenal.

The small vanity mirror reflected her results--nothing there to worry a beauty queen, but she'd done her best. She looked as hot as possible given her basic equipment. Now, she needed to relax and enjoy the rest of her vacation.

* * * * *

The Beach Hut jumped with a reggae band, the buzz from booze-fueled games, and the happy hormones whistling for company. The nightspot was tightly packed with locals as well as the cruise ship passengers.

Zara studied the crowd for lone men, spotting an intriguing player in pirate dress decorating the bar. Working her way through the crowd, she avoided eye contact--in order not to spook her target.

Instead of focusing on the hunk at the bar, she perused the rest of the scenery. The hut's rustic structure was suitably picturesque with a thatched roof supported by eight massive poles, which in turn were securely bolted to a concrete pad. A single wall acted as a windbreak and backing for the bar, which dominated one end of the building. A panoramic view of the sun moving toward the horizon with great pomp and drama lit the western sky.

Boldly, she climbed onto a padded bar stool close to where she'd last seen the rugged pirate. She scanned the crowd with eager interest, hoping to catch another glimpse of the smoldering hottie. Aware her odds of success decreased in direct ratio to the rogue's hunk factor, she optimistically searched for her dream man anyway.

Why not try for the best?

But, her screening of the bodies crowding the bar confirmed the bad news, no loose hunky pirate. Everyone seemed paired off already. No one's fault but hers for letting Smiley's intimidation keep her from playing the Treasure Hunt game earlier. Her rumbling stomach reminded her she missed out on the crab feed too.

A rapidly moving waitress disappeared into the crowd with a full tray of gaily-colored cocktails with lime wedges, cherries, and miniature umbrellas. The pretty drinks made Zara thirsty as well as hungry.

"What's your pleasure, Miss?" the bartender asked with a friendly smile.

"What kind of drinks were in those hurricane glasses over there?" She waved toward the

decorated cocktails.

“Those are Caribbean Cruises, Miss. They’re very popular with the ladies.”

Zara hesitated for a bare second. “I’ll have one of those, please.”

“Do you want to run a tab? Or--.”

While she was considering her options, the smoldering hottie she noticed earlier wedged in next to her, claiming a previously nonexistent space. Then he gave her a thorough going over from her well-groomed hair to her cute sandals.

Apparently, she’d passed inspection because he tipped his head toward her in a brief nod of approval.

“Add it to my bill and bring us a plate of coconut shrimp too, and another Long neck brew, thanks pal.” The intriguing pirate placed his order with an engagingly crooked grin.

“Thank you,” she said, swiveling toward her benefactor.

A seductive pair of dark eyes met hers, making the lively bar scene fade into oblivion.

This close, the man intoxicated her senses. He was so near a faint trace of bleach from his shirt mingled with scents of sandalwood and clean man. The heat emanating from all those hard muscles warmed her skin.

She tried to swallow, but found her mouth suddenly too dry.

The bartender placed her pastel drink neatly in front of her and she leaned in for a fortifying sip.

Casually, she checked out the hunk through lowered lashes. Like Smiley, the man with the sinful voice was dressed as a pirate. But on him, the costume worked. Her smile spread a little wider with relief as she realized the costume meant he had to work for the cruise line. Maybe, he was one of the cooks, since she was positive she hadn’t seen him on deck. She would have remembered.

A good head taller than her lanky five eight frame, and much broader, he made her feel positively dainty--a novel but pleasing experience. His open-necked white shirt framed a nicely rippled chest with a good sprinkling of curling black hair. Well-worn pants disappeared into supple leather boots. His waist was bound by a faded red silk wrap, complete with a wickedly authentic looking knife, tucked into the fabric. Dark curls swirled to his shoulders, providing the perfect frame for heartbreaker-eyes and the devil’s own mouth. At least one day’s growth of beard darkened his jaw. A rap-star sized diamond winked from his left ear.

“Razor Brinks,” he said, holding out a hand.

She accepted the offer to shake, darn near forgetting who she was as his warm grip engulfed her.

“Zara Sterling,” she managed to say her name. Then, because her tongue was faster than her brain, she asked. “What kind of name is Razor Brinks?”

“Mine, Sweetheart,” he drawled, taking her hand and brushing a thrilling kiss across her knuckles, and then rubbing the spot that continued tingling long after his mouth had departed.

Chapter Two

Really, the name Razor Brinks suited him. So did the drawl. Zara's heart beat faster at his arrogant declaration, or maybe it was from the way he was still caressing her hand.

"What do you do Mr. Brinks?" she inquired politely, pulling back her hand and resisting the urge to fan herself.

"I'm an arranger."

"An event arranger?" she asked, frowning, because it was the only kind of arranger she could think of at the moment and it seemed an unlikely occupation for him.

He laughed and the sound shook loose several of her inner barriers.

"No, I arrange...different things." His eyes twinkled with amusement. But, he didn't embellish on his professional life.

She felt certain whatever he arranged would be thoroughly satisfactory.

The appetizer arrived, interrupting thoughts headed down the same highway to hell as her good intentions.

"You first," Razor insisted.

Zara selected a sizzling coconut shrimp from the basket, dipped it into the sweet-hot pineapple salsa, and took a cautious bite. Then she finished it off.

"Delicious," she said, keeping her gaze locked with his and hoping he understood she meant more than the seafood. Razor's strong white teeth neatly severed a plump shrimp from its crispy tail. His eyes almost closed in appreciation.

She watched mesmerized while he ate several with obvious enjoyment. After too long, she self-consciously tore her gaze away from his mouth, moving her stare to the condensed water forming beads and miniature trails on the bottle of long neck ale, which he tipped to his sensual lips and swallowed.

"Please, have some more," he urged her.

She took another shrimp, feasting her eyes on the tasty pirate. The man was far more interesting than the snacks. She wracked her mind for something provocative or intriguing to say and struck out, asking, "Do you work for Carefree Cruises?"

"No. How about you, what kind of work do you do?" he asked with more interest than her boring career merited.

"I'm an accountant," she admitted.

He stroked her shoulder approvingly, sparking tingles all through her overloaded nervous system. "Who is adventurous enough to travel alone," his drawl hinted at other thrilling explorations they could share.

Possibilities never before experienced zinged through her mind, short-circuiting her lust-soaked brain. In an attempt to gain time and poise, Zara sipped moderately at the pretty cocktail, which tasted like pineapple with a hint of peach. Experience warned her that the drink undoubtedly included a high-proof punch underneath its fruity top notes. But, she needed the boost of courage.

Razor lit fires in all her erogenous zones with blazing glances, and then he sketched a salute of regret as he strode away.

Leaving her disconcerted and wondering if she'd said something wrong. She tried to follow him with her gaze. But, a cluster of men involved in a drinking game blocked her view. By the time the gamers settled back around their long table, he'd disappeared.

* * * *

Flirting with one of the pretty women tourists fit nicely with Razor's current bad boy cover story. There'd been a genuine spark of intelligence in her pretty green eyes. For a few minutes, he'd simply relaxed and enjoyed the sexy game.

He'd let himself wonder where she lived and worked and played. Funny how attractive the mundane life of an accountant sounded to him after a few years of living in the world's most luxurious sewers with the worst of mankind.

Not that there'd been anything mediocre about her looks. Maybe on the slim side, but from what he'd seen, she was strictly first-class every inch of the way. The kind of woman, who made him remember why he wanted to get back to reality.

She'd been interested in him too, which had made him slightly jealous of Razor in a weird way. From the outside, his cover life looked exciting--beautiful women, fast boats, and plenty of danger. But, it wasn't his life.

At least, he prayed that it wasn't. The truth was for the past eight years he'd spent more time as Razor Brinks than he had as Ryder Goodman.

He hoped he was still one of the good guys. But, what the hell did he know? For years, he'd worked so far off the grid he wasn't on anyone's scorecard.

The fact was, he couldn't tell himself from the bad guys, without identification he never carried. The only contacts to his agency, an emergency phone number, encrypted emails, and regular impressive deposits to his numbered account didn't reassure him.

However, an identity crisis was a luxury he didn't have time for--not if he wanted to keep breathing. Now, it was time to get his head out of his ass and take care of business.

He kept moving through the throng of happy drunks to where he'd last seen Smiley, close to the men's room.

"What's happenin' Cap'n?" Razor asked, speaking louder than necessary and slurring his words enough for Smiley to notice.

"Keep your voice down," the captain huffed predictably.

"Buy you a drink?" Razor whispered back loudly and slapped Smiley's back.

The Captain stumbled then caught his balance. "I'll meet you at the dock later, keep moving. I don't want anyone to see us together." Smiley's eyes whipped from side to side as he sidled into the men's room.

An impulse to follow Smiley and stage an offended gay lover scene tempted Razor. However, neither boredom nor disgust would provide an adequate defense for blowing months spent developing the elaborate setup. The object was to reel in a particularly nasty ring of modern pirates. Razor had spent months cultivating Smiley, who in turn had vouched for him with the sea-going terrorists.

This kind of case required iron discipline and lots of patience. The closer to the end, the harder it became to maintain an alert readiness mode. Curbing his unreasonable urge to embarrass and humiliate the Captain, he headed for the cigarette boat. He took advantage of the delay to refuel the always-thirsty *El Diablo*. After filling the gas tank, he took his time checking his boat over before mooring it alongside the magnificent Carefree Cruise schooner.

With forty minutes left before Smiley was expected, Razor used a grappling hook to hoist

himself aboard the sailing ship. Regrettably, the boarding gear had marred the teak finish. An efficient search of the captain's quarters turned up nothing except a small stash of high-grade coke, which he'd supplied Smiley, courtesy of a helpful DEA agent.

At the moment, the tall-masted schooner was the only tourist boat in port. Therefore, one of the cabins belonged to the alluring Zara. Needing a distraction, Ryder indulged himself.

Three doors later, he recognized her scent--vanilla and jasmine with a bit of citrus--intensely erotic, feminine--like her. He stood for a moment with his eyes closed, absorbing the sensual ambiance of the tiny room. Then he searched the small cabin as thoroughly as he had the Captain's quarters.

This time he made much more interesting discoveries. No drugs. However, he did find a small stash of cosmetics, lacy scraps of underwear, and a book.

The cover featured a big-busted woman straining her dress's seams, and the laws of gravity. Locked in the fierce embrace of an eye-patch wearing pirate, the heroine seemed ecstatic. The rogue, pictured in the act of feasting on her arched neck, seemed equally caught up in the moment. The lurid cover art ruled it out as recreational reading Ryder would've chosen for himself. Since, he was on a surveillance mission, he dove right in, turning first to the pages she'd bookmarked. Her choice of a placeholder stopped him.

Razor examined the strip of black and white photos. All four of the images featured a smiling Zara looking adoringly at a jagged hole. A closer inspection revealed choppy edges characteristic of nail-scissor excision. Evidence suggestive of a recent breakup.

Rapidly, he skimmed the text of the Pirate's Captive. Reading more from curiosity about Zara's tastes than for either education or entertainment.

Lashed to the Captain's bunk, Lady Violet arched her back and strained against the cruel ropes keeping her legs spread wide

A few pages later, Lady Violet shivered in erotic rapture as the wicked pirate, Captain James, had his way with his fiery captive. Hot stuff. Razor set the book back exactly where he had found it with surprisingly strong regret.

The spine, cover, and pages all showed signs of frequent reading. Zara's favorite fantasy was an unprincipled rogue. In real life or only in fiction? He pondered the question--keenly aware it was one he shouldn't be asking. And even more aware of how desperately, he wanted to learn the answer.

* * * *

Zara stared at the still icy bottle of Long John Silver Ale dripping on the bar's surface. Surely, he would be right back. She sipped her drink slowly, no longer interested in the crunchy shrimp.

Pokey minutes crept by on their bellies, each one stealing a little more of her optimism.

The bartender made his way back to her and lifted the brown bottle. "Done with this?"

She shrugged her shoulders, which were taking more and more effort to keep squared. "I'd like another of these, please." She moved her, nothing-but-slush, hurricane glass to the business side of the bar.

After the new drink arrived, she nursed it for half an hour. Plenty of time for her to speculate about why the really hot guys took off like tax cheats with an audit notice. Then she pushed the glass away, signaling she was finished.

"Allow me," Slimy inserted himself next to her, waving a twenty-dollar bill folded lengthwise to attract the bartender's attention.

"No thanks, I prefer to buy my own drinks." Zara leveled a look intended to wilt even

his over inflated ego.

He smiled humbly and coaxed. “Hey, I was out of line this afternoon--I get it. I’m sorry for what I said. You aren’t the kind of girl who would hold a grudge--are you? Come on, at least let me buy you a drink.”

Wrong on two counts, Slimy. She was a woman, not a girl. And he could bet his stuffed parrot she held a grudge.

She spoke coolly. “I’ve already had my limit. Thanks anyway.”

Slimy leaned closer, smogging her with hundred-proof breath and revealing drops of perspiration blooming beneath his tri-corner hat. “Come on, Honey. A couple of more of these and you’ll be begging me for more than a drink,” he coaxed, trailing shaky fingers along the side of her breast.

Her elbow rammed into his solar plexus--pure reflex. Caught unprepared, he doubled over, fighting for breath.

It took all the courage she could muster to turn her back on him and call for her bill. By the time she glanced around, Slimy was nowhere in sight.

She didn’t feel guilty. He’d deserved the jab. No question. But, the incident put an end to her hope that the smoldering hunk of a pirate, who’d flirted so nicely, might come back. She sighed then counted out the cash for her drink, added a two-dollar tip, and tucked the money under the nearly empty glass on the bar.

At the outer edge of the Beach Hut’s lights, she peered into the night. Seeing nothing alarming, she stopped, letting her eyes adjust to the dark, and then removed her sandals. The loose sand made walking barefoot easier.

A few couples shared the beach with her, enjoying their moonlit strolls. The handholding and nuzzling pairs reminded her of her solo status. But, an open beach and the people within yelling distance, even oblivious lovers, offered some protection in case the obnoxious Captain lurked along her journey back to the ship.

Zara needed to make a decision. Three non-refundable nights remained of her cruise. Should she eat the loss and fly home early? Or could she assume Smiley finally had gotten the message? Not likely. Better to accept the waste of money and leave with her honor and body intact. But, she was not about to leave without her new bikini, an almost full bottle of Obsession, and her favorite book, the Pirate’s Captive.

Her trepidation grew as she approached the ship. Only small lights dotted the deck while reflective paint gave an eerie outline to the gangplank. The ship appeared deserted. But, that’s what she’d thought earlier in the day, when Smiley had trapped her in the narrow passageway. A careful reconnoitering yielded no sign of anyone on board. The dock itself was deserted.

Sitting tight until other passengers came along and gave her the safety of company was her best move. The small sundry shop at the end of the dock was closed. But it had a view of the approach to the ship and offered some concealment.

She pressed into the weathered wood on the side of the building and schooled herself to wait for fellow cruisers. But the evening was young and only couples, not yet ready to go aboard, meandered past her position.

The deep-throated purr of a powerboat cut through the night air, and then faded as the engine stopped. The boat remained hidden by the larger schooner. A muffled thud caught her attention. She crept closer to investigate the noise. Parallel with the gangplank, she glimpsed the silhouette of a large man as he disappeared down the hatchway.

