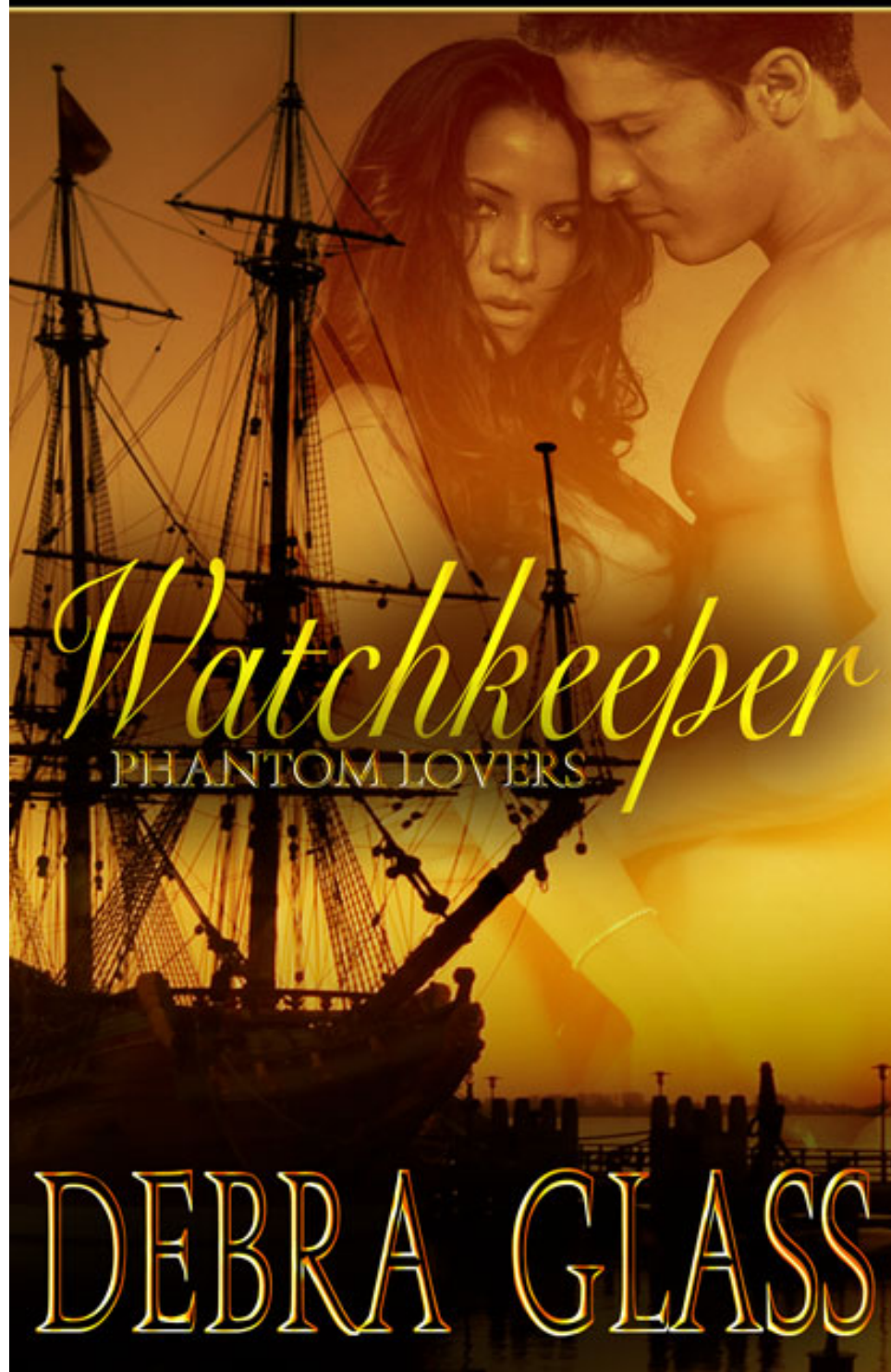


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



Watchkeeper
PHANTOM LOVERS

DEBRA GLASS

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Watchkeeper

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WATCHKEEPER

Debra Glass

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of the real gentleman pirate, Stede Bonnet, and especially to my best friend, Karen Murphy Merrigan, the inspiration behind Gwendolyn.

My special thanks to Elissa and Amy, two beautiful witches whose knowledge and experience were invaluable to the writing of this story, and to fellow Ellora's Cave author Lolita Lopez, and her wonderfully helpful paramedic husband, David.

And to Kelli for...well, everything.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

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Author Note

Several years ago, I traveled to Charleston, South Carolina, and stayed in the beautiful Battery Carriage House Inn facing the historic White Point Gardens.

Just prior to my visit, however, I watched an episode of *Haunted History* that featured events witnessed by patrons of the inn. Visitors had seen the headless torso of a Civil War ghost while another spirit, dubbed the “gentleman ghost”, had frightened several females by joining them on their beds. Needless to say, I was nervous when I crawled into the antique four-poster my first night there, which, incidentally, was a Friday the thirteenth. Whether it was just my imagination or really the famed gentleman ghost, I did feel a presence sit on the bed with me that night and the night thereafter.

While on one of the Charleston ghost walk tours, our guide asked if anyone was staying at the inn. Sheepishly I raised my hand, and she inquired if the ghost had sat on the bed with me. I recounted my experience.

With a wave of her hand, she dismissed the History Channel’s version, which portended the gentleman ghost was a man who had committed suicide in the house. The guide claimed she knew the identity of the *real* gentleman ghost. “Why, it’s Stede Bonnet,” she said in her lovely Low Country drawl. “He was incredibly handsome and was known as the ‘gentleman pirate’. He was hanged on the site where the house stands now.”

The romantic story of Stede Bonnet has fascinated me ever since.

Stede Bonnet was christened July 29, 1687. He was born into a wealthy family from Barbados. He married Mary Allamby in 1709, and the couple had four children. Shortly after the birth and subsequent death of his daughter in 1716, he purchased a ship—which he named *Revenge*—hired a crew and sailed off to become a pirate.

Shortly thereafter, he encountered Blackbeard. The two formed an uneasy alliance but after a falling out, Bonnet petitioned the governor of North Carolina for a pardon and a Letter of Marque, which would classify him as a privateer instead of a pirate.

When a hurricane prevented him from obtaining his Letter of Marque, he returned to a life of piracy.

In the late summer of 1718, Colonel William Rhett led an expedition against pirates along the Carolina coast and captured Stede Bonnet at the mouth of the Cape Fear River. Bonnet was held in Charleston but managed to escape disguised in a woman’s dress.

He was recaptured and, despite impassioned entreaties for his life by the ladies of Charleston, he was hanged for piracy on December 10, 1718, at White Point Gardens.

While the characters of Stede Bonnet and Blackbeard are based on real people, *Watchkeeper* is a work of fiction.

Prologue

Charleston Harbor

November 18, 1827

"There's treasure on that island," Jupiter said, pausing from his backbreaking work as a deckhand. "Pirate's treasure."

A brisk salt wind whipped through the sails of the brig *Waltham* as eighteen-year-old Edgar Allan Poe stood by the rail, staring across Charleston Harbor at the gray fortress of Fort Moultrie on Sullivan's Island.

His gaze was fixed on the shore, where the sweet grass swayed and the dried palmetto branches clattered in the stiff breeze.

Charleston was a place where history, culture, folklore and superstition were all intricately interwoven. The Low Country overflowed with misty swamps, voodoo and ghostly legends.

He glanced over his shoulder at the old slave. "Pirate's treasure, eh?" Poe smiled at the irony. He'd amassed substantial gambling debts and, in an attempt to hide from his creditors, he'd entered the Army. A couple of gold doubloons would certainly cover his amount outstanding.

Jupiter nodded vigorously. "Yes sir. Blackbeard's treasure."

Edgar studied the man's sincere dark brown eyes. Did Jupiter truly believe his tall tale of pirate booty? Edgar leaned casually on the rail. It would amuse him to play along. "And how do you know this?"

"My grandpappy sailed with Major Bonnet."

"Major Bonnet?"

Jupiter tugged proudly on the lapels of his coat. "Stede Bonnet. The gentleman pirate."

Edgar laughed heartily. "A *gentleman* pirate? Jupiter, the two words are totally incongruous."

Jupiter raised a wooly gray eyebrow.

Edgar simplified. "At odds. One cannot be a gentleman *and* a pirate."

"Yes sir," Jupiter said. "Major Bonnet was. He was my grandpappy's master in Barbados and he took him with him when he sailed off to become a pirate."

"Pray tell, Jupiter," he said blandly. Perhaps it would be interesting. Edgar felt the makings of a new story brewing.

"My pap was the only one they didn't hang 'coz he was too valuable as a slave." Jupiter leaned in as if someone might be listening. "Pap told me all about it. He told me

he was with Major Bonnet when he buried Blackbeard's treasure. He was there when Bonnet marked the spot on a treasure map."

"A treasure map?"

Jupiter's head bobbed up and down. "A *secret* treasure map."

Edgar scoffed. These islands had been hunted far and wide for pirate treasure. If there had indeed been a map, someone had most certainly unearthed and absconded with the cache. However, it wouldn't hurt to find out what lore the slave believed—for the sake of a story, of course. "When, supposedly, did Bonnet bury this treasure?"

"Right before he was killed."

Edgar gave him an indulgent smile. "If your grandfather survived, as you say, then why did he not go back and exhume the treasure himself?"

"He was sold off."

This story was going nowhere. Edgar gazed out over Sullivan's Island, which consisted of little else than golden brown sea sand. Fort Moultrie loomed gray above the scrubby vegetation of bristly palmettos and fragrant sweet myrtle.

"But on his deathbed, Grandpa Jupiter gave the map to my pap."

Edgar shot the ancient slave a pointed glance. "Your father has the map?"

"Not no more."

Disappointment sank to Edgar's toes. It was certainly feasible a manservant would have been entrusted with a treasure map. There had been little distinction between slaves and other crew members on a pirate ship.

Jupiter reached into his blue woolen coat and withdrew a piece of parchment. He smiled broadly, displaying a wide gap between his yellowed front teeth. "Now I has the map."

Edgar froze. His gaze flickered from the time-worn foolscap to Jupiter's brown eyes. "May I?"

Jupiter pursed his lips and gave a single nod of his head as he handed Edgar the vellum.

Edgar's pulse pounded in his throat as he unfolded the thin piece of parchment. The paper itself was certainly old enough to have been in existence when pirates sailed the Carolina coast. He opened it—and flipped it over and over again.

There was nothing on it except a few lines so faded as to be unreadable. He noticed a tiny faded skull centered between an equally tiny dagger and a heart, a single bone placed horizontally beneath the skull.

Edgar suddenly felt foolish. "Jupiter, this is just a silly piece of paper. There's no map here."

Jupiter's eyes narrowed. "Oh yes they is." He reached out and took the map back, securing it once more inside his coat pocket. He patted it for good measure. "It's magic ink."

“Magic ink?” Edgar wet his lips with the tip of his tongue and resisted the urge to chastise old Jupiter. “Treasure maps and magic ink.” He shook his head. “And how, pray tell, does one entice the map to appear?”

This time, Jupiter produced a deck of cards from his pocket.

Edgar stared at the cards and then lifted his gaze to Jupiter’s. His hands practically itched to feel the spread of the smooth cards between his fingers.

“I heard you was a fair hand at Speculation,” Jupiter said.

Edgar laughed outright. “Gambling got me into the Army, my friend.”

“And gambling can get you out—if you win the map.”

This was ridiculous. He should walk away now. He hadn’t figured Jupiter for a wily card shark who intended to bamboozle him with a fake treasure map. And yet, Edgar Allan Poe was intrigued. Very intrigued.

Chapter One

Present day

As Gwendolyn Wyse hefted her heavy black and tan suitcase onto the luggage rack, her gaze swept the quaint room in the Battery Carriage House Inn. The historic inn's website had an entire page devoted to ghost sightings in the house and that was one of the main reasons Gwen had chosen it.

The room was nice, furnished with antiques that gave Gwen the feeling she'd stepped back in time. Two chocolates graced the plethora of pillows. An antique white chenille bedspread had been turned back invitingly while an ice bucket, complete with a bottle of champagne and two long-stemmed glasses, stood on a silver tray at the foot of the bed.

When Gwen had made the reservations, she'd told them this would be like a second honeymoon and the manager had generously insisted on the complimentary champagne. She'd hoped being here in Charleston would rekindle her romance with her husband, Roger.

A shiver swept up her spine despite the sultry June heat outside. Had the maid service left the air conditioner on the lowest setting? She let her purse and travel bag slide down her arm to the floor before she checked the setting. Medium. The air blowing through the vent was comfortable so why was it so cold in the room? She hugged her arms.

Perhaps the chill in the air was due to one of the many spirit residents.

A little thrill tickled through her veins. She would like to come across a ghost. Although she was a witch and often experienced intuitive insight, she didn't have much experience with otherworldly entities, other than feeling her grandmother's spirit.

But after her friend Amy's encounter last year with an incredibly sexy spirit, Gwen was very open to being *haunted*. A smile curled her lips.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," she called coquettishly.

She envied Amy. So happy now. So in love. Gwen knew her own husband had lost his passion for her but still, a raucous bout of sex would do her some good. Especially since it had been six months, one week and three days since she and Roger had slept together. She bit her bottom lip. Hopefully, this trip would change things.

A chill which had nothing to do with ghosts at all swept up her spine. Thinking about Amy had reminded her of the prediction her friend had made just last year. Gwen inhaled. Amy was a powerful psychic and had told her to warn Roger to be careful around water. Gwen hadn't thought about it until now – and just yards outside the front door of the inn was the whole Atlantic Ocean.

Amy was never wrong.

Gwen pulled her cell phone out of her purse and scrolled through the numbers until she found Amy's. She punched it and then listened to ring after ring. Finally, it went to voice mail so Gwen grimaced and snapped the phone shut. She'd like to know Amy's psychic take on a sailboat tour of Charleston Harbor.

While she waited for Roger, she picked up the television remote and scrolled through the channels searching for a weather report. There were so many things she wanted to do with Roger while they were in Charleston and she wanted plan accordingly for the next few days.

"I've never heard of a beautiful witch before." Upon hearing the familiar lilt of Judy Garland's Dorothy, a smile tugged at Gwen's lips because she *was* a witch—a beautiful witch.

Certainly, she had her trouble spots like every other woman—her breasts were a little small and her ass was a little big—but overall, Gwen had no complaints. In fact, she loved her eyes. They were the color of dark chocolate and when she lined them dramatically with black kohl, she felt—and looked—like an Egyptian queen.

She flipped through a few more channels before she finally found the Weather Channel. She squinted at the temperature reading in the bottom left corner of the television set. Was that a nine or an eight?

That was another thing. She'd become terribly farsighted since turning thirty last year. Focusing, she saw it was eighty-seven degrees outside.

"Eighty-seven?" She tossed the remote into the television armoire and checked her watch, still set for Central time. It was nearly six-thirty, which meant here in Charleston, it was an hour later. Gwen hugged her arms again to ward off the still-persistent chill invading the otherwise balmy evening.

She whirled when the door opened and then rushed to help Roger bring in his suitcase.

"I've got it," he snapped as he heaved his own bag onto the bed.

Gwen closed the door behind him.

Roger raked the sleeve of his white shirt across his forehead. "It's hot as hell in here." He blew out a sigh. "I can't believe there aren't any porters in this place."

"It's a bed-and-breakfast."

A scowl crossed his handsome features. "I know." He rolled his eyes—a habit that highly annoyed Gwen. "We could have stayed at a hotel."

She forced a smile. "But this is so much more romantic."

His lips parted as if he were about to speak and Gwen felt an inexplicable surge of panic. Not wanting to hear what he might have to say, she turned her back. They'd been married for nearly five years and Roger had grown increasingly distant over the course of their union.

After only one year, he'd informed her he'd had a vasectomy—without consulting her. At the time, Gwen hadn't been certain if she wanted children or not but Roger's selfish decision had made her choice for her.

Although she had issues with that, she had no complaints about the living he provided for her. Being the vice president of a record company in Nashville had its advantages and Gwen had every material thing she could have ever wanted.

But the one thing she wanted above all else was his love—and he had never truly given her that.

He seemed to think giving her *things* would keep her happy. Two years prior he'd bought her a business, Gwyniad's Goddess Emporium, a metaphysical shop in their hometown of Franklin—but now she knew Roger had bought it to give her something to do. To keep her from getting bored.

He never let her forget the fact she'd been struggling when he plucked her out of her hometown in east Tennessee. It had been a difficult time in her life and she had considered Roger a gift from the Goddess. Her grandmother had passed away several years previous, after battling cancer for years. Gwen had cared for her, and had still been grieving—and working two jobs to pay her lingering medical expenses.

She shuddered. Granny's death had left a hole in her soul not even the attentions of a wealthy, handsome businessman could fill. She wished Granny were here now, alive and healthy. Granny would know what to do about Roger's coldness—and her knowledge of spell work would have added power to the love spell Gwen had cast last night under the waxing moon.

She'd used her ritual pen—a quill—and had written the words, "If there be a perfect match for me, Goddess, hear my plea. The perfect one who is meant to be shall find his way home to me. In perfect love and perfect lust, I send this out with all my trust. This spell will guide us to unite, free will remains with us tonight."

The spell had instructed her not to focus on a certain person. Although Gwen knew prayers to the Goddess and their outcomes were supposed to be turned over to the Universe, she couldn't help but focus on Roger while she meditated until she got *the feeling* her prayer would be answered. Only then had she lit her ritual fire and repeated the spell aloud three times. At the end of each repetition, she'd sprinkled moon incense on the fire. After that, she'd placed the spell in a special heart-shaped box and had buried it in her back yard.

It hasn't worked yet, she thought dismally as she lifted the ice-cold bottle of Korbel out of the bucket. "How about some champagne?" she asked as she removed the gold foil.

Roger scowled as his gaze scanned the label. "You know I only drink Cristal," he said before disappearing into the bathroom. "Damn, this place is so small you can hardly turn around in it," his voice boomed through the closed door.

Gwen's heart sank. This was not the romantic interlude she'd imagined. Her shoulders tensed. When Roger had told her to make reservations in any city in the

world, she'd chosen Charleston immediately, envisioning moonlit carriage rides and dining on rich Low Country cuisine in a romantic southern setting. So far, it had been anything but romantic. Since they'd boarded the plane in Nashville, Roger hadn't said two words to her. Instead, he'd checked his stocks and conducted business on his latest, greatest cell phone while Gwen had thumbed through a boring airline magazine.

She bit her bottom lip. Why had Roger suggested a trip if he hadn't wanted to renew their floundering relationship?

So much for her love spell.

He stepped out of the bathroom and just the sight of him made Gwen's stomach tighten. Even after years of sharing a home and bed with him, she still found him incredibly attractive. He looked more like an actor than a cutthroat businessman with his clipped black hair, chiseled jawline and bright blue eyes under brooding dark eyebrows.

Gwen was dark herself, with an olive complexion and long, straight black hair. She was very aware that she and Roger made a striking couple.

She offered him the bottle of champagne. "Can you get this, baby?"

With one thumb, he dislodged the stopper and thrust the bottle back in her hand. Gwen took a step closer to him and let her hand linger over his as she took the Korbel. Her body heated as she gazed into his sapphire eyes. "Are you certain you don't want any?" she purred, looking at him in such a way that he could not mistake her double entendre.

A muscle in his jaw clenched. Indecision flashed in his eyes. "All right. One glass."

Gwen's lips curled into a smile. Maybe he just needed to relax and get out of business mode. He did have a high-pressure job.

With renewed hope in her spell-casting ability, she filled two glasses with the sparkling effervescent liquid and handed him one. She took a sip, delighting in the way the bubbles tickled all the way down to her tummy. "This is going to be so nice. Just you and me—here in Charleston."

He stared.

Gwen's mind raced. Why was he being so cold? Especially since he'd invited her to choose the place and make the reservations. It didn't make sense.

Maybe he needed to see the little outfit she'd bought at Pleasures. Her whole body thrummed with excitement as she opened her suitcase and withdrew a little pink bag from underneath her clothing. Taking her champagne with her, she giggled as she slipped into the bathroom.

This would surprise him.

She gulped down two more swallows of champagne, already feeling its heady effect, and then stole out of her dark brown skirt and sandals. She wriggled out of her thong and then pulled her blouse off over her head. Her breasts were small enough that she rarely wore a bra—but tonight would be different.

She opened the little bag and withdrew a pink lace G-string that featured a string of pearls for a crotch and a matching bra that was nothing more than several revealing strands of pearls, which left the nipples provocatively exposed.

As she dressed, her heart rate accelerated at the thought of surprising Roger with her risqué purchase. She'd never been adventurous enough to do anything like this before—but her marriage was at risk and she was willing to try more than a love spell to get back the fire they'd had in the beginning.

She checked her reflection in the mirror, turning to evaluate her backside. The strand of creamy pearls disappeared into her cleft and she could feel them sliding sensuously between her labial lips as she moved. Just wearing this little outfit made her so aroused she knew she would explode when Roger touched her.

Her body thrummed with excitement. She could just imagine Roger sucking each nipple into his warm mouth while the little pearls rolled teasingly over the sensitive flesh of her breasts.

After fluffing out her hair, she took another sip of champagne for courage and then opened the bathroom door.

Roger had removed the suitcases from the bed and was sitting on the side, perusing a stack of papers. Gwen's heart hammered. Desire and anticipation heated her blood. Tense, she waited and when he didn't look up, she purred, "Happy second honeymoon, baby."

He glanced up and then did a double take. His face went red with color.

Something was wrong. Very wrong. Gwen shook as the blood drained out of her cheeks. Was he embarrassed? A lump welled in her throat. "D-don't you like my outfit?" Her voice was meek. This wasn't the reaction she'd expected.

His shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath. "Gwen...I think you may have gotten the wrong idea."

Desire was quickly replaced with confusion—and humiliation. She swallowed thickly.

Roger continued. "I asked you here to tell you something that I thought you'd need a few days away from home to absorb."

Her gaze darted to the papers. A sense of doom overwhelmed her. Her hand trembled violently as she set her glass on the nightstand and snatched a robe off the back of the bathroom door. Why hadn't she seen this coming? She was a *witch*. She should have known. How could Roger so easily blindside her this way?

But she knew why. She'd ignored her own intuition because she *wanted* so desperately for things to be different with him. Even as he sat here confronting her with *papers*, she wanted things to be different.

She paled. She'd cast the spell too late.

"Sit down, Gwen."

Her knees threatened to give way as she pulled on the robe and then sank onto the side of the bed. Denial gave way to anger as her gaze swept the papers again.

Case number...

Wyse vs. Wyse...

Cold chills broke out down her arms as she lifted her gaze to his.

He rubbed his temples. "I'm divorcing you." His tone was noncommittal. Cold.

Gwen shook her head. She was in shock.

His unsympathetic gaze finally found hers. "I wanted to break it to you gently but—"

"Gently?" The fire in her voice surprised her. Spite welled. "Gently?"

She shot to her feet. "You let me think this was going to be a second honeymoon! You let me drink champagne and truss myself up like a call girl and then you shove divorce papers in my face and tell me you wanted to break it to me *gently*?" She glared and trembled uncontrollably. "You son of a bitch. I knew you were a cold-hearted snake but I never expected *this*."

The lump in her throat grew. She was thoroughly humiliated. She huddled inside the robe, her breaths ragged as she fought to control stinging tears. "How long have you been planning this?"

"A while."

"How fucking long, Roger?"

"Six months."

Her mind raced back over the past six months. How had she not known?

"We're just not right for each other, Gwen," he said. "You and I both know this has been coming for a long time."

Gwen folded her arms over her exposed chest. "Don't you love me?"

He ignored her question. "I've tried for years to get you to open up. Hell, when we married, you even kept your house. If you'd wanted a life with me, you would have sold that house. Stop kidding yourself. *You never loved me.*"

Gwen couldn't think of anything to say. She *had* loved him. She'd just been afraid to let her grandmother's house go. Nothing was ever permanent in her life. She stared, wondering if she had somehow sabotaged their marriage with her fears.

Roger continued. "It's over. It was over before it ever began. Let's be adult about this and just walk away."

Her mind still grasped at the statements he'd made earlier. She avoided the part about her *opening up*. She couldn't let her fears ruin her marriage. How could she change this? How could she let him know she wanted to try? Was it too late? "What does the house have to do with anything?" she asked.

"You kept that house because it earned a nice rental income for *you*. Besides, it wasn't as if you needed the money after marrying me."

No! That wasn't true. She had wanted to keep the house because it had belonged to her grandmother—for its sentimental value. Now it seemed like a good thing. Though she'd never admitted it, even to herself, she'd always known her relationship with Roger was doomed—doomed like every other relationship she'd had.

She was hurtling through life following in her mother's footsteps. At least she wouldn't be living on the streets the way her mother had, she thought morosely. The way she, Gwen, had when she was just a little girl.

She shuddered as her mind was filled with dark images from her childhood—her mother, drunk and stumbling while ten-year-old Gwen tried to help her out of the house. The landlord had stood by looking at her with pity in his eyes while a policeman and a child services officer flanked him.