She didn’t know the mysterious boarder. One thing was certain, he was not Captain

Smiley. He'd been a head taller and one and half times as broad. As quietly as a Swiss banker, she crept onto the deck, straining to catch any hint of danger. After a few minutes with no more excitement than the flutter of a mild breeze, she peeked at the boat that she'd heard arrive.

The speedboat looked fast just bobbing next to the sailing ship. The smaller vessel was tapered--long and as sleek as a dildo. But, much larger and wickeder. The lettering on the back read El Diablo, a fitting name for the flame-decorated torpedo.

A creak of the hatchway stairs gave her barely enough warning to hide behind the wheelhouse. The mystery boarder disappeared down the dock, whistling a haunting tune that she didn't recognize. As soon as the song faded, Zara scampered below deck. Having come this far, she was getting her things. She rushed into her cabin, threw her essentials into the beach tote, and then raced topside.

Two steps from the gangplank, approaching footfalls and the rumble of male voices forced her to scramble for the niche in back of the motor housing. The lightweight aluminum bridge crackled under the weight of more than one man. The low murmur of their voices grew louder and more distinct.

A deep voice spoke first. "Did you talk to Raul?"

"Keep it down, man. Wait till we get to my cabin." Smiley sounded nervous.

"Sure, pal," Deep-voice agreed. "Come here and check out my boat first."

Zara wrapped her arms tight around her knees and tucked herself into the smallest possible space. With any luck, they'd go below deck soon--allowing her to make her get away.

The moon rose, gilding the water and setting the pale beach aglow with reflected color. The night and passing clouds added moody shadows to the ordinary shapes of the deck, dock, and the sundry shop. Zara's cramped position grew more uncomfortable. After several moments of silence from the men, she risked unwinding and stretching.

The men were nowhere in sight. Stealthily, she moved across the deck, creeping along the lee side. And wishing she had an entirely different life. One where she got to enjoy the moon that was so close it seemed touchable and the stars that sparkled just out of her reach.

The sleek cigarette boat was tethered by a single line, a pair of rubber fenders protecting its glossy finish as it rode the tide alongside the schooner.

Zara calculated the distance from her position to its deck, wanting to jump in the smaller craft and roar away.

The clean lines of the compact vessel gleamed in the pallid light. The dimmer illumination made the boat's lurid flame-themed paint job appear almost tasteful. Everything conspired to tempt her to try her hand at piracy.

The men must be below deck. There would never be a better time to get away. She edged carefully toward the gangplank, trying not to even breathe too loud.

A porthole window whined as it opened, halting her progress. She hadn't planned on eavesdropping. But she inched closer, eager for information.

"That wasn't part of our deal, Smiley." Deep-voice sounded irritated. Zara suppressed a hysterical impulse to laugh. The Captain was an equal opportunity offender.

"Deal's changed, man. Take it or leave it."

"What did this chick do to you?" Deep-voice sounded bored.

"She's a smart-mouthed bitch that needs to be taught a lesson," Slimy said sulkily, sidestepping the question.

Zara leaned over the railing to get even closer to the conversation floating up from the Captain's cabin, curious to learn who else merited Slimy's rancor.

“Why don’t you take care of her yourself?” Deep-voice asked reasonably.

Yeah, Slimy. Why don’t you handle your own problems?

“I have to think about my job,” Slimy excused his cowardice.

“So I scare your girlfriend, and then I get to do business?” he asked. Cynicism laced the man’s words.

Slimy slapped the wall, muttering with the kind of unreasonable petulance usually only found in toddlers who missed their naps. “I want her hurt. You carve up that pretty face. That’ll give her a new attitude.”

What a loser! Someone finally stood up to him and he bribed some other guy to hurt her? Zara fumed, wanting to yell a warning to Deep-voice not to believe the lying little rat.

A quick replay of the conversation tempered the impulse. What kind of nefarious deals were they discussing? She suspected there was something creepy about the Captain besides his ego and lack of manners.

Smiley was probably a smuggler or a drug runner or both or worse. She shivered. Crime appealed to men like him. Those with limited skills and unlimited appetites. The other man must be a criminal too. Pity, he sounded sexy. Which just illustrated how desperate she’d become. Thank God, the smoldering pirate had disappeared before she’d made a fool of herself.

“How am I supposed to recognize this stupid chick?” Obviously, the man was pond scum, since he’d fallen right in with the Captain’s plan.

Zara crouched, straining to hear the details, determined to warn the woman.

“She’s wearing a short red dress, dark hair, around five eight, and skinny. She’s drinking Caribbean Cruises over at the beach bar. You can’t miss her,” Slimy’s voice grew more confident as he related the description to Deep-voice.

Zara swallowed a gasp as the implication of his words sank into her head. Oh my God! They were talking about her. For a few vital seconds, panic numbed her brain and froze her body. Then her survival instincts jump-started.

The rumble of the men’s conversation continued in the background as their footsteps groaned on the stairs. None of their actual words registered as her thoughts ran full-tilt through a maze of escape routes. The Beach Hut bar beckoned with its lights and the buzz of drinkers. But it was half a mile down the nearly deserted shore. Too far for an average sprinter. Even with the edge of adrenalin-fueled panic, she wasn’t willing to chance it.

There were only two possibilities for concealment on the open deck. She could hide behind a large sea chest used to store sails. A good ten feet from her current position. Or back to cowering behind the wheelhouse. She prayed that the lapping of the water, the creaks of the shifting ship, and the faint buzz from shore would mask the sound of her pounding heart.

She darted for cover, and then shrank against the wheelhouse’s teak planks. The moon’s light dimmed as a cloud obscured its luminous presence. The night grew slightly cooler as she waited for the men to leave the ship. She prayed again, more fervently, that Smiley would take it upon himself to point her out to Deep-voice. She needed a decent head start to make a successful escape. After long seconds of silence, she risked a peek toward the shore.

Captain Smiley stood at the end of the dock. His listing parrot and tri-corner hat made it easy to identify him as he watched Deep-voice, striding for the bar.

She was trapped.

Smiley covered the dock. The speedboat blocked the schooner’s leeward. Even if she cleared the cigarette boat and dove into the sea, after she reached the shore she couldn’t go to the bar. Because, she didn’t know what Deep-voice looked like.

With her luck, he'd be the first person she asked for help.

Chapter Three

Hesitation did nothing to improve her chances. Zara heaved her tote bag into the speedboat with only a glance to confirm it had landed safely. The contents spilled and she steeled herself to ignore the peril to her precious possessions. Getting away in one-piece was more critical.

Her status as the only passenger who'd actually listened to the mandatory disaster drill lecture paid off now. Quickly, she dug out a rope ladder, securing it to the leeward rail cleats--directly above the speedboat. Before beginning her descent, she tried to get a fix on the two men. Both of them had moved out of her line of sight. She hoped they were further away from her precarious position.

While climbing down the scary, moving ladder, she cheered herself by visualizing the boat keys in the ignition, willing reality to match the mental image. Her feet connected with the smooth fiberglass of her target. Frantically she untangled herself from the clinging safety ladder. She banged a knee in her race to the control panel. There was a key slot, exactly as she'd envisioned it. But, no key.

At the sight of the empty ignition, her heart fell from her throat to her stomach.

There was no time for hopelessness. Zara squared her shoulders, exhorting herself to think like a boat key. No key on the handy molded shelf over the instrument panel. Nor on the floorboards. None under either the captain's or the passenger's seat. She tried one compartment, and then another, all locked tight. No key anywhere. Sadly, she didn't have a clue how to hotwire the vessel.

She was screwed.

Fear began eroding her thoughts. Then she gave herself a mental shake. She could swim to shore. It was only a few yards away. Once she gained the beach, she would walk inland. The island was small but there were roads. Therefore, there had to be houses and people somewhere. It was the tropics--she wouldn't freeze to death. An insect bite or two hardly counted next to the danger of hanging around waiting for Smiley's friend to carve her into ugly pieces.

Already on her knees, she crawled over to her tote bag and began hastily retrieving the contents, which had scattered across the cockpit.

The boat lurched alarmingly and the oval bottle of Submission wobbled out of reach, she crabbed after it, fixated on rescuing her belongings.

"Looking for something?" Deep-voice asked.

She jerked around so fast that she risked serious neck injury. Slowly, she recognized that the mocking deep voice belonged to Razor, the smoldering hunk from the bar.

Zara waited for the floorboards to part so she could sink into the sea.

A few seconds passed with no miracles. She finally accepted there wasn't going to be an easy way out of her current mess. Terror, disappointment, and humiliation all roiled through her, tightening her stomach into a miserable leaden knot and fogging her thoughts.

Unlike Smiley, Razor was truly frightening and intimidating. Large, dangerous, and fast--she wasn't silly enough to try an elbow jab on him. Putting herself within his reach might well be her last mistake.

The heart that had sunk to her stomach when she couldn't find the boat keys plummeted to her knees, turning them shakier than a pyramid scheme.

To hell with the fragrance. She drug in a deep breath and flexed her leg muscles. Then using every bit of her fear-fueled energy, she bolted for the gunwales.

* * * *

Ryder assessed the sexy complication staring at him wide-eyed with terror. He wished he knew her side of the story. Based on Smiley's version of events, she probably deserved a standing ovation.

But, who really knew? Hell of deal when he couldn't tell the good guys from the bad guys without a cheat-sheet. It was past time for him to make some changes. However, his personal burnout was on hold until after this case was over.

The bundle of trouble, masquerading as a beautiful woman, drew in a deep breath and flexed long pretty legs. Her eyes flickered to the side of the boat. She might as well have rented a neon sign to announce her intention to jump ship. One long stride closed the distance between them before she had a chance to execute her diving plan.

"Sorry, Sweetheart. This hurts me more than it does you," he muttered under his breath. Then he clipped her neatly on the jaw. He caught her on the way down as she collapsed into his arms like a sail without wind.

A few minutes later, he'd bound her wrists behind her back using the always handy roll of duct tape. A safety belt strapped her securely into the passenger's seat where he could keep an eye on her without taking his attention away from navigating the boat.

He couldn't help wondering what she'd done to the scuzzy Captain Smiley. Something that pissed him off enough for him to risk blowing his cover.

Of course, Smiley didn't have any idea the opportunistic Razor was a cover. The captain was a small time drug dealer, who Ryder had carefully cultivated as a passport to the pirate band operating in the area.

When it came to talking about the woman, the captain had been uncharacteristically shy about sharing Zara's details. Whatever sins she'd committed, one thing was plain. She'd pricked Smiley's over-blown ego.

In different circumstances, Ryder would be cheering for her team. However, in this reality Ryder didn't exist. He was Razor Brinks, an opportunist, a player, and a general all around badass.

Nothing about the situation suited his preferences. Here and now, Zara existed only as a complication--one he needed to handle as carefully as any other potentially lethal booby-trap.

Ryder couldn't risk releasing Zara unharmed--Smiley was too unstable. Letting her wander around the Captain's territory would be like sending a toddler out to play in traffic. She simply had no idea what a man like Smiley was capable of. Plus, Razor had a reputation as a heartless bastard to maintain. If she came in contact with the Captain before the operation was complete, and she was uninjured, then his cover role would crumble faster than an addict's New Year's resolutions.

The most practical answer was to cut her and dump her back by the cruise ship. He'd done worse, and been highly rewarded for it.

The official rationale revolved around serving the greater good. Weighing the benefit to the many against the harm to one. Under this theory, ruining one beautiful woman's face didn't compare with stopping the band of pirates, a nasty viral form of sea-based terrorists.

However, cruising along with Zara, who was guilty of nothing more than poking a hole in

Smiley's delusions, Ryder could not bring himself to hurt her.

The alternative might prove entertaining enough to offset the bother. He'd keep her contained in his custody until Smiley phoned to confirm the meeting. Once the meet was set, he would drop her off on one of the area's quiet beaches before he connected with the pirates.

By the time she made her way back to civilization, the case would be well over. Mr. Smiley, and the rest of the bad guys, would be cooling their jets in federal cells. Ryder would finally come out of long-term storage to begin a new life as the head of his own security consulting business.

Right now, he needed a secluded cove where he could lay low until Smiley called. He'd fueled up earlier, giving him a selection of several sheltered inlets within easy cruising distance.

Weighing the relative advantages of distance, privacy, and amenities he reviewed the navigation charts in his head. Eventually, he selected Smuggler's Cove from the possibilities. The only tricky part, skirting the coral reef guarding the sheltered inlet, shouldn't be a problem. With the speedboat's shallow draft they would coast through even if he slightly miscalculated the narrow passage--an unlikely event.

Twenty minutes of cruising, at a leisurely fifty miles per hour, brought them to a safe anchorage. The three-quarter moon was bright enough for him to secure the boat without risking the running lights. Once satisfied that the boat was safely anchored, he turned his focus to his unplanned guest.

She was awake. Something that looked a lot like panic flickered across her face.

He maintained a deliberate calm, ignoring her, and scanning the beach. The deserted shore, dramatically backed by the inky silhouettes of sentinel palms and the mounds of wild grapes writhing between them, revealed no lurking menace. When he lazily turned his attention back to Zara, she'd conquered, or at least hidden, her fear.

"What'd you do to tick off Smiley?" he asked with cool disinterest.

"Nothing he didn't have coming," she muttered.

He frowned at her. Not doubting the provocation for whatever she'd done. Nevertheless, he expected full and forthright answers to his questions.

She responded to the pressure of silence. "All right, I jabbed him in the stomach."

His eyebrow and his estimation of her courage both rose. "Is that a fact?"

"Yeah, well he asked for it." She twisted in the vinyl seat trying to ease the strain on her arms. "He pawed me."

More evidence that Smiley was scuzzy and stupid. Not a surprise. The Captain should stick to his own species, low-life scum. Apparently, his sexy passenger didn't know how to finesse a pass, which did surprise him. Beautiful women usually got very good at handling unwanted attention--fast.

"Caught him off-guard, huh?" he encouraged her to elaborate.

"Something like that," she said modestly, refusing to look at him. She angled her face away from him. "Could you at least loosen these? It's not like I can go anywhere."

Actually, they were only a few miles from civilization, but he didn't need restraints to control her. He simply enjoyed the look on her. There was nothing more exciting than a sexy woman held hostage and awaiting his pleasure.

The erotic possibilities roughened his voice. "I don't know, I kind of like you this way."

She twisted her head back, darting a lethal glance at him.

He held up an open palm. "If you promise to cooperate, I'll loosen them. I wouldn't want to damage your pretty hide any more than I already did."

The fear was back in her eyes. She blinked at him blankly with the solemn innocence of a baby bird.

He felt bad about decking her. It had been a long time since he'd wanted to impress a woman with his good qualities. But, common sense said knocking her out before they'd been properly introduced was an unforgivable breach of manners. Plus, it gave him a serious handicap in the battle to win her trust. Worse, it had left a tender-looking spot darkening along her jawline. The bruise bothered him a lot more than her attitude.

As gently as possible, he helped her to her feet. She stumbled against him. For a second, soft curves pressed against his horny body, starting a fire smoldering deep in his belly.