Gwen knew what they hadn't. She knew her mother was afraid of the voices she heard in the dark and she drank to quiet them.

Child services had not been so sympathetic to her mother's cause, and that was the last time Gwen had seen her mother alive.

Roger thrust a pen toward her, dragging her out of her reverie. "Sign the papers and I'll be on my way back to Nashville. You can stay here as long as you like and I'll take care of the bill."

Adrenaline pumped through Gwen's veins. So that had been his plan! He'd talked her into getting out of town so he could rush back to Franklin alone to celebrate his freedom. He hadn't even considered marital counseling. He'd just decided—the same way he'd decided they'd never have children. A fresh wave of anger rushed over her. "Who do you think you are?" She clenched her fists so hard her nails dug into her palms.

He burst into laughter. "Gwen, don't embarrass yourself." He offered her the pen once more. "Have some dignity."

"Dignity?" Her voice rose with hysteria. How could she possibly have any dignity left when she was standing here confronted with surprise divorce papers while wearing a pair of pearl-thong panties?

Her fists ached to pummel him. A fleeting image of prodding him with the stun gun she'd packed in her suitcase reared up hard. Her heart pumped in frantic bursts. Rage flooded her and before she could stop herself, she snatched her champagne glass off the table and hurled it at him.

He easily deflected the glass with his elbow but sticky champagne rained down on his hair and shirt.

At once, Gwen regretted her actions. She never acted in haste. Never. She covered her mouth with both hands. "Roger, I'm sorry."

He merely shot her a look of annoyance. "Given the circumstances, I admit I probably deserved it." He stood. "If you don't mind, I'll bathe and change my shirt before I leave. Look over the papers. They're quite fair."

Gwen wanted to kick herself. Hard.

Roger retrieved a clean shirt from his bag and brushed past her as he went into the bathroom.

She waited until the door was closed behind him before picking up the divorce papers. She felt sick as she squinted to read them. His attorney had been very thorough. Roger got to keep everything except the Goddess Emporium, the house Gwen still owned under her maiden name and her car. There was a tiny stipend and minimal alimony but if she signed the papers, she forfeited any right to his life insurance policies and social security monies.

She felt like an idiot who thought true love was real and that her marriage would last forever.

She sighed. "Oh Granny," she whispered to the spirit of her beloved grandmother she'd always felt and hoped was near. "What am I going to do?"

No answer came from the ethers but still, she knew Granny was near—and always would be.

Chewing on the tip of Roger's pen, she fingered the divorce papers. There was nothing to really negotiate. He had left her the shop. At least she would have a way of making money...

How could she be looking at this so analytically? It was ludicrous!

She blew out a very audible breath. Fresh anger surged that made her want to rip the papers to shreds. She seized them in her hands, intent on doing just that—when she suddenly heard the sound of a skid followed by a splash, then a hard thump coming from the bathroom.

Gwen gasped. Her gaze flew to the closed door. Had Roger fallen? "Serves you right, asshole," she said under her breath. After a few minutes, when she didn't hear any subsequent noise, dread filled the pit of her stomach. "Roger?" Her voice was tremulous.

No answer came from behind the door.

Gwen stood and tapped on the door. "Roger?"

The only sound she heard was the running bath water.

She twisted the knob and sucked in a breath when she saw Roger sprawled naked and unconscious under the water in the tub. His eyes were closed. His mouth sagged open and one hand lay limply over the side of the tub.

"Shit!" Gwen rushed to switch off the faucet and yank out the plug. She dropped to her knees, hefted Roger's body out of the water as far as she could and then patted his face. He was unresponsive. "Roger?"

She shook his broad shoulders. "Roger, open your eyes!"

Still, he didn't move.

He's dead!

She refused to consider that possibility.

But what if he is?

With trembling fingers, she touched his neck in search of a pulse.

Nothing.

Gwen's breath left her body in a ragged rush. Sick, swift dread flooded her.

This didn't look good at all.

Broken glass littered the bedroom. Divorce papers were scattered across the bed – and Roger was dead in the bathtub.

Roger. Dead.

With strength she didn't know she possessed, Gwen seized his heavy arms and rolled Roger's body out of the tub and onto the floor. There was hardly any room in the tiny bathroom so she whipped back the robe, straddled his body and began heart compressions.

She had no actual idea how to perform CPR but instinct took over and she pumped rhythmically before she bent to breathe into his mouth. Somewhere in the back of her panic-crazed brain she recalled her best friend, Amy, recounting how she'd revived her brother using CPR.

She needed to call 9-1-1 but she was too afraid to leave him.

I don't know what to do! Goddess, help me! Help Roger!

Tears flowed unchecked as she searched once more for a pulse. Her hand shook terribly but she was certain she felt nothing.

Nothing.

A wave of nausea rushed over her at the total absence of Roger's life energy. Terror caused her heart to beat in her throat. "He's dead," she muttered. "He can't be dead!"

She pumped his heart several more times and then dropped to breathe into his mouth again.

Still nothing.

Wild panic fled through her being.

The authorities would think she killed him. Everyone would think she murdered her husband in a fit of passion.

"Dammit, Roger, don't you fucking die on me!" She was breathless and trembling. Her arms ached. Her stomach roiled.

And Roger was dead.

Chapter Two

Gwen pushed herself up off the cold bathroom floor, her gaze riveted to her dead husband. She was in shock.

She had to move.

She had to call 9-1-1.

There's always Necromancy...

Gwen shut down the voice in her head.

Necromancy was a dark and dangerous practice. She wouldn't do it.

But she *could* do it.

After she'd gone to live with Granny, she'd seen her bring a man back from the dead. Her grandmother had explained to her that Necromancy was gray magic and neither aligned with the right or the left-hand path, although it was considered a black art by every other witch Gwen knew.

Still, her mind raced back in time to the night she went with Granny to Lucile Hobbs' house...

The little Smokey Mountain town of Hamilton was quiet and getting increasingly darker by the second. Twelve-year-old Gwen listened intently as Granny explained to Mrs. Hobbs what she was about to do. Mrs. Hobbs was crying and Gwen understood her husband had died earlier that day.

Gwen had never seen a dead body and a morbid sense of excitement and trepidation thrummed through her little body.

Mrs. Hobbs had given Granny a big wad of money so Gwen knew Granny was about to perform a really difficult ritual—or a really *dark* one. Granny always charged more for those rituals because, as she'd explained to Gwen, dark spells and rites came back on you.

Gwen's stomach felt full of butterflies. The dead body was in the room at the end of the hall. She could see it through the open doorway at the end of the long corridor and for some reason, she couldn't compel herself to look away.

"Come, child." Granny's eyes glittered in the soft light of Mrs. Hobbs' living room as she stood.

Gwen stood on shaky legs and wound her fingers into the back of Granny's skirt. She followed her down the hall toward the shadowy bedroom.

"He's in here," Mrs. Hobbs said before she hiccupped and led them into the room at the end of the hall.

The wooden floorboards creaked ominously as they walked in silence. Gwen felt more and more dread as her gaze drew in on the bluish corpse stretched out on the bed.

Mrs. Hobbs reached to turn on the light but Granny held up a gnarled hand. "No lights. The dark spirits don't like the light."

Gwen took a step closer to her grandmother.

"Don't get underfoot, Gwendolyn."

"I'm scared, Granny."

Granny turned to her. "Don't fear child. Always remember this night. Know there is great beauty and divinity in the darkness. This is a rite of twilight, a merging of dark and light in a natural union." She brushed her wrinkled palm across Gwen's cheek. "If you have an open heart and are pure of spirit, you may be graced by the presence of spirits. But always do so through love alone."

What happened next made an indelible mark on Gwen's soul.

Granny shot a glance out the window. "It's twilight." Her gaze collided with Mrs. Hobbs'. "It is time."

Instinctively, Gwen's heart rate accelerated. Something bad was about to happen. She knew it. Granny shouldn't be doing this.

And then, Granny withdrew a knife from the pocket of her skirt.

Gwen's heart thudded hard against her rib cage. Her breaths came in short, panting gasps. She'd seen Granny perform dark magic before—making a man fall in love with a woman, casting a spell to chase away a rival, bringing harm to an abusive husband or a philandering wife—but she'd never seen her dabble in matters of life or death. It frightened her. Badly.

Granny glanced at Gwen. "Watch closely, child—you will need to know this ritual one day." She opened Mr. Hobbs' pajama top and then she took the knife and lightly scratched a pentagram into the skin on his chest.

Gwen held her breath.

Granny raised the knife high in the air and called out to Mr. Hobbs' spirit. "Darvin Hobbs, I demand you to return to this body. I demand it!" With that, she slowly lowered the knife and then Gwen watched in horror as Granny sliced open her own palm. She pressed it to the pentagram she'd etched into the man's chest and chanted in her native Cherokee.

Gwen's knees shook uncontrollably.

Mrs. Hobbs wailed like a banshee.

And then, Darvin Hobbs opened his eyes and sucked in a ragged breath.

Gwen stared at Roger's lifeless body.

How could she *not* try it?

She closed her eyes and tried to take a few calming breaths. Roger was dead. It wouldn't hurt to try. She had nothing more to lose—except her freedom when the authorities wrongly accused her of murdering her husband.

Without another thought, she lunged toward her suitcase and flung her clothes across the room as she searched for what she called her bag of tricks. She always kept spare herbs, a smudge stick, various crystals, incense and other things from her shop just in case she needed to clear a space of negative energy.

Brother, had things just gotten negative!

Among the other sundries in her bag was a knife. Her heart skipped a beat. What if she did it wrong?

Mr. Hobbs had never been quite right after Granny raised him from the dead and he'd died again three short years later. Still, that was better than going to jail for a murder she didn't commit.

Her mind flitted over what the police would say if this ritual failed and she had to call them to the scene. How could she ever explain a bloody knife, a sliced palm and a pentagram carved into her dead husband's chest?

Dammit, Roger.

Seizing the knife, she rushed back to where Roger's body lay on the cold tile floor. She straddled him.

Her hands trembled violently as she dropped to her knees. *Goddess, give me strength.* What if it didn't work?

What if it did?

She shot a glance over her shoulder at the last rays of lavender light filtering through the plantation blinds. It was still twilight but she didn't have much time.

This is a rite of twilight, a merging of dark and light...

Steadying the knife with both hands, she placed the point of the blade in the center of Roger's chest. She bit her bottom lip so hard she tasted the metallic tang of her own blood—and then lightly pressed the knifepoint into Roger's skin. The blood had already begun to coagulate so the thin line she scratched into his chest looked strangely empty as she etched the point of a small pentagram.

Gwen tamped down the rising hysteria and focused on the incantation. "I invoke the Watchtowers of the Elements to assist me. The Earth and North for flesh, the Air and East for breath, Water and West for blood, and Fire and South for essence."

She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly.

Then she opened her palm and bit back a yelp as she sliced across her lifeline. "That hurts!" she hissed as a thin line of blood trickled from the wound. She willed herself to ignore the stinging pain. Once more, she chanted the spell, invoking the Egyptian Goddess Nekhbet and demanding the return of the spirit to the body.

She inhaled sharply and then blew out the breath, focusing intently on her will. "I demand my husband's spirit to return!" The fury in her voice surprised her. She pressed the bloody palm down hard on the pentagram. "I demand it!"

Roger's eyes snapped open. An eerie strangled sound emanated from his throat.

Gwen stared in horror – and amazement.

He convulsed beneath her for a moment and then stared as his ragged breathing slowly returned to normal.

"Baby! You're alive!" Gwen's shoulders sagged with relief. She slid off him and kneeled at his side, drawing a nearby towel under his head. "You're alive. Oh Goddess, I thought I'd lost you!"

His blue eyes locked with hers and grew wide with shock. His hand moved to his throat and Gwen quickly jumped up to run some tap water into the plastic cup on the sink. She kneeled and as she held it to Roger's lips, he drank, gulping the water, heedless that he spilled more than he consumed.

Tears coursed down Gwen's cheeks. "I thought you were dead. I thought –"

Roger pushed himself up and sat. His gaze traveled hungrily over her body and heated as it moved over her breasts and down to the single strand of pearls that disappeared between her legs.

Gwen's nipples tightened instinctively and she squeezed her thighs together, suddenly reminded of the sensuous beads teasing her clit.

Roger reluctantly looked away from Gwen to gape at his own body. He stared at the back of his hand as if he'd never seen it before. Both hands swept downward over his chest and his thighs.

Gwen's gaze followed and her breath froze in her chest when she noticed his enormous, engorged cock. Her eyes lifted to his and a one-sided grin claimed his lips. A sense of apprehension flooded her as his trembling hand lifted and he brushed her long black hair off her shoulder to bare one pearl-rimmed breast. Drawing in a rough breath, he grazed his thumb over the dusky pink nipple.

Gwen didn't move or breathe. Her heart hammered.

Despite what had just happened, a wave of sweltering heat swept up her spine and she arched toward her husband's touch. For so long, she had wanted to be touched this way. For so long, she'd wanted him to look at her with lust in his eyes and now it was happening. Her love spell *had* worked, after all! She sighed audibly and threw herself into his arms, burying her face against his shoulder and holding him so tightly she dug her nails into his back.

Something was different. She *felt* something different in his aura. She trembled.

Intuitively, she recognized it as *desire* – and something else she could not identify.

His arms wound around her. His fingers threaded through her hair as his shoulders expanded with a deep breath.

Gwen was overcome with emotion. She drew back just far enough to look into his eyes. Something indecent sparked in the sapphire pools. His smile was...not a smile at all. It was a leer!

He inhaled another long, deep breath and let out an audible groan of approval as he exhaled.

Her eyes narrowed. Her lips parted. "Roger...?"

His smile broadened and he nodded. His fingers tightened around the back of her neck and he drew her to him, slanting his head and opening his lips.

He was going to kiss her! Gwen was exultant.

His mouth brushed hers, his tongue darting out to trace the straight line of her teeth and taste her open lips. He voiced his approval. Gwen's heart fluttered like a caged bird in her chest. She wanted more. So much more.

This was the romantic interlude for which she'd waited. This was her happy ending! What had changed? Could coming back from the dead cause Roger to be so suddenly different?

And then, his mouth closed on hers. All coherent thought fled as she melted against him. His tongue mated with hers and she responded with a passion she hadn't known she possessed. A tug on her nipple surprised her and she gasped into his mouth. Desire shot straight to her pussy and she writhed against the strand of pearls.

He'd never kissed her so thoroughly. She arched her back so that her breast pressed more tightly into his hand. His palm swept over the pearls, rolling them over her skin and pinching her nipple between them. He gave her breast a gentle but firm squeeze that took her breath and then he chuckled softly into her mouth.

"Roger," she purred as his kisses moved to her cheeks and down her throat.

"Aye," he murmured as he seized her hand in his and pushed it toward his distended cock.

Aye? Gwen gasped. He was so different. So wonderfully different.

Could they really start their relationship over? She wanted desperately to be open and honest with him but could she ever trust him after his bold admission of adultery?

Her hand closed around his cock and it throbbed against her palm.

"Aye," he whispered again as his gaze found hers. Desire blazed in his eyes and ignited a spark in Gwen that made her wet between the legs.

She wanted him. Now. Right fucking now.

Drawing her bottom lip between her teeth, she straddled his thighs, kneeling over his rearing erection. She braced her hands on his shoulders as her gaze locked with his.

Again, that devilishly sexy, lopsided grin curled at the corner of his mouth. Gwen's body tightened in anticipation as Roger's fingers slid the pearl strand to the side of her labial lips. She was wet. So, so wet. Had she ever wanted him this much before?

Perhaps it was just the earlier trauma but Gwen was utterly consumed with desire so hot it felt like flames licking the insides of her thighs.

"Ride my cock." It was a command.

He shifted his hips so the thick head nuzzled her center. Gwen's insides clenched and she sank onto his erection, taking it all the way up inside her. Little spasms fluttered through her abdomen, emanating from her pussy. His hands slid under her ass cheeks and he lifted and lowered her back down. Just once.

And Gwen was suddenly mindless, coming, spiraling, floating.

"I'm coming!" she mewled over and over as she thrashed her head from side to side.

"Coming?" His voice was but a very hoarse whisper.

"Yes, yes...oh Roger!"

He gave a throaty laugh and began pumping her up and down on his cock. "You want more?"

"Yes." Gwen shut her eyes tightly and dug her nails into his shoulders. Her thighs burned. Her channel was still spasming like crazy. She rode him until she was breathless, until she could hold her position no longer. "Take me to the bed," she panted. "Fuck me on the bed."

Balancing with her hands on his shoulders, she pushed herself up and then staggered back against the vanity.

Roger stood, his eyes widening as his gaze moved past her to his reflection in the mirror.

The pentagram! Gwen offered a breathless explanation. "I had to. I had to scratch a pentagram in your chest to bring you back." But she realized he wasn't looking at that. He was staring at his own face as if he'd never seen it before.

His gaze swiveled to hers and the fire blazed there once more. "I haven't a care how you did it, luv."

Gwen's forehead furrowed. His voice sounded odd—but then, he *had* just come back from the dead.

She started toward the bed but he suddenly grabbed her hips and lifted her so her ass was perched on the vanity.

"I cannot wait that long," he growled as he parted her thighs and shoved his cock into her cunt.

Gwen gasped as his thickness filled her to capacity once more. She hooked her calves around his waist and clung to his arms so she could lean back to give him greater access.

His gaze raked her body in blatant, torrid appraisal, stopping on her recently waxed pubis. "Pretty." His eyes found hers once more. "My pretty, pink butterfly."

His words and the sound of his voice were strange but the glint in his sapphire eyes stole her breath. Her gaze dropped to where they were connected and her pussy tightened around him again. It was a beautiful sight. His thick cock was slick with her cum. Her clitoris was swollen and flushed a deep pink. The cum-drenched strand of pearls curved erotically around her labia.

His hands grabbed her ass and he pulled her precariously to the edge of the vanity, where he held her so tightly his fingers dug into her flesh. With his gaze riveted to their connection, he pumped himself into her.

Wild sensations mingled with the sound of his body slapping against hers. His balls pushed the pearls against the oh-so sensitive flesh between her vagina and anus and she opened her thighs as wide as she could to take all he had to offer.

It had never been this way with Roger. Never.

He had always been conservative, requiring either missionary sex or her on top and always, *always* in a bed.

"Cream for me again, luv." The voice was coarse, the accent strange.

Gwen's gaze shot to Roger's face. He'd never talked to her like that during sex. His eyes were dark and fierce and still fixed on where his cock breached her. She could tell he was about to come and she wanted badly to come with him. She slid her fingers over her clitoris and rubbed it in a circular motion.

"Ah, that's it," he growled. "Your little cunny is full of cream now."

Cunny? Man, he was all about the dirty talk tonight. She'd never heard that one before.

That was all it took.

Gwen's body tightened. She sucked in a breath and sensation exploded through her limbs, swirling from where he pulsed deep inside her.

She could hear him giving voice to a thick moan and she knew he was coming too. When the spasms subsided he sagged over her and his mouth found hers. His lips drew hers in possessively and an instant sense of connection struck Gwen like a lightning bolt.

Breathless, he finally dragged his mouth away. A hint of the lopsided grin returned as he rested his forehead against hers. She was in shock. He was like a different person.

His cock softened inside her and he withdrew as he sighed with brash satisfaction. His palm cupped her face and he flashed a smile of approval before he turned and strode into the bedroom.

Shaking, Gwen eased off the vanity and moved to the doorway.

Stark naked, he stood there, his head tilted back as he drank long, guzzling draughts of the champagne from the bottle.

"What are you doing?"

He brazenly wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and offered her the bottle. She laughed as she took it from him and drank from the bottle herself. The cold, effervescent liquid tingled all the way to her tummy.

Had Roger's near-death experience changed him that much? Or was it her love spell? It seemed as if he had thrown all caution to the wind and was suddenly grabbing life by the horns.

He ran his tongue around his teeth as his gaze judiciously raked her again. Despite what they'd done, Gwen felt bare in his sight. It was exhilarating.

Boldly, she shrugged off the robe. Her gaze clashed with his and held, and the unmistakable desire evident there made her heart soar. Warm desire flooded her pussy. Her hand crept to where the pearls nestled against her clit and she rolled them against the hardening wet bud. Damn, she wanted him again—this time on the bed. "Do you like my pearls, baby?"

He nodded. "Aye."

There was that word again. They'd never been adventurous enough to role-play but if that's what it took, Gwen was all for it.

He took the one step that closed the distance between them and slid the champagne bottle out of her fingers. After lifting it to his lips and taking another long drink, he swallowed and then searched her eyes. "What manner of witch are you?"

His accent was strange and old world. It sounded melodic and very refined, as if he were trying to imitate Anthony Hopkins.

Gwen laughed softly. "I'm a *bad* witch, of course."

That fire sparked once more in his sapphire eyes. He grinned and nodded. "Aye. A bad witch."

"Aye," she repeated, playing along as her gaze flicked to his already-aroused penis and then back to his eyes. "And I want to show you just how bad I can be." She was flirting. Never in a million years had she thought she'd be *flirting* with her husband.

Taking the champagne, she filled her mouth with it before she handed the bottle back and sank to her knees. Her hands found his granite-hard thighs and she inhaled as she swallowed the bubbly champagne. How long had it been since she'd had him in her mouth?

She pressed a soft kiss to his testicles and then leaned back to gauge his reaction. The blue in his eyes had turned almost black. A muscle in his jaw clenched and he threaded his fingers into her hair and pulled her back toward him, arching so his cock would enter her mouth.

Gwen's channel tightened at the suddenness of it—at the force. She moaned around him and entwined her fingers around his thick pole to keep him from shoving it down her throat. His ruthlessness sparked something inside her she had never before known—something wild and wicked. She sucked him savagely, lightly biting the head and tugging on the thick skin of his scrotum.

"Aye, witch," he groaned. "Suckle my shaft. Make it hard and I'll cram it up your cunny again." His hand tightened around the back of her head. He pulled her so close she could feel the head of his cock thrusting against the back of her palate but still, she sucked and squeezed and primed him.

Salty cream dribbled onto her tongue. He was about to come and she wanted to save that for her pussy. When she pushed at his thighs he released her, only to seize her shoulder. Still holding the bottle, he dragged her to her feet with one hand and bent her over the bed.

Gwen gasped as she planted her palms down on the scattered divorce papers and felt Roger's cock ride her crevice until it found the opening and plunged inside.

His balls slapped against her clit as he thrust into her. "Is this where you want me to shoot my cream, witch?"

"Yes!"

A resounding slap stung her ass. Gwen cried out and bore down. She was going to come. Again.

He embedded himself in her and undulated his hips, the motion lifting the heels of Gwen's feet off the rug.

Goddess, why wouldn't he spank her again? The heat of it unfurled through her bottom and she wanted more. She gritted her teeth and shifted her hands to get a stable grip on the bedspread.

He pulled back, every long, hard inch of him, until Gwen felt just the head teasing the opening of her cunt. She wanted more. She tried to push back and once more his palm landed on her backside. Her pulse throbbed. Her heartbeat grew heavy. She moaned loudly as the initial sting spread out warmly through her buttocks and his cock pushed up tight inside her again.

"I think my wee witch takes pleasure in a sound thrashing."

That crooning accent was driving her mad with desire.

"Yes," she said through clenched teeth. Damn, she was wet. She could hear the sodden sound of her sopping pussy as his cock slid in and out.

His hot palm rubbed the spot on her ass where he'd spanked her. Gwen quivered. Who was this man who, in the past half hour, had fulfilled a good many of her fantasies? Roger had never ventured outside his own conservative interests in an effort to please her.

But *this* — this was all for her and she knew it.

"Your arse is red, witch."

Her sheath constricted around him.

She heard him guzzle the rest of the champagne and then heard the empty bottle clatter to the floor before both his big hands gripped her hips. His foot pushed her feet farther apart and now she was at his mercy.

He plowed into her pussy and Gwen's consciousness rushed within to where his cock engaged in a hard, loud, ball-slapping fucking. The sensations crested and exploded rhythmically in a thousand points of pure pleasure.

Gwen's knees buckled and Roger rode her to the edge of the bed, wresting every ounce of orgasm from her.

"Oh!" she moaned as the spasms subsided. "That was so good."

"We're just getting started, my lady witch." He withdrew and lifted her onto the bed, rolling her onto her back as he did so.

A gasp escaped her lips. That's right. He hadn't come – yet.

Her heart hammered.

He climbed onto the high bed, his knees parting her thighs wide as he nestled between them. His gaze raked hers. "Can you take me some more?"

Her answer was to grasp his shoulders and draw his deliciously heavy body down onto hers. She gasped when his cock breached her and she felt that familiar inch-by-inch slide push way up into her pussy.

"Oh Roger," she growled.

"I'll roger ye," he murmured against her ear and he bucked wildly, his breaths uneven as he drove himself until she could feel him spurting within her.

"Bloody damn hell!" A ragged groan tore from his throat as he collapsed and covered her.

Gwen lay on top of the scattered divorce papers underneath the man who'd confronted her with them. She was trembling and sated and flooded with renewed love for him.

She ran her hands over his back, which was misted with perspiration. His hot breath fanned her ear and she turned her head more fully toward him as he brushed his mouth against the sensitive shell. He pressed a kiss there and then propped on one elbow to gaze into her eyes.

Gwen's stomach tightened at the combination of love and lust in his expression. She cleared her throat. "I don't suppose you plan to divorce me after this."

His forehead furrowed. "Divorce?"

Gwen swallowed. "I can change if you can. I want this to work."

"What to work, luv?"

"Our marriage."

He burst into laughter. "Marriage?"

Gwen was stunned – and bruised. Her hand slid from his shoulder and she swiped at a lock of sweat-dampened hair that had stolen across her face. "Yes, our marriage."

"Marriage?" he repeated incredulously.

Gwen's eyes narrowed. "If you still want a divorce after this, then by all means, you fucking bastard, give me a pen and I'll sign the papers."

He cleared his throat. "Luv, how can we possibly *divorce* when we are not married?"

Anger flared. She slapped at his shoulders. "Get off me and stop with that fake accent."

He made no move to get off her. Instead, he endured her feeble pushing and slapping until she grew weary and stopped. When she was finally breathless, he said, "Exactly *who*, my lovely lady witch, do you think I am?"

Chapter Three

Panic surged.

Gwen stared.

He was still semi-erect inside her.

But who was *he*?

Suddenly, a blast of wind rushed through the room, rattling the windows and door violently. Roger's divorce papers swirled around her while the plantation blinds rattled. The temperature in the room felt as if it had abruptly dropped twenty degrees.

"Major Stede Bonnet!" a voice reverberated in the tiny room. The sound of it had an unearthly, metallic rasp to it.

Gwen gasped. Her gaze riveted to the pale apparition of a *pirate*. He stood inches from the bed with his legs braced wide and his hands on his hips. She froze.

Wearing a cutlass belted to his hip and twin flintlock pistols jammed into the waistband of his breeches, he was dressed from head to toe in the eighteenth-century garb of a pirate. A greasy black, braided beard jutted from his chin, hanging halfway down his chest. His bottle green coat was so long it nearly concealed his trousers. The coat's impossibly wide cuffs were turned up and held in place with big brass buttons. Thigh-high black leather boots and a ragged, feathered tricorne hat completed his pirate ensemble.

"Edward Teach," seethed the man who was still embedded inside her.

Gwen's gaze flicked back and forth between them. Her heart beat rapidly. Well...she *had* wanted to meet a ghost. But this one looked downright *mean*.

The sulfurous odor of brimstone permeated the air.

Chills swept her arms and legs despite the carnal heat of the man on top of her. The voice in her head told her there was no possibility of life ever going to back to normal. Not after this.

A thin smile stretched across Teach's bearded face. It didn't reach the two beady black eyes that roved over Gwen's nearly naked body before lifting to her lover's once more. "I see you still fancy the doxies. You always were one for eyeing the quality whores in every port."

Gwen balked. She was no whore. She'd thought this man was her husband!

"State your business here!" the man above her commanded.

"My business isn't with you, Major Bonnet." Once more Teach's menacing gaze swiveled to Gwen. He stared as if he could look beyond her eyes and dissect her

thoughts. His macabre smile stretched impossibly wider. "My business be with the witch."

She felt utterly exposed and it had nothing to do with the fact she was nearly naked. What could the ghost of a dead pirate possibly want with her?

At once, the man she thought was Roger leapt off her and stood ready to do battle with the pirate ghost. "Over my dead body," he growled.

Gwen scrambled backward and hugged her legs. She stared, wide-eyed, not moving.

Teach laughed heartily. "That won't be necessary, Major." And then he walked *through* Roger's body. "Yet."

For a steep second, the pirate closed his eyes and then he tilted his head slightly back, his nostrils flaring as if he were a beast picking up the scent of a wounded animal. "I can smell yer cunny." His voice was chilling.

She cringed.

"Don't be shy about it, lass. Meself, I like the scent of a fresh-prodded skincoat." The pirate's face was cold and heartless, his black eyes glittering with malevolent insight. "Did ye truss yerself up for the *gentleman* or were ye perhaps hopin' ter rekindle yer dead husband's flame?"

Gwen felt a conflicting sense of violation and shame.

"Tell me this, witch," he said. "What has the *gentleman* offered ye fer the body?"

"Go back to the devil, Teach!" the man in Roger's body ordered.

But the pirate kept his steely gaze trained on Gwen. "I've a proposition for ye, witch." He glanced over his ethereal shoulder at the man in Roger's body – the man he called Major Bonnet – and then his eyes pivoted back to Gwen's. "I want that body and I want you to use your magic to put me in it."

"She'll not be giving you the body or anything else." Bonnet stiffened. Anger flashed in his blue eyes. "It's mine. She called me to it – to *her*."

A look of smug self-satisfaction crossed Teach's features. "I feel fairly certain she will, Stede." He took a step closer to Gwen, reminding her she was wearing nothing but a pearl thong and string bra.

She stared into his fathomless eyes which seemed to hold her whole.

"She's mine until I say otherwise." Bonnet glared.

Gwen was aghast. *Mine*? A frisson of shock passed through her.

Teach never took his eyes off Gwen. "Oh, she'll say otherwise all right. Of that, I'm confident."

Anger blazed. Who were these people and why were they discussing her as if she were a prize to be had? She lunged to her knees, forgetting the fact she was all but naked. "What the hell do you want?"

Teach laughed triumphantly as his lurid gaze raked her body and then lifted to lock with her eyes. "I want you to put *me* in *there*." He gestured at Roger's body.

"Don't do it, luv," Stede said grimly. "He only wants the body so he can collect the treasure I buried."

Gwen blew out a sigh and rubbed her pounding forehead. Pirates and treasure? *And where's Roger?*

"The witch can make her up own mind." Teach's black eyes ensnared hers. "She can choose her own fate. Can't ye?" Once again, that sinful smile became visible. "Or do ye mean ter let yerself be tossed around by fate like a skiff in a storm for the rest o' yer life?"

"What do you mean?" She felt as if she were powerlessly being drawn in by him hook, line and sinker.

He gestured around the room at the half-unpacked bags, the rumpled covers and the empty champagne bottle on the floor but his eyes never left hers. "I can see it in yer face. The things ye had no control over." Something malicious crackled in his gaze. "Ye were slapped around when ye were but a wee thing, weren't ye?"

Gwen swallowed thickly. How did he know that? She'd never told anyone about that. Not even Roger. And the fact he'd brought it up made her feel raw inside.

"Leave her be, Teach!" Bonnet glared at him.

"Ye waited all yer life fer some *git* to come along and rescue ye and when he did, ye thought ye'd finally found *happiness*." He waved his hands with a mocking flourish. "But that ain't what ye got, is it, witch? Yer fancy *git* never loved ye and despite all the things he could buy ye, inside ye was hollow and empty."

Her breath left her body in a ragged rush. How could he read her so easily? The fact that he'd somehow raped her thoughts left her shaking and vulnerable.

"I can set ye free, witch."

"How?" she blurted.

"Put me in the body."

"Don't do it!" Bonnet yelled.

There was no way she was doing it. Edward Teach wasn't the only one who could read a person. Gwen could easily see he was a liar and a trickster. His eyes were like a shark's—black and flat and fixed with one purpose in mind. Bloodshed.

She shook. "No. No. I won't put you in the body," she said with more resolution than she thought she possessed.

The pirate waved his wrist in a grand gesture—and suddenly Gwen's granny's spirit appeared.

Gwen's heart soared only to come crashing back down around her with sickening force. Flanking Granny were two dark entities with glowing red eyes. She'd heard Amy talk about them and although she, Gwen, had never seen them before, she knew without a doubt they were soul collectors—bent on taking earthbound souls to hell.

"Granny!" She started toward her but the beings drew dangerously closer to her grandmother.

"Child, stay back!" her grandmother cried, raising a gnarled hand to stop her.

Gwen's gaze shot to the pirate's. "What do you want with her?" Wild terror warred with anger to consume her. She fought to control it.

His clipped British accent was cool and low. "I've no use for her at all other than to convince ye to put my spirit in that there body."

"Why?"

"'Tis not for ye to question, witch," he said. One hand found his hip. "However, if ye refuse me, I will summarily send yer grandmother's soul ter hell."

Gwen paled. Her eyes moved from Granny to the pirate and then to the man who inhabited Roger's body.

"Don't heed him, luv. He's lying." Stede's voice was charged with warning.

Listening to the one called Stede confused her. Her gaze clashed with the Teach's once more. "You tell me why."

"Yer friend, Major Bonnet, cheated me. He filched me plunder and now I need the body to recover it." A lurid smile crawled above the oily beard. "And ter enjoy it."

"That booty belonged to my crew and you know it, Teach!"

"Shut up!" Gwen yelled. She was irritated and aggravated—and stunned. "All right, I don't give a damn why you want the body. What are you doing with my granny?"

Teach shot a glance at the little old lady's spirit. "Since ye refused my very generous offer, let's just say the old gal's my assurance ye'll perform the spell correctly."

Gwen quaked with sick fear. Her stomach felt as if it were lodged in her rib cage. She slid off the bed and covered herself with her robe as her gaze found Granny's. Although she'd always felt her spirit near, she hadn't seen the woman who'd raised her since she was eighteen years old—since Granny had withered away from cancer in Hamilton, Tennessee.

A lump welled in Gwen's throat as a hot tear coursed down her cheek. She swatted at it. Playing at matters of life and death was wrong and against all her Wiccan principles. She knew she shouldn't have done it. But how could she have just let Roger die?

Granny only gave her a sad smile.

"You've been with me all this time, haven't you? You never left. You never crossed over."

Granny shook her head.

Guilt jabbed Gwen hard in the gut. When Granny had died, Gwen had grieved so desperately that Granny had never transitioned into the Light.

It was *her* fault her grandmother's soul was at risk. "I'm sorry, Granny!"

"I couldn't leave you. You thought you needed me." Granny's eyes filled with tears.

"I *did* need you!"

Granny gave her that melancholy smile again. "I taught you everything you needed to know, Gwennie."

Gwen's gaze flitted to the soul collectors and then back to her grandmother. "Can they..." She couldn't bring herself to finish her question. *Can they hurt you?*

Teach clapped his dirty hands together once, startling Gwen. "The witch needs proof!"

And then Gwen watched in utter horror as the soul collectors dove on her grandmother, clawing and hissing.

Panic surged. "Stop! No!"

"Stop this at once!" Roger — *Stede* — ordered, stepping forward.

Teach clapped his hands again and the soul collectors slinked back but hovered perilously over Granny, who was now cowering and nursing an angry scratch across her cheek.

Gwen's gaze clashed with the pirate's. "What do you want me to do?"

Both Granny and the man in Roger's body began arguing but Gwen kept her eyes trained on Edward Teach.

A perverse but triumphant snarl curled his thin lips. "Do what ye must, witch, but install me in that body this instant."

"I refuse to stand for it!" Stede barked.

Gwen shot him an icy glance. "You don't have a choice."

Teach laughed. "See, Bonnet, the witch can be reasonable."

Gwen inhaled. Her gaze slid to his once more. "And neither do you."

The pirate's lips parted. "It is *you* who have no choice in the matter, madam."

Gwen's eyes flicked to Granny's and then back to the pirate's. "You're exactly right. I don't have a choice. Bringing a soul back to a body is a ritual of twilight, therefore it must be done at the precise moment of sundown or it won't work." She glanced at the clock ticking on the mantle. It wasn't yet nine-thirty. "You have nearly twenty-four hours to wait before I can do it."

Teach sucked in an angry breath. He whirled to face Granny. "Is that true?"

Granny nodded.

The pirate mulled it over. Gwen trembled. He was pissed. Very. And the one called Stede Bonnet stood naked and glaring at the pirate, waiting to hear to his reply.

"I suppose I have no alternative." He took a step closer to Gwen.

Her heart pounded but she forced herself to hold his ghostly gaze. "Come back at twilight and I'll give you the body — *if* you will release my grandmother."

A strange light flickered in his black eyes. "A gentleman's agreement, witch?"

She swallowed and nodded.

"He's no gentleman!" Stede interjected.

Teach snorted. "You'd better not let *him* get away." His gaze roved over the room. "He's escaped many sturdier holds than this."

Gwen hadn't considered that. She gnawed her bottom lip. What if Stede simply took Roger's body and ran? He was far bigger and stronger. He could overpower her in an instant and escape—and then Granny's soul would be forever lost. Conflicting thoughts tore at her until she wanted to scream.

Her gaze found Granny's. She clutched the robe tighter as the shadow beings hovered closer to her grandmother. Granny was wrong. Gwen *did* need her—and she'd never needed her more than now. Conflicting joy and pain at seeing her after all these years made her heart ache. Gwen bit back a sob. "Leave her with me until twilight. Please."

Teach shook his head. "You're going to be far too busy for that, witch. If I am to wait, I will also need the treasure."

"The treasure?"

"I'm certain Major Bonnet can help you with that," Teach said. "He and his manservant buried the booty." His eyes narrowed and Gwen trembled under his cruel gaze. "The loot and the body are yer keys to the welfare of yer grandmother's soul. Do ye understand?"

Gwen nodded but her mind screamed. How was she going to keep Stede Bonnet from taking off with Roger's body? And how on earth was she going to coerce him into helping her find treasure that had likely been buried for centuries—to give to some other pirate?

The pirate turned to the man in Roger's body. "*Gentleman Pirate* indeed, Bonnet."

"Go back to hell, Teach."

The pirate laughed and then with a sudden whoosh of wind, all the spirits vanished.

Gwen lunged, grasping at the spot where her grandmother had been only to fall sprawling in the floor. Pain shot through her knees and wounded hand. A sob racked her shoulders and she slumped against the Persian rug and cried.

She became aware of a big, warm hand stroking her back. Anger flared. Not only had he stolen her husband's body, he'd fucked her! Now, because she'd brought the bastard back from the dead, her grandmother's soul was in the lurch.

Gwen could control it no longer. With catlike speed, she pushed herself up and slapped the man who'd inhabited Roger's body as hard as she could across the face. Her hand stung and she stared at him, shaking with rage.

Surprise flashed in his eyes but he remained motionless, naked and on one knee beside her.

How could she have been so easily fooled? She'd just indulged in the most intimate positions with him. Had she really not known? But Gwen had known *something* was different. She had simply wanted to believe so badly that Roger could care for her, she'd ignored her intuition.

Slapping him had done little to relieve her anger so she lifted both hands to pummel him again. This time, he seized her wrists and then hauled her body against his. She struggled but his hold was too tight.

One big hand held both her wrists while the other dragged her petite body into his lap as he sat. She writhed against his unyielding grip and body, grunting and groaning until she was finally exhausted.

Her shoulders shook with a sob and then he cradled her against him, loosening the hold on her arms. "What's your name, witch?"

She sucked in a breath. "Where's my husband? What have you done with him?"

"His spirit vacated the body. I had nothing to do with it."

Fury blazed. "So you just decided to steal his body?"

"Your spell drew me here," he said.

Her mind grappled with everything at once. He'd said *spell*, not ritual. But her love spell had been meant for Roger. How had it lured some dead dude to her? It didn't make sense. She struggled again to no avail. "How?" she demanded.

A little chuckle from him infuriated her further. "You're the witch. You tell me."

She squeezed her eyes shut trying to calm down, to assimilate all the information, and then she opened them and pinned him with a stare. "Who are you?"

"Stede Bonnet."

Stede Bonnet was a name she'd heard before. She'd come across it when she was researching Charleston for her second honeymoon destination. The Battery Carriage House Inn faced White Point Gardens and Bonnet had been hanged here for piracy, his corpse left in a gibbet until the bones bleached in the sun, in the early 1700s. A ragged breath left her body in a rush. *I've brought back a dead pirate?*

"Tell me *your* name?" His voice was soft and gentle.

She drew back just far enough to look into his eyes. "Gwendolyn."

His gaze moved over her face as if he were trying to fit her name to it. He nodded. "Gwendolyn."

The sound of her name on his lips made her insides tighten and Gwen was all too aware of his hands around her arms and legs—and very aware she was wearing nothing except a robe and pearl-garnished bra and panties. She lowered her lashes and at once, she was assailed with the sight of his naked body.

Roger had always been handsome but in a cold, conservative way. With Stede Bonnet's energy inside his body, she hated to admit it but he was overwhelmingly gorgeous—and her traitorous body was having a very difficult time resisting him.

He fingered the fabric of her robe. "Do—I—have any clothes?" Stede asked.

Gwen blew out a sigh. She debated refusing him. If he dressed, then he could skitter out the door and she'd never see him again. Granny's soul would be lost and Gwen would be left with nothing. But could she keep him here, *naked*, for almost a day?

Something warm and fluid spiraled downward inside her. Would it be so bad to use her feminine wiles to entice him to find the treasure and save her grandmother's soul?

No. It would serve her better to keep him here by other means. Like threatening him with the stun gun in her suitcase.

"You have clothes." She stood and rifled through Roger's suitcase, selecting a pair of jeans and a gray T-shirt. Trembling, she retrieved the stun gun from her own suitcase and slipped it in the pocket of the robe.

"These are queer breeches," he muttered. "What manner of toggle is this?"

Gwen turned and the sight of him wearing nothing but the jeans—with the fly unzipped and gaping to reveal a patch of black curls—stole her breath. She swallowed, her gaze locked to where his hands held the fly open. "It's a zipper." Her voice left her mouth in a breathless rush.

"Show me."

She shook as she took the two steps to close the distance between them. She gripped the slider and drew it up, the back of her hand brushing the dusting of hair that led from his navel downward. Her gaze grazed his and she started to turn away but he caught her shoulders and held her there.

"What time is this?"

"It's the twenty-first century."

A muscle in his jaw twitched.

She had to find out how much he knew. An eighteenth-century man wouldn't be capable of driving a car to escape but he was certainly capable of running. "Do you have any concept of how long you've been here?"

He shrugged. Something bleak flashed in his eyes. "It was as if I were floating in water, lost and at the mercy of the waves—until I heard your voice reciting the spell."

Gwen stared. She fought to ignore the blatant implication in his voice. Had she really drawn *him* to her? "But if I recall correctly, several pirates were hanged on this site." It occurred to her that a man who'd been hanged as a criminal was potentially dangerous. She tensed.

He flinched and nodded. "Several of my crew hanged that day, Gwendolyn."

"I don't understand. Why did *your* spirit linger?" She had to keep him talking. She had to keep him here.

"I don't know, luv."

"Were you aware of that...that other pirate?"

He shook his head.

"But you know him?"

"Yes, him I know."

"Then who is he and what does he want?"

Stede took a deep breath and blew it out. "Edward Teach. Better known as Blackbeard."

Gwen gasped. "*Blackbeard?*"

Now she was really afraid. Although she knew very little about him historically, the name itself struck fear in her heart.

She rubbed her aching temples and tried to think. It was imperative that she get Stede Bonnet to cooperate with her. Her pulse accelerated as she considered how to word her next question. "Can you take me to this treasure?"

"No." He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead before snatching the T-shirt and slipping it over his head. "It's been a pleasure, luv."

Her heart skipped a beat. He was leaving. He was going to leave her and her grandmother's soul at the mercy of that pirate.

He started toward the door. "I am terribly sorry about your grandmother." His gaze heated as it moved down Gwen's body and then back up to her eyes. "I wish I could stay longer but..." His hand gripped the doorknob.

Panic surged. She withdrew the stun gun from her pocket. Her hand quaked as she thumbed it on. A current buzzed between the prongs.

His curious gaze dropped to the weapon and then lifted once more to her face.

Determined, she stared directly into his eyes. "Listen, Major Bonnet. As it stands, I don't need your permission to put Blackbeard in that body. I can do it from anywhere and any place." She was lying but he didn't know that. She hoped.

Prodding him with the stun gun would be the last resort. Besides, she'd never actually had to use it before. She'd bought it as a safety measure when she'd opened the Emporium in Franklin.

Stede's gaze continued to dart back and forth between her eyes and the weapon. "What are you saying?"

She had to maintain every ounce of iron control she possessed to keep from lunging at him and buzzing the pirate bastard into oblivion with the stun gun. Her hand tightened around the weapon. Her finger curled around the trigger. "I don't know you. I don't give a rat's ass what happens to you but I *do* care about my grandmother. If you try to walk out that door, I will put Blackbeard's spirit in my husband's body and you'll be left hanging – again."

He studied her. "I don't believe you."

"Just wait until twilight."

"You only want me to find the treasure for you."

"You're damn right, I do."

He smiled, flashing white teeth and two sexy dimples. "Madam, *adieu*." He bowed with a flourish and then twisted the doorknob once more.

Gwen bit her bottom lip. This wasn't working. He was smarter than she'd given him credit for being. She tried to muster the courage to stun him. "If you stay, we can trick Blackbeard! You can keep my husband's body and the treasure and in return, I keep my grandmother's spirit safe."

"I can find the plunder on my own."

"You think so?"

"I buried it."

"Three hundred years ago."

That dashing smile claimed his lips once more. "How much could things have possibly changed in three centuries?"

Gwen gestured toward the door.

She trembled violently as Stede opened it and walked barefoot into the courtyard. *Please don't leave*. Every fiber of her being grew taut. She was foolish for not jabbing him with the stun gun. Any moment she expected him to bolt away and she desperately needed Roger's body to remain here.

He strode cautiously onto the middle of the cobblestone path leading from the front gate into the courtyard, his gaze sweeping the darkness and the surrounding towering houses. A delivery truck rumbled by on the street outside and he leapt back. "Sink me!" he exclaimed. He turned and his stricken gaze collided with hers. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph!"

A sense of triumph surged through Gwen. She bit back a smile as he hurried back into the room.

He shut the door behind him, his wide gaze searching hers. "What is this place?"

She shrugged. "Charleston."

"This, lass, is not Charles Towne," he said breathlessly.

"Will you help me or not?"

His eyes narrowed. His mouth tightened into a hard, straight line. "I know you're lying."

Gwen swallowed.

He took a menacing step closer. "Do you think me a rube, lady?"

"A rube?" Unfortunately, he was anything but stupid. "Of course not."

He snorted. One side of his mouth twisted into a sardonic grin. "I've been hornswoggled by far more cunning rig runners than you."

"I'm not *hornswoggling* you."

He caught her hand in his and lifted it so her own palm was facing her. "I know you can't put Blackbeard's spirit in the body without spilling your own blood onto it."

Gwen stared at the scratch. Her stomach plummeted. She had to think fast. Really fast. "Maybe not. But I can put his spirit in the body and then kill him." She brandished the stun gun. "With this."

That wasn't actually true—but there was no way he'd know.

Stede's eyes flashed and then both sides of his mouth curled into a devilish grin. "Aye. You could, couldn't you?" He nodded. "But what assurance do I have you will put me back in the body?"

Her mind ran rampant and all she could think to offer him was the treasure—and her body. She looked him hard in the eye. "We have almost twenty-four hours to find the treasure."

"Aye."

She inhaled. "You've been in limbo for three centuries."

"Aye." This time his voice rose with uncertainty and his eyes narrowed.

This was so much harder than she had thought it would be. "I could...well, I'd be willing..."

When her voice trailed off, he finished her sentence. "Are you offering your *services* to me as payment for my assistance?"

Heart pounding, she drew open the robe and nodded.

His gaze raked her in unmitigated appraisal as he obviously considered her offer. "I could just leave now, keep the body and find the treasure on my own."

"Even if you find it, you can't just sell gold doubloons or whatever else you have on the open market. You have no idea of the value. Hell, you don't even know what your name is. I have all my husband's legal documents, his social security number, his driver's license—everything. In the twenty-first century, your identity, Major Bonnet, is more valuable than anything else." She pointed the stun gun at him menacingly. "Besides, I'll make you sorry if you try to walk out that door."

His blue eyes turned black. Gwen could practically hear his mind working. Hopefully she had convinced him it would be very difficult for him to get along without her.

His face was expressionless but she could tell he was still thinking. "How do I know I can trust you?"

Gwen knew her face darkened. She took a deep breath and blew it out. "I can't let Blackbeard take my grandmother's soul. I *need* you."

Stede searched her eyes. "Killing a man is not as easy as it sounds. Even for a witch."

"I wouldn't really be killing Blackbeard. He's already dead."

Stede paced in the room. His chest rose and fell with quick breaths. "It's too risky." Once more, he reached for the doorknob.

Gwen dashed between him and the door. "You can't go. Please, Stede! I can't let him hurt my grandmother. I can't. You're her only hope." Tears flooded her eyes and streamed down her cheeks. She shook uncontrollably. "It's because of you that bastard has my granny anyway. You and your freaking treasure!" Desperate, she searched his gaze.

He hesitated and stared. A muscle in his cheek tensed. After a tense bout of silence, he added, "Are you forgetting your *love spell*, madam?"

"Obviously, my spell didn't work. I would never have called someone like...like *you* to me!" She was so angry she couldn't think of anything bad enough to call him. She'd offered him her body and now he was mocking a spell she had cast with the best of intentions.

How could the Universe have ever sent someone so insufferable to her? She knew she was trembling and staring but her mind was torn with grief and shock—and something she couldn't define in the presence of this man in her husband's body.

"Put down your weapon, Gwendolyn," he said severely.

"Why?"

"Put it down!" he ordered. "I refuse to talk to you while you're aiming that...that thing at me." He pointed accusingly at the stun gun.