As quickly as possible, he sliced through the duct tape, and then rebound her hands in front of her. She stood still as a paper target on a windless day. The second he dropped her wrists, she shrank back from him and began gnawing frantically on the tape.

He tugged her hands away from her mouth, and then framed her face. He moved in too fast for her to pull away.

She didn't make any objection. Frozen in place, her only movements were the rapid pulse at the base of her neck and that slow sexy blink. Then the blinking stopped as her lashes drifted shut.

He stood close enough to feel the warm puff of air from her slightly parted lips. Smell the heady scents of vanilla, jasmine, and sweet-hot woman. His lips brushed her bruised jaw and she shivered in his arms. He tucked her close, surrounding her with his body. He tasted her in small sips. Took his time tracing the edges of her lips, which finally softened and parted in an invitation to plunder. Then his tongue dueled with hers, savoring the taste of honey laced with the traces of alcohol and pineapple that flavored her sweet mouth.

Soft curves molded against his hard angles, which grew harder with every beat of his heart. She opened wider yet, welcoming him to plunge deeper into her mouth. At the same time, her thighs eased, making room for his erection. Her bound arms looped over his head. Slim fingers tugged his hair, evoking an erotic pulsing, which rapidly settled in his groin, making a hard situation even harder.

He broke the kiss--already breathing too rough, needing to get his head straight.

"Are you going to ravish me?" she asked in a breathy voice. Her body practically begging him to do exactly that.

"Is that what you want?" he asked, hope sneaking a ride on his cautious words.

She kept her eyes down, licking her lips with a slow and deliberate thoroughness. "No...but there's absolutely nothing I could do to stop you." She paused and licked her lips again. "No matter what--," she said, darting a glance at him before continuing, "Liberties you took."

Her words snaked through his belly tightening everything. Not in a good way.

More than a decade before, when he was a naïve pre-law student, his first real affair had gone wrong. Heather wanted a wedding ring. When he'd declined, she cajoled, threatened, and then charged him with rape. Eventually the district attorney had declined to prosecute and the charges were dropped.

The nightmare hadn't ended there. Since he attended school on a scholarship, the girl's father, a major donor to the college, had ensured that the morals clause had been invoked. His sports career had ended abruptly. Then his scholarship had been withdrawn. Friends had shied away and girls had shunned him. Depressed and reckless, he'd enlisted in the marines. From there, he'd been drafted into an elite recon unit. A few years later, his missions had led him into

an even more exclusive and secretive branch of the government.

In the beginning, he'd thrived on the risks and the challenges. He'd learned caution along with other deadly skills. However, even at his wildest, ever since the college rape fiasco, he was non-negotiable on one subject--consent.

Ryder drug in a breath. "So you're telling me....," he said, letting the words drift off provocatively as he skimmed down her neck and across her shoulder, testing her supple skin for resistance. All thoughts of leaving her alone scattering as a new level of hunger surged through his veins.

"No," she sighed with an erotic shiver, arching into his touch.

The single word chilled him faster than glacier runoff.

Domination, a little bondage, a little punishment--hell that suited him down to his size fourteens. But, he had to have clear consent before the games began. Or else he didn't play.

Apparently, that was where Zara got her freak on a little differently. She wanted him to rape her while she moaned and struggled in vain.

Right, not in this lifetime, Sweetheart.

He'd never forced a woman. And he wasn't starting with Miss High and Mighty Tits.

However, all was fair in love, war, and pirate games.

He had a better plan. She would not only agree to be his sex slave. She would ask him for the privilege. Because, he was going to torture her with exquisite pleasure until she begged.

Zara waited impatiently for Razor to kiss her again or, better yet, begin taking indecent liberties with her aroused body. But, instead of pressing ahead and claiming her when she'd said no, he'd pulled away.

What was much worse, she had no idea of how to get him to come back.

Time to face facts, she sucked at seduction. She should've started with someone easier and worked her way up to bronzed sex-god pirates.

The truth was this was her first try at tempting a man to sin. She wasn't movie star material, but she didn't scare small children, and her long slim body generated enough interest so the only thing she had any real experience with was rejecting unwelcome advances. Not that she handled those all that well either.

For reasons she didn't understand, ninety percent of the guys who came on to her were not the ones she was attracted to. She tried for kindness and tact when she had to turn down men. Except when it came to guys like Smiley, who refused to accept a polite 'no thanks' in response to their advances. Maybe if she learned how to send better signals, her sex life might improve. Except for the acute shortage of promising rogues.

Her conviction that a cruel fate had placed her in the wrong century continued to grow. Most of the time she wound up alone, dreaming of a commanding pirate, who captured her body, heart, and soul. Up until a few hours ago, the most real pirates she'd ever seen were actors at an amusement park.

She was beyond hopeless, flirting with Razor made no sense. The prudent reaction to kidnapping was terror. When he pulled out that vampire slayer knife--her blood really had run cold. Yet somehow, he'd wielded the weapon so expertly, the blade had sliced cleanly through the tape while only whispering over her vulnerable wrists, leaving her perversely thrilled.

Though he'd ignored Smiley's orders to carve her up, so far, fear tightened her stomach. Her host seemed completely capable of carrying out the instructions. She tried to take reassurance from his considerate actions rather than heeding bits and pieces of overheard conversation. Strange as it seemed, she sensed no menace from him. But how accurately could

she read a complete stranger?

A few hours ago, fielding passes from Captain Smiley had been her biggest problem. Now, kidnapped by a dangerous, possibly violent, criminal held the top trouble spot. Along with a new brand of neurosis, whispering about how hot her captor looked. Surely, no sensible woman found anything thrilling in such a predicament. Yet, the shivers she tried to control arose only partly from fear. Hokey, or not, being ravished by a sexy pirate--one who took full advantage of her too weak and willing flesh, torturing her with incredible pleasure in the process--topped her favorite fantasies list.

Inevitably, confined in the small boat with the very sexy Razor, her thoughts centered on what a wonderfully marauding, ruthless, and totally irresistible pirate he made. The man captivated her imagination. Dominant lovers existed only in her head, not in her actual experience. Could reality compare to her dreams? What if it did? Would she miss out on the chance to live her most cherished fantasy simply because the guy was a little bossy?

Of course not!

Bossiness was a prime component of the sizzling attraction. As long as she remembered he was a real man--quite separate from one of her imaginary pirates, those too-good-to-be-reality men who fell instantly in love with her, then everything should be fine. She'd leave with fantastic memories and no reason for regrets.

Their location, anchored in a serene and very isolated lagoon added to her daring mood of disregarding the potential dangers of her situation. Though obviously a criminal--as long as she ignored his knocking her out initially, which she was willing to overlook--his treatment of her was well within pirate bounds. After all, even Captain James knocked out Lady Violet in the beginning of the Pirate's Captive.

In fact, now that she thought about it, Razor had loosened her bonds when she'd asked him to and he'd moved her with amazing strength and gentleness.

Besides, he kissed like her mouth held the secret of happiness while his body made hers impossibly erotic promises.

Best of all, she didn't need to make the decision. The pirate ravished, all she needed to do was protest convincingly. Then lay back, writhe seductively, and enjoy the plundering.

Gentle waves rocked the boat, soothing her. The sounds of water lapping gave an erotic backbeat, accompanying her steamy thoughts and bounding pulse.

Moonlight made pools of liquid silver on the restless rippling water. The sweet scents of tropical flora blended with the smells of the sea. Even more intoxicating were the aromas of coconut oil, sandalwood, and clean man, which emanated from her very own pirate, drugging her with every breath she drew.

Despite the heady atmosphere, she needed a teensy bit of reassurance. The element of real peril was ruining an otherwise lovely captivity. Did she dare trust him?

"Are you going to cut me?" Zara asked, trying for a cool detachment, but betraying too much about her nerves with her shaky voice.

Razor frowned at her for so long she worried the question had been a mistake. Then he turned his gaze away from her when he finally spoke. "No. Forget about Smiley. You don't need to worry about him."

I never did, but you--you could destroy me without even trying. "But, you're making arrangements for Captain Smiley--."

"Arrangements?" He frowned again.

Zara prodded delicately for more information. "You work for him, right?"

“Negotiations are open.” He dismissed the subject, moving his attention to something on the instrument panel.

The center of the console clicked open, startling her. He stroked her arm. A warm caress that set off a chain reaction of electric yearning.

He caught her chin, holding her head still. “I won’t do anything you don’t want me to do. At any time if you want me to stop--say the word and the game is over. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Zara squeaked. A million questions jangling in her head. “What game are we playing?” she asked, because it seemed the safest and the best place to start.

“Pirate and Captive,” he answered with an amused half-grin.

She liked the sound of that. “What’s the object of the game?”

“Your pleasure,” he answered easily.

An undertone to his smooth response had raised the fine hairs on the back of her neck.

Chapter Four

To avoid hitting his head on the low ceiling, Razor had to hunch over.

Ducking, Zara trailed behind him into the cabin.

Still not entirely reassured, she'd accepted her fate, for now. The situation had left her little choice. She was at his mercy. Or lack of it. The idea shouldn't excite her.

But, it did.

After clearing the hatchway, she straightened carefully. Finding she could stand comfortably, she relaxed a tiny bit.

He guided her to a built-in padded bench then backed away. "Wait here," he ordered with the easy confidence of man used to obedience.

She huffed, though secretly she liked his high-handed attitude. Besides, with her hands bound, limited visibility, and zero familiarity with her surroundings--sitting tight seemed like her smartest option.

Alone in the dark cabin, she shivered on the cool vinyl cushions, which were rapidly warming from contact with her bottom, and from skin-tightening anticipation.

She wondered how long he would keep her here, shamelessly hoping for hours of erotic torture. She wondered when he would return and what he would do next. She wondered what he was doing right now and wished she could see him.

The faint gleam of moonlight told her the hatchway remained open. Everything else was as dark as a pirate's heart. The blackness sharpened her other senses, but the only audible sound, the steady lapping of the ocean against the hull, offered no information. No smells, tastes, or textures enlightened her.

Time increased the tension until her nerves were stretched to a taut itchy awareness. Every inhale and exhale tightened her nipples and clenched the long muscles in her thighs.

A muffled snick jerked her attention. The rectangle of pallid light vanished into uniform darkness. A heartbeat later, the interior lit up like a used car lot. Blinking and peeking around her bound wrists reassured her. The only menace in the speedboat's small cabin was the tempting pirate. And she already craved him.

As her eyes adjusted to the brightness, she sat hypnotized by the deft movements of the large male body going about his business.

He paid no more attention to her than he spared for the persimmon-colored cushions or fire-engine-red hardware. The entire room was red. The effect was as if she'd been swallowed by some giant leviathan or been magically transported to a brothel. A darted peek at the ceiling showed solid red fiberglass, no mirrors. An argument for the ocean-monster explanation.

Distracted by the simple act of him stripping his tee shirt off, she nearly missed the whisper of rollers gliding. He crouched and disappeared into a miniature head.

Listening to the tinkle and splash of running water, which triggered a compelling need to use the hidden facilities. She amused herself by singing *If My Friends Could Only See Me Now* under her breath.

He emerged, working a small cherry-red towel over his water-glistened bronzed skin. And what magnificent skin it was. Naked and plainly aroused, she drank in the sight of pure

male temptation. Her mouth grew parched as all the moisture inside her body headed south to service a more urgent need.

Not giving her any chance to take advantage, he freed her hands and deposited her inside the tiny bathroom.

Gratitude, so strong she wanted to weep, filled her heart.

Hurriedly, she used the facilities. Then put a wet washcloth and some Ivory soap to work. She cleaned away her smeared eye makeup. Next, she washed her feminine folds and crevices thoroughly, hoping he would plunder her soon. She hesitated, but ultimately stepped back into the thong, settling the thin nylon strip between the cheeks of her bottom. The red lace triangle barely covered her mound. Once finished with her grooming, the compact bathroom offered limited entertainment.

Definitely time to re-enter the pirate's fiery red den. Shyness and doubt slowed her exit.

When she finally slid the stall door open, the cabin lights dimmed.

Then, turned off.

As Zara entered the cabin, swift, powerful arms caught and immobilized her, twisting her wrists behind her back. The sound of duct tape tearing split the darkness. In an instant, she found herself bound again.

Completely helpless, erotic anticipation whispered across her bare skin pebbling the exposed flesh.

"I smell soap. You washed your pussy for me didn't you?" Razor's words heated the side of her neck as he nibbled his way toward her shoulder.

"Yes," she breathed, hope rising along with her temperature.

He stepped back, breaking contact. "Do you want me to lick your pussy?"

"No, I ... I didn't want to offend you," she fumbled a totally lame explanation.

Suddenly he moved further away, leaving her miserably alone. At the same time she ached for his touch--she worried--unsure that she understood any of the rules of his version of Pirate and Captive.

"Spread your legs, wench!"

Her feet lagged in response to his command. A strong thigh thrust between hers, forcing her to give way. The boat rocked sharply to the port side. She bent her knees to keep her balance. Strong hands caught her waist steadying her--disorienting her.

For the first time, real fear permeated her erotic haze. This wasn't a safe fantasy. This was unpredictable. This was dangerous. This was alone with a powerful stranger.

Yet, nothing he'd done had really harmed her. She repeated her litany of reassurance. But, the mantra failed to calm her. She didn't know anything about him. What if he grew bored with making her melt with pleasure and moved on to other, more violent, games? The arousal plumping her feminine tissues ebbed as doubts crowded in, chilling her.

He'd promised her that one word would end the game instantly. Did she want the game to be over? Could she trust him?

The sounds of compartments opening and closing thrummed along nerve endings already frayed by tension. Smooth fabric covered her eyes, and then tightened. Faint rustles of cloth and a series of tugs and pulls against her hair accompanied the knotting of the material.

The blindfold increased her submissive status and gave her an odd reassurance. A slightly paler shade of blackness announced the lights were back on, ending her few moments of comfort.

The knife kissed the skin of her scant cleavage, not cutting her, merely chilling the

sensitive flesh. Her nipples sprang to attention. The elastic tube top of the dress was tugged downward, exposing the inner curves of her excited breasts to the air. The knife pulled at the thin fabric of her bodice again. The material parted further, exposing her tightly pearled nipples. The flat of the knife blade pushed the torn material aside, freeing her breasts completely.

“That’s better. I like to look at you,” he growled with approval.

She drug in a shallow breath. An invisible band constricted her chest, making it impossible to get enough oxygen. She began to feel a bit lightheaded.

“Sit there,” he ordered, nudging her in the direction he wanted her to go.

Instinctively, Zara stiffened, trying to break her fall. But with the restraints binding her arms, she wound up sprawled awkwardly on one of the boat’s built-in benches.

Rough hands carefully righted her. He stopped to caress her breasts and her thighs with intimate pets as he arranged her to his liking. She stayed rigid, willing herself not to respond to the electric tingle of his touch.

A featherlike stroke of her neck. Another along her ribs. A whisper across her lips. A barely there brush against the beaded tips of her breasts. Next, a gentle kneading of her thigh. Then, just as she began to relax, his hot breath teased her nipples.

All thoughts of easy pleasure evaporated in a jumble of erotic hungers. Every inch of her needy body begged to be ravished.