She stared at him with hope. Was he amenable to coming to some sort of agreement? Against all better judgment, she thumbed the stunner off and dropped it back in her pocket. The thought occurred to her that she was now at his mercy. He might be dangerous. But his earlier actions and the spark in his eyes told her differently.

"Does your offer still stand?" he asked, coming toe-to-toe with her.

Gwen's pulse rioted. She was so very aware of the heat radiating from his body as he reached inside the lapel of the robe and cupped her breast in his hand. She sucked in a ragged breath. Part of her wanted to melt into his touch and another part of her wanted to slap the everliving shit out of him. He wasn't a gentleman at all! He was actually going to take her up on her offer of sex for his assistance!

You offered, she thought. But still...the bastard!

Her body responded in a totally different—and totally wanton—way. "Yes," she hissed and shrugged her hair behind her shoulder, annoyed that her traitorous pussy contracted in shameless anticipation.

"Then kiss me," he whispered.

Instinctively, Gwen moved toward him but then hesitated. This was crazy. This was...

And then, all coherent thought escaped as he dragged her against him, laced his fingers in the thick hair at her nape and held her head as his mouth sought hers. Gwen moaned and opened for him, allowing his tongue inside. Roger had never kissed her this way but lust battled the guilt she felt and she suddenly found herself swept up in his arms and being carried toward the bed.

“Bloody damn hell,” Stede said as he dropped her on the bed and began hastily unfastening his jeans.

Chapter Four

Stede could not believe he had given in to the witch's whims, but he'd spent an eternity trapped between heaven and earth and there was something about Gwendolyn he could not define – something from which he could not easily walk away.

He pushed his breeches down and took his cockstand in his hand. No other woman had ever made him this hard or this aroused.

When she propped herself on her elbows, her dressing gown fell away to expose the alluring little strand of pearls that disappeared into the folds of her cunny. As he moved onto the bed, his gaze swept upward over her heaving breasts to her face. With her glistening lips parted seductively and her thick black lashes lowered, she was the epitome of any man's fantasy.

His gaze dropped once more to her cleft. "Spread your legs," he growled.

When she didn't immediately comply, he looked sharply into her eyes. "I said, spread your legs!"

"Hateful bastard," she bit out as he nudged his shoulders roughly between her thighs.

A whimper escaped her lips as he lowered his head and breathed in the scent of her sex. Slightly tainted with a soft floral perfume, she smelled soft and feminine and he wanted to taste her.

Her body shook with tension and need as he drew the strand of beads to the side and then ran the tip of his tongue down the swollen little bud at the height of her sex and lower, between the beautifully bare folds to her hole. With a groan, he pushed his tongue up inside her. Sweet. So lusciously sweet.

His hands tightened on the soft flesh of her thighs and he shifted. Closer. He couldn't get close enough.

"Stede..." she moaned.

Tentative fingers burrowed into his hair and drew his mouth up to that hard little hillock again. When he sucked it between his lips, she cried out and the knowledge he was giving her such pleasure made him rock his hips so that his prick rubbed against the soft coverlet beneath him.

She draped one of her legs over his shoulder and dug her heel into his back, drawing him even closer as she lifted her hips toward his hungry kisses.

This was definitely worth any sacrifice he'd have to make on her behalf.

Besides, he would never have been able to leave her in good conscience. Not after seeing the stricken look in her eyes when Blackbeard taunted her with the spirit of that old woman.

The witch gasped and arched up and then she grasped at his hand. "Your finger...fuck me with your finger."

Stede's insides clenched. He wanted to fuck her with more than his finger. But for now...

He lifted his head to watch her face as he slid his index finger slowly inside her channel. Still propped on her elbows, she dropped her head back and exhaled as she kneaded her own nipples. Her thighs drew up and then opened again like the wings of a butterfly.

Once more, she brought her head up and opened her eyes, her passion-hazed gaze locking with his. "Eat my pussy while you finger-fuck me."

Pussy.

Although he'd never used that word in that context, he knew implicitly what she meant. A grin tugged at his lips as he lowered his head once more into her fragrant folds to suckle the soft, smooth skin into his mouth.

This time, he was crazy with the taste of her and the feel of her wet, velvet insides clenching around his finger. She attempted to squeeze his head with her thighs and then roll on the bed, so he was forced to wedge his shoulders between her legs as he wrestled her into bliss.

She grew suddenly still and Stede felt a telling flood of wetness soak his finger. Her muscles seemed to grow taut as she sucked in a quick breath through her teeth and then let it out in a long, silky moan.

She lay panting against the covers as he crawled over her and slid his aching prick along her dewy cleft. When he touched her there, she jolted and her eyes flew open.

"It's too much," she whimpered. "Too intense."

But he didn't care. He had to be inside her. There'd be no waiting. Not now. He pinned her little fists above her head and held them to the bed with one hand while he plunged his cock into her. She was so tight and so wet inside and the feel of those slippery pearls sliding around his cock made him want to explode immediately but somehow, he held himself in check.

Then she writhed and he thought he'd lose control. "Be still," he commanded. "Gwendolyn, be still."

Her eyes flew open and she looked up at him—and he was overcome with the urge to kiss her. He grazed her lips with his and voiced his satisfaction before sliding one of his hands under her head to hold her while he plundered her mouth. "Just as sweet as your cunny," he murmured against her lips.

He rocked up tight into her and then pulled back slowly. "How does that feel?"

"Good!"

"And this?" he asked, driving bone against bone in a maddeningly deep, slow slide.

A little sound emanated from her throat and her eyes filled with tears. "You would have left me with no way to save my grandmother." Hysteria tinged her voice but overlying it was unmitigated passion – and Stede recognized it.

"How could I leave you when you have bewitched me?" He dropped his head down and nuzzled the curve of her neck, kissing his way up to her ear. He whispered her own spell. "The perfect one who is meant to be shall find his way home to me. In perfect love and perfect lust, I send this out with all my trust."

Her body tensed and when he freed her hands, her arms flew around his back, her palms gliding down to his buttocks and back up to his neck. "Stede," she whispered as she took his face in her hands and drew his mouth to hers.

This time, it was the witch who kissed him while he slowly rutted between her legs. She radiated tension and desperate need and Stede felt an overwhelming desire to hold her and keep her safe. This sensuous little witch, for all her outward bravado, was really a woman who had not yet realized her own power.

Stede finally dragged his mouth away and braced his feet on the rail of the footboard to gain leverage. Holding her tightly, he thrust into her with one goal in mind – assuaging this lust he knew emanated from deeper within him than he cared to admit.

* * * * *

Gwen couldn't believe she'd resorted to offering Stede Bonnet sex for his help. At the time, she hadn't been able to think of anything else – but thank Goddess, it had worked. Her body heated at the memory of his face nestled between her spread thighs. She blinked and looked away, trying to force the lurid memory from her mind.

Stede paced in the small room, curiously switching the lights off and on and playing with the television remote, while she sat on the bed huddled in the waffle-weave robe. Although electronics and modern conveniences seemed to interest him, he was far more consumed with the task at hand.

"We're going to need a jolly boat with a jib sail."

Gwen turned to him. "A jolly boat?"

"A small boat," he explained. His gaze scanned her arms. "You don't look as if you'd be much for rowing."

"I'll rent one with a motor."

"A motor?"

"Trust me. You'll love it," she said blandly.

"We'll need shovels."

"I'm sure there's a Wal-Mart somewhere nearby." She fought a yawn and lost. She was terribly tired but she didn't dare go to sleep even though she knew she would need her strength tomorrow. Now that he'd had her again – *make that again and again*, she thought – he might reconsider and leave.

Stede glanced at the clock and Gwen's gaze followed. It was nearly midnight. She yawned again.

"It's late," he said. "Why don't you get some rest and we'll venture out at the first light of dawn."

She bolted upright in the bed. "No. You can't trick me into that."

"Trick you?" His hands found his hips. "Madam, I wouldn't presume to *trick* you." He moved toward the bed.

Gwen's breath froze in her chest. Did he intend to fuck her again? Her traitorous pussy flooded with wetness. Her legs shifted restlessly and she was reminded of the pearl thong. She'd been too afraid to slip into the bathroom to change into something more modest because she thought Stede might leave.

He slid onto the bed, the jeans creasing and tugging in all the right places as he sat. Now wasn't the time to change clothes. Her breathing stopped as he moved next to her and slipped his arm around her shoulders.

"I'll stay with you." His voice was but a whisper. "Take a caulk."

Her confusion must have been evident on her face because he added, "A nap, luv. Close your eyes. I'll keep watch."

Gwen leaned against him. Oddly, she felt perfectly safe and perfectly secure with Stede Bonnet acting as watchkeeper. His body felt so *good*. She wanted to stay here forever, to pretend he was a husband who loved her, to forget everything that had happened. Just for a minute... What would it hurt?

Her eyes fluttered shut.

Long fingers threaded into her thick, black hair and made lazy circles at the nape of her neck. Part of her wanted to disappear in his arms again, to feel his body joined with hers, his luscious cock moving in and out of her pussy. She knew she shouldn't want him but she couldn't help it. Still, the reality was that he wasn't a man who loved her. He was a pirate who'd jumped into her husband's body the second he'd died.

A flash of remorse for Roger flitted through her but she forced the feelings away. She couldn't think about that. Not now. Not with everything else at stake.

Stede Bonnet was a man who'd been hanged as a criminal three hundred years ago. He was not a man she could trust—and definitely not a man she could love. He'd been about to walk out on her until she'd prostituted herself to make him stay.

He shifted and she felt a warm blanket being drawn over her legs. His arms tightened around her and he drew her head against his chest. The T-shirt smelled like home, like the fabric softener she used. It seemed odd that the scent wafted around this stranger—this pirate from the past.

Still, she needed this embrace, even if it was only temporary. She needed to feel strong arms around her. Dropping her guard, she wound one arm over his abdomen, sliding her hand underneath the T-shirt and laying her palm against his skin. It radiated a warmth she'd never felt from Roger.

Stede's breathing was different. Deeper. His touch was altogether different. During sex, he'd been on the verge of rough and demanding. Now he was gentle and soothing – and more dangerous than ever.

Sleep slipped over her like a placid wave and she drifted, but only for an instant before she jerked awake. She couldn't sleep. Not in Stede Bonnet's arms.

His arms tensed. "Lie quietly, Gwendolyn," he murmured.

"I can't."

"Tell me about your grandmother. Were you close to her?" His voice was whisper-soft.

"I lived with her." Images of Granny's welcoming arms assailed her. Although Granny's death had left a hole in her soul she knew would always feel empty, she'd known her spirit was close when she could faintly detect the scent of dried herbs mingled with the homey aroma of sugar cookies.

How many times had she run in from school to be greeted with a fresh batch of cookies while Granny chopped and brewed herbs for a spell?

A little smile tinged with longing pulled at her lips. As long as she felt Granny was near, she'd always known which path to take, what to do. Now she felt lost.

"What happened to your mother?" Stede's voice dragged her out of her reverie.

Gwen wished she'd fallen asleep now. She swallowed and snuggled closer against his warmth. "My mother couldn't take care of me after my father left."

Stede's body grew taut. "Your father left?"

"I don't remember much about him."

Stede's chest expanded with a slow, deep breath.

"I always felt like it was my fault," she confessed.

"Why?"

"I was different. Things happened around me. Light bulbs exploded. Mirrors shattered when I was angry. When I was a child, I didn't know how to control my...powers," she told him. "But then, I guess it was better than if I had lived in your time."

"Most assuredly," Stede told her. "You would have been burned."

Gwen swallowed at the thought of being burned at the stake for a natural ability she had no choice over. "Do...do you think less of me because I'm a witch?" She'd never cared what others thought of her but for some reason, Stede's opinion mattered – and she couldn't explain to herself why.

He gave a little chuckle. "My dear, I was brought up in the islands far from the reaches and influences of England. I spent more time with our African servants than any whites and I was no stranger to voodoo and the like." And then, he added softly, "But we were talking about you."

Gwen's stomach plummeted. Not even Roger had ever gotten her to open up about her childhood. Of course, he hadn't really asked. It was as if those years of her life had never existed if she refused to think or talk about them. But the memories had always lurked just beneath her calm, collected exterior.

Stede stroked her hair. "Is your father still living?"

A thick lump welled in her throat for a man she'd never really known. "I don't know."

At the lurch in her voice, Stede cradled her closer. "Your mother?"

"No." Gwen shuddered at the memory of overhearing her grandmother talking to Lucile Hobbs about how someone had discovered Gwen's mother dead in her car. She'd been parked in a stranger's garage with the motor running, an empty whiskey bottle still clutched in her hand.

That had happened long after child protective services had taken her away and although Gwen had pushed and shoved and forced those awful memories into the furthest reaches of her mind, they still reared up to haunt her when she was most vulnerable.

"Did you have a family?" It was too uncomfortable to talk about herself.

"Pirates don't have families," he said tersely. "You should rest. We have much to do when you awaken."

He was avoiding her questions and she knew it. What in his past could be so horrible he would be so secretive about it?

She tried in vain to stifle a yawn. Her body felt so heavy, so tired. Her eyes drifted shut and then she fell under the disarming spell of sleep – and Stede Bonnet's arms.

When Stede heard Gwendolyn's deep, even breathing, he knew she'd fallen asleep. He glanced at the clock. It was almost one and his stomach knotted with the prospect of everything they had to accomplish on the morrow.

He shifted slightly and she snuggled closer. Her lightly curled fist resting on his prick caused an involuntary twinge to surge through it.

Any sane man would have left her. He glanced down at the way her black hair sprawled across his thigh and veiled her shoulder and back. A self-deprecating grin tugged at one corner of his mouth. *Sane man*. No, the lovely little witch had driven him to madness the first time he'd touched her.

And the spell she'd cast to draw him to her was like an invisible magnet from which he was powerless to free himself.

The deal he'd made with her for sexual favors in return for his help had been totally false on his part. He'd accepted it because she had offered it and because it gave him an excuse to command her to do what she clearly wanted to do anyway. He smiled as he thought about how quickly she'd responded.

Still, he realized he would more than likely lose the body to Blackbeard—forever. But some things were far more important than *life* in this world. He'd learned that lesson long ago. He'd been a selfish fool, rash and reckless to the point of self-destruction and he'd been left in the limbo between heaven and earth because of it. Perhaps, by helping Gwendolyn rescue her grandmother's soul, he would earn his right to heaven.

Gwendolyn took a deep breath as she slept restlessly.

Stede watched her. No heaven could be as wonderful as the look of passion in her dark chocolate eyes when he was buried to the hilt inside her. Maybe this was all the taste of heaven he was ever going to receive.

* * * * *

Gwen shifted and breathed in the heady, sexy scent of *male*. Clarity came rushing suddenly back and she bolted upright with a gasp.

"Whoa, luv."

Her heart raced as the memory of what happened flooded over her in a torrent. Roger had died. A pirate had stolen his body. Another pirate had taken her grandmother's soul hostage. She started shaking.

Stede reached for her. She didn't think twice—she rushed into his arms. He enveloped her and cooed into her hair. How could such an arrogant man—a pirate—fret over *her*?

Warmth coursed through her veins.

"What time is it?" She twisted to look at the clock.

"Dawn," he said as his fingers slid under the veil of her hair and caressed her neck. Gwen tensed. Her body tightened at the memory of his cock deep up inside her pussy. She squeezed her eyes shut trying to tamp down the sensations—the desire.

After a while, she opened her eyes, drew back and lifted her gaze to his. It was a mistake. His blue eyes were dark. His cheeks were mottled with passion.

"I know you're afraid," he murmured. "I give you my word I'll do everything in my power to save your grandmother."

Gwen's heart tightened. She bit back a sob but couldn't stop the tear that spilled down her cheek.

He swept it away with his thumb and she turned her face into the warmth of his palm. Her pulse sped as his gaze dropped to her lips and lingered before rising once more to her eyes.

Gwen became aware of the tension throbbing between them.

When his fingers feathered down her cheek, tracing down the curve of her neck, chills immediately swept her body and she drew in a breath. Wild desire pounded in

her veins. She glanced at the clock again. It was just before six a.m. "We don't have much time."

"We have time for this, luv." His hand dropped lower still, slipping under the lapel of the robe to brush across the pearls and sensitive skin of her breast. Instinctively she arched toward him, pressing her pointed nipple into his palm as she gave voice to a soft sigh.

His gaze followed his hand and then found her eyes again. "I'm wanting to be inside you again." His voice was coarse.

She wanted him too but pride made her ask, "Are you only asking me to have sex with you because of our deal?"

"No, Gwendolyn. Not this time."

The throbbing pulse in her pussy exploded and she worked her hands under the hem of his T-shirt to unfasten his jeans.

"Easy lass," he muttered as he took over undoing his pants. "You act as if you're man-starved."

Her breath left her body in a rush as she reached inside the open fly and wrapped her fingers around his hardening cock. He was right. She *was* man-starved. Starved for sex and for love. Starved to be held and kissed – and made to feel safe.

She dipped her head as he wriggled out of the tight jeans and, while he pulled his shirt off over his head, she took his long, hard penis into her mouth. A soft moan escaped his lips as she sucked him. He tasted salty. He tasted like sweet pussy. *Her* pussy. She mewled as she ran her tongue all over the velvety skin of his shaft and head, trailing down to lave his tightened balls.

When she took his cock back into her mouth, a shudder rippled through him and he caught her head in his hands, guiding her, fucking her mouth.

Gwen's clit became erect and excruciatingly aroused. She wanted to ride him again, to rub her clit against him until she was raw and coming. As she sucked him, her hand crept between her legs and she rubbed furiously, bucking against her own hand to appease her need.

Suddenly, his hands gripped her shoulders and he was drawing her up, sliding the pearl thong to the side so he could plant her on his cock. Gwen gasped as it filled her. Clutching the headboard on which his back rested, she sank down to where his bristly pubic hairs tickled her freshly waxed pussy.

She shrugged out of the robe and then tugged unsuccessfully at the pearl bra. She wanted his mouth on her nipples – without anything to impede it.

He reached around to try to help before he let out a frustrated growl and ripped the beaded back strap. Pearls scattered across the bed, rolled to the floor and Gwen cried out as Stede's mouth latched onto one taut nipple.

As he rolled the tip of his tongue over the diamond-hard bud, his gaze caught hers and something torrid and fiery blazed a path downward to her clit.

Gripping his head, she held him against her breast, bucking her hips wildly to assuage the white-hot yearning between her legs.

His thick, black lashes fluttered shut and the muscles in his jaw flexed as he suckled her nipple into his mouth. His breathing was harsh and so utterly sensuous while he tongued her, Gwen thought she would come just from the act of him laving her breasts.

As his fingers took over kneading her nipple, he kissed his way up her chest, lingering to nibble and suckle her neck, kissing higher and higher still to her ear. "How long has it been since he tumbled ye?"

Gwen whimpered.

His hand wound into the hair at the nape of her neck and he pulled. Hard. Her head tilted back and he pressed his mouth into her ear again. "How long, witch?"

A sob caught in her throat. "I don't know. I can't remember the last time."

He stilled. "How do you like it best?"

She writhed on his cock.

"Tell me what pleases ye."

The heat of his breath and his graphic words made her feel faint with desire.

"On your knees? In your arse?" His fingertip nudged her there and she jerked. "Do ye like it this way, squatting with my stiff pole up in your juicy quim?"

Wild images played through her head.

"Do ye want me on top, rutting hard?" He wriggled his fingertip into her anus and she groaned. "Or would you prefer I love you tenderly?"

A vision of him on top of her, kissing her mouth while he undulated lovingly inside her nearly made her explode on his cock. But even that image vied with the other more graphic ones for prominence in her fantasies. "All of it," she gasped. "I want it all."

His finger prodded farther into her anus.

There...

Oh yes, there...

She bit her bottom lip and gyrated her hips so that his finger pushed up higher inside her. It felt so good.

"Do you want more than my finger in there, luv?"

She swallowed. *Yes.*

He wiggled his finger and then slid it in and out of her anus, pushing all the way up to where his palm flattened against the curve of her ass. His other fingers splayed in and around her slick labia. "Do you?"

Yes...

She writhed.

Dammit, couldn't he tell?

"Tell me, luv. Tell me what you want."

How could she? How could she admit to him she wanted his cock *there*? It was taboo. But damn, she'd always fantasized about how a thick, hard penis would fill her there.

She lifted herself off his cock and finger to slide forward so the tip of his phallus prodded her anus.

A jubilant laugh rumbled in his chest. "Oh no," he said and caught her hips in his hands to prevent her from sinking onto his erection. "You have to *tell* me what you want."

Frustration surged. Desire to have him embedded in her ass was quickly cresting. She'd never had a man there. Ever. Now that she'd mustered the courage to try it, he was toying with her. She wanted to slap him. Instead, she dragged her nails down his shoulders and growled.

The head of his cock pulsed maddeningly against her anus. She could just imagine it sliding snugly inside. Her clit throbbed.

"Open your eyes, Gwendolyn." It was an order.

She hadn't realized she'd closed them until now. She opened her eyes and her gaze clashed with his.

Perspiration misted his forehead. His breaths were short and shallow. Tension drew every muscle in his body taut. "I'm about to waste my cream all over your lovely arse."

She sucked in a ragged breath. "Don't you fucking dare! I want you in there. I want your cock up my ass."

She crawled off him and rummaged through her suitcase until she found a bottle of lubricant.

A strained smile stretched his lips as she crept back on top of him. He watched as she coated his cock with the slippery oil.

Gwen's pulse thickened despite her racing heart. Once he was sufficiently lubed – with a bit of lubricant on her backside for good measure – her eyes locked with his and her breath froze as he guided her down.

The swollen head of his cock pushed mercilessly as he fed it into her. Sharp pain radiated around the rim of her anus and when he pressed past, she forcibly relaxed the tight muscles and sank, feeling his penis filling her full, sliding slowly in, inch by rigid inch.

His forehead furrowed and he fought to keep his eyes from closing. Gwen did too. She let out a breath as finally, his cock was buried to the balls in her ass.

She undulated and he gasped.

"Tell me how it feels." His voice was uneven, barely above a whisper.

"Big. Full...*good!*" She wanted to ride him but she knew if she moved at all, he'd explode inside her. "You tell me how it feels."

"Tight. Slick."

She was so tight there she could feel his pulse throbbing inside her. She raised her hips slightly and snuggled back down on him, grinding her clit up against his pelvis.

His gaze drifted past hers and his eyes widened slightly before a slow, sexy smile crept across his lips.

Gwen glanced over her shoulder to find a mirror hanging across the room, the angle tilted just right so she could see his shaft buried to the hilt in her anus. In her kneeling position, she could see everything. She looked wanton with her long, black hair sweeping halfway down her back and her thighs straining as his hands splayed wide across the pale flesh of her buttocks. A hot blush welled in her cheeks, blazing when he gripped her hips and guided her up and down.

"Do you like the way you look with my cock up your bum?" he asked.

She voiced her acquiescence, her gaze riveted to the mirror.

"Lean back," he whispered. "Just a bit."

"No."

"Lean back. I want my fingers up your cunny."

Gwen arched to give him enough room to work his hand between their bodies. She clung to his shoulders as one then two fingers slid up her drenched pussy. His thumb played with her clit while his other arm encircled her bottom, lifting her up and down again and again on his cock.

Her head dropped and she squeezed her eyes shut. The sensations were so encompassing and so overwhelming she didn't think she could tolerate them. He bucked beneath her and her ass burned until she couldn't distinguish between pleasure and pain. All she knew was that she was about to come. Her body tightened and her thighs strained and burned as she tried to spread her legs even wider. She squirmed against his intruding fingers and then the sensations exploded within her, radiating outward from both orifices at once.

She clawed at his shoulders hard and threw back her head as ecstasy shattered through her. "I'm coming...I'm coming!"

His hold around her hips tightened and he pulled her down hard, his body arching off the stacked pillows between him and the headboard. "Oh bugger!" He moaned the words.

She could feel him spurting his cream all the way up her tight little ass. His body tensed and when he finally relaxed, he slid his hand from between her legs and lay back against the pillows, Gwen slumped against him, still with his cock entrenched deep inside her.

During the course of having sex with him she had temporarily forgotten everything else. As long as he was inside her though, everything seemed as if it would be all right.

His hands threaded into her hair and then ran down over her back, caressing, exploring, finding their way back to her face as he drew her head to his and brushed his lips against hers. His mouth was feather soft and Gwen was shocked at how gently he

could kiss her with his cock stuffed rudely up her ass. He played at her lips, the pressure growing insistently until his tongue darted out to taste and tease her.

Gwen intensified the pressure, thrusting her tongue into his mouth and kissing him with wild abandon. Despite what they'd done, kissing him seemed so intimate—an act of trust and something else Gwen couldn't identify.

Something she refused to consider.

After a few minutes, his cock grew soft and slipped out of her.

She moved beside him and as she rested her head on his chest, they lay entwined together, their hands exploring and caressing.

"I've missed a woman's touch," he said so softly Gwen wasn't certain she'd heard it.

"Did you have someone special?" She'd asked the question and suddenly didn't want to know the answer.

"Aye."

She couldn't help herself. "Who was she?"

"My wife."

Gwen tensed. "You're married?"