“So beautiful,” the sinful voice murmured as he lifted and arranged her facing him. Her legs spread open across his lap. The feat of strength was made even more impressive by the fact he wasn’t panting for air the way she was.

She’d been completely wrong about kidnapping not working as foreplay. Without a doubt, this was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to her.

She tried to remember Razor was a stranger--a dangerous criminal. But, he acted like a sexy modern day pirate and her body screamed much too loudly for satisfaction to allow room for any piddling reservations.

Arousal surged back in full pulsing glory, distilling her thoughts down to a single need for fulfillment. Now.

She gripped his outer thighs with the insides of hers, anchoring herself against his hair-roughened skin. His legs were as hard and unyielding as any deadly weapon.

He pinched her nipples lightly, rolling the hardened tips with wicked fingers and making her pussy drip, soaking the thin strip of the thong. She tried to slide forward, seeking friction for her empty, aching, slit.

Big hands clamped down on her thighs holding her immobile.

“Try that again and I’ll bind your legs too,” he promised. “And that would be a shame, because then I couldn’t do this.”

He mauled her bottom’s cheeks with tender kneading strokes, producing lavish wetness from the fountain of hunger whining between her legs. Anger and humiliation battled with excitement, firing her cheeks, filling her breasts, and short-circuiting her thoughts.

“Are you trying your best to obey me?” he questioned her sternly.

“Yes,” she panted, trembling with the effort required to stay still.

“Yes what?” he grumbled.

“Yes sir?” she whispered.

“Yes master,” he corrected. But, his tone held the fond tolerance a teacher has for a favorite pupil.

Her lips curved into a tentative smile.

“I believe you want to please me,” he petted her breasts approvingly before fastening his lips over one stiffened peak.

“I do, Master,” she sighed happily while his mouth pulled on her swollen breast and the rippling pleasure pulsed all the way down to her womb.

He moved his mouth to the other breast. “Then you deserve a reward.”

Her lips parted, but no air came out as she clung suspended on the cusp of a climax. Her muscles clenched, her pussy pulsed. Still, satisfaction danced just out of reach as he continued working on her breast, keeping her thighs spread wide. Not allowing any contact with her darkest, wettest, and neediest places.

“What do you want?” he asked.

His question sent a shockwave rippling through her over-taxed pleasure circuits.

A hundred requests jostled for front and center. Everything. Anything.

And why did she have to ask? He was supposed to ravish her. There was absolutely no point in being violated against her will if she asked him to do it.

After all, Violet never asked Captain James for anything, except to let her go. But, Captain James was smart enough to know she didn't really mean it.

“Let me go,” she demanded convincingly.

He gently removed her from his lap.

The cruel bastard. He doesn't know a damn thing about how to play Pirate and Captive. This whole game setup sounded too good to be true. And to think she worried about trusting him! Modern men were worthless.

“Take off the blindfold and the tape,” she snapped, thoroughly disgusted with him and even more so with herself.

“Sorry, Sweetheart those aren't part of the game.”

The boat dipped as he climbed out of the cabin. Then the door clacked down. For a moment she sat still, stunned by his departure. Then she tried to rub off the blindfold.

The attempt only messed up her hair. She felt her way to the drawers he'd opened earlier and blindly searched by touch for something sharp enough to cut the duct tape. Her bound hands were too clumsy to manage a knife--even if she'd been able to identify one. So, she tried sawing the tape against the corner of the open drawer. The bonds didn't weaken at all. Stubbornly, she worked at the restraints, fuming with temper and frustration.

A clicking and a stirring of the air warned her of the hatchway's opening. A few seconds later, the door shut with final clunk. Despite the fact she couldn't see him--she felt him.

Razor was back.

Ryder marched Zara away from the drawer where she'd been working on the duct tape.

He checked her wrists. She'd bruised herself. Laying her on her stomach, he severed the tape and rubbed the bruised flesh with ice. She didn't fight him. For some reason, her passiveness bothered him more than when she yipped defiance at him.

He'd stepped out of the cabin to let the dark and her helplessness make her more pliable. Finding her working on her bonds surprised him. She'd shown more grit than he'd expected from her.

He knew she wanted his domination, but she refused to ask for what she craved. Lack of patience was his biggest weakness. Right up there alongside a truly submissive woman.

Now, he had to call on the perseverance he used to endure undercover work. The pressure escalated because he didn't know how much time he would have with her. His plans for her slim body and that carnal mouth kept growing. The sooner she gave him clear consent

the better. But, before that could happen, he needed to win her trust.

If she stopped and thought about it for ten seconds, she would realize that she was safe with him. But, she wasn't thinking. She was reacting, whether from fear or from arousal. What he needed was a way to allay her fears while increasing her desire until she willingly submitted.

Zara felt him rubbing ice on her abraded wrists. Determinedly, she ignored the thrill of arousal. Why waste her strength fighting him when escape was impossible? She submitted passively to his touch. But, she couldn't avoid breathing in the heady scent of his nearness. She endured the moist warmth of his lips on her neck.

True. He held her arms loosely, but she wasn't fooled. If she struggled then he would overpower her instantly. To her shame, a frisson of fresh excitement hummed through her core at the thought.

He lifted her effortlessly, laying her gently on a padded surface.

While she drifted into a sensual haze from his wicked caresses, he'd made plans and taken action.

First, her right arm was pulled away from her body, a leather cuff snugged on her wrist, and then fastened to the hull. She tugged on the binding, finding it confining, but comfortable.

She offered no resistance.

Then her left arm was cuffed and tethered to the opposite wall.

Now, she really was helpless.

Razor slid the knife between her breasts and the rest of the red dress split open. It took only one good tug for him to dispense with the ruined garment.

Though, the small cabin was warm, practically steamy, goose bumps spread along both of her arms, and then across her chest.

Razor captured one of her feet.

Too late, she kicked and struggled. Undeterred by her small rebellion, he restrained her ankles, securing each of them in turn to the immovable bulkhead. The restraints allowed some play--not enough to afford any resistance or escape.

Arousal sizzled along every nerve ending in her body.

She was naked, save for the blindfold and her very skimpy red thong. Surely, the ravishing would start any second now.

The knife rested against her right thigh, freezing her. He left it there while he reached over her, and then lifted her head. He tucked the pillow under her, relieving her hair from the pull of the blindfold. The steel blade sliced through one side band of her thong, the other side was quickly dispensed. The small garment came off with a gentle tug.

A male growl, she hoped signaled frustration, was Razor's only reaction.

His rough hands caressed her exposed breasts with shocking tenderness and uncanny skill. She tried to hold back the moans of pleasure, but they bubbled out of her throat as she arched into his hands.

"Are you ready to begin the game?" His voice croaked much rougher than his hands.

"Pirate and Captive?" she asked, too eagerly.

"Yeah."

She pretended to consider the question as if she could think or had any choice in the matter. "Tell me about the rules."

Rules? Was she freakin' crazy? Pirates don't play by the rules. Only one rule counted. She had to consent or else they couldn't play.

Ryder took a minute to study the generous mouth talking nonsense. Very nice. The silk

tie hid her pretty eyes. It also heightened her other senses, and that was the point. Long limbs looked even more beautiful cuffed in supple black leather. It had been a long time since he'd used the restraints. His cock throbbed way past ready. He needed to jack off soon. Or maybe, if she asked nicely, he would let her give him a blowjob.

When they finally fucked, he wanted it to last a long time.

Her nipples kept pouting at him, begging for attention. He ignored her question and concentrated on tormenting the pretty tits with the diva nipples. Small and firm, each was tan except for a tiny triangle of vanilla skin with a ripe cherry topping. Flicking his thumbs over both tips at the same time made her whimper.

He loved the sound and repeated the gesture, alternating it with small pinches, and then he fastened his mouth over one rigid peak and feasted.

She arched and groaned, pressing against him, ending the silly talk about rules.

He left the first breast and placed his mouth on the second, loving her responsiveness. Holding his own needs in hard check as he set about driving her crazy.

Technically, Zara had not consented to the pirate rules game. However, he wasn't discouraged. He had only begun to persuade her.

He pulled back, blowing on the glistening peaks. She shivered in response--her high breasts quivered enticingly. Then he leaned further back and enjoyed the visual richness spread before him.

Nothing else compared to the erotic sight of a beautiful woman blindfolded, bound in black leather, and completely submissive. His eyes traveled down from her perfect tits to the dip of a belly button, on to the hollow of her taut belly, and even lower to the rectangular patch of downy hair decorating the top of her mound. The groomed thatch was raw, classy, and in-your-face sexy. A description, which summed up his captive.

Caressing her lightly, he started with the flower-petal soft skin of her inner ankles. He varied the pressure of his touch from butterfly kiss to medium massage, working with both hands and alternating between legs. When he arrived at her inner thighs, the narrow strip of dark hair was damp and the sweet-musky smell of an aroused woman teased his nose.

He used his thumbs to part her outer lips, exposing her secrets. Her clit was so plump and ready that it almost nudged him. He took great care to avoid touching it as he licked his way toward her entrance. Her hips flexed and he held them firmly while continuing his tongue massage. When she moaned in frustration, he drug his mouth away.

"Are you ready to begin the game?" he rasped.

"No," Zara whimpered.

He crawled away from the sweet body screaming yes.

She whimpered again.

But, he wouldn't ask her for consent. Not this soon.

"You look overheated," he commented, forcing a smooth drawl. It took more effort than he wanted to admit to keep his tone casual. "You're already naked. Now, what can I do to cool you off? Maybe--."

He leaned in then blew a stream of warm air across her ripe sex. Her hips flexed. He rewarded her with a quick flick of his tongue across her clit.

"Razor!" she cried his name, but nothing more.

He locked his jaw in frustration and left.

Yanking on pants, he paced the deck, seeking to regain control. The damn stubborn woman refused to ask for what she obviously wanted. She'd already held out much longer than

he expected. A chuckle emerged as he thought about her whimpered 'no'. That had cost her. She was burning up for him, balanced on the edge of a climax. Yet, she stubbornly clung to her rape and pillage fantasy.

Hell of a mess, he liked fun and games as much as the next guy, especially this game. But he needed to find a way to break their impasse.

Zara didn't think Razor left the cabin, but she couldn't be sure. She tried to listen. But her panting and her pounding heart made so much noise she couldn't hear much of anything.

Then the padding slanted under her as he climbed onto the bunk.

Cold and wet circled her nipple, widening over the outer curve of her breast and back again. The strokes contracting into tighter spirals, so chilling her nipples hardened almost painfully. He repeated the same slow ice cube torture on the other breast.

The cube traveled between her peaks. So slowly, the ice stung her heated skin as it passed. The rapidly melting cube slid lower. The journey stopped for a moment, and then resumed. He had replaced the melting cube with a fresh one. As the ice slid even lower, anticipation sang along every nerve ending, adding fresh urgency to her already high level of desperate excitement.

The ice never even paused at her steaming pussy.

The deliberate omission made her want to scream with frustration. He skimmed down the tops of her thighs, over her knees, and paused at her ankles to replace the ice again. And then he traced a new damp trail of erotic torture up the other leg.

After setting aside the ice cube, he unfastened one hand's cuff. Before she'd fully registered what he'd done, he refastened it to the same device where her other hand was tethered.

Immediately her fingers felt for a buckle or snap. There wasn't enough time to work out the puzzle of the restraints before her ankles were fastened together.

His head was close to hers. She felt his body heat and his breath on each exhale. His lips touched hers. A gentle, passing kiss, making her yearn for more.

Delicately, his tongue followed the inner edges of her smile. She softened, opened, and willed him to take her mouth--take everything as she melted under his tender invasion. The restraints ebbed away from her thoughts. There was only room for a single burning need--to be this man's captive.

Why didn't he take her? Why was he so cruel?

"Tell me what you want," he tempted her with his seductive voice.

Zara begged him. "I just want to please you, Master."

"Liar!" Ryder unfastened the ties that held her to the bulkhead with quick jerky tugs

She felt his fury. His loss of control was both frightening and arousing.

Whatever the rules of the game had been--they had just changed.

Zara removed the blindfold, meeting his gaze. Stripped of her clothes and her defenses, she gathered her dwindling courage and offered him the only thing she had left.

The truth.

"I want you to--you know--." Her voice sank lower with the weight of her shame. "I want you to rape me."

Chapter Five

Razor had actually flinched when Zara had finally found the nerve to ask him to rape her. Her hopes gurgled and sank to the bottom of the lagoon. In that one moment of truth, she'd lost the chance to live her cherished fantasy with the most perfect pirate she'd ever imagined. Now, she had nothing.

Even low-life, lying, cheating Jason had been more than willing to have forcible sex with her. Because, only then did she have a chance of achieving orgasm.

Temper surged and she balled her fists impotently, searching for something suitably devastating to say next.

"Real men don't rape," he said flatly.

Zara heard the disgust and the finality in his tone. It was her turn to flinch. And she did. He might as well have called her a disgusting pervert.

She stretched her neck regally, pretending a dignity and a confidence that she didn't feel. "Whatever, you don't have a lot of room to criticize my preferences."

She lifted one ankle still bound by a supple leather cuff to emphasize her point. The bonds were hot stuff, not that she'd admit it in a million years.

"Sorry," he said stiffly. "This isn't negotiable."

"Why?" she asked, and then held her breath. She was crazy for asking and still unable to stop hoping for an answer she'd like.

Razor stayed quiet for so long that her neck curved downward in regret.

When he finally began speaking, his voice sounded as if he had swallowed broken glass. "In high school I was the original geek, thick glasses, too tall for my clothes, and skinny."

She flashed a look of disbelief at him.

He laughed. "Thanks for that look, Sweetheart. It's true. Sorry, I don't have my high school yearbook to prove it. Everything changed my junior year. I had eye surgery to correct my vision. I added some muscle, and started to fill out. I won a starting position on the basketball team. For the first time in my life, girls were interested."

Again, he paused.

Zara leaned closer eager to hear more. She related to his story all too well. She'd been five foot six by the start of middle school and she'd kept shooting taller like the corn in Kansas. Painfully thin, her parents had had her evaluated for anorexia--a complete joke. In those days, she ate so much that gluttony was her guiltiest secret. She definitely knew how it felt to be gawked at as if she were a sideshow freak.

"I didn't handle the sudden attention well," he admitted gruffly.

She heard the pain under the words and tipped her head, listening even more intently.

"Heather came along and she was everything an awkward teenage boy dreamed of--a perfect blonde Barbie. And she wanted to play bondage games with me.

Discrimination wasn't a part of my vocabulary. When she wanted forever, I laughed. It was the wrong response. I'm not proud of hurting her feelings."

As Zara watched, the skin across his cheekbones tightened, making the laugh lines at the corners of his eyes paler against his deep tan.

Despite a pinch of jealousy over the perfect Heather, she wanted him to continue. “What happened after that?”

“She cried to Daddy that I’d raped her. It was a damn lie. She’d been more than willing. Hell, she’d been the instigator in the games. Charges were filed against me by the District Attorney. Eventually the accusations were dropped. By then it was too little, too late.