"Aye." He paused for a moment. "I suppose the correct term is *was*—when I was alive that is."

A nagging flash of jealousy swept through Gwen and she didn't like it one bit. "Did...did you have children?"

"Four."

Gwen drew away from his embrace and pushed herself up so she could look into his eyes. Suddenly, the fact he'd live a life, albeit three hundred years ago, left her hollow inside. "Where did they live? England?"

"Barbados." His tone was noncommittal. Bland.

"How can you be so...casual about the fact you left a wife and four children behind?"

"I left a wife and *three* children behind." His voice was suddenly very soft.

He'd lost a child? Sympathy for him brimmed to the surface. "Oh Stede. I had no idea. I'm sorry."

Grim, he rolled out of the bed. "Can you call on a slave to bring me a basin of water?"

Gwen was stunned. Her mind was still stuck on the fact he'd lost a child.

He stared. "Do you have slaves?"

Gwen shook her head and forced herself back to the present. "No. Slavery was abolished a hundred and fifty years ago." She slid off the bed and padded into the bathroom, avoiding looking at the spot where she'd unwittingly brought Stede's spirit into Roger's dead body. She switched on the faucet. "Here."

He joined her and stared at the water rushing from the spout.

"This is the hot and this is the cold. The shower works the same way." She flushed the toilet. "This is the commode."

"Fascinating," he said as he jiggled the handle himself.

Gwen started toward the door. "I'll give you some privacy."

He suddenly caught her wrist. She froze as her eyes clashed with his.

"I don't want *privacy*." He switched on the bath faucet. "I want to bathe you."

Gwen stared. Something in her chest tightened so hard, the breath left her lips in an audible sigh. Her throat constricted and she wanted to succumb to tears and disappear into his bone-crushing embrace. After all he had done already, he wanted to *bathe* her?

Trembling, she reached across him and adjusted the water temperature before drawing the shower curtain. "We don't have time for that but we can shower together." The strangled sound of her voice surprised her. It frightened her. She couldn't be falling for him. She reminded herself this was not her husband. This was the spirit of a dead pirate whom she planned to trick out of the body to save her grandmother's soul.

She pulled her wrist away from him and turned her back so he wouldn't see the tears rimming her eyes. This was crazy.

His warm hands slid up her arms and Gwen wanted to melt. She fought to stay strong. "The water's hot," she mumbled.

"Hot?"

She blinked her tears away and turned to face him. A little smile tugged at one corner of her mouth. He truly was an eighteenth-century man. The total lack of guile in his voice warmed her heart. She took his hand and tugged him toward the hot spray of water, watching his face to gauge his reaction as he felt the heat.

His lips parted and then a wide ingenuous smile spread across his handsome features. "How can that be?"

"The water is heated by electrical power."

"Electrical?"

She'd stepped in it now. "I don't know exactly how it works but it's what gives us lights and hot water."

"Electrical," he repeated. "Amazing."

You're amazing.

No! Gwen caught herself. She couldn't be entertaining ideas about him. Especially when she planned to give him up to his mortal enemy.

She stepped into the shower. "Come with me."

He followed her behind the white shower curtain, his eyes closing in ecstasy as the hot water rushed over his skin. "Heaven."

Gwen smiled. She took the soap and lathered it in her hands and then rubbed it over his shoulders and chest, down his flat belly and over his semi-hard cock. Her gaze

grazed his and then locked. He was staring but his blue eyes were clouded, moving over her in a way that made her stomach clench.

He didn't even look like Roger anymore. Although Roger had carried a certain air of conceit, Stede's expressions were cockier and far more self-assured than Roger's. Stede Bonnet was a man who knew what he wanted – and Gwen knew from the look in his eye, he wanted *her*.

She continued to stare as he took the soap from her hands, lathered it and then laid it in the soap dish before he coated her skin, sliding his slick hand between her legs and in the cleft of her ass where he'd fucked her.

Gwen propped her foot on the side of the tub and laid her head on his chest as he probed and washed her there. With her eyes closed, all she could do was *feel* – the wet, wet heat, the hard and the soft of his touch and his body.

She wished there was a way she could ensure the safety of her grandmother's soul and keep Stede's spirit with her in Roger's body forever.

All those wasted years with a man who never loved her... All that time she had waited and longed – for *this*.

And now that she had *this*, she had to give it up.

Chapter Five

Stede stared dubiously at the blue Honda rental car.

Gwen, who already had her fingers curled under the door handle, could have kicked herself. With Stede dressed in Roger's formfitting jeans, designer T-shirt and Chuck Taylor tennis shoes, it was far too easy to forget he'd been dead for nearly three hundred years.

The June morning was already hot and muggy and it wasn't even eight yet. Gwen's sense of urgency rose as she considered the monumental task they had before them today but at least Stede knew where the treasure was.

A car whizzed by on the street and Stede jumped back.

"It's okay," she said as she rushed around to the passenger side to open the door for him. "They're not going to run over you." She understood his reticence but there was no time for lengthy explanations. If the treasure still existed at all, they would have to find it, dig it up and haul it back to the inn by twilight.

Vaguely, she recalled drifting off to sleep during a documentary about finding lost pirate treasure. It had taken entire teams of trained people who had access to dredging equipment, dozers and highly sensitive metal detectors. How was Stede, with the aid of one woman, going to be able to unearth and bring back an entire chest of doubloons?

Dread permeated her to the core and left her feeling sick and shaky.

Stede slid into the passenger seat. "Does everyone have such a means of conveyance?"

"Most everyone," she said and shut the door before she darted around to the driver's side. She shoved the key into the ignition and cranked the car.

When the engine hummed to life, Stede froze.

"It's okay. It's supposed to do that." She reached across him and as she buckled his seat belt, she became aware of the scorching heat of his body – and his gaze on her face. She had to put a stop to this attraction. Now.

Reluctantly she drew away from him and gripped the steering wheel with one hand, shifting into drive with the other.

Stede watched her motions intently. "You frequently use the word 'okay'. Am I to assume it means 'all right'?" he asked. Obviously trying to contain his terror, he clutched the console and the armrest simultaneously as Gwen wheeled into traffic.

If he knew about those last three tickets she'd gotten, he'd have good cause to be scared.

"Yes," she said as she checked the side-view and rearview mirrors.

"Gwendolyn, I by no means intend to be impertinent," he said in his lilting British accent. "But do all women wear so little clothing out of doors?"

She glanced down at her white sleeveless blouse and khaki shorts. "Yep," she said crisply. The idea he'd be looking at other women clad in what he would consider scant clothing disturbed her but she couldn't think about that now. "Relax and tell me which way we need to go to get to the treasure."

He shifted in the seat, his worried gaze roving over the well-manicured White Point Gardens and the lacy Georgian architecture dominating Rainbow Row. "Gwendolyn, I fail to recognize this place as Charles Towne."

The tires screeched as she slammed the breaks. She gaped at Stede. Well, that little bit of information shouldn't be a surprise, not after the way he'd reacted the night before when he'd tried to hightail it out the door.

"I fear we will definitely need the map," he said.

Gwen blew out a sigh. "A treasure map? I don't suppose you know where it is...?"

"No. And it wasn't a map *per se* but —"

A horn honked, interrupting him, and Gwen pulled the car over to the right side of East Battery Street. She stared at Stede, ignoring the brightly colored sailboats and tour boats traversing the waters of Charleston Harbor behind him.

"And you can't remember what it said?"

"It detailed the exact location."

"If you can get me anywhere near the location, we'll get a metal detector and find the treasure that way."

He searched her eyes for a moment before he turned and looked out over the harbor. "None of these buildings were here in my time. The treasure is on an island. Suppose something has been built over it?"

Gwen's heart sank. That was entirely possible. "Exactly what is in the treasure chest?"

"Jewels, diamonds, rubies, sapphires. Coins. Guineas."

Gwen swallowed. There was probably a fortune in that chest and he was either trusting her implicitly or planning to trick her. But what would it matter? Stede Bonnet's treasure map was most certainly no longer in existence. No doubt some other fortune hunter had discovered the chest and unearthed it by now.

Disappointment surged. She batted her eyelashes to keep from succumbing to stinging tears. This was the first time in her life she hadn't felt Granny's guiding presence, the first time she wasn't comforted by the pungent memory of herbs and sweet-scented sugar cookies.

Gwen bit back a sob.

When Stede's hand clamped down on her bare thigh, she let out a little gasp. Her gaze flew to his. He flashed a smile which he obviously intended to convey comfort. "It will be *okay*."

Gwen let out the breath she'd been holding. Somehow, the sincerity in his expression and the warmth of his touch suggested it *would* be okay. A sense of calm stole over her, giving her clarity. "Who last had your map?"

"My manservant."

"Did he have a name?"

"Cuff."

"Cuff? Cuff what?"

Stede shrugged. "Cuff Bonnet, I suppose, if he chose to carry a last name."

Realization flooded Gwen. "He was a slave?"

Stede nodded. "He came with me when I left Barbados."

Gwen pulled back into traffic as she mulled over the fact that a slave ended up with a treasure map. "Was he hanged as well?"

Stede shook his head. "Of course not. He was too valuable a commodity for the good citizens of Charles Towne. I would assume he was sold."

Gwen steered the car into a parking place and then snatched her purse. She dug through it until she found her cell phone. "I'll call Daph. She's a historian. She'll know what to do."

A dear friend, Daphne McKissack worked at a historic site in Smyrna, Tennessee. Certainly she would have access to a multitude of records.

Stede stared as Gwen flipped open the phone and scrolled through her contacts. She punched the call button and Daphne answered at once. "Hey girl!"

"Hi Daph. I need some help. I'm in Charleston and I need to look up a slave."

"Charleston! Cool. Have you seen any ghosts yet?" Her Tennessee drawl echoed over the phone.

Gwen's gaze swept over Stede. "A couple." She knew Daphne was teasing her. Daph was a self-proclaimed "historical scientist" who dismissed anything metaphysical and pooh-poohed all the ghost-walk hullabaloo at the Sam Davis Home where she worked. But she would know exactly in which direction to send them to find slave records.

"What time period are we talking?" Daphne asked.

"Are you asking about the slave or the ghosts?" Gwen inquired. Daphne's mind flitted from one subject to the next and Gwen often had trouble following her friend's train of thought.

"The slave," Daphne said as if Gwen should have easily followed the abrupt change of subject. "Nineteenth century or eighteenth?"

"He would have been sold here around 1718." Just saying it reminded Gwen the man sitting across from her had lived several hundred years ago.

"That should be fairly easy in a place like Charleston. Do you know his name?"

"Cuff."

"There's an archives on Meeting Street. I've been there before. It's at the South Carolina Historical Society. Go there and look up the bill of sale records, wills, the log of the auction company," Daphne suggested.

"Thanks, Daph." Gwen said.

"Hey Gwen? Why do you want to know about some old slave? I thought you were there to light a fire under Roger's ass."

Gwen inhaled. "It's a long, sordid story. I don't want to go into it over the phone."

"Gotcha." Daphne sounded disappointed at being left out on the details of a *sordid* story. But Gwen knew she'd be thrilled at the prospect of an historical fact-finding mission. "I'll see what I can find out on my end."

Gwen said her goodbyes and then ended the call.

Stede gingerly took the phone from her hand. He opened it and examined it curiously. "Fascinating."

She snatched it back out of his hand and activated the GPS, typing in "East Bay" and then "South Carolina Historical Society". At once, a map appeared. "Great!" Gwen exclaimed. "We're within walking distance."

She shoved the phone back in her purse, switched off the motor and then opened her car door. "Come on, Stede."

Stede fumbled with the various buttons until he discovered the door handle and then climbed out. Gwen locked the doors with a punch to the key ring. Without thinking, she laced her fingers with his and they walked quickly toward the archives.

Gwen barely glanced at the historic and colorful houses on Rainbow Row. The gentle lapping of the waves against the Battery wall fell on deaf ears. She had but one mission—to find the treasure and secure the release of her grandmother's soul.

Stede, however, gaped openly, stumbling as he tried to walk and take in all the new and fantastic sights. Whenever a car or truck rumbled by, his hand tightened on hers.

Gwen noticed his alternating sense of fear and wonder. She suddenly felt terribly selfish but there was no time to explain every nuance to him. Not with Granny's soul in the lurch.

When they reached the stately Georgian-style building that housed the historical society, Gwen was not surprised to see the sign.

Hours, 9:00-4:00

Monday through Friday

She looked at her watch. It was 8:20. They had forty minutes to kill—forty minutes they could not afford.

Her heart sank straight to her toes.

Gwen turned and dropped on the stairs. She wanted to bury her face in her hands and cry but she couldn't give in to the worry and grief. Losing her grandmother once was hard enough.

Frustration boiled to the surface. She looked up at Stede. "I can't believe you can't remember where the hell you buried that damn treasure. How fucking hard can it be?"

He stared, shocked. "I have been yanked into some other man's body, in a time where I fail to recognize anything and you, madam, have literally begged me to put this life, *my life*, at stake for the sake of some woman I do not even know."

Panic joined Gwen's frustration. She should never have challenged him. He could walk away right now. Hell, that's what she would do.

She needed him and she needed to stay calm. Briefly closing her eyes, she forced herself to take several calming breaths before she looked up once more at Stede. "I'm sorry. I'm just...I don't know *what* I am. I'm mad. I'm hurt." A lump rose up hard in her throat and she swallowed against it to no avail. One tear seeped out of the corner of her eye and she furiously batted it away.

At once, Stede was sitting at her side with his big, warm hand stroking her back. Gwen sagged against him.

"I know you are upset," he said softly. "You have my deepest condolences. You've lost your husband and now you stand to lose another person you love. I understand."

"You could never understand."

He inhaled and she felt his chest and shoulders expand. "You're right. I couldn't."

His tone was sympathetic but almost patronizing and Gwen couldn't help but wonder if he *could* understand.

"Do...do you know what happened to Roger? Did you see his spirit before you came into the body?" she asked, as if knowing could somehow quell the pang of guilt and remorse she had at losing a man she'd been married to for five years.

"Yes, luv."

"Did he speak to you?"

"No."

Gwen swallowed. "But you saw him? What did he look like? I mean, was he sad or shocked?"

Stede was silent.

"Stede? Is there something you're not telling me?"

"There is something I don't want to tell you but perhaps it will lessen the anguish you feel," he said reticently. "He...he appeared to be very content with his...circumstances."

Gwen drew back and gaped at Stede. "He was *happy*? Roger was happy to die?"

Stede shrugged. "I suppose it's different for all of us." The look in his eyes was apologetic.

Gwen cast her gaze downward toward the cobblestone street. "Am I that awful that a man would be happy to *die* to get away from me?"

"No!" Stede said quickly. "I don't think you're awful a'tall. In fact, I think you're quite charming." He chuckled her under the chin and Gwen lifted her gaze to his.

"Perhaps he was simply surprised he wasn't going down instead of up," Stede joked and when he smiled, a certain amount of her uneasiness melted away.

They whiled away the rest of the time discussing cars and streetlights and other things new to Stede. Gwen was surprised at how quickly he seemed to assimilate all the elements of twenty-first-century living.

Finally, they heard the lock turn behind them and at once, they bolted to their feet and rushed inside.

Stede continued to observe as Gwen trod toward a desk to explain to an elderly lady with a beautiful, true Charlestonian accent what she wanted.

The lady led them to a desk and told them to wait while she perused the stacks for the information they needed.

Taut with tension, Gwen drummed her fingers on the desk—and then her heart plummeted when the woman returned and began to lay book after thick, dusty book on the massive oak table at which she sat.

Why had no one put all this crap online? She didn't know where to start.

Stede, who had until now remained silent, stood when the lady approached with a third stack of ancient books. "Madam, before you trouble yourself further with these cumbersome volumes, may I spell out our request?"

Gwen watched in awe as the lady practically melted under his sapphire gaze. "Of course." She breathed a sigh of relief. Apparently, he understood her urgency and was trying to cut to the heart of the matter.

"My *wife* and I are researching the honorable pirate Stede Bonnet, and one of his slaves whose name was Cuff. I'm reasonably certain Cuff was not hanged at White Point Gardens but rather sold to a local planter. Are you familiar with this?"

Gwen suppressed a smile. *Honorable pirate, indeed!* But the fact he'd referred to her as his wife sent a bolt of adrenaline straight to her heart. She stared, stunned at her own reaction.

The lady's face brightened. She pushed her stylish glasses up on her nose. "Why yes. My ancestor was Nicholas Trott and I hate to tell you this, dear, but Stede Bonnet was far from honorable."

Stede's face darkened and Gwen could tell he was struggling not to show emotion. He drew in a tight breath.

The lady pushed and pulled the books around until she found one which she opened and thumbed through until she stood back triumphantly. "Here's the part about Bonnet's slaves. My ancestor was a friend of Thomas Drayton, and Cuff was sold to him to work the Magnolia Plantation."

Stede tensed and Gwen took his hand again. These names meant nothing to her but to Stede, they obviously meant *everything*.

It was Gwen's turn to ask the questions. "What do you know about a treasure map Cuff may have had in his possession when he was sold to Drayton?"

Again, the lady's face brightened. "That's a great mystery. You know Edgar Allan Poe's story, *The Gold Bug*, was based on it. Allegedly, while he was stationed at Fort Moultrie on Sullivan's Island, he saw the map. A slave used it as stakes in a card game."

"So Poe got the map?" Gwen interjected. Her stomach sank.

"Oh heavens no!" She clapped her hands together. "Poe was a terrible gambler. He lost that game."

Gwen was no historian but she did know Edgar Allan Poe wrote over a hundred years after Stede Bonnet was hanged.

"I'll tell you who might know about the map, although her stories are mere tales. She's a descendant of the Drayton slaves."

"Who?" both Stede and Gwen asked in unison.

"The griot down at the market. She calls herself Mama Zulie. You'll find her with the sweet-grass basket-weavers."

* * * * *

Gwen barely scanned the elegant Charleston architecture as she and Stede hurried further down Meeting Street toward the market. *Goddess, this place looks so old.*

"I am astounded at how new everything appears," Stede said, his perception completely contrasting her own.

Gwen's heart tightened. She wished she had the time to slow down and experience all the romance Charleston had to offer with him. Her gaze caught his and he smiled broadly, causing currents of warmth to spiral downward inside her.

A horse-drawn carriage loaded with tourists rolled by. On the other corner, a walking tour was being led by a theatrical, *chapeaued* lady with an old Carolina drawl. She reminded Gwen of the woman at the library and her revelation she was a descendant of Nicholas Trott. Who was he and why had the mere mention of his name affected Stede? There was only one way to find out.

"Who was Nicholas Trott?" Gwen said.

A muscle in Stede's jaw clenched. His nostrils flared. "He was the judge who condemned me to death."

A chill swept up Gwen's spine despite the humid summer heat.

"Did you also know Thomas Drayton?" Her voice was softer, more compassionate.

"No, but he owned a rice plantation—and they were far worse than the grave to a slave."

Gwen's lips parted. "You were fond of Cuff?"

"Fond of him?" He shot her an astonished glance. "Although he was my manservant, he was my best friend, my confidant. I...I loved him like a brother."

She stared, trying to absorb it all.

Somewhere, a clock was striking ten and as she began to count the chimes, she trembled with surging panic until Stede gripped her shoulders. "Gwendolyn," he murmured. His voice was feather soft amidst the din of tourists and traffic. "We will find the map."

His tone was reassuring but Gwen knew he was only trying to calm her. His compassion threatened to overwhelm her and she couldn't prevent a tear from forming in her eye and rolling down her cheek. Stede brushed it away with the pad of his thumb and then enveloped her in a bone-crushing hug.

"I won't let him harm your grandmother," he whispered into her hair.

Her shoulders shook with a sob and she tried to forget she was on a busy street surrounded by thousands of vacationers whose cares had been left far behind.

His hand crept underneath her chin and he tilted her face up to his. "I made a promise to you, Gwendolyn, and I intend to keep it."

Gwen felt as if she were melting. The toe of her heeled sandal touched his black and white sneaker. Her bare knee brushed the fabric of his jeans and the hard bone and muscle underneath. Her hand found the spot where the waistband hugged his hip. Her heart pounded against her rib cage. And then his mouth swept hers.

At once, Gwen opened her lips for him. Her body rose up against him as a warm rush of desire unfurled inside her abdomen. Her clit throbbed.

"We should not do this in view of others." He breathed the words against her lips.

"Just kiss me," she whispered.

His arms tightened. The pressure of his mouth increased and his tongue pushed through the tiny opening her lips made. Gwen forgot all about the throngs of tourists and the conservative Old South Charlestonians. All that mattered was this kiss—this wonderful, soul-awakening kiss.

Stede tilted her head back to gain better access. His tongue explored and tangled with hers.

Gwen's knees went weak and she sagged against him, clinging. She would have fallen were it not for his strong arms around her. How the hell could she ever let this go?

Finally, his pressure gentled and he dragged his mouth away. "Gwendolyn—"

"Ha ha!" a male voice teased playfully. "Honeymoon?"

Gwen blinked and managed to nod at the tourist. She knew she was blushing. This was hardly the second honeymoon she had envisioned. It was better.

Stede's gaze never left her face. "The griot."

Yes. Yes. *The griot.*

Goddamn the fucking griot.

Somehow, she managed to jolt herself back into reality. The ochre, colonnaded Charleston Market loomed large just beyond where they were standing. She seized his hand in hers. "This way."

They practically ran through the arched opening between the twin wrought-iron-laced staircases and down the shadowed corridor, passing shops and vendors until Gwen saw a woman sitting against the wall weaving a sweet-grass basket and singing softly to herself.

The lady was large—so large she sat in a double-wide folding chair and took up all the space and then some. She wore a jaunty red and yellow do-rag tied to her head and an African print muumuu that looked more like a tent than a dress.

Gwen knew at once this was Mama Zulie.

Heart pounding, Gwen exchanged glances with Stede and then together, they approached.

Mama Zulie never looked up as she continued her basket weaving. "So you be de Wyse woman who bring a man back from de dead." Her accent was pure South Carolinian Gullah.

Gwen was stunned.

Mama Zulie cast one dark brown eye at Stede. The other eye was shockingly bluish and completely glazed over.

Gwen swallowed. Hard. "Do you know the story of Cuff?"

That one good eye swiveled on Gwen. "I knows mo' dan de story."

Gwen trembled. She knew this woman could see into her very soul.

"You needs to keep what you got. Understand?" Mama Zulie stared and then her gaze dropped to where her yellowed nails pushed the blades of sweet grass through the labyrinth of the basket.

"Keep what I've got?"

She shrugged her meaty shoulder in Stede's direction. "He de one answer yo' call. He de one you needs to keep."

"But my grandmother—"

"Yo' grummah know she ought not to stayed on dis plane!" Her bracelets jingled as she swept her heavy hand through the air to indicate a flat surface.

"But—"

Mama Zulie's one-eyed gaze lifted to Gwen's. It pinned her. "You let dis go, witch, or you in fo' a worle o' hurt. Understand?"

Stede's hands found Gwen's shoulders and she sank back against him. Although several tourists traversed the shadows of the market, they were completely alone and secluded in Mama Zulie's corner.

"I won't let her grandmother's soul perish on my account," Stede said. "Do you know what happened to the map?"

Mama Zulie stuck out her bottom lip and gave one nod of her head.

"Is it still in existence?" Stede inquired.

She nodded once more and her brown eye pinioned Stede. "If I tell you dis, you will lose de body."

Gwen felt him tense behind her.

"I understand," he said softly.

Gwen wondered if he thought she might try to double-cross him. If that were the case, then why did he continue to help her? Her heart felt as if it were beating in her throat.

Mama Zulie nonchalantly began weaving her basket once more. "De map was passed down tru' de generations. It was much prized but no one eber believed it to be anything mo' dan a piece of ol' paper. Still, when dey open a restaurant, dey bought de map from de las' one survivin' and dey display it dar in a case."

"Where?" Gwen blurted.

Mama Zulie looked up and smiled. One gold tooth glimmered in the faint light as she gave voice to a thick, throaty laugh. "*De Revenge.*"

Chapter Six

Both Stede and Gwen were silent as she drove the nearly twenty miles to Daniel Island. Gwen had no idea what they were going to do when they got there. Perhaps just laying eyes on the map would jog Stede's memory.

As they drove across the bridge, he craned to look out over the Cooper River.

"Look familiar?"

He shook his head. "I never had this vantage point before but I'll wager if you got me out on the open sea, I'd smartly get my bearings."

"That lady at the market gave me the creeps."

His hand slid over her bare thigh and he gave it an affectionate squeeze. Gwen started to cover his hand with her own when she saw the sign for the Revenge Restaurant. "There it is!" she exclaimed as she flipped on her blinker and wheeled into the parking lot. She'd expected a pirate-themed restaurant to be cheesy – and it was.

As they got out and then walked toward the front door, Gwen said a silent prayer to the Goddess no one would yell "argh" or "avast maties!"

In truth, she only wanted to get a look at the map and be off but the aroma of deep-fried comfort food made her mouth water and her stomach growl audibly. She tried to ignore it. "Okay, we're going to find out where the map is, look at it and leave."

Stede's gaze roamed over the place as it had everything else in the modern world. He snarled, "So this is what it's come to? Pirates are nothing more than comical figures at which to be laughed and ridiculed?"

The interior did not disappoint. Jolly Rogers hung like banners from the ceiling. Big wooden replicas of long-gone ships were displayed in massive glass cases.

The whole place smelled of freshly fried fish and southern hushpuppies. Gwen's mouth watered. She was starving but they did not have time to leisurely sit down and enjoy a meal.

Stede stopped short in front of a black pirate flag depicting a white skull flanked by a dagger and heart. A bone rested horizontally beneath the skull. "That's my standard," he said under his breath.

"What do the symbols mean?" An image of him standing at the helm of a ship dressed in the garb of an eighteenth-century gentleman pirate sent wild desire spiraling through her.

"The one bone underneath the skull stands for the scale of pirate justice. Each of my crew had a say and I was the only pirate who paid them a wage out of my own pocket," he said proudly. "The dagger represents battle."

"And the heart?"

He was standing so close she could feel his hot body expand with a deep breath. "The heart signifies...*life*."

"Ho maties!" hailed a server dressed in black-and-white-striped pedal pushers and a red scarf.

Stede froze as the college-age girl approached. "Is that the way I sound to you?" he hissed.

"Don't be ridiculous," Gwen said under her breath and then smiled at the hostess.

"Table for two?"

"I was told you had some artifacts which may have belonged to Major Stede Bonnet," Stede said.

"All the artifacts are in that area." The hostess pointed with a Jolly Roger-topped menu toward a room swarming with tourists in a corner of the restaurant.

Gwen's heart sank. There was no way they would be able to get a good look at the map with all those people hovering around it.

"Would you like a table?" the waitress asked again, this time impatiently.

"Yes. Yes, thank you," Gwen said. They had no choice.

But as the waitress headed the other way toward some booths, Stede turned to head toward the artifacts.

Gwen seized his hand. "Not yet. We need a plan."

Reluctantly, he followed her to a booth and slid in across from her.

"Care to join the chantey and have a draught?" the hostess asked, blandly reciting what the management obviously considered pirate talk.

Stede's gaze swept the restaurant. "Are you daft, lass? No one is singing."

She laughed out loud. "Oh, is that what that means? I always wondered." She propped some extra menus on her hip. "And hey, you're pretty good with that accent."

Gwen watched in horror as Stede's eyes narrowed. He started to speak but she kicked his shin under the table.

"We'll both have a Diet Coke."

As the hostess sauntered away, Gwen leaned across the table. "I'm starving to death. Besides, we can't just grab that map and run for it."

"Why not?"

"It's not as easy to steal as you would think."

He laughed. It was a devastatingly sexy laugh that made dimples appear at the corners of his mouth.

"What's so funny?" Gwen asked.

"What is it that you think I do?"

"You're a...pirate..." Her voice trailed off on that last word. "But it's not the same. It's too easy to catch a thief nowadays."

"Madam, you cut me to the quick. Thievery is an art whether it be my time or yours."

"Which proves my point," she said jokingly. "You got caught then too."

He grimaced. "Twice." The serious look in his eyes turned playful. "*Touché.*"

His leg nudged hers under the table and Gwen struggled to tamp down the sudden surge of desire swirling in her abdomen.

She shifted her thighs on the seat. The motion caused her clit to throb traitorously. Despite everything, she could hardly look at the man without wanting his cock inside her.

She dropped her gaze to the menu and noticed a biography of none other than Stede Bonnet below a picture of his Jolly Roger.

She read hurriedly.

One of the sea's strangest and most unlikely pirates was Major Stede Bonnet. Bonnet came from a wealthy Barbadian family. He possessed a liberal education and was known to be "a man of letters." His sugar plantation brought him considerable wealth and he found himself among the elite of Bridgetown on the island of Barbados.

Therefore, it was a great shock when, for no apparent reason, Major Bonnet left his life as a planter to take up piracy.

As a pirate, Bonnet was an amateur. He did not capture a ship as any other pirate would do; he purchased his own in early 1717, which was completely unheard of in the world of piracy. Named Revenge, it boasted ten pieces of artillery secured to her solitary gun deck. Bonnet paid his crew – whom he had recruited from the taverns and grogshops of Bridgetown – out of his own pocket.

One night, he cast off without a word to his wife and set his course for the Virginia Capes, where he captured a few vessels. After marauding the New England coast, he returned to the south.

Bonnet dropped anchor in the Bay of Honduras, where he encountered the Queen Anne's Revenge and her captain, the fearsome Edward Teach – Blackbeard.

Bonnet became Blackbeard's prisoner, and the pirate tried to convince Bonnet that a man of his education should not be forced to the rigors of commanding a ship like the Revenge and to transfer himself to the more comfortable quarters of the Queen Anne's Revenge. There was little Bonnet could do or say and soon one of Blackbeard's crew took over command of the Revenge.

Eventually, Bonnet persuaded Blackbeard to allow him to captain the Revenge again. Soon after, the two parted and Bonnet left his ship for North Carolina, where he surrendered himself as a reformed pirate to the Governor, Charles Eden, who granted him a Letter of Marque to become a privateer.

Bonnet attempted to return to Barbados but a hurricane prevented him so he turned to piracy once more.

In September, 1718, he was captured by Colonel William Rhett, from whom he escaped only to be recaptured and brought to trial under a Court of Vice-Admiralty in Charles Towne, South Carolina. Despite the appeals by the ladies of Charleston, with whom Bonnet was immensely popular, the judge of the Vice-Admiralty Court, Sir Nicholas Trott, sentenced him to death. Stede Bonnet was hanged for piracy on December 10, 1718, at White Point Gardens.

When Gwen looked up, Stede had just finished reading the bio as well. His posture was tense. The blue of his eyes had turned almost black.

"What's the matter?"

Their server, a college-aged boy with red hair and freckles, set two Diet Cokes on the table. "You maties ready to order?"

"Give us a minute, please," Gwen said and then turned her attention back to Stede once the boy had walked away. "Is something wrong?"

"My entire life has been reduced to mere paragraphs."

"It wasn't *unflattering*," she said and reached across the table to cover his hand with hers. "Did you read the part about being immensely popular with the ladies?"

He cracked a smile.

"Stede, this is just a silly theme restaurant. I'm certain somewhere out there is a very detailed biography of your life."

He opened the menu and scanned the items before he shot a glance at her. "I was indeed popular with the ladies."

Gwen felt a niggling sense of jealousy but she couldn't resist asking, "How so?"

"The first time I was captured, they held me at the Marshall's home in Charles Towne. The local ladies told my jailors it was unchristian to keep me from receiving visitors and persuaded my captors to allow them to visit. One, whom I befriended for ulterior reasons, brought me a basket with a dress and frilled cap concealed within. I donned it and my Quartermaster, David Hariot, and I walked right out the front door with the other ladies."

Gwen burst into laughter. "Really?"

He nodded and took a sip of his Diet Coke. Suddenly, his face contorted and he shivered as he swallowed the drink. "What the devil is this?"

"Coke," she said and then thought coke might mean something different to him. "Cola."

"It tastes...*alive*." He smacked and took another drink. Apparently, this time he was prepared for the carbonation. "Not bad though."

The waiter caught Gwen's eye and she ordered a couple of fish sandwiches with fries. She was hungry but needed something fast. They still had treasure to find and it was just past eleven.

Two small children raced across the restaurant wearing eye patches and brandishing plastic cutlasses.

"Gwendolyn," Stede said conspiratorially. "Those patrons have gone. I'd like to see my map."

Anticipation fluttered in her stomach as she followed him into the artifacts room.

Stede stopped before a glass case and stared. Inside, amidst a chest filled with plastic jewels and doubloons, a couple of burnished coins and some rusted iron manacles, was a piece of yellowed parchment no larger than a regular sheet of paper.

Gwen had somehow expected the map to be the size of a table cloth.

"Is that it?" she asked.

He nodded.

Gwen's stomach felt as if it had sunk straight to her toes. Only a few lines here and there were visible. The damn thing had faded! "There's not enough on it to be useful!"

"Precisely."

Every nerve in her body grew taut. They'd wasted an entire morning chasing down a faded, useless map? She wanted to scream.

"You see, I only depicted a mere bit of direction to throw off those who would plunder my booty. The rest of the ink will be activated when introduced to fire."

"What? Invisible ink?"

"Yes. You see, when zaffre is digested in aqua regia and then diluted with four times its weight in water, a green tint results. The regulus of cobalt dissolved in the spirit of nitre produces a red."

"In English, Major."

He chuckled. "These colors disappear after the material is written on but become apparent once more upon the application of heat."

"So, you're telling me we have to hold this paper to fire to get the words to appear?"

"Yes."

"Won't it burn?" She'd used special parchment leafs in spells. They'd burned quickly and easily.

"Yes, but sheepskin parchment is resistant enough to heat to get warm without catching fire."

Gwen stared at the display case with dread. "We'll have to steal it to do that."

Stede shrugged as if that were the least of his worries but his gaze was roving over the room like a professional cat burglar's.

"How will we ever get it out of there?" she asked.

"Gwendolyn," he said softly. "What is in that strongbox?" He gestured toward the chest of treasure in the display case.

"It's plastic."

His forehead furrowed with confusion.

"It's fake. Not real," she explained.

"Not real?"

"No, plastic is a manmade material. That treasure is only there for looks."

"I see," he said thoughtfully.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the redheaded server putting their food on the table. "Chow's on."

Stede followed her back to the booth but Gwen could tell his mind was on getting that map out of the case.

Although her fish sandwich was good by fish sandwich standards, she barely tasted it. Her stomach wadded into a tight knot. Stede was planning to steal a valuable artifact and lead her to a priceless treasure which he planned to *give* her to save her grandmother's soul.

No one—ever—had made such a sacrifice for her. No one.

Somewhere within, she rioted. Was he lying? What if this was all for show and he was planning to trick her once he got a feel for twenty-first-century Charleston?

Her insides hollowed as she imagined how she would feel if and when he fled and left her at the mercy of Blackbeard.

Her gaze lifted from her sandwich to his face. His cheek bulged with a big bite as he chewed and then he swallowed, chasing it down with a gulp of Diet Coke. "This is passable fare," he said but then lifted a French fry. "However, this leaves much to be desired."

Gwen couldn't help but smile. Right now he looked as if he would stay with her forever. Instinctively, her foot slid across the floor to his and she slipped off her sandal and sneaked her toes under the hem of his jeans. His eyes widened and he bent slightly until she felt warm fingers caressing her bare calf.

"You've given me a right strong cockstand, luv," he whispered.

Gwen's breath caught. The idea that one simple, little touch could arouse him so easily made her pussy clench. When she squirmed, the inseam of her shorts rode tight against her swelling clit. It was the slightest of motions but it sent tiny spasms of pleasure rushing through her pelvis and caused wet desire to dampen her lacy panties.

She couldn't do this. She couldn't allow herself to get any more involved with him. He wasn't from her time. Even if all odds weren't against them, *this* was impossible. Still, a new sense of intimacy had formed between them—and Gwen didn't want it. They'd shared sex. Great sex. But now an emotional bond was forming that put Gwen in a danger of a different kind.

Fucking Stede Bonnet and being attracted to him was one thing—falling for him was another.

Besides, he would soon be replaced by Blackbeard.

She would need her wits about her. She couldn't be grieving over someone she'd only known for the course of twenty-four hours.

She put her napkin on the table and slid out of the booth. "Excuse me. I'm going to the restroom."

Stede popped out of the seat and stood as she did. Gwen's heart somersaulted. He *was* a gentleman—a real one—with the biggest hard-on glaring through his jeans that she'd ever seen.

Her breath froze in her chest and all she could do was get a hold of her reeling heart and walk quickly toward the restroom. By the time she was inside, her knees were so weak and her pulse was pounding so hard, she could hardly stand. She leaned against the door for a few seconds and then stumbled to the sink where she splashed cold water on her cheeks.

What was happening?

She stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her olive skin was pale. Her brown eyes were rimmed red with fatigue. She smoothed her long, straight black hair with her hands.

She hadn't had time to grieve for Roger. Some part of her felt oddly hollow inside but another part was relieved to be free of him. Perhaps having Stede in Roger's body had somehow suspended the grief she knew she should be feeling.

But darkly, she wondered what would happen when Blackbeard possessed the body.

She reached for a paper towel, eyeing the two stalls in the mirror. As she tossed her refuse into the trash can, the door burst open and in strode Stede.

Gwen gasped. "You can't come in here! You're a ma—" she began but he cut her words short when he covered her mouth with his own.

At first she balked but his kiss deepened and she found herself unraveling in his arms. Liquid desire pooled between her legs. He arched against her and she felt his hard cock pressing against her belly.

His fingers slid under the veil of her hair where he cupped her head in his big palm. As he tilted her head back, his tongue plundered her mouth further. Gwen had no choice but to open to him. Sexual need swept wildly through her limbs and she clung to his arms, sliding her hands underneath the sleeves of his T-shirt and over his broad, hard shoulders. The voice in her head that was screaming at her to stop grew fainter and fainter.

Ultimately, Gwen's inner critic was completely obliterated when he dragged his lips from hers and spoke in her ear. "I mean to take you, Gwendolyn. Right here. Right now."

She felt intoxicated. "We can't!" She heard her own voice as if it were far away. "This is a public restroom."

But despite her words, he lifted her just high enough off the floor to urge her into the handicap stall. "We have an accord, witch," he growled.

Gwen's further objections were weak and unconvincing.

She stared as he slammed the stall door shut and pushed the latch to lock it.

That devilish sideways smile claimed one corner of his lips as he unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans. He freed his erect cock and stroked it as he stalked her.

Her back found the wall. "What are you doing?" She searched his clouded gaze.

He didn't bother with an answer. Instead, his hands fumbled with the button and zipper of her shorts. She felt uninhibited and out of control as her shorts and panties slinking down her thighs.

"Stede," she gasped, half in protest and half in anticipation as long fingers snaked through her already slick lips and up inside her shuddering pussy.

"Aye, lass," he murmured. "Ye yearn for my prick." His speech lost all its refined polish when he was aroused.

She entwined her fingers into his coarse, dark hair and stepped one foot out of her shorts as he lifted her, sliding her body up the wall so he could impale her on his cock.

Gwen trembled as he filled her. With her head and shoulders pressed against the wall and with Stede's hands digging into the soft flesh of her thighs, he was able to gain leverage to slam his loins into hers.

She wrapped her legs around his hips, her shorts, panties and one shoe dangling from her foot.

"You're wet." His gaze fixed on the place where his cock plunged in and out of her pussy.

It had been ages since she'd gotten much more than damp for Roger. They'd frequently had to use lubricant. But with Stede, she was sopping. The wet suction combined with her husky moans echoed in the tiny bathroom.

Somehow, he managed to lift and lower her and thrust inside her all at the same time. Gwen cried out, on the verge of coming—just as the door to the bathroom opened.

A gasp caught in her throat. Her gaze flew to Stede's and they watched each other as he continued to silently rut inside her.

The other stall's door hinges creaked as someone entered it and Gwen saw one white tennis shoe and then jeans pooling around it before she heard the hissing sound of someone taking a piss.

Stede undulated his hips in a circular motion and Gwen's breath left her lungs in a rush. She was about to come.

Reading her, he slipped one massive hand underneath Gwen's ass and held her there with one arm as he covered her mouth with his other hand and pumped furiously into her.

Suddenly, her pussy clamped down on his cock and then she was out of control. She spiraled inward, vaguely aware of sinking her teeth into the underside of Stede's fingers, of digging her nails into his arms and tightening her legs around him to hold his pulsating shaft tightly inside her. Her body bucked and jolted and he held her fast.

His own moans were stifled but she could feel the convulsions of a powerful orgasm shuddering down the length of his body.

In the next stall, the toilet flushed and then, as Gwen's own orgasm subsided in constricting waves, she heard water being run and then the pump, pump of the paper towel dispenser.

The door swung open and then closed and they were alone once more as Stede lifted her off his cock and lowered her to the floor.

Gwen was in shock. Her knees threatened to buckle and she caught herself against the wall. Pearly cum trickled down one of her thighs as she watched Stede zip and button his jeans.

His sapphire gaze grazed hers and then he leaned in for a quick kiss before he stole out of the bathroom.

Gwen trembled violently as she availed herself of the toilet, wiping their combined fluids from her sopping crotch and putting her clothes back to rights. Her hands continued to shake as she washed them before making a vain attempt at making herself look as if she hadn't just been fucked.

When she opened the bathroom door minutes later, she half expected a restaurant manager to be standing there scolding Stede but instead, all was quiet.

Still, a sense of impending doom inundated her, increasing as she walked past the room where the map –

Oh Goddess, it's gone!

The map was missing.

Her gaze shot to the booth where she'd been sitting with Stede.

He wasn't there.

Panic surged.

Her pulse rioted as her gaze swept the interior of the restaurant.

Stede was nowhere to be seen.

The fucking pirate bastard took the map and left!

Chapter Seven

Gwen raced to the table. Her purse was still in the booth. She snatched it and with shaking hands, withdrew thirty dollars and tossed it in a wad on the table.

She plunged her hand once more into the purse and breathed a sigh of relief when her fingers closed around her key to the rental car.

Stede couldn't have gotten far on foot. But what if he'd hitched a ride?

Breathless, she darted out of the restaurant. The Honda still sat where she'd parked it. Empty.

Her stomach sank and she was deluged with a fusion of disappointment and red-hot anger.

"What took you so long?" The loud whisper startled her.

Gwen whirled. Relief sank straight to her toes when she saw Stede standing at the corner of the restaurant. She blew out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

Stede straightened. His eyes narrowed sharply and his lips parted with realization. "You thought I'd nipped off."

Gwen suddenly felt very guilty.

His hand tightened around the rolled-up map. "You thought I had taken the map for myself and meant to leave you in a lurch."

Gwen scuffed the toe of her shoe on the pavement. She bit her bottom lip.

He stalked toward her, not stopping until he was toe-to-toe with her. Gwen sucked in a breath.

"After I gave you my word."

"We've got to get going, Stede," she said, staring up at him. "They'll realize the map is gone."

With that, she turned and punched the key remote. The doors unlocked with an audible click.

As Stede got in the car, he continued to glare at her incredulously. Gwen swallowed as she fastened her seat belt. Remorse surged.

"After what we've done together. After I promised you." He was acting as if he couldn't believe she would think he was capable of something so heinous.

Gwen shot him an exasperated look as she started the car and backed out of the parking spot. At first she'd felt terribly guilty. Now she was getting annoyed. "What was I supposed to think when I came out of the bathroom and you and the map were gone? Besides, you told me yourself you'd only befriended that woman in Charleston

so she'd help you escape," she snapped. "Did you make the same deal with her you made with me?"

"Madam, I may be a thief and a pirate," he stated emphatically. "But I am a man of my word and your distrust has wounded me."

Gwen reminded herself not to piss him off. He hadn't left her. He hadn't been anything but honorable and she was angry at herself for not trusting him. "I'm sorry," Gwen said honestly. "I'm just scared."

"I am too." His declaration shook her to the core.

She glanced into his eyes and melted. He had everything to lose and yet he was helping her. She'd been foolish to doubt him.

But when she glanced at the dashboard clock, anxiety welled again. It was nearly noon. They'd wasted time eating—and fucking. She blew out a breath. How could she have been so foolish? They needed every minute to get that treasure and to formulate a plan.

A plan...

Gwen glanced at Stede. They hadn't really discussed any options for getting Blackbeard out of the body once he got in. Sick dread flooded her and she stared at the traffic in front of her as she drove.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched him finger the map. "How the hell did you manage to get that map out of the case?" she asked.

"Easily."

"Easily? You stole a priceless artifact from a museum—albeit a restaurant museum!"

Stede shrugged.

"What if there had been an alarm on it?" Gwen demanded as terrible thoughts of a siren wailing while authorities apprehended Stede rose in her mind.

"The case was unlocked," he said simply. "I pushed open the door, reached inside, took the map and concealed it beneath my shirt. No one was the wiser."

"We hope."

"We will need to build a fire to read it," he said. "Do you have a tinder box?"

She should have asked the waitress where the closest Wal-Mart was. Thank Goddess for the nav-system in her phone. "I've got a better idea." Driving with one hand, she searched the depths of her purse for her cell phone with the other. She withdrew it, flipped it open and began typing with her thumb, glancing quickly back and forth between the phone's screen and the road.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Looking for the nearest Wal-Mart. I assume we're going to need shovels."

"Yes."

"Is this treasure in a chest?"

Stede nodded.

"How big is it?"

He indicated a size slightly larger than a shoe box by gesturing with his hands.

"That small?" she asked as the GPS coordinates flashed onto her cell screen.

"What'd you expect?"

"In the movies they're always big, like a sea chest or something."

"That's ludicrous," he said. "You'd need a score of men to lift the thing." He mulled it over for a second and then added, "What's a movie?"

"I'll explain later. Right now, we've got to get to a Wal-Mart."

Luckily, the Wal-Mart wasn't too far of a drive. Gwen checked the clock again as she pulled into the parking lot and twisted the key in the ignition. It was noon and they still had to rent a boat, find the treasure, dig it up and return to the Battery Carriage House Inn before twilight. Her stomach tightened into such a knot she wished she hadn't eaten that fish sandwich.

"How far out of Charleston harbor is this island where you buried the treasure?" she asked.

"It's on one of the barrier islands." He followed Gwen's lead and got out of the car. "And if you can put me in a skiff that will go as fast as this...this *Honda*...then we'll be there in no time."

Gwen searched his eyes. She was suddenly overwhelmed with doubt. "What if it's not there?"

Stede's mouth stretched into a taut, serious line. "No one has figured out how to read the map. Unless someone has just happened upon it, I have to assume it's still there."

She wanted desperately to believe him but he didn't know about metal detectors and treasure hunters—nearly three hundred years worth of them.

He took the car keys from her hand, casually stuffing them into his pocket before entwining his fingers with hers. Gwen leaned against him as they walked toward the Wal-Mart entrance. Somehow, just his presence seemed reassuring. Still, her mind ran rampant with possibilities. What if they didn't find the treasure?

The image of her grandmother's spirit ripped at her heart.

And then there was Stede.

Gwen glanced up at him. He wore Roger's body far better than Roger could ever have. There was an ease about him and a quick-witted intelligence that Gwen found tremendously sexy.

She tried to imagine what she would feel like if she had suddenly been thrust three hundred years into the future. She'd be terrified. Stede had adapted to wildly modern technology with speed and little difficulty.

He seemed genuinely respectful and caring—two qualities Roger had never possessed. Stede was exactly the kind of man Gwen could easily fall for. There was just one problem. At twilight, Blackbeard was going to commandeer the body.

Then what?

Her mind raced.

Gwen inhaled. How could she give Stede up?

He jumped when the doors opened automatically.

"It's okay." Gwen laced her fingers with his and led him inside. She pulled a shopping cart loose from the others and headed into the store with Stede at her heels.

"Good afternoon," a smiling Wal-Mart greeter said.

"A good day to you as well, sir," Stede said and started to make a bow before Gwen seized his arm and dragged him away.

"A simple 'hello' will suffice," she whispered.

"I was only exhibiting the proper decorum—"

"That's all well and good," she interjected. "But proper decorum has changed since your time."

She watched him, touched as his eyes grew wide at the sight of a fully stocked Wal-Mart in all its glory.

Tantalizing scents drifted from the bakery. Gwen breathed in the nostalgia-inspiring aroma of sugar cookies and her insides constricted as she was sorely reminded of her grandmother.

In the center of an aisle, a cardboard *Pirates of the Caribbean* display had been set up complete with toys, movies and a chest of plastic treasure. Stede eyed the gleaming artificial doubloons skeptically. "Fake?"

"Fake."

His gaze scanned the rest of the place. "This is a dry goods store?" he asked.

"Wal-Mart has everything," Gwen said as she turned toward the garden center.

Stede followed, gaping, his head turning from side to side as he took in as much as possible. "I never would have dreamed a place like this was possible," he exclaimed.

Gwen stole a glance at him and the smile that lit up his face and his blue eyes caused her heart to constrict. How could she have ever thought he would betray her?

An ugly surge of guilt settled uncomfortably in her gut. In just a few short hours, she would be performing a spell that would give the body to his mortal enemy. She'd told Stede she could unseat Blackbeard and put him back in the body but she wasn't at all sure that was possible.

The *griot's* sing-song Gullah reared in her head. *You let dis go, witch, or you in fo' a worle o' hurt.*

Still, her Granny's soul was at stake.

"Ah," he said. "Shovels."

Gwen felt sick as Stede loaded one shovel into the cart. "Grab another one," she instructed.

"I'll not have you digging about!"

Gwen smiled but inside she felt miserable. "I assure you I'm capable of digging a hole." She slid around him and added a second shovel to the cart. "We're going to need a metal detector."

Stede leaned in close. "Is there a...what did you call it? A *restroom* nearby?"

Gwen spied several brands of metal detectors. "There should be one near the door where we came in. It will either say 'men' on it or have a picture of a man."

He gave a nod.

"Meet back here," she said.

"I shan't be long."

Gwen watched him walk away. His walk was even more self-assured than Roger's. His posture was perfect without looking stilted and he took purposeful, long strides that made his jeans conform enticingly to his backside. As if he could feel her gaze on his back, he turned and flashed a heart-stopping smile.