The alumni association had my scholarship rescinded. I lost my spot on the team, my friends disappeared, and the cute girls looked at me as if I’d suddenly grown fangs and howled at the full moon.”

“But it was lie! I can’t believe everyone just let her ruin your life.” Her heart raged for the unfairly ruined boy.

Ryder’s eyes snapped to Zara, startled by her vehemence.

She sat on her folded knees with her small fists balled, ready to defend him from wounds incurred in a dozen years ago.

An unfamiliar feeling seeped into his chest. But, he steeled himself against the warmth. The stupid college student didn’t even exist in this reality.

Automatically, he retreated, distancing himself from her. The wounded boy had no connection to Razor Brinks’ life. Sharing too much of his personal history with her was a dangerous mistake.

“Is that why you turned to a life of crime?” she asked softly.

He wanted to deny it. Swallowing the impulse to defend himself, which he knew was beyond stupid, burned like acid going down his throat.

The false accusation had been a pivotal moment, leading directly to whom he’d become--who he was now. Ironically, it had led him to a career serving justice.

However, he couldn’t tell her any of this. His status as a criminal was exactly what she needed to believe. Razor Brinks was a badass--an amoral bastard.

He ignored the prickle of conscience, sinking himself into his cover role as Razor. He aimed an unrepentant grin in her direction. “Yeah, Sweetheart. It wasn’t the only reason--but it got the ball rolling.”

She nodded--too seriously. He caught her hand and brushed a reverent kiss across her knuckles. A small truth and a silent apology for all the necessary lies he’d told her.

“It’s never too late to try a different road,” she murmured.

“It’s too late for me,” he said. More bitterness than he had intended leaked into his tone.

Zara shook her head in disagreement. But, fortunately, she didn’t pursue the subject of redeeming him.

“I’m sorry I asked you to--you know. Now, I understand why you don’t want to do it. But, it’s the only way I can--.” She swallowed hard and her voice faded to nothing.

“You need to be raped to climax?” Blatant skepticism coated his words.

She nodded, with her cheeks burning and her eyes riveted on her lap.

Forcing himself to relax, he drawled. “I don’t think you’ve ever had what you need.”

“What’s that?” she asked softly, the pulse at the base of her neck beating faster.

“To be dominated by a man who knows what the hell he’s doing. Are you willing to trust me to take care of you--to put yourself in my hands?” His need to claim her, to make her his slave grew stronger and harder to control as he waited for her answer.

“Do you need to have written consent? Or is it enough that I just say it?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Say it.”

She bent at the waist, folding herself into a compact oval with her hands flat on the berth.

The posture was almost prayer-like--completely submissive. Her head was tucked tight into her knees, giving her voice a muffled quality that tugged at his non-existent heartstrings. "I surrender to you, Captain Brinks. My body is yours to command."

He spoke harshly, hiding his gratitude melting his heart. "From now on you will address me as master, Slave."

"Yes, Master," she said obediently, retaining her tractable posture as a good slave should.

For her sake, he regretted she didn't have a dress he could tear off again. Ripping off her clothing seemed like a critical feature of her pirate fantasy. Instead, he fastened a leather slave collar around her neck.

"You may sit up, but don't look at me," he warned her sharply.

Zara obeyed him in a way that made him swell with anticipation. She unfolded gracefully, keeping her eyes trained steadily downward. Her ripe cherry nipples were as hard as two red buttons.

"Thank you, Master."

Quickly Ryder stripped off his pants.

Zara waited patiently with her eyes demurely focused on the mat. However, he watched the rapid pulse in the hollow of her throat, her parted lips, and her erect nipples, all of which told him she was aroused too.

Ryder arranged himself with his legs crossed at the ankle on the cabin's built-in loveseat.

"Your tits please me, Slave," he said more roughly than he'd hoped to sound. "You may sit on to my lap facing me and I will suck on them."

She scampered to do his bidding and he bit back a smile. Her legs snaked around his waist and her arms encircled his neck in a posture of perfect trust. His cock thrummed against the damp outer lips of her pussy. She was tall enough for him to fuck her and suck her breasts at the same time--a fond, but never realized fantasy.

Now that he had her full cooperation, he didn't need to hurry. He focused all his attention on the eager breasts begging for his expert torture.

He fastened on one peak, biting lightly and sucking. And then biting again.

Almost immediately, she cried out, her hips jerked futilely--her pussy grew more lavishly wet. He lifted her, positioning his erection between them. Letting her ride the hard outer edge of his cock--rubbing her slick folds against him.

She came in seconds, screaming his name.

The rush from her satisfaction, from knowing he was the first man to conquer her in this way surged through his veins, pleasing him immensely and arousing him further.

While she continued to pulse, he began working his painfully stiff erection inside her tight passage. Her inner muscles milked his overheated cock with surprisingly strong contractions. By pressing hard on the base of his erection, he postponed his own rapidly building climax. She took a long time to finish.

He held himself still, needing to prolong the pleasure--for her--for him. Buried to the root inside her pulsing sheath, her pleasure rippled through her delicate muscles, massaging his rigid cock over and over and over again.

Her incredible orgasm extended, giving him a sweet-hot thrill, more erotic than anything he'd ever known. Suspended between arousal and climax, time elongated and swept him toward a new level of ecstasy.

When at last she quieted, he stood, easily supporting her weight.

* * * *

A strange thing happened shortly after Razor fastened the leather collar around her neck. It gave Zara a feeling of security. It made no sense, but it was very real. The twin sensations of being completely helpless and utterly in his control liberated her incredibly. As his slave, she had no inhibitions and no responsibilities--except for pleasing her master.

As Razor carried her, the only assistance she rendered, wrapping her legs around his hips, added movement to the wondrously thick, hard, hot cock filling her. Stretching her. Thrilling her. Amazing her. Incredibly, her orgasm had begun building from the moment she bowed in obedience to her master.

At first she'd been sure that she was merely experiencing a stronger than usual arousal. But, it built so fast that she'd spun into a climax before she'd had a chance to worry about not finding her release.

Even now, aftershocks from the first mind-expanding orgasm continued to shudder through her as he positioned her on the counter and began pounding into her core. With her legs splayed and hips held in his powerful vice-like grip, she was unable to do anything, except revel in his assault.

To her stunned delight, the aftershocks took on new power and strength until another, unprecedented and unexpected, consciousness-stealing orgasm rocked her from the roots of her hair to the soles of her feet, sending waves of bliss cascading through every cell of her being.

When awareness crept back in, Razor's growls of completion joined with strange animal noises. She realized, with some embarrassment, that the wild sounds came from her throat. She'd never considered multiple orgasms a possibility. Since, she'd frequently failed to achieve even the first one. She wrapped around him tightly--elated and dazed.

Too soon, he unwound her trembling legs and stepped away. But, when she tried to close her thighs, he blocked her. Humiliation warred with an unsuspected exhibitionist streak as she considered the consequences of rebellion.

She remained exposed and vulnerable as he dampened a washcloth and used it to clean his softening penis. He rinsed the cloth, and then tended to her as matter-of-factly as if he were a doctor bathing a wound.

"You're a juicy little treat, aren't you, Slave?" There was nothing clinical in his tone.

She tuned in and turned on to the absolute possession, which lay beneath his words. She nodded--wanting to please him though she wasn't sure he expected an answer.

"So wet, so eager, so responsive--how long had it been for you?"

"A few months," she whispered. Forever, she thought, touching her collar and holding on to the pride, which, oddly, came from her new position as his sex-slave.

Razor's possession insulated her from the bad memories and long nights that she'd wasted weeping for a man who'd never made her truly his.

He tossed the washcloth aside, but continued to stroke and knead the inside of her thighs. Her eyes drifted shut, but she felt him studying her exposed flesh, making her self-conscious and crazy with desire all at the same time.

"You want to please me don't you, Slave?" Razor asked while he retied the blindfold over Zara's eyes, smoothing her hair out of the way.

"Yes Master," she agreed. Though, her mind was still reeling with sensory overload and way too muddled to form opinions.

A loud pop startled her, and then something fizzed.

Razor's firm hand tipped her back while his other hand pushed her legs further apart. His confident touch thrilled her as he rearranged her limbs to suit his preference.

Every part of her sang with greedy hope for more rapture.

But, he moved further away rather than closer.

When he returned, he touched only her mouth. The heat from his nearness shimmered over her. To her disappointment, he came no nearer, concentrating determinedly on the kiss.

Soon she forgot wanting more. He sucked her lower lip inside his mouth, and then his hungry tongue teased and tangled with hers.

All the while, the crisp-sweet-tart taste of champagne tempted her into sucking on him with blatant hunger.

He broke contact for a moment. Returning seconds later, to let her suck his tongue again and swallow more champagne from his mouth.

Intoxication, beyond anything from the bubbly drink, buzzed through her veins, making her wild, and wanton, with desire.

The next time he broke the kiss, icy bubbles raced over her breasts and spilled between her legs. Her breathing constricted to shallow pants as he licked and sucked the bubbling wine clinging to her curves, hollows, and folds.

Both agonizingly, and deliciously, conscious of her exposed position, Zara remained pliant. The blindfold robbed her of any ability to read his expression. The bonds and collar remained, reminding her of her submissive status.

He spread her legs wider. The spilled champagne made sweet trails tingling from her nipples, rolling down her belly, and seeping through the small rectangle of hair over her mound.

The very powerlessness of her position acted like an aphrodisiac. Strangely, helplessness allowed her to experience new levels of sensual joy.

A wickedly skillful mouth fastened over one taut nipple.

“Oh yes, please.” She pressed forward, seeking more.

“Maybe like this?” His teeth nibbled gently on the tight peak.

“Yes!” she pleaded for more of the exquisite pain.

“Or maybe this would bring you more pleasure,” he murmured following a champagne stream to her belly button and then lower.

At last, dipping his facile tongue into her slit.

“Oh God,” she prayed fervently for him to continue.

Work roughened fingers joined the talented mouth, smoothing her plump folds for better access. His tongue rimmed the edges of her pussy, and then thrust inside.

She arched her back, encouraging him with wordless whimpers of delight.

His busy tongue moved on, licking the champagne bubbles from each crevice. Two fingers pressed inside her, stretching and stroking a secret knot of nerve endings into frenzied lust. The stiffened pointy tip of his tongue circled her clit as she wriggled.

Helpless, exposed, and totally aroused, she begged mindlessly. “Please, please, please.”

At last, his tongue flickered across the distended bud and she stiffened as ecstasy cascaded through her in a glorious burst of fireworks.

Licking and petting her with exquisite care, he prolonged the pleasure until she was limp with bone-deep satisfaction.

She became convinced that she would die of sheer bliss. It was impossible to feel any better than she did and still live.

Then Razor moved closer. Slowly, he filled her with his rigid cock, reaching new erogenous zones and providing her with fresh thrills. Her level of satisfaction rose with each inch of his invasion.

Finally, he was settled impossibly deep, stroking with maddening control inside her. Her inner fires burned hot, and then hotter still. Until all thoughts ceased and she melted into pure, hot, explosive ecstasy. Exhausted by the pleasure and the emotional intensity, she slept.

When she woke, the blindfold was gone and he was reattaching the wrist restraints. She was positioned face down, on her knees with her breasts pressed flat against the thin mattress. A tender, rough-skinned hand stroked the curves of her bottom. Then moved away.

In no time, the ankle cuffs were efficiently tethered to the bulkhead. He applied soothing jelly to her exposed vulva. He had not expressly forbidden her to look at him and the blindfold was off.

Peeking backwards gave her a heart-stopping view of Razor. His muscles rippled with tension, his cock bobbed, thick and heavy as he applied the cooling lotion carefully to her slippery channel.

In those few breath-stealing seconds, the image of his aroused body etched into her mind, forming an indelible print.

The restraints limited her movements. One of his strong hands immobilized her hips, adding to her excitement.

Without taking his eyes away from her bottom, he positioned the glistening tip of his cock against the outer lips of her feminine core and gradually surged inside, giving her body time to soften and welcome him. The need for the lotion became clear as her stinging passage stretched to accommodate his hard cock.

Razor's other hand rimmed the sensitive flesh where they joined, making her moan with an exquisite pleasure heightened further by the edge of pain. Then his fingers slid over her clit, barely grazing the aroused nub. Again and again he teased her with the lightest caresses as he slowly stroked in and out of her sore slit, making her gasp and whimper for the fulfillment he denied her.

"You're my prisoner, naked, and cuffed to the wall. You're completely helpless, my personal slave-girl, existing only to give me pleasure. Beg me to fuck you. Or I'll stop," he threatened her.

"Please fuck me, Master," she complied eagerly.

Razor pinched her clit lightly, and then shortened his strokes, pounding into her harder and faster. She shuddered--her feminine muscles contracting rapidly as the world exploded around her, shattering all awareness.

Hours later, she woke, shaking. Her cheeks wet with tears. But, nothing remained of the nightmare, except a feeling of devastating loss.

"Breathe, Sweetheart. That's it. In and out--nice and slow." The words in her ear came from far away, uttered in a melted chocolate voice capable of solving all her problems. But, not one she recognized in her half-dream fog.

A slight twist brought her face to face with Razor, the beautiful stranger right out of her personal x-rated version of the Pirate's Captive.

For a moment, she stilled warily, unsure just what was real and what was hands down the absolutely best fantasy she'd ever imagined.

A glance confirmed the black leather cuffs still encircled her wrists and ankles. Though, she was no longer tethered to the wall. Apparently, the last few hours had really happened. She was the dangerous Razor's prisoner.

Scrubbing her face with her palms, the one bright spot in her new peril was instantly clear, she could quit worrying about finding her inner vixen.

Chapter Six

Razor stood close--not touching, just watching. His gaze so intense it both excited and alarmed her. There was something vaguely threatening about being the focus of so much barely leashed power. A twenty-first-century scent of sandalwood blended with salt water and clean man, offsetting the scruffy ancient jeans and the once black tee shirt.

Zara smiled tentatively at him.

“You okay?” he asked. His expression serious but his eyes were full of devilish glints. She nodded, cautiously waiting for some kind of cue to tell her what game they played.

“Great,” he squeezed her arm gently. “How about some coffee and a little breakfast?”

“Yes please, Master.”

He winked at her, with his crooked grin.

But she caught a hint of something more complex and more dangerous underneath his wicked rogue demeanor.

“You can call me Razor. We aren’t playing the game.”

She swallowed a lump of disappointment and started undoing the leather cuff on her right wrist, doing her best to act as if she handled this kind of encounter all the time. “Great. Do you have something I could wear?”

Rough hands, which she remembered with sudden staggering clarity, captured her wrists and made short work of removing the leather straps. With the restraints off, she felt much more exposed. She shook off the feeling, reminding herself that while last night was cataclysmic for her--for Razor it was just one more night of erotic games.

He offered her a well-worn sweatshirt with Duke printed in navy blue letters against a grey background.

They weren’t her best colors. But, the naked can’t be fussy. She pulled it over her head and poked her arms down the sleeves. The top covered her from neck to mid-thigh. Grabbing her beach bag, she slipped into the head. Immediately, removing the sweatshirt to apply sunscreen and tug on her bikini. Once dressed, even though barely decent, she felt better. The shirt skimmed her modest curves, draping over her so loosely that the presence or absence of under garments hardly mattered. Except to her.