Gwen drew in a deep breath. Her insides tensed and she had to force herself to tear her gaze away from him and concentrate on the metal detectors. Unable to think, she finally grabbed the most expensive one and then manhandled the box into the cart along with the shovels.

Stede returned just as she was pushing the cart toward the checkout.

Gwen retrieved a lighter and a map of Charleston from a rack at the checkout and handed them to the lady behind the counter.

Stede watched attentively as the clerk scanned the items and gave Gwen the total.

After Gwen slid her debit card through the reader, Stede took it from her and turned it over in his hand. "This is your form of payment?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," Gwen said as he handed it back to her.

He took the cart from her. "Allow me."

Gwen stepped aside and walked beside him as he pushed the cart out of the store.

"How is your payment backed?"

"Cash in the bank."

"I see," he said. "And that device reads the card and removes the funds from your bank."

Gwen's lips pulled into a smile. She was amazed at how quick he was. "Yep. You know, Stede, for a man who's been dead for several hundred years, you sure catch on fast."

When they arrived at the car, Stede handed her the keys and Gwen popped the trunk with the key remote.

"Go ahead and get in," Stede said. "I'll transfer our purchase to this hold."

With his hand pressed to the small of her back, he followed her around the side of the car and opened the door for her. Gwen's gaze caught his as she slid into the seat and an overwhelming sense of desire warmed her insides.

She inhaled. He was wonderful. He was an expert lover and a kind, thoughtful, highly intelligent man. The fact he had lived nearly three hundred years ago and viewed things she took for granted as new and fascinating made Gwen want him that much more.

She glanced at her watch. Less than eight hours from now, she would be performing the spell to remove Stede Bonnet from Roger's body. Everything was suddenly hurtling forward with wild force and there was nothing she could do to change it. Nothing.

* * * * *

"They're going to ask you to fill out some paperwork," Gwen said as they walked up the stairs and into the boat rental office. "I don't have a boating license but Roger does, so just ask me to do it and tell them you forgot your glasses."

"Forgot my glasses," he repeated.

"Good afternoon," the cute blonde behind the counter said. "How can I help you?"

"Madam," Stede began before Gwen could interject. "My good lady wife and I wish to charter a barkadeer or jib boat from your establishment. We prefer something fast and I believe the two of us could even handle a vessel as large as a barque."

Gwen gaped.

The blonde was thoroughly confused. "A barque?"

"A small sailing ship with three or so masts, all of them square-rigged except the after mast, which is fore-and-aft rigged."

The blonde stammered. "Um...we have a saltwater fishing boat, center console. It doesn't have sails but it does have twin outboard motors."

"That's perfect," Gwen said as she whipped out her debit card again.

Stede looked from Gwen to the blonde. "I forgot my glasses."

Gwen nearly laughed at the austere, serious expression he maintained while the blonde stared at him and gnawed her bottom lip. Gwen rubbed his biceps, letting her fingers trail underneath the hem of his sleeve. "That's right, honey. You did. I'll fill out the paperwork."

"Okey-doke," the blonde said to Stede. "I'll need your driver's license, boater's license and one other form of identification."

He swallowed visibly.

Gwen reached into her purse and withdrew Roger's wallet.

After the blonde checked his IDs to make sure everything was valid, she handed them back to Stede. The way he stared at the picture and read over the information

reminded Gwen that Roger was gone. She had hardly had time to consider that fact and wasn't about to let herself think about it now. Picking up the pen on the counter, she concentrated on filling out the paperwork.

"Do y'all know how to drive a sea-going boat?" the blonde asked as she stapled the contract to a receipt.

Stede snorted. "Madam, I—"

Gwen interrupted. "Yes. We do." She and Roger had kept a boat at their river house on the Cumberland in Nashville. Although she wasn't the best sailor, she'd watched Roger enough to know the basics.

"It's in the slip directly behind this office." The blonde handed them a key that was linked to a faded buoy-shaped floater. "Happy sailing."

Gwen seized Stede's arm and ushered him out of the rental office before he could make any further comments.

They hurried down the steps and Stede retrieved the items they'd bought from the trunk as Gwen climbed onto the fishing boat and cranked it.

Stede heaved the shovels and the metal detector onto the boat. The folded treasure map peeped out of his back pocket as he bent to untie the rope. He rolled it loosely and tossed it into the boat.

"Did you get the lighter?" Gwen asked as he jumped deftly from the pier to the boat.

He shoved his hand down his front jeans pocket and produced the little green lighter. "If you mean this, then yes."

She shifted into reverse and then pushed the throttle forward slightly as she steered out of the slip. Shifting into forward, she steered the boat out of the inlet and toward open waters.

The warm salt breeze whipped through her long hair as she gazed out to where the cloudless coastal sky met the horizon of water. Despite everything that happened, the gentle rocking of the boat and the hum of the twin engines churning the water calmed her.

Stede, however, was thoroughly fascinated with every aspect of the boat. He stared at the motors, leaning far over to watch the props spin. "How fast will she go?" he yelled over the roar of the engines.

"I'm not sure," Gwen said.

"I would wager twenty knots," he said excitedly as he joined her at the wheel. "The fastest galleons only coursed a speed of about eight knots."

"What about your ship? The *Revenge*?"

"With good winds, she could do nine."

Gwen stepped away from the wheel. "Would you care to captain her, since you are, after all, a real captain?"

"Aye, luv." He laughed, the sound rich and hearty – and utterly seductive.

Gwen slid her hand over his and placed it over the throttle. "This controls your speed." She pushed forward and the boat planed out, the bow rising up from the waves as the streamlined hull sliced through the water.

She slipped her arms around his solid waist, sliding her hands underneath his T-shirt to feel the hard smoothness of his belly and chest. Clinging, she laid her head against his back where she could faintly hear the steady beating of his heart. It was no longer Roger's energy making the heart pump. It was Stede's.

Her gaze swept the lush Carolina coast as he steered northward. The saw palmetto fronds waved in the ceaseless ocean breeze. Breakers sparkled in the bright midday sun as they rolled one after another onto the beige sand.

The feel of Stede's strong body in front of her and the baking heat of the summer sun on her back made Gwen wish this moment would never end. She closed her eyes and basked in it, imagining what Stede would have been like three hundred years ago when he captained the *Revenge*. She longed to know him that way—as the swashbuckling gentleman pirate.

But even clad in jeans, a T-shirt and Chuck Taylors, he still retained a swaggering, dashing air.

She felt his shoulders shift as he drew the throttle back. The boat slowed to a rocking creep.

He killed the motor and then twisted in her arms. His gaze roamed over her face, lingering on her lips before rising to her eyes once more. "We need to look at the map," he said hoarsely.

The boat rocked in the Atlantic waves but his hands on either side of her hips steadied her.

Gwen retrieved the lighter and the modern map of Charleston. She unfolded her map and spread it out on the deck of the boat.

"Are you certain that device will produce a fire?" he asked, gesturing to the lighter.

Gwen nodded. She flicked it and at once a bright orange flame blazed up.

Stede shook his head in astonishment. "Perfect." He withdrew the map from his back pocket and unfolded it. "Hold the flame underneath."

Gwen used both hands to steady the lighter as Stede stretched the map out over the fire. The flame flickered wildly in the wind. A smile spread across Stede's face as he moved the parchment back and forth over the heat.

"Is it showing up?" Gwen asked. Anticipation thrummed through her veins.

"Yes."

As he dropped to one knee beside her on the deck, Gwen dropped the lighter and stared incredulously as the faint red and green outline of the Carolina coast appeared on the surface of the sheepskin.

"Now let's compare the two maps," Stede said as he laid his beside Gwen's.

Although his was crudely drawn, a strong similarity between the barrier islands was very apparent.

He pointed to a tiny spot on her map. "This is the island."

Excitement tightened her stomach. "You'll be able to find these coordinates on the boat's navigational system." She stood and showed him the GPS screen. "See?"

He followed her. "Blow me down!" he exclaimed. He chuckled her under the chin. "But I won't need that. We're not far and I can determine our location by skirting the coastline."

Gwen's enthusiasm increased when he pushed the throttle forward as far as it would go. She sank onto the bench behind the wheel and watched him drive the boat. Even though he'd never before handled anything so modern, he seemed at once completely at ease. His black hair whipped in the wind when he turned to scan the coast. His T-shirt billowed at his back, making Gwen long to run her hands underneath it once more.

On one desolate beach, a majestic pelican took flight from a log that had washed ashore.

As they approached another island, children swam and waved. Brightly colored beach houses lined the coast.

Stede's mouth formed a long, thin line and his eyes narrowed as he squinted to see ahead. Gwen was unexpectedly overcome with wonder. Although she knew he'd come from the past, she had never asked him what his perception of the present was. She suddenly wanted to know. "Stede?"

"Hmm?"

"What do you think of...of *now*?"

He turned and pinned her with a look of confusion. "Are you speaking of your time?"

Gwen nodded.

"I...I think I could quickly become accustomed to it," he said softly.

Her heart turned over hard. There were so many things she wanted to do with him. So many things she wanted to show him. Her wristwatch suddenly felt like a dreadful weight on her arm. She didn't dare glance at it because with every tick of the second hand, she knew she was second closer to losing Stede.

"What do you *not* like?" she asked, hoping that would ease the tumult of emotions nagging at her insides.

"I know speed is a matter of convenience but everything seems to be happening so quickly. The people have everything at their fingertips and yet...seem impatient. No one greets anyone else with the exception of that kind fellow in the dry goods store."

"What do you like best?"

He stared at the water as he thought and then a gorgeous smile lit up his face, deepening the dimples at the corners of his mouth. "I like *this*."

"This?"

He gave a little nod. "Yes. Odd, isn't it, that I most prefer the thing I loved best in my own time. The open sea. The briny scent of saltwater accompanied by the warm breeze on my face. The feel of the waves gently rocking the hull—and your arms around me."

Gwen swallowed. Hard.

Stede continued. "That was the thing that was missing most in my life and the thing I have found *here*. You."

Tingles skittered up her arms and then down her spine. She couldn't think of anything to say. For the first time today it seemed as if time were standing still and Gwen savored it, wanting this one moment to last forever.

They'd been traveling for about twenty minutes when he pulled back on the throttle and steered the boat toward an uninhabited beach.

Gwen's breath caught as they approached. She stood. "You'll have to raise the outboard motors as we get closer."

He shifted the boat into neutral and Gwen reached around him to flip the switch that raised the motors while the waves continued to push the boat toward the beach. The bow sliced into sand near the shore and the boat came to a slow stop.

"Is this it?" she asked.

"Aye, luv," he said as he dropped anchor. He pocketed the key and then leapt over the bow into the surf. "Pass me the gear."

Gwen handed the shovels to him, which he tossed easily onto the beach. Then she took the heavy metal detector out of its box before handing it over. "Don't throw this one."

He walked it up onto the beach and then came back. "Get the map, luv, and I'll carry you to shore."

Gwen laughed. "I'm not afraid to get my feet wet."

"I insist," he smiled as he held his arms out to her.

Crazy desire spiraled downward at the sight of his dimples and sexy white teeth.

She scrambled to get the map and then she climbed onto the bow of the boat. He lifted her into his arms and as he carried her effortlessly through the crashing waves to dry land, she gazed into his eyes. He was handsome with his skin flushed with sun and his short black hair ruffled by the wind.

"Does any of this look familiar to you?" she asked as he lowered her feet to the sand.

"If I remember correctly, it's not that big an island but there's a rock formation in the center. The treasure was buried at the base of a tree which I seriously doubt is still standing."

Gwen stared at the overgrown brush with dread. She hadn't thought to bring a machete or a weapon of any kind. What if there were snakes? Her skin crawled at the prospect. "How far inland?"

"Not too far," he said. "When my manservant and I buried it, I was being pursued by Billy Rhett."

He hefted the metal detector in one hand and balanced the shovels on his shoulder with the other. "Stay close," he said as he stepped over the scrubby brush and dense coppice of sweet myrtles.

Gwen breathed in the mixture of their perfume mingled with the salty sea breeze as she followed Stede into the thick undergrowth.

He proceeded in a northwesterly direction and Gwen stayed close at his heels. The island was wild and desolate, alive with marsh hens and other water birds. Brambles and mosquitoes nipped mercilessly at her bare legs as she trailed behind Stede toward a steep hill.

The hill was so thickly wooded Gwen hoped they wouldn't be climbing it. All down the slope, sharp crags jutted through the tangle of oaks, tulip trees and vines. A deep ravine lay at the foot of the hill and as they made their way into the shadowed jungle, Gwen shivered from the sudden drop in temperature.

Stede readjusted the shovels on his shoulder. He could feel the tension radiating from Gwendolyn's body as she walked behind him. He'd never really thought she meant to betray him—until now. What if she had no intention of putting him back in the body?

He glanced back at her and her worried gaze found his. Something bleak and hopeless flashed in her dark brown eyes. Something *different*.

Was she planning at this very moment just how to leave him? And did she have any inkling what havoc Blackbeard would wreak upon her? Stede doubted it.

Ugly images of Blackbeard taking liberties with the lovely witch assailed Stede and he shuddered. An overwhelming sense of wanting to protect her welled up in him—despite what she might be plotting.

He nodded his head with resignation. He had agreed to help her find the treasure. He'd agreed to help her save her grandmother's soul. As a man, he could do no less and whatever regretful circumstances came his way because of it, he was prepared to face.

His thoughts swept back to the grog house where they'd dined earlier. When she'd excused herself from the table, he'd watched her walk away and had suddenly been overcome with desire for her. It wasn't the swish in her walk or the fact her short breeches were no more than under-drawers, exposing her long, comely legs to his view—although his prick stirred even now at the thought of it. No, it was something else. And the combined terror and awe he'd felt as he'd watched her walk away drove him to have her on the spot.

Desperate to claim her, he'd taken her against the wall like a man possessed and even that had not assuaged his lust. Even now he wanted to tumble her on the ground like a common whore. He wanted to fuck her and fuck her until she confessed to him no other man would ever satisfy her apart from him.

However, time was of the essence. From the sun's position in the sky he could tell they had precious few hours left before Blackbeard's return. And although the terrain was familiar, locating the buried booty portended difficulty.

After they'd walked about fifteen minutes, Stede stopped and stared up at the top of the hill. He instantly recognized the massive arch-shaped rock formation which dominated the thick growth—and which marked the place he'd chosen to bury the treasure.

"This is it," he said as he lowered the shovels and metal detector to the ground.

Gwen's stomach tightened with expectation. It occurred to her the treasure was likely still here.

Stede's gaze caught hers and held. Finally he moved toward her, his eyes still locked with hers as his fingertips trailed down her bare arm to where she held the map.

Gwen couldn't tear her gaze away from his dark blue eyes.

You don't have to do this, Stede.

But then, a memory of her granny's spirit flanked by those two soul collectors surfaced and Gwen pursed her lips to keep from uttering the words in her head.

Stede's gaze dropped to her mouth and lingered. For a moment she thought he might kiss her, but disappointment surged within her as he suddenly inhaled then took the map, turning his attention to it.

A shiver ran up her spine. Something had just changed between them and Gwen wasn't certain if it was good or bad.

Now was not the time to dwell on it. She switched on the metal detector. It hummed to life and she adjusted the frequency until it beeped when she passed her platinum wedding band in front of it.

A ray of sunlight shone through the thicket above and illuminated the diamond on her finger. Although it was Roger's diamond, somehow she felt as if it now signified her connection to Stede.

Stede's wife...

She shut her eyes tight. This was impossible. She couldn't allow herself to think this way.

Looking at the map, Stede walked a few paces toward the crag. "Try your contrivance here."

Gwen hefted the metal detector and walked toward Stede. It buzzed steadily, indicating it was on. If the treasure was still here, using the detector should speed

things up. Stede wouldn't need to decipher the rest of the map to pinpoint the exact location.

Stede watched impatiently and Gwen knew he was watching her to see how the metal detector worked. "Allow me," he said and took it from her.

She shook out her shoulders. The thing was heavier than it looked but Stede waved it around with ease, quickly covering an area of several yards.

When the detector didn't beep to signify underground metal, Gwen and Stede exchanged worried glances.

What if it wasn't here? Her stomach twisted into a knot.

She took a deep breath. "Stede, what do you think Blackbeard will do if we can't find the treasure?"

It was a long time before he answered. "He's rather unpredictable."

"But can he be reasonable?"

"Only when he's getting what he wants," Stede answered as he continued to sweep the metal detector over the ground.

That wasn't the answer Gwen wanted to hear. She crossed her arms over her chest. She wanted Blackbeard to just give up, let her granny's spirit go and let her keep Stede in Roger's body.

Stede blew out a sigh that only heightened Gwen's anxiety. Silent minutes ticked by before she realized she was clenching her fists and forced herself to relax her hands.

"It's not there, is it?" she asked.

A muscle in Stede's jaw twitched as his gaze grazed hers.

Gwen fought to stay strong. Inside, she wanted to fall apart and give in to the fear and grief threatening to consume her at any moment. She shook as she watched Stede move farther from his starting point, waving the detector in ever-widening circles.

It wasn't here. She knew it. Her stomach plummeted—and then she heard a long, loud beep.

Stede's breath left his lungs in a rush. "Is that it? Is that the sound?" He passed the detector over the spot again and was rewarded with the high-pitched signal once more.

"Yes!" Gwen jumped up and down. A rush of excitement swept through her as she hurried to his side. The treasure was still here, just under their feet! She lifted her gaze from the leaf-strewn ground to Stede's sparkling eyes. "X marks the spot," she teased.

Chapter Eight

Impatient, Gwen watched as Stede set the metal detector aside, took up one of the shovels and pushed it into the sandy earth.

"How deep down is it?" Gwen asked.

"About three feet."

Gwen knew she'd probably just be in the way but she seized the other shovel and helped dig. Whereas Stede shoveled large quantities of earth from the ever-deepening hole, Gwen only managed a piddling amount. Still, she felt as if she were contributing and she was too anxious to just stand around and watch.

It took far longer than she had suspected to dig a three-foot hole. A bead of perspiration rolled downward between her breasts and she stopped digging to catch her breath and peel her drenched tank away from her chest.

Stede hastily brushed the sweat from his forehead with the back of his wrist and then went back to digging. The muscles in his arms bulged as he tossed shovelfuls of dirt to the side.

Gwen's own arms burned from the strain and she had worked up a nasty blister by the time she heard the point of Stede's shovel *ping* as it came into contact with something solid.

Their gazes collided and then he began to dig in earnest.

Gwen stared, astounded as he kneeled and furiously swept the soil away from the top of a chest with his hands.

The treasure's here! It's really here!

Her heart thudded hard against her rib cage. All the pirate movies she'd seen and the books she'd read had not prepared her for this moment. She was excited and thrilled and anxious all at the same time.

Stede had buried this treasure here three centuries ago and although she'd known he'd lived that life, somehow this cemented it. A strange sense of terror shook her to the core.

"Look!" Stede exclaimed.

Gwen had expected the coffer to be dark and secured with rusted metal bands. She was not disappointed.

Instead of the wood having rotted with time, it had been preserved by some sort of mineralizing process, doubtless from centuries in the sandy soil.

With a grunt, Stede stretched out on the ground and reached into the hole with both hands, grabbing the chest by the sides to wriggle it loose. Gwen dropped as well and

clutched a metal ring on the top. Her arm and shoulder burned as she tugged and jerked. She couldn't wait to see inside—to see and touch real pirate treasure. She wanted to roll in it and drape herself in jewels. Hardly able to contain her excitement, she pulled hard on the ring.

Although Stede was excited, his giddiness didn't nearly match hers and Gwen had to remind herself this probably wasn't the first time he'd dug up a treasure chest.

The chest finally snapped away from its earthen bonds and, groaning, Stede heaved it out of the hole and dropped it heavily on the ground. He rolled onto his back and sighed a deep breath.

Gwen was elated. She leapt to her feet and then joyously stepped to where Stede lay before she straddled him and sank. "We did it!" she exclaimed, pummeling his chest and shoulders playfully.

Her breath left her lungs in a rush when his arms suddenly locked around her back and he drew her down to kiss her. With wild abandon, Gwen pressed her mouth to his, pushing her tongue through the small opening his lips had left for her.

She hadn't intended her reaction to be so consumed with passion but all of a sudden it was—and the deep-seated emotion behind this simple kiss took her completely by surprise.

Cupping his firm jaw with her hand, she held him as she surrendered to the sweet sensations and deepened their kiss.

Her black hair splayed wildly around his head, reaching like inky tendrils into the fallen leaves. Her nipples swelled as she pressed her breasts to his hard chest. One of his hands slid into the hair at her nape and his other arm tightened around her back, holding her so closely her breath caught. He writhed beneath her.

He feels it too.

Her heart soared only to come tumbling back down. They'd found the treasure—but for Blackbeard.

Gwen stilled and sighed into his mouth. His hold on her loosened.

"I suppose we should look in the chest," she whispered, nose to nose with him.

Still disturbed at her wild emotions, she pushed herself up and dusted her knees off. Stede stood and then he took her abruptly by the shoulders. Gwen's gaze flew to his.

"Whatever happens..." he began.

Gwen's throat constricted. Sentiment rioted within her. Unable to speak, she shook her head and bit her lip to keep from sobbing. What was this? What was causing this? She hardly knew him. He'd agreed to help her. It wasn't as if she were forcing him.

She swallowed. Hard. "Open the chest," she said to divert him. "I want to see what's inside."

A genuine smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. He swept a leaf from her hair before he nodded and then kneeled beside the sea chest. He fingered the rusty lock. "The blasted thing has rusted shut." He stood and took up a shovel. "Stand back."

Gwen pressed her hands over her ears as he swung the shovel hard at the top of the chest. He struck it twice more and then the lock snapped off and the lid cracked open.

Stede's biceps swelled as he forced it the rest of the way open and Gwen gaped at the gleaming treasure within. He motioned for her to come nearer.

On shaky legs, she approached him and sank to a squat. Varied sizes of gold and silver coins interspersed with glittering jewels were heaped inside the chest. Gwen knew her mouth was agape but she'd never seen anything like it before. She couldn't begin to estimate the worth of the treasure. "Wow!" she breathed. "Did...did you *steal* all of this stuff?"

Stede shrugged guiltily. "Not all of it. Teach stole some of it."

She lifted a coin out of the chest.

"That's a piece of eight."

"A real piece of eight? Cool!"

"I suppose it is a bit chilly. It's been in the ground for three hundred years."

Gwen laughed. "No, cool means neat. Great."

He smiled. "Then you're incredibly cool, Gwendolyn Wyse."

Her heart skidded.

Turning back to the treasure, Stede began to rake the coins and jewels to one side. He plunged his hand into them, his mouth pursing with effort before he gave a little gasp. "Ah." His eyes glimmered as he withdrew a small, black velvet bag.

But the triumphant gleam grew dim as he stared at the time-worn fabric, his thumb raking over whatever was inside. Gwen sensed the bag held something important to him and she watched as he fingered open the drawstring and then withdrew a tiny silver cross on a delicate silver chain.

He laid it in his palm and caressed the pendant with the tip of his index finger.

Gwen stared as he drew in a sharp breath. He seemed so touched, so affected by this miniscule little necklace.

His shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath. "This was hers."

Gwen's heart skipped a beat. His wife's? She suddenly felt like a fool for throwing herself at him. Something ugly roiled inside her. She averted her gaze.

When he sniffed, she looked back to find Stede's eyes rimmed with tears. He made an irresolute attempt at composing himself by clearing his throat. His earnest gaze found hers. "I want you to have this."

Gwen shook her head. "I couldn't. Really." The audacity that he would offer her something that belonged to wife was unthinkable. Could he not tell from her actions how she felt about him?

"I beseech you, Gwendolyn. It's the one thing I have left that belonged to my only daughter." His hands trembled as he unfastened the delicate clasp. "Please take it. I won't be —"

Daughter?

Her heart twisted.

"I would love to have it," she whispered, interrupting him. She couldn't bear to hear the rest. An image of him making certain he had the necklace before he deserted Barbados to become a pirate struck a chord of sentimentality in Gwen that made her want to cry.

"Having sons was one thing," he said and smiled sadly as Gwen lifted her hair. Reaching around her slender neck, he fastened the clasp. "But a daughter...I never realized what responsibility meant until I held my daughter in my arms. I was utterly consumed with the need to protect and indulge her and...and *love* her..." His voice tailed off with those last words.

Gwen stared.

His eyes warmed as he studied the little cross against her olive skin.

He nodded with finality as if he were resigned to some hard-accepted memory. "She wore this when we christened her at Christ Church in Barbados and would have again worn it on her wedding day but for..."

Gwen studied his face. He glanced away and a muscle in his neck bulged with strain. Dread filled Gwen. She knew she was about to hear something heartbreaking. "What was her name?"

"We named her after her mother. Mary."

"Mary Bonnet," Gwen said and tried to imagine Stede in a church dressed in full eighteenth-century regalia, proudly holding his baby girl.

The blue in his eyes turned almost black. His gaze returned to the cross. "We buried her at the same church less than a year later."

Gwen's heart turned over. Hard. "What...what happened?"