If there was a hidden shower in the small bathroom, she had no idea of how it worked. She set about making the best of things with the spit-sized sink, a washcloth, and soap.

After she’d cleaned up, she found breakfast and Razor waiting in the main cabin. The selection of iced sweet coffee, a basket of fresh muffins and whipped honey-butter impressed her. Cold cereal was as ambitious as she got first thing in the morning.

When the muffins were nothing but crumbs and the honey-butter a smear in the bottom of the bowl, she remembered her manners. “Thank you for a lovely breakfast. The muffins were marvelous--they tasted freshly baked.”

Razor shrugged off her compliment. “I shop everyday, eating out gets old. Here, these are for you.” He handed her a new toothbrush and a sample tube of toothpaste.

When she emerged from the head for the second time, all evidence of breakfast had vanished. She waited for Razor to reappear, grateful for the food and the toothbrush, but

nervous about what would happen next.

She was a good swimmer, all she had to do was get to the top deck, and then she could dive in and swim to shore. The hatchway was closed. A quick examination didn't reveal the secret to opening it. Before she had a chance for further investigation, the door lifted and Razor stepped back into the cabin, his wet hair combed straight back.

He moved briskly. "Time to get you settled."

Settled, she soon learned, was a euphemism for bound and gagged.

"See you later." He sketched the same salute he'd given her in the bar before he disappeared last night. The molded door opened for him.

Well sure, he had the remote control. Her chances of wrestling it from him were slim to non-existent. Zara glared at his great looking butt as it headed for the hatchway.

Once there, he turned toward her and raised an eyebrow. "Sorry about the gag, but I can't trust you to keep quiet."

His business-like tone just made her madder. The door clicked shut behind him, leaving her fuming. And locked inside the glowing red cell.

Then the lights went out.

Time was hard to measure in the dark with nothing for company except the sound of her breathing, her heartbeat, and the distant rumble of the engines. She was surprised how well insulated the cabin was, the roar of the motors was muffled to a purr and the pounding of the waves was actually lulling.

Immobilized and tired, her anger ebbed away and she dozed. Voices woke her, but the sound was too muted to make out actual words. The sounds drifted further away and sleep reclaimed her. She didn't fight the drowsiness. She needed to be well-rested to escape.

The next time the boat stopped, she woke still halfway inside a frightening and erotic dream, featuring a dangerous pirate determined to kill her with relentless pleasure.

"Time for lunch, Sleeping Beauty," Razor spoke from the deck, calling her in a sexy drawl that recalled the most disturbing parts of her dream.

To her chagrin, the gag and the restraints had been removed while she'd slept through the opportunity for freedom. With as much poise as she could manage, Zara sauntered up and out to the aft deck.

Her captor had organized a picnic lunch with Cuban pressed sandwiches, plantain chips, and fresh pineapple spears. A bottle of chilled mineral water waited across from him at the place he'd set for her.

Breakfast was a distant memory. The lunch looked luscious and she was hungry. His thoughtfulness in providing food softened some of her resentment over the restraints and gag. Besides, she could always escape later.

Ryder smiled appreciatively as Zara strolled toward him like a princess on a state visit.

She waited until he'd bitten into his sandwich before uncapping her water and drinking a third of the bottle. Then she took a ridiculously small bite of her lunch. Her eyes drifted almost shut as she chewed the spicy combination of ham, roast pork, salami, Swiss cheese, and condiments all pressed together inside the dense bread.

The next bite of his sandwich tasted even better because of the way she relished each mouthful of hers.

After she'd devoured the first half of her sandwich, she eyed the other half with longing. But, she didn't touch it. Instead, she nibbled three chips and one spear of pineapple.

The suspense got to him after a few minutes.

“Are you done with that?” he asked.

“Help yourself.” She moved the sandwich closer to him.

“Thanks.” He dispensed with the treat in a couple of bites.

She sipped at her water. “Do you own this boat?”

The question caught him by surprise. He didn’t and he wouldn’t. Half a million for a gas hog wasn’t his style.

But, El Diablo, which was actually on loan from the DEA, was part of his cover. Ryder had already told her too much about himself. Facts, which didn’t fit with Razor’s pirate lifestyle.

“Yeah,” he answered her question, curious about where this conversation was going.

She frowned in concentration. “You could sell it for a great deal of money. Enough for you to go back to college and get your degree. What was your major?”

“Basketball and cheerleaders,” he chuckled, hiding how touched he was that Zara wanted to redeem Razor’s worthless life.

“Seriously, I want to know.” She aimed green witch’s eyes at him.

Damned if he didn’t tell her. “Liberal Arts with a minor in anthropology.” Then because his answer sounded so geeky, he explained. “I was pre-law.”

“At Duke University?”

He should have seen that one coming. She was wearing his old college shirt.

“Yeah, well they offered the best scholarship.”

“Are you going to let a little thing like being accused of a crime that you didn’t even commit ruin the rest of your life?”

“Hey, lighten up, Slave-girl. Who’s calling who ruined?”

She didn’t back off. “Have you ever been convicted of a felony?”

Instead of answering, he ignored her question, since it was the kind of surly thing Razor would do. He asked, “Are you going to eat anything else?”

“No thank you, I’m fine. The lunch was delightful. We need to finish the discussion about your arrest record,” she said with undiminished determination.

He could be stubborn too. “Sure you don’t want some more pineapple?”

“So, you do have a felony record,” she muttered to herself. “That rules out law school. But, there are plenty of other jobs you could do.”

“Maybe,” he teased her, needing to get her off this subject. “But, do they come with fast boats, tropical lagoons, and slave-girls?”

“I doubt it,” she admitted with a small smile.

“Forget about it then,” he said with mock disgust, much too aware of the dangerous territory reality represented. He wanted her back in the safe haven of their erotic game.

“I need to brush my teeth,” Zara excused herself coolly, slipping into the cabin.

Razor let out a sigh of relief. Wanting to freshen her breath was a good sign. He cleaned up the picnic remains enthusiastically, stowing everything into one of the boat’s built-in compartments.

No sooner than he’d finished policing the deck, it started to rain. A typically island downpour of warm water gushed from a passing cloud.

Zara joined him on deck, tipping her head back and reveling in the tropical shower. She stripped off the already soaked sweatshirt, revealing the bikini.

The scrap of fabric didn’t cover much of her assets, tempting him with reminders of how good it felt to sink deep inside her slim body.

Her arms rose as she combed through her hair in a gesture so elementally female, new

warmth started in his chest and moved lower.

Watching her made him think about brushing his teeth. It would take him one second to grab the shampoo while he was there.

He wanted to work the lather into her hair, let the rain rinse her, and then strip off the bikini. Stepping through the open hatch, he went straight to the head. After brushing his teeth, he snagged the shampoo he'd come for.

Then he slowed down. It would be much smarter to simply hand her the bottle.

With a jolt, he realized he hadn't turned on his cell phone today. He swore silently at his carelessness. She'd become a dangerous distraction. He couldn't afford to lose his edge.

It was one thing to amuse himself with a round of Pirate and Captive for a few hours last night. It was completely unacceptable for him to lose focus today.

He stormed out of the head, the shampoo forgotten, pausing only long enough to retrieve his phone from the charger and thumb it on.

No missed calls--thank God. He'd been lucky. However, he needed to stay sharp. Slipping the phone into his swim shorts pocket, he strode out to the deck.

Zara was gone.

Ryder swore out loud this time, tossing the cursed cell phone onto the captain's seat. He replaced it with his survival knife before dashing to the back of the boat. He spotted Zara cutting through the water like a dolphin. She was already less than dozen yards from shore.

Wasting no more time, he dove in and swam strongly for the beach. But, it was another example of too little--too late.

By the time he hit the sand, her footprints had disappeared into the jungle. And then he followed too fast, losing her trail.

A few hundred yards due north was a wildlife preserve access road. If she made it that far, he'd lost her. To the west was a popular marina, complete with restaurants, and tourists--only a mile and a half away.

Earlier, he deliberately took the long way around the island to mask how close they were to civilization. Smiley's ship had been sailing toward the dock. If Zara made it to the marina, and Smiley saw her unharmed then Ryder's cover was blown.

Worse, she was barefoot, wearing nothing except a bikini, which afforded minimal protection in a jungle containing at least four varieties of poisonous snakes.

His heart leapt with fear as he imagined Zara's peril too vividly. It took every ounce of discipline to stop and spend the time required to patiently examine the wild grape and ferns choking the tropical forest floor.

Slow seconds ticked by before he finally marked her trail.

A shriek of sheer terror put an end to his careful tracking. He crashed through the undergrowth straight toward the sound. Clearing a rotting log, he caught site of Zara.

She stood as rigid as a statue. Her eyes locked on a Bushmaster. Its lethal head wove--ready to strike.

The knife leapt to his hand. He covered the remaining distance with no memory of moving. Snatching the big reptile behind its triangular head, he decapitated the writhing snake.

Zara's eyes rounded with fright--her face pale and tight.

He examined her for evidence of a wound. "Did you get bit?"

She shook her head no, tears slipping past her lashes and running down her cheeks.

"Don't cry," he said uselessly.

She scrubbed away the tracks of her tears with her palms. "I'm not crying. What kind of

snake was that anyway?"

"A Bushmaster--a large pit viper."

"Are they poisonous?" she asked in a thin voice.

"Very," Ryder bit off the answer, still shaking on the inside. He held his hand out to her.

Zara took it without hesitating. He pulled her into his arms and tipped her chin up, forcing her to look at him. For a couple of seconds he simply stared at her. His heart pounding from her brush with death and his realization of how much he cared. If he'd been one minute later.... "I want your word you won't try to escape again."

Shuddering, she nodded yes. He accepted her silent agreement gratefully.

Miraculously, he got them both out of the jungle and all the way back to the boat without encountering any further disasters.

Every time he replayed the scene and thought about how close he came to losing her, icy fear bit into his chest. He had to touch her arm or her back or her shoulder to assure himself she was okay. He'd acted like a reckless idiot, and it almost cost Zara's life.

Zara stretched out on her stomach across the master bunk, exhausted. She didn't even care if Razor came along and tethered her to the wall.

Escaping had seemed like the right thing to do. She swam well and the islands were fairly small. Even if he'd chosen an isolated wildlife preserve, there should still be passing boats, fish and game people--somebody to help.

She'd had no idea there were poisonous snakes in the Caribbean. She did well at home in the wilds of Newark. Commuting, holding a responsible job, negotiating the tax code, filling out schedules and addendums, shopping, going to the gym--these were things she knew how to handle. She was a regular urban warrior-princess.

But, take her cute sandals just one step off the approved tourist path and she fell into deep shit. All the way up to her Brazilian bikini wax.

Razor hadn't said two words to her since he'd made her promise not to try another escape. As if, she was that stupid. Well, she deserved his insulting opinion. She had acted dumb, but she'd learned her lesson.

From now on, she would take her chances with the pirate.

Except, now she wanted more than the game. If she had any sense, she'd write off the silly idea that they could have a real relationship.

He'd all but confessed to a felony arrest record. Not that a convicted felon couldn't turn his life around. That was the thing--she knew a good man hid underneath the dangerous pirate façade. Just an hour ago, he'd saved her life. But, that wasn't the only reason. She could cite dozens of examples of his kindness, consideration, and patience.

She lay awake for a long time, thinking about the contradictions that made up the puzzle of Razor. When he'd rescued her from the snake, his heart had been pounding as fast as hers. The elevated pulse was a normal result of the adrenalin rush from killing the snake, sure. But, panic fueled energy didn't explain how safe she felt in his embrace.

She drifted into the world of dreams. When she woke, lying on her side, Razor's hard body spooned around her, giving her warmth, safety, and a sense of belonging.

Her head said she was completely crazy to feel secure with a pirate. She stayed nestled against him, too sleepy to analyze the contradictions. So instead, she simply accepted the protection she found in his arms, sinking back into unconsciousness.

When she woke the second time, the sleep mist parted slowly as her breasts filled and her womb contracted.

Lazy, hedonistic delight expanded inside her body, growing brighter and more urgent with each erotic caress. Hard, hair-roughened thighs pushed against the back of her smooth legs.

The seductive smell of aroused man stoked the banked fires of passion, blurring the line between reality and fantasy. She lay with her pirate, held fast by an irresistible desire to be plundered, more compelling than the leather restraints.

Razor's rigid cock drove into her ravenous pussy filling her, emphasizing her submissive status, yet elevating her at the same time.

A groan of satisfaction from her master sounded sweet to her ears.

"Tell me what you want, Slave."

He continued to stroke. Steadily rubbing against her G-spot with each thrust.

Before she managed a coherent answer, he assaulted her with new questions.

"Do you like this?" he asked with a wicked chuckle as he lightly pinched her nipples, making her gasp and contract harder from his salacious attentions.

Again, he didn't wait for an answer. He'd already moved on, using two fingers to isolate, and then squeeze the slippery skin on either side of her clit. The small bud hardened and throbbed until she was certain she would explode from sheer frustration.

Then he abandoned her swollen clit, positioning her leg in a new angle with her foot flat on his outer thigh.

The new arrangement arched her back and exposed her most intimate parts to the air in a way that added further to her submissive status. And to her excitement. The depth of his stroke shortened, but the rounded steely head of his cock still nudged her G-spot on each thrust. Her feminine muscles clenched and she contracted around him faster and faster.

Fulfillment rolled closer, jerking her hips. His touch was an irresistible erotic force, dragging her closer to the edge of paradise. Winding his arm through her cocked leg, he flicked her clit gently. At the same time, biting the side of her neck.

An explosion of sensation drenched her slit and stole her breath. She crested, soaring into a soul-searing climax.

Ecstasy transported her to another realm and left her muscles limp. The only part of her body still functioning--the feminine muscles massaging Razor's erection--amazingly kept on going like an internal battery-operated bunny.

Without missing a stroke, he realigned their merged bodies, driving into her heat, ramming her with short, hard, fast thrusts.

She panted and crested into another shimmering orgasm. As she rode the tidal wave of the ultimate release, he joined her. When he found his own pleasure, it blended with hers into something new and rare.

They stayed nestled together, comfortable with the silence as their breathing and pulse rates synchronized and slowly returned to normal. He dipped his head, kissing the sensitive juncture between her neck and shoulder where he'd bitten her earlier.

The moment was so tender, so beautiful, and so fleeting that a silent tear escaped, rolling beside her nose.

Somehow, he'd stolen her heart and nothing would ever be the same.

"What's wrong, Sweetheart? Did I hurt you?"

The concern in his voice made her feel even more emotional. A second tear slipped after the first and a knot of sadness lodged in her throat making it impossible to speak. She shook her head, no. More his captive now than when she'd been cuffed and tethered to the bulkhead.

Chapter Seven

“Come home with me,” Zara choked out her plea.

“It would never work,” Razor said, with enough regret to give her hope.

“You don’t know that, you haven’t even given it a try. There are lots of things you could do--almost anything you wanted.” Except practice law, or....

“Forget about it.” His voice was gravely--final.

She gave him a shaky smile and tried to lighten the mood. “You could count on having your very own slave-girl.”

“My own slave-girl, hmm, a seductive offer.” He caressed her breasts.

She recognized the erotic touch as a blatant ploy to distract her. It still worked.

He captured her mouth in a sizzling kiss.

She sank into the addictive taste of him, shamelessly embracing the euphoria of lust. Instantly, ready to serve him in anyway he demanded.

Reluctantly, Ryder removed himself from the oblivion of Zara’s slim, tight body. The connection between them was already strong, scary, and growing.

There was a whole lot more to her than her slave-girl qualifications. She was an intriguing, lovable, and sexier than hell woman in or out of restraints.

And he was endangering her every minute they stayed together.

But, there was no one he trusted to keep her safe until the operation ended. For the sake of the case, and for her protection, he needed to distance himself from her.

Edge of a Bullet blared from his cell phone, giving him the perfect excuse to move away from Zara. It took everything he had to summon up the crooked smile and salute that were Razor’s stock in trade as he grabbed the slim phone.

“What’s happening, pal?” He pinned the small cell in place against his shoulder as he pulled on his wrinkled, damp swim shorts, and cinched the waist.

“Raul wants to meet you. See, I told you I’d come through for you, man,” Smiley said.

“I owe you one,” Razor responded easily.

“Hey man, softening up that smart-mouthed bitch for me makes us even. So, when and where do I rescue her?”

Smiley’s snickered question narrowed Ryder’s eyes to slits.

He kept his tone coolly casual, allowing only a hint of irritation to bleed in. “Shit Smiley, you never said anything about rescuing her. She’s fish bait.”

“Holy fuck! You killed her?” he screeched.

“Yeah, so?”

“I had plans for her,” Smiley whined.

“Fuck you, pal. You asked me to mess her up--you said fucking squat about dropping her off afterwards.”

Imagining Smiley’s idea of fun with Zara’s slender body made Ryder grind his teeth together. Over his cold, embalmed corpse, and even then.... With an effort, he concentrated on what Smiley was saying. “Sorry pal, I guess I went overboard. Is this gonna be a problem?”

“No, forget about it, man. Shit, I wish--.” Smiley’s words quavered.

He sounded shaken. Good. But, Ryder needed to get him back on track.

“Hey, my bad. Truth is I played too rough. Things got out of hand. You know?” he quirked his lips in a wry smile and infused man-to-man contrition into the lie.

“Right, you’re right. I remember there was this ho in Kingston”

Ryder let Smiley regale him with a wildly improbable tale of sexual derring-do for several minutes. “Hey pal, you’re fucking amazing. So, what’s the deal with Raul? If he’s not interested, I need to get busy putting something else together. El Diablo doesn’t run on fumes. I gotta scrape up some change. You know what I mean?”

Smiley didn’t answer for a couple of seconds.

Shit, maybe he’d strung together too many complex thoughts all at once. Ryder chuckled, “You’re gonna hook me up with Raul, right, pal?”

“Yeah, yeah right, man. The tourists fly home tonight and the next crop doesn’t get here until tomorrow. Raul and the rest of the guys are joining me for a private party on the schooner. I’m countin’ on you to bring the blow.”

Perfect. While the real pirates were getting wasted, the rest of his team could search their vessel and confiscate the smuggled weapons. Intercepting the shipment, before it ever hit the international black market.

“I’m runnin’ a little lean, pal. How much coke are you lookin’ to score?”

“A kilo’s good.” Smiley sniffed.

Ryder grimaced, hoping his bud at the DEA could handle the weight. “Gotcha covered. Where are you docking?”

“St. Georges.”

“Good, I know the harbor. Gotta couple of things to take care of first. Probably be after midnight by the time I get there,” Ryder explained his imaginary flakey distractions vaguely.

“Not a problem,” Smiley assured him.

Ryder didn’t think it would be. Not when he was bringing a kilo of coke to the party. He hoped like hell the backup team could be in place by then. He glanced at the boat’s clock--less than six hours. He closed the phone then set it back in the charger, racing through the mental list of all the things he needed to put into place before tonight’s meet.

He reached for the phone, automatically checking the signal level.

“Don’t do it,”

Zara’s voice brought his racing thoughts to a dead stop. Her eyes pleaded with him to listen, to choose the right path.

“You’re not like Smiley, you’re better than this. Just walk away from whatever deal you think sounds so good, it’s not worth the risk. Sooner or later you’ll get caught, and then you’ll be locked up.”

To his amazement, her voice broke, and then tears welled, adding wet highlights to her green eyes. She actually gave a damn whether he lived or died.

Her concern touched him, far more deeply than he dared let her suspect.

He would have given his left nut to tell her not to worry--that he was one of the good guys. If.... He clamped down on that river of misery real fast. This wasn’t the time for regrets. He still had a job to do.

Zara captured his face in her hands. “I have a good job working for Anderson, Crown, and Finch. Plus, my dad is the head of the Sterling Investment Fund--he could give you a job. I know he’d do it for me. Give yourself a chance. Come home with me. There’ll be honest work for you. I promise.”

Ryder stiffened, armoring his heart against her. She was another spoiled, rich girl, who thought her daddy could buy and sell him.

He should have seen it coming. Silky skin, tight body, perfect smile, even the hot bikini wax that sent him into overdrive--all part of the rich bitch package. And he'd fallen for it.

No sale, Sweetheart.

He glared at her. "That would be perfect wouldn't it? I go to work for daddy's company and then I'm good enough to marry you."

"Thanks for the charming proposal. But, that wasn't the offer. Right now, you're headed straight for a jail cell or a grave. My suggestion was about saving your neck--nothing else." She glared back at him full of fire.

She was so much more than another spoiled rich girl.

She was his.

"Listen, Slave-girl. We have a couple of hours after I make a few calls. You want to waste them arguing about saving my worthless hide?"

Her hands fell from his face, her eyes widening in alarm. "Who are you calling?"

"Business associates," he said flatly.

Shit, he was tired of playing Razor. Tired of worrying about becoming Razor. Tired of being on guard every second.

"Do I need to cuff you to the wall or will you give me your word that you'll stay quiet?"

All the fight seemed to go out of her.

"You have my word." She turned and snagged her bikini from the bunk, slipping it on with simple grace and a dignity that tugged at his heartstrings.

Sitting on edge of the master bunk, her posture was perfect and she angled her legs to her right, as if she were visiting royalty. She stared, waiting for him to decide.

Maybe, he had lost his edge. He actually trusted her to keep her promise.

Ryder pocketed his knife, the hatchway remote, and the cell phone. Then he left the cabin, sealing the door behind him. Thoughts, regrets, and might-have-beens about Zara were shoved to the back of his mind. Everything, except the case, went on hold until he'd done what needed to be done.

Once he'd coordinated the arrangements, Ryder went below to change. He needed more pockets and more concealment than the swim shorts provided. He shot a fast glance at Zara.

She'd stretched out on the bunk--asleep, or pretending real well.

Either way worked for him. Changing to ancient jeans, a faded tee shirt, and running shoes took him less than three minutes.

He couldn't resist stealing one last glance at his favorite captive.

Green slits of awareness watched him through a fringe of dark lashes. He leaned over, brushing her lips with his. A good-bye kiss.

Zara recognized the kiss as a farewell gesture--part regret, part apology. Her hopes broke along with her heart.

She'd lost.

The kiss was Razor's way of telling her their time together was over.

For a moment she faltered, wondering what would happen if she asked for an extension of her position as his slave-girl. But, stayed quiet, clinging to the ragged scraps that were left of her pride.

After all, Razor hadn't begged her to toss aside her life and run away with him to where ever pirates lived when they weren't busy smuggling, or stealing, or....

She might not have gone even if he asked.

Blinking back the tears that threatened, she thought about how devastated her folks would be if she disappeared. Life held more than just hot sex with dangerous pirates. She had a promising career, a nice condo only a block from Lincoln Park, and she was totally in love with a ruthless criminal.

At least, she hadn't done anything really stupid, like telling him how she felt.

To make herself feel better, she cleaned up in the miniature bathroom. The bikini left her over-exposed, even in the warm room. She shrugged into his Duke Shirt.

The small red cabin no longer seemed dangerous. Actually, it was quite cozy, except for too many reminders of Razor. The memories did nothing for her concentration as she ran through a maze of arguments, looking for something compelling--some incentive, which would open his eyes to the mistakes he was making. Clearly, she wasn't enough reason for him to give up his life of crime. She had to try to convince him again. There had to be a way.

Ryder stared at the hatchway covering, holding the wheel with both hands to keep from opening the molded door--the only thing separating him from Zara. In a few more hours, he would drop her off at a busy marina on the other side of the tiny island. Roughly an hour before his scheduled meeting with a DEA agent to pick up the kilo of coke--his engraved invitation to the real pirate party.

She wanted to rescue him. It was sweet and sad and perversely funny. And completely impossible. Pictures of Zara--trying to steal his boat, swimming for shore, and damn near escaping, the razor-edged glare she aimed at him when he'd refused to rape her--kaleidoscoped through his head.

He deserved a few more hot memories. Only a couple of hours left with his favorite slave-girl. Not nearly enough time.

When she left, she'd be packing his heart with her.

Reality left him only one way to play this. He clicked open the entrance to the cabin, deliberately plunging into temptation.

His old college sweatshirt covered everything except for most of those long elegant legs, her vulnerable neck, and her beautiful face. His heart was rapidly turning to mush in her small, soft hands.

Hiding his feelings became a matter of survival--hers as well as his.

Ryder crossed his arms and glowered at her. "Are you ready to begin the game?"

The implication of unimaginable consequences rippled through Zara as his rough words sank in. Any tenderness he'd ever felt for her had vanished. Her attempt to offer him a different future had not only failed--it had backfired.

"Pirate and captive?" she asked with borrowed nonchalance.

"What else?" He spread his legs a little wider, uncrossing his impressive arms to plant his fists hard against his narrow hips.

For a fraction of a second, pain twisted his harsh features.

She'd glimpsed the truth he hid so carefully. She'd hurt him and he wanted to punish her. She'd already failed with words. Could she convince him with sex? Did she have the courage to try?

But, this wasn't just about sex anymore--for her it would be lovemaking.

Suddenly, the game had grown a lot more dangerous.

"Same rules?" she asked, playing for time and an infusion of courage.

"Pirate rules," Razor corrected her, stepping closer and erasing her chance to negotiate.

Her resistance ebbed with each breath she drew. The man personified the phrase, 'walking invitation to sin'. The more she saw of him the better he looked. His jaw was dark with at least two-day's worth of beard. The bristles framed a sensual, but currently rigidly forbidding mouth. Eyes as black as the devil's heart bore into hers, reading her deepest secrets as if they'd been blared from a billboard.

Those mesmerizing eyes were even more compelling because they were shaded by expressive brows and thick lashes--both as inky as the hair curling around his shoulders. His skin was a deep, dark bronze, which made her golden tan look like a pale imitation.

Her body was lean and fairly well toned, but harbored several soft spots.

In comparison, his was hewn from a solid block of some impervious element, nicely covered by supple skin stretched tight over amazing muscles and great bones.

Good sense vanished, shoved out of her mind by a truly frightening lust. The insanity, which had started along with her first really good look at her abductor, had become a full-blown mania. He was dangerous, yet she felt safe in his arms.

Throwing out caution, she surrendered to the moment--to him.

For her, the game was already over. But, the love was real.

Nothing she could do, or say, would change Razor. She loved him anyway. Or maybe even because. He was her ruthless pirate. Every moment with him as her master and commander gave her a completion she would never find again.

"Tell me how to please you, Master." She kowtowed at his feet, already pulsing with desire before he'd uttered a single order.

"On your knees, Slave-girl,"

Razor growled and her blood heated.

"Yes, Master." Zara unfolded herself with all the grace she could manage, keeping her eyes demurely downcast. She held her submissive posture.

Even after his tee shirt hit the deck. Even after the zipper of his jeans purred downward. Even after the pants had crumpled around his ankles and had been kicked aside.

A shiver of excitement skittered down her spine as she waited.

He stepped closer and the clean, musky scent of aroused male, which was his alone, added fuel to her lust.

She longed for permission to touch him. Her muscles trembled from the discipline of kneeling without moving.

"Take off your clothes, Slave. You must earn the privilege of covering your body."

Zara's gaze flew upwards, stopping at an impressive erection.

"Keep your eyes down. You aren't worthy to look at your master."

She lowered her gaze reluctantly, and then pulled off the shirt, which she'd been wearing. As she reached for the tie that held the bikini top in place, he stayed her hand.

The cold blade of his knife slid under her hair, slicing through the slight string tied around her neck. The tiny top fluttered down, dangling under the small globes with their eager peaks scrunched tight in anticipation.

Zara kept her eyes down as the knife caressed her heated skin making the tips of her breasts contract even tighter and forcing an erotic shiver. Then he severed the remaining string. The scrap of striped fabric slipped down her body, and then littered the cabin floor.

"Teach me how to please you, Master," she begged, shameless in her need for his approval--his demands. For the erotic thrill of his domination.

"Silence! I have other uses for your mouth, Slave. Lick your palm."

Zara complied with his instructions, drying her parched mouth further.

“Hold my cock here.” He placed her hand around the base, squeezing tenderly. “Not so tight, better. Now twist your hand. Back. Good.” His voice grew hoarser. “Now you may lick. Start here.” He pointed to the seam separating his balls and fisted his hand in her hair.

When she’d done as he ordered, he groaned and issued new commands. “Now up the shaft to the head. Slow. Slower. Suck as much as you can into your mouth.” Another harsh groan of pleasure erupted from his lips.

Anything he said after that was lost as she licked and suckled and did her best to swallow his entire length. His taste was as seductive as his scent. She gulped his cum as it spurted against the back of her throat. He was still hard so she continued, licking and twisting her hand.

Until he stilled her efforts with a soft tug of her hair.

She swallowed and reluctantly moved her mouth away from his cock. A powerful hand at her elbow guided her to her feet. Her legs wobbled, tingling and she leaned on his strength.

“You’ve pleased me well, Slave-girl. Name your reward.” His sexy drawl lit fresh fires in her excitable erogenous zones.

Chapter Eight

Razor leaned forward, and then sucked one of her hardened nipples into his magic mouth. After a few minutes of driving her out of her mind, he asked again, "Isn't there anything you would like to try?"

"Eat my pussy," she blurted.

"What?" he lifted his head, scowling.

She tried again. "Please eat my pussy, Master."

He moved closer, casually caressing her aching breasts.

"Better," he said gruffly, pinching her nipples affectionately.

His hand played across her lower back as he steered her toward the captain's bunk.

After he'd shackled both of her arms to the bulkhead, and then her legs, he vanished.

When he returned, he carried the knife.

She felt no fear, just sensual excitement.

The smooth blade glinted in the dim cabin lights before dipping beneath the sides of her bikini panties to sever the ties. Delicately, he peeled back the flap of flagrantly damp fabric, discarding the ruined bottoms.

A moan of relieved pleasure escaped her mouth as he touched her firmly then gently, stroking down her torso. And then he followed the path that his hands had made with open-mouthed kisses.

Hard, and then soft--rough, and then tender--slow, and then blindingly fast, he teased her senses. His seductive touches blurred the line between fantasy and reality.

Her body responded to him on cue as if she had been mated to him forever and done this intimate dance a thousand times. Yet, every touch was new and as thrilling as the first.

An unshakeable faith held her safe in his keeping. The irrational feeling grew stronger--enough to make satisfaction more than just a possibility. With Razor, ecstasy had become a given--an inalienable right he granted his happy slave.

But, she wanted her gratification now.

Frustration tugged at her breasts and raged between her legs--a ferocious craving for fulfillment that only wild, down, and dirty sex with Razor could give her.

At last, his fingers slipped between her legs, parting her intimate folds, and exposing her tightly swollen clit. Maddeningly, light brushes with his fingers bucked her hips.

When she was convinced that she would die from frustration, his tongue dipped into her slit. Then two fingers replaced the facile tongue, pushing inside--coaxing her engorged G-spot while he suckled her clit.

Without warning, an orgasm rocked her hard--every muscle jerking in time with her hips. He held on, gentling her with his tongue, with his fingers, soothing her, and lapping her essence. Making her heart his slave as surely as her body.

While her climax lulled, desire still burned in her veins. Suddenly, she wanted more--things she'd never done, never considered--everything he had to give. She wanted it all.

Nothing was out of the question during these final precious hours.

Every move he'd made tantalized her poor aching body. Until she was nothing except an

empty vessel shimmying with desire.

With infinite patience, he continued his salacious onslaught of her helpless flesh, bound hand and foot and spread-eagled upon his bed. He tucked a pillow under her bottom exposing more of her secrets to his eyes, his touch, and his kiss.

His talented fingers continued torturing her, rimming the mouth of her vagina, and then tickling the puckered flesh of her back passage. The sensation contracted her channel, sending thrills reverberating all the way from her womb to her breasts and back again.

The coming storm gathered momentum with every beat of her heart.

Her aching slit was already drenched, and still her body oozed fresh lubrication--eager for the pirate's invasion.

Carefully, he cleansed her and his hands before the taunting fingers moved again, spreading the lavish moisture from between her folds to her clit.

She tensed and tried to rub against his hand.

Cruelly, he held her motionless, pinning her between his rigid body and the mattress.

Another needy whimper escaped her lips.

He pinched the small bud at the top of her folds. Lightly, almost softly.

But, she was balanced so precariously that even the smallest touch was like a lit match dropped on a trail of gasoline.

First, her thighs locked and trembled. Then her whole body shuddered as ecstasy roared through her, shaking loose everything she'd believed about sex. Everything she'd believed about him. Everything she'd believed about love.

Again, he kept her anchored. She shivered, not with fear, but with greedy anticipation for pleasures yet to come. Hungry for more, even while her limbs were limp from the second breath-stealing climax. The aftershocks shimmied on and on as the golden orgasm lingered.

A deep chuckle warmed her ear. "Better pace yourself, Slave-girl. We're just getting warmed up."

Oh my God, he really was going to kill her with pleasure. And she didn't even care. She was going to die with a satisfied smile on her face.

For a moment, her foolish heart longed for more of this kind of giddy happiness. She wanted this irrational trust to be part of her regular life. But, the wish went beyond crazy.

Razor didn't fit in to the everyday world where people went to work, paid bills, and cared about their families. And he never would. No matter how much she wanted him there.

Before she had a chance to get maudlin, he released her restraints. Then he lifted her against his rigid body.

Wrap your legs around me," he commanded.

She complied without hesitation, determined to savor every minute with her pirate.

His hard cock surged between her swollen inner lips, plunging straight into her stinging sheath--filling her--stretching her wider than ever.

In her short time as a slave, she'd learned he preferred her entirely submissive.

The surprise was how much she enjoyed her role. His domination of her was total and permitted no movement from her, other than massaging his rigid erection with her intimate feminine muscles.

Rough hands held her hips in a vice-like grip. His hair-roughened chest abraded her tender nipples, and his thick cock hammered deep inside her pussy.

Pleasure pulsed through delicate tissues she'd thought were past any response. Her nipples grew into hard buttons, her clit bloomed, and fresh moisture oozed from her core, coating

his erection.

All thought escaped in the heat of coupling, leaving her nothing, but sensation, and a connection that went far beyond physical mating. She accepted his fierce embrace, opening her heart and giving him all her love along with complete access to her body.

Impossibly, he grew even thicker and longer as she panted her new favorite chorus. "More, please, Master."

* * * * *

Ryder drifted close enough to the pier to toss a line to Anika.

She bent to catch it and he noticed the pink nylon backpack that rested next to her shoes. Her pressed shorts and polo shirt reminded him that he shouldn't have destroyed Zara's bikini.

It drove him crazy to think about her wandering around the marina with all its two-legged wharf rats, wearing nothing but one of his old sweatshirts. The glossy finish of El Diablo's port side bounced against the old tires nailed to the pier, leaving a black streak.

"Hey Razor, where're your fenders?" Anika grinned, hands fisted on her hips.

Ryder ignored the jibe. "Did you get everything?"

"Yeah, it wasn't easy," she complained.

"I knew you could handle it." Ryder jumped onto the dock and held out his hand to help Zara make the leap.

She didn't wait for an introduction, holding out her hand to Anika with as much poise as if they'd met for drinks at the Plaza. "I'm Zara Sterling."

Anika shook the offered hand, giving her a friendly smile, and then hoisted her pink nylon backpack to her shoulder. "Call me Ani, everyone does. Come on, civilization is right this way."

"Give us a minute," Ryder said.

Anika shrugged. Then she strolled far enough away to give them an illusion of privacy.

He dug in his pocket, hauling out a roll of cash.

Zara's eyes widened, and then flew to his as he handed it to her. "No, I can't take this." She pushed the money back, stepping away from him as she shook her head in refusal.

"You're going to need money to get home. I swear to you, I earned this money honestly," he said.

"I believe you." Zara moved closer, finally taking the cash. She counted it and divided the roll, giving half back to him. "El Diablo needs gas. You need to eat." She refused to meet his eyes. "I'll never forget you."

A tear escaped. The glistening drop of misery rolled down Zara's smooth cheek.

Using his thumb, he erased the evidence of her pain.

Then she stretched closer, brushing his lips with hers. As far as kisses went, it wasn't much. And it was everything he'd ever longed for in one brief caress.

Whirling around, she ran to where Anika waited.

Ryder damn near had to nail his shoes to the dock to keep from going after her.

Zara refused to look back. If she did then there would be no stopping the river of tears burning her throat. Numb legs carried her closer to the woman waiting at the end of the pier.

"Don't beat yourself up for falling for Razor. He's something special, and no matter what he told you, he's definitely one of the good guys." Ani gave her a one-armed hug.

Good in bed. No doubt, the lovely Ani knew all about that. A pinch of jealousy poured salt on Zara's broken heart.

Almost immediately, she regretted her mean thoughts about the woman helping her.

She swallowed around the knot of tears clogging her throat.

“Thank you for coming to my rescue.”

“Hey, there’s not much I wouldn’t do for Razor. Don’t tell him I said so. His ego is already too big.”

“How do you know Razor?” Zara asked, because she was a glutton for punishment.

“He’s a friend of my brother. I wanted more,” she confessed with a shrug. “Guess I’m not his type. I hope you know how lucky you are.”

Zara bit her tongue to keep from blurting out her sad story of lost love and followed Anika aboard a classic wooden cabin cruiser. “I’m not feeling real lucky. He just dumped me off on you.”

“That alone should tell you that you’re something special,” Ani murmured.

“Maybe you’re right,” Zara said politely, not believing a single word of it.

Ani shrugged off her backpack, setting it down on the galley counter. “The master stateroom has its own head and the only decent shower on board. The towels are clean, make yourself at home. Meanwhile, I’ll try to round up something for you to wear.”

“Thank you. I’d kill for a real shower.”

“Not a problem. I wish I could do more.” She wrinkled her cute nose. “Razor only gave me a couple of hours notice, there’s no shopping around here. Tomorrow, we’ll get you to St. Georges, and then on your way home.”

After the wonderful luxury of a hot shower, a pair of yellow yoga shorts and an orange tank top, which was a little on the skimpy side, waited for her. Before dressing, she tenderly rolled Razor’s sweatshirt into a compact bundle, stuffing it into the bottom of her beach bag. And then she carefully refastened his slave collar around her neck.

When she entered the main room, Anika grabbed the backpack and unzipped an outer pocket, producing Zara’s passport. “Sorry, I couldn’t get the rest of your things. As I mentioned, good old boy Razor didn’t give me a lot of notice.”

“Thank you. How did you get this? I thought it was locked in the ship’s safe.”

“It wasn’t a big deal,” Ani dismissed the accomplishment modestly.

Zara tried to reconcile the elegant blonde in front of her with the image of an expert safe cracker. Something didn’t compute, but her head and heart both ached too much to make sense out of the contradictions.

The next day, on the long flight home, Zara had plenty of time to think. Despite several hours of replaying every moment she’d spent with Razor, she had surprisingly few regrets.

She’d met the man of her dreams. Their affair was too brief. But, he was still the love of her life and no one else would ever replace him.

If fate ever handed her a second chance, she wouldn’t hesitate. She would tell him she loved him. Maybe if she’d done that, instead of rambling on about her dad and jobs, things might have turned out differently.

Though, she doubted it. Much as she loved Razor, she didn’t have any illusions. He wouldn’t change his life just to suit her. To be painfully honest, she wouldn’t want him if he were the type of man she could bend to her will.

She swallowed a sigh, and picked up her beach bag, taking another step forward as the line through customs inched along. Finally, it was her turn.

“Passport please,” said the inspector.

Zara handed over the dark blue booklet with its gold lettering.

“Anything to declare?”

“No.”

The inspector squinted at her passport and held out his hand. “Ticket please.”

She fished through her tote and produced the airline ticket for him.

Another official approached the inspector, saying something too quietly for Zara to catch the words.

Abruptly, an armed custom’s officer took her elbow. “Come with me, Miss Sterling.”

Alarm skittered down her backbone as she was marched away from the line of weary travelers, clutching her bag.

Her escort moved her rapidly down a long dimly lit corridor. She wished she wasn’t wearing Ani’s yoga shorts, a too small tank top, and her bronze sandals. Protesting indignantly worked so much better when she was dressed for the job in a power suit and pumps.

Zara dug in her heels, slightly slowing his progress. “What’s going on? I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I wouldn’t know about that, Miss.” He opened an unmarked metal door and deposited her inside an unimpressive office.

Two thinly padded visitor’s chairs faced a gray steel desk. A flourishing philodendron draped from the top of the matching filing cabinet.

Her nerves jumped and jangled, even though she knew she was innocent.

Alone in the modest work area, she paced in the narrow path from the wall to the door and back again. She touched the collar, taking comfort from the warm leather.

Were they holding her in order to question her about Razor?

Ryder brushed the snow from his shoulders. He’d forgotten what New York in February felt like. He took the escalator down to customs.

Keith met him at the entrance, waving him through security, and then handing him a visitor’s identification card.

Razor clipped it to his shirt pocket. Then shook the balding man’s hand. “Long time no see.” He clapped his old friend on the shoulder.

“Thought some low-life would’ve capped your chance-taking ass years ago,” Keith grumbled good-naturedly.

“Forget that,” Ryder scoffed. “Who taught me how to stay safe?”

“Right, like you ever listened to good sense. She’s in there--fourth door on the left.”

“Thanks Keith, I owe you one, pal,” Ryder said, an irrepressible grin tugging his lips.

“You’ve got twenty minutes. Then I want you out of my area and this had better not come back to bite me in the ass. You read me?”

“Like a bull’s-eye.” Ryder sketched a salute.

“Well, what the hell are you doing wasting time talking to an old man when your woman is waiting on you?” Keith snorted rudely as he stomped off in the opposite direction.

Razor entered the room, effectively shrinking the space. He moved toward her, looking even better than she’d remembered.

His ancient once black tee shirt skimmed over well-worn jeans and a totally ripped physique. Trendy sunglasses clung carelessly to the neck of his top and a visitor’s badge dangled from his tee shirt pocket.

A small interior voice droned on about danger and responsibility. But, he was close enough for her to breathe his special sandalwood, soap, and clean man scent. The warning voice rapidly drowned under the heat, the thrill, and the insane optimistic trust she couldn’t stop from bubbling inside her at the sight of him.

“Razor,” she whispered. Her throat tight and dry.

“Actually, the name is Ryder,” he said, closing the distance between them.

His words barely registered as he folded her into his arms and kissed her until she forgot her own name.

“Let’s get out of here,” he murmured, placing small sipping kisses at the corners of her mouth in between the nonsense words.

“I have to wait here, there’s some problem with customs,” she said, weaving her fingers into his hair to hold his head in place.

“That was me. I’m sorry if it worried you. I didn’t want to take a chance on you getting home and refusing to see me.”

Zara pulled back. “How could you make the customs officials do anything?”

“Let’s talk about this later,” he drawled persuasively.

“No, I want answers right now. What did you say your name was?” She bit her lip as the familiar guarded expression settled over his features.

“Ryder. Ryder Goodman. Do you want to see some identification?” he asked in a tone drier than one of her dad’s martinis.

His mocking voice acted like ice bath on her hot hopes.

“What good would that do? I’m sure you have terrific documentation for Brinks too.”

How on earth could I have fallen for that? A pirate named Razor. Shaking her head in disbelief at her own gullibility, she shrank away from him, her cheeks flaming.

He must have been laughing himself sick over her pirate fantasy.

“Zara,” he said, reaching toward her.

But then, he let his arm drop, making no real move to bridge the widening chasm between them.

“What are you--some kind of cop?” she asked in a voice as raw as her feelings.

“Something like that.” He brushed off her question.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked. It seemed like a reasonable question.

“I was undercover,” he said, as if it were a totally adequate explanation.

She frowned at him. “But, you could have told me. I wouldn’t have said anything.”

“It’s against the rules.” Ryder folded his arms across his chest and widened his stance, reinforcing the memory of just how seriously this man took his rules.

“So, what was the game, something to pass the time between cases?” She hated the note of hurt that seeped into her words. But, she needed to know.

Ryder stepped closer, crowding her. “Is that what you think?”

“I--” Zara stopped, studying his face--searching for some sign of reassurance in his hard features. She saw pride, courage, and something that might have been fear. But, the emotion was too fleeting for her to be sure that it was anything other than wishful thinking on her part. Then she remembered her resolution--if she ever got a second chance.

“I love you,” she blurted, tossing her heart into his rough hands. She held her breath waiting for his reaction.

“Come here.” He didn’t wait for her to comply. Strong arms wrapped around her, tucking her safely under his chin, where she belonged.

It felt as though he kissed the top of her head.

“That’s my favorite slave-girl,” he murmured into her hair. “I love you, Sweetheart.”

His words were soft, low, and pitched for her ears alone.

Nothing had ever sounded better.

He slipped a package from behind his back, showing her a suede pouch. Carefully; he removed a gleaming gold wire necklace.

Ryder lifted her hair, removing her leather collar. Then he kissed her neck, before fastening her new slave symbol with a satisfyingly permanent click.

“This tells the world I own you--body and soul.”

The End