"Barbados is a rather small island," he began. "I was starved for conversation and news so whenever a ship sailed into port, I entertained any gentlemen aboard." He paused and took a deep breath. "One morning, William Rhett weighed anchor in Bridgetown and I invited him to dine with us. Unbeknownst to me, he was very ill at the time."

"And you caught what he had?" Gwen asked.

Stede nodded. "And passed it on to little Mary." He sat and propped his arms on his knees. "I went to the scaffold knowing I deserved my punishment."

"You weren't to blame —" Gwen began but Stede cut her short.

"Yes, I was." He picked up a twig and stabbed mindlessly at the ground with it. "I was to blame. God was to blame. William Rhett was to blame. That's why I named my ship the *Revenge*."

Gwen stared.

"I was broken after Mary died and I resolved there and then never to feel that way again."

"But you escaped. You wanted to live."

He snorted. "I was a miserable coward."

The self-loathing in his voice startled Gwen.

"I watched Mary go to her death, knew I was watching her breathe for the last time." He threw the twig toward a thicket of brush as hard as he could and stared at the spot where it landed. "She just...slipped away...and that was the end of her life on earth."

Gwen couldn't think of any words to comfort him.

"I suppose I expected something more...grand." He shrugged. "I expected to see *immortality*, something more—her spirit leaving her body. Something! And instead there was this *nothingness*. Just one last little breath. I wasn't even certain she'd died."

A memory of sitting with her granny while her life ebbed crossed Gwen's thoughts. Even though she had no doubt the spirit continued after death, she'd felt so utterly alone and raw after losing her grandmother. Still, she knew her pain couldn't compare to that of losing a child—someone who was a part of you.

"When you died...what was it like for you?" she asked and then immediately regretted it.

Stede sucked in a breath. A muscle in his jaw clenched as his gaze swiveled to hers. "After Mary died, all the good in me was rent from my insides and all the blood and thieving and filth didn't seem to matter. I knew I deserved my fate because I was not repentant. And I did not go to my death with calm."

"That's not true, Stede. I see the good in you."

He studied her. "Perhaps because you've somehow brought out the man I was before." His voice was so soft Gwen barely heard the words.

She realized her pulse was racing. He was getting too close. *Too close to what?* She felt a desperate need to steer the conversation away from herself and bring it back to him. "Did...did it hurt to be hanged?"

"Unimaginably."

Gwen shuddered.

"But it was not nearly so bad as being bound like an animal and carted through the streets of Charles Towne before jeering crowds who expected to be entertained by my misery."

"I would have been terrified."

"I was." He swatted at a mosquito that landed on his arm. "I was thoroughly unmanned because, my lovely lady witch, I thought I was going straight to hell."

"What *did* happen...after you died?"

His gaze dropped to the ground. "Nothing. There is no other fitting description. I felt no bodily pain. I felt no body. I had no concept of time...but the cruelest joke was I had complete awareness. It was as if I were floating in a sea of blackness with my thoughts as my sole companion. I wondered if I was simply mad—or if this was really the true hell."

"And then?"

His regard found hers and clung. "And then I heard your voice."

Gwen's heart went out to him. She expected some other revelation from him but instead, he stared for a long time before he pushed himself up and hoisted the heavy treasure chest onto his shoulder. "Hand me those shovels." He extended his other hand.

Gwen shook her head. "We don't need them anymore."

"Very well," he said coldly and, shifting the chest on his shoulder, he strode past her in the direction of the boat.

She hugged her arms as she watched him walk away. He had been on the verge of opening up to her and then had just closed himself off. Her insides hollowed.

She brushed her fingertips over the tiny cross. She'd never had children. She couldn't imagine the pain Stede had felt when the child had died but it had obviously been terrible enough to turn a wealthy, respected man into a revenge-obsessed pirate.

Feelings churned inside her which she hastily curbed as she raced to catch up with Stede.

Breathing heavily from the weight of the chest, he trampled the dense undergrowth and then plodded through the sand and waves to the boat. Gwen watched the muscles in his arms flex as he lifted the cumbersome coffer and sat it over the edge of the bow into the boat.

He then turned and waded through the frothy surf toward her. Gwen bit her bottom lip. He was magnificent with the sun glinting off his black hair and his broad shoulders outlined in the soft gray fabric of the T-shirt. His wet jeans clung to his muscled thighs as he walked and the sight of him sparked such a rush of desire in Gwen that it made her clit pulsate.

At that moment, she wanted him more than she had ever wanted anything in her life.

A wave of indecision surged but she quickly repressed it and then, mustering every ounce of determination she possessed, she pulled her blouse off over the top of her head and dropped it in the sand.

Stede stopped before her, staring.

Gwen swallowed. Her pulse rioted but it was too late to stop now. She boldly shucked off her bra. His gaze heated as it dropped to where her breasts heaved with her shallow breaths.

Her nipples tightened and she let out a whimper as she instinctively tugged on them, feeling the subsequent rush of slick wetness flood her panties. She shook with desperate need and terror that he would reject her.

His eyes lifted to hers and he gestured to her shorts. "Take those off." It was a command.

Gwen's heart took flight as she untied the decorative belt on the front, unbuttoned and then unzipped. A little shake of her hips sent the khaki fabric slithering down her legs. She stepped out of her shorts and shoes at the same time and then hooked her thumbs under the elastic band of her thong.

"Take it off," he ordered. His voice was urgent and she knew he was already so, so hard because she could see the outline of his erect cock in his jeans.

A thrill rushed through Gwen's veins at the knowledge it would soon be inside her, bringing her to mind-numbing bliss.

She slid the stringy thong down her legs and kicked it off.

Standing naked on the beach, she took hedonistic pleasure in the feel of the warm sun and ocean breeze caressing her bare skin.

"You're a goddess," he murmured as he hastily closed the distance between them.

Gwen opened her arms and closed her eyes as his hard body came in full contact with hers. She inhaled, drinking in the masculine scent of him as she laid her forehead against the expanse of his chest.

His hand skimmed down her arms, her sides, her hips, over her ass and then returned up her back. Gwen pressed her lips to his chest as he entwined his fingers in the hair at her nape. She gasped when he tilted her head back with sudden, passionate force.

Her eyes snapped open and locked with his.

His hips rocked into hers, the coarse fabric of his jeans raking the sensitive folds between her thighs as his warm breath fanned her face. "I would spend my whole life over again for this one day with you."

Gwen's whimper dissolved in his mouth. Crazy emotions rampaged inside her as he kissed her thoroughly, his skilled tongue mating with hers, teasing her with the promise of what was to come. There was no time for this but the idea she might lose him reared in her thoughts. She forced the terror away and arched against him, her hands fumbling with the button and zipper of his jeans.

He moaned into her mouth when she reached for his steel-hard cock. She stroked the rigid head and the shaft, feeling the wonderful combination of hard and velvet beneath her fingertips. He tilted his hips so his cock was thrust fully into her hand and she stroked him hard, squeezing, pulling, sliding downward to cup his tight scrotum and then gripping to work him again.

Groaning, he dragged his lips away from hers and then yanked his shirt off over his head. He shook it out and placed it on the sand for her to sit on.

With her blood running thick with desire, Gwen planted her backside on the shirt and spread her thighs as he kicked off his shoes and shed his jeans. He joined her and as they fell back on the sand together, she jolted as the thick head of his cock breached her labia and slid up hard into her drenched hole.

Gwen cried out and buried her nails in his shoulders. The feel of his body, so close and so hot, brought stinging tears to her eyes. She writhed beneath him, clinging and mewling as he pumped into her, one hard, bone-jarring thrust after another.

He fucked her as if he were somehow trying to become one with her and Gwen basked in the pure carnal eroticism of it. All that mattered was Stede and what he was doing to her right here, right now. All coherent thought fled. Blackbeard could go to hell for all Gwen cared.

She ached with heart-wrenching need for that feeling of utter, all-encompassing completion only Stede could give her and when his hand crept between them and his thumb and forefinger formed a vise grip on one of her nipples, Gwen arched and cried out.

The orgasm seemed to start at the top of her head and spiral rapidly downward, culminating deep in her channel and then radiating outward in violent surges of molten desire and something else she could not describe. Something powerful and intense—and dangerous.

“I’m coming,” she groaned despite the whirlwind of overwhelming emotions. “Come with me, Stede! Come inside my pussy. Now!”

His big palm slid under her ass and he lifted her, holding her tightly as he ground his pubis against hers. He jerked upward once, twice and then he was giving voice to an animalistic groan as his penis pulsed thickly inside her.

As the spasms eddied and then trailed off, Gwen burrowed her fingers into the back of his hair. He dropped his head to the valley between her breasts and remained there, his body lusciously crushing hers into the soft sand.

Sated and enjoying the deliciously heavy feeling in her body, Gwen held him and stared up at the blue sky and the waving palmetto fronds. She wanted this moment to last forever. This feeling. This moment in paradise. And as long as he didn’t move, she could pretend it would last.

After a while, he rolled onto his back and dragged her into his arms, laying her head on his chest. His hand sought hers and he squeezed, holding it tightly in his. The rapid pumping of his heart beneath her ear was a raw reminder of the unpredictability and fragility of life. Panic suddenly crashed over her in a wave. A lump welled in her throat.

Overhead, a thick, gray cloud passed over the sun, stealing the warmth from the parts of her body that weren’t touching Stede.

How long did they have left?

Gwen shut her eyes against the threatening tears. How could she ever let him go? Although she'd known him less than a day, the thought of living without him inspired feelings of terror and despair in her heart.

She'd spent much of her life keeping others at arm's reach, protecting herself from just this sort of thing. How had an eighteenth-century pirate breached her defenses?

Stede's chest rose and fell with a satisfied breath.

He seemed so strong and so full of life. She snuggled closer against him. Gwen couldn't imagine this body carrying anyone's spirit but Stede's. But it would.

It would.

Soon.

A traitorous tear seeped out of the corner of her eye and splashed onto his chest.

He had her on her back in an instant, his concerned gaze searching hers. "Gwendolyn? Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head.

"You look as if you are about to weep." His thumb traced her bottom lip.

Gwen quickly averted her gaze.

"What's wrong?" The tenderness in his voice threatened to undo her.

Her eyes found his again and she suddenly knew what was wrong...

She was in love with him.

She was in love with a man who, in a few short hours, she would have to kill.

Chapter Nine

Love. Could it be true? Gwen felt as if she were stuffed full of butterflies. This situation was impossible.

In the beginning, she'd loved Roger. She'd loved a few other guys in college and her crushes from high school—but that had been a different kind of love.

She'd loved Roger out of fear of being alone. She'd loved him for the security he provided. When she'd first married him, she thought she would be safe with him and although she was financially secure, she had never, not ever, felt *safe*.

And here, naked in her arms, was a man who had been tried, convicted and hanged for piracy and she felt a curious sense of total security with him.

Stede hovered over her. Compassion and anxiety filled his eyes. "Do not fear, luv."

She knew what he meant but the unintended double entendre pierced her heart like an arrow. She *did* fear love.

She feared it far more than Blackbeard's surly spirit.

"Aren't you afraid?" she asked.

A grim smile tugged at his lips. "Gwendolyn, I have faith you will do your utmost to put my soul back in this body."

She stared.

His smile broadened and then he dropped his head to nibble and kiss the curve of her neck.

"Wait—" She started to confess it probably wouldn't work and that if he decided to take the body and renege on his deal to help her, she'd understand. But when his hand dipped between her legs, sliding between the slippery folds to knead her clitoris, Gwen reeled.

She clung to his head as he kissed lower, across her collarbone, pressing the sweetest, most tender kiss to the silver cross that lay in the hollow of her throat. Liquid heat mingled with love gushed in her veins and she forgot all about confessing as she spread her thighs to give him greater access.

His mouth locked on her nipple and Gwen arched as his hot tongue laved, prodded and then flattened over the distended bud. Her breath left her lungs in a rush. This was *so good*.

She'd never known the power of love and lust merging in her soul until now.

Her clit throbbed under his palm and she undulated, desperately wanting his fingers inside her—everywhere—completing her, pleasing her, fucking her.

"Please," she begged, lifting her hips off the T-shirt and toward his hand.

After leaving her nipple diamond hard, his mouth moved to her other breast. "What do you want, Gwendolyn?" he asked between suckling little kisses.

"Your fingers." She took his hand in hers and pushed it toward her hole. "Inside me. Please, Stede."

He slid his index finger up her pussy to the knuckles. "Like this?"

She felt drunk. "Yes!" Goddess, it felt good.

"And this?" he murmured against her skin as he drove his middle finger past the tight little opening of her anus and all the way up that hole too.

Gwen fought off the sudden urge to come. She wanted to enjoy this. She wanted this feeling to last.

While his fingers rooted inside her, he moved back to the other breast and took nearly the whole thing in his mouth. His tongue circled her nipple and, encouraging him in bold, crass language, Gwen seized his head in her hands and pulled his hair.

He gasped and raised his head. His blue eyes blazed and then his lashes fluttered shut as he lowered his lips to hers and kissed her so deeply, his teeth grazed hers. Gwen opened her mouth and her legs for him. She dug her heels in the sand and gyrated her hips as she clung to his head and took her fill of his mouth.

She whimpered when he dragged his lips from hers. "Cream for me," he said and then she went crazy as his tongue traced the shell of her ear. "Do you like my finger up your arse?"

Consumed with desire, she made nonsensical noises and lifted her hips off the ground, pushing down hard on his hand.

His breath was so hot and wet on her ear and his hand was fucking her so damn good, Gwen went mindless. She felt as if she were spinning wildly out of control, going deeper and deeper within her body—and then she exploded into a billion flickering stars that slowly drifted back to earth and Stede's arms.

Tingles swept her skin as this fire—this love for this man—burned her up inside. She felt alive. For the first time in her entire life, Gwen felt alive.

Stede's lips pecked hers. "That was...amazing."

Yes it was.

Her eyes blinked open. He was smiling as if he hadn't a care in the world and inside, Gwen was dying.

All she could think was, *I love you, I love you.*

The words were on the tip of her tongue and just as she worked up the courage to utter them, Stede jumped up and began getting dressed.

He pulled on his jeans and then, without zipping or buttoning them, he sat in the sand to put on the Chuck Taylors.

Still humming with the eddying waves of a perfect orgasm, Gwen sat. Goddess, the body was gorgeous with Stede's energy alive and vibrating within the skin and bones.

The pentagram she'd scratched into his chest had faded slightly and now he was all bronze skin and muscles. A line of soft black down meandered over his rippling stomach and disappeared into the gaping jeans.

He stood and then picked up her blouse. "We'd better be sailing for Charles Towne, luv."

The mid-afternoon sun was already starting to drop in the sky. Gwen inhaled slowly, resisting the urge to look at her watch. *Can't we just stay here?*

He shook the sand out of her blouse and handed it to her. "Trade?"

She realized she was still sitting on his T-shirt, soaking it with her cum. Gwen was miserable and her knees felt as if they would give way as she stood and collected her bra. With trembling fingers, she fastened it and wriggled into it before pulling on her blouse.

Stede beat the sand out of her thong on his thigh and then kneeled to help her dress. His eyes grazed hers as she stepped into it and he slid the scrap up her thighs and over her hips. Her stomach tightened when he ran his index finger under the lace and dragged it through her juicy pussy lips.

She thought she would come again when he withdrew it and slid it into his mouth. The expression on his face as he tasted her pearly cream sent tingles through Gwen's entire body. Then, as if that weren't enough for him, he drew her the half step that closed the distance between them and closed his eyes as he breathed in the scent of her sex.

Gwen's pulse raced. She threaded her fingers into his thick hair. "I don't want to go."

His body tensed. He pressed a tender kiss to the ribbon bow on the front of her thong and then stood and pulled on his T-shirt.

Shaking, Gwen managed to get her shorts on and as soon as she stepped into her shoes, Stede swept her off her feet and carried her through the incoming tide to the boat.

She clambered in and then watched as he lithely pulled himself up with his arms, anchored one dripping Chuck Taylor on the bow and swung himself easily into the boat.

Gwen felt sick inside as she glanced at the treasure chest.

What if she couldn't get Blackbeard in the body? He would send her grandmother's soul to the devil.

What would happen to Stede?

He seemed on edge as he brushed past her and weighed anchor before he turned the key in the ignition. If he was afraid, he was trying very hard not to let her see it.

There had to be some way to trick Blackbeard, some way to save Granny's soul and keep Stede in the body.

Gwen stared out to sea and although her mind raced with possibilities, the situation seemed utterly hopeless.

* * * * *

Stede seemed grim as he crawled into the Honda after turning in the boat key at the rental office.

Time was spiraling quickly. Almost five hours had inexplicably dwindled away between their first and last trip to the boat rental office, and Gwen desperately wanted to turn back the clock. This was so unfair. She wanted to scream but instead, she shifted into drive and then pulled out of the gravel parking lot. In addition to all her other worries, Gwen felt queasy because she knew now she was really in love with Stede.

A honking horn brought her abruptly out of her reverie and Gwen realized she'd drifted into the wrong lane. "Shit!" she exclaimed as she righted the car with a jerk. Her heart pumped in frantic bursts and she took deep breaths to calm down. She'd nearly killed them both. A vision of their slumped bodies hanging like shot-down paratroopers in the seatbelts with a fortune in gold doubloons and jewels scattered in the trunk flooded her thoughts. She shook it off.

Glancing at Stede, she shrugged an apology. "Sorry."

He stared. His austere expression remained the same, as if he were unaffected by their near miss.

Gwen turned her attention back to the road but she was painfully aware of the heat of his hand as he swept a little twig from her long hair. She felt as if she were unraveling at breakneck speed and there was nothing she could do to prevent it.

The drive back to the Battery Carriage House Inn seemed to go by far too quickly and oddly, at the same time, not quickly enough. When Gwen parked the car and then switched off the engine, the silence that ensued sent tendrils of terror creeping through her body. Her hands shook and she knew if she let go of the steering wheel, she'd come apart.

Stede opened the passenger door.

Let's just keep driving.

Gwen shot him a worried glance.

"Come inside, Gwendolyn."

She shook her head.

His lips slid into a tentative smile. "Come inside. If these are to be my last moments on earth, I'd much rather spend them in your arms than in this...this contraption."

She gave a little nod but her knees threatened to buckle as she stepped out of the Honda. She pressed the trunk button on the key remote. It released with a pop and Stede moved to the back of the car.

Gwen joined him and was surprised when he drew her into his arms, gazing into her eyes as he swept one side of her hair behind her ear.

I love you.

Unable to utter the words, she searched his eyes.

His smile was sad and resigned as he pressed a chaste kiss to her forehead and then pulled her hard against him and breathed in the scent of her as he held her.

All around them, life went on as usual, oblivious to the heart-wrenching pain that twisted Gwen's insides into knots. Water in the fountain gurgled. Cars whizzed by. Children played in White Point Gardens while the gulls cried out and the horse-drawn carriage tours plodded rhythmically by.

She clenched her fists against his chest and fought back stinging tears.

"Breathe, Gwendolyn," he whispered into her hair.

She hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath but she felt that if she exhaled right now, all her pain would rush out in a torrent.

"I know you are afraid of Blackbeard," he said. "But he can be reasonable. If you give him what he wants, he won't harm you."

Terror of Blackbeard was the furthest thing from her mind.

When she raised her head to look into his eyes, he brushed a damp tear away from the outside corner of her eye. Her lashes fluttered shut and she turned her face into his hand. His touch was so absolving, so good.

"We should go inside and formulate some sort of plan, luv."

She nodded.

"Go and I'll bring the chest."

"Okay," she murmured and then reluctantly left the warmth of his embrace to walk up the cobblestone drive to the carriage house.

A small part of her thought he might take the treasure and run and a bigger part of her hoped and prayed he would. She didn't look back as she walked around the back of the carriage house and unlocked the door to her room.

While they'd been gone, housekeeping had come and made the bed, placing two gold-foil-wrapped chocolates on each pillow.

The divorce papers had been collected and placed neatly on one bedside table, two clean waffle-weave robes had been draped over the foot of the bed and the stun gun had been placed on the other bedside table.

Gwen stared at it.

If all else failed, perhaps the stun gun was the answer to all her prayers.

The door opened and Stede blustered in with the treasure chest. He grunted as he shifted it off his shoulder and lowered it to the carpeted floor. "That should appease him enough so he won't harm you."

Panic brimmed at the thought of Blackbeard's imminent return. "Stede, what if you just left?"

"What are you suggesting?"

"What would he do if I told him you ran off?"

He shook his head. "I refuse to do that you."

"But Stede —"

"You don't know what that man is capable of."

Gwen's heart was so tight she could hardly speak. "I...I don't know if —"

His big hands gripped her shoulders. "If he discovered I was gone, he would send your grandmother to the devil."

Gwen swallowed the lump in her throat. "Do you really think —"

"I *know*," he interjected. His grip on her shoulders loosened and his palms trailed down her bare arms. "Gwendolyn, I gave you my word."

She shook her head. "There has to be some way. There has to be something we can do."

His eyes darkened. "You said you could kill him with that...weapon." He gestured toward the stun gun.

Gwen nodded. Her heart pounded against her rib cage. He was going to help her formulate a plan.

"I don't want you to try it," he said.

Gwen stared. Had she heard him correctly? "Not try it? Stede —"

"I won't allow it."

Her eyes narrowed. "This is the twenty-first century, Stede Bonnet, and men no longer order women about like deck hands. I can think for myself and I'll do any damn thing I want to regardless of what you think!"

His expression softened. "Gwendolyn, I didn't intend to rile you," he said quietly. "But Blackbeard is a dangerous enough man that he would harm you if you dared cross him."

"I have an advantage." She lifted her chin.

"Which is what?"

"He died in the seventeen-hundreds. He won't know what a stun gun is. I'll just —"

Stede cut her off. "Promise me you won't attempt to carry out some addlebrained scheme."

Gwen gaped. "I thought you wanted me to put you back in the body? That was our original deal."

"Never make a deal with a pirate." He had the audacity to wink.

Undaunted, Gwen continued, "I told you if you'd help me save my grandmother, I would do everything in my power to keep you in this body." Her voice rose increasingly with hysteria.

"I knew your plan wouldn't work when you suggested it."

Gwen's stomach somersaulted. "And you went along when you could have run away and lived?"

He shrugged.

Trembling, Gwen searched his deep blue eyes. "Why?"

"Perhaps because my first death was riddled with dishonor and shame." His voice was so quiet she could barely discern the words.

That was hardly the answer she wanted to hear. She wanted him to say it was because he was so in love with her he couldn't see straight—anything but some gentleman's lofty discourse about honor and manhood.

But it was ridiculous to think a man like him could love her. Still...

Her shoulders rose and fell with an exasperated breath. "Right now I would prefer dishonor and shame, Stede."

He shook his head. "No, you wouldn't."

"Believe me. I would."

A smile tugged at one side of his mouth. "Gwendolyn, if I mean anything to you, let me go with my reputation intact."

She squeezed her eyes shut and fought off the urge to scream. Did he not understand what most mattered was living and spending the rest of his life with her? How could he stand here and talk about honor and respect when her heart was breaking into a million pieces?

She opened her eyes and her gaze found his. Would it matter to him if he knew she loved him? Surely he would help her do whatever it took if he knew how badly he would hurt her if he died. She steeled herself to tell him.

Her lips parted to speak but he pressed a finger to her mouth.

"I know my soul was trapped between heaven and earth because I was to blame for my daughter's death." His voice was subdued, almost inaudible. "Release me, Gwendolyn. Release my soul from this endless purgatory."

Her heart twisted.

He continued. "I know you must hate me for taking your husband's body and bringing discord to your life but I swear on all that is holy, when I heard your voice, I was compelled here." He tapped his chest for emphasis. "To you."

Unable to hear any more, Gwen turned her head and attempted to pull away from him but he caught her chin in his hand and gently coaxed her to face him. His gaze swept her face and then locked with hers.

She trembled violently.

"This day, this one day, spent with you—in your arms—has absolved me," he murmured and then his head slanted slowly to hers where he brushed the softest kiss across her lips.

"Promise me," he whispered between kisses. "Let me die knowing I died for an honorable cause." His lips tugged on hers and Gwen dissolved. "To see you safe." His arms moved down her back, drawing her closer and closer until she was pressed against the hard wall of his chest. "Promise me,luv."

His tongue teased open her lips and then tenderly engaged hers in the most intimate kiss Gwen had ever experienced. When she moaned into his mouth, he deepened their kiss. His teeth clashed with hers as his arms constricted around her and he groaned.

Toe-to-toe with him, Gwen could feel his arousal prodding her belly. He took one step that pushed his knee between hers as his hands slid down to her ass, where he drew her up hard on his thigh.

Standing on tiptoes, Gwen rode his hard leg with one thought in mind—assuaging this maddening throbbing in her clit. Her hand crept between their bodies and she kneaded his hard cock through his jeans.

Conflicting thoughts battled in her brain. She should be pulling out her bag and working on binding spells but she couldn't tear herself away from Stede's embrace. When she uttered a moan of protest, he dragged his mouth from hers. "Twilight is a couple hours away. We have time, Gwendolyn," he muttered breathlessly.

"No..."

"Give me this. Give me one more time with you," he murmured, "Because I know heaven will never be as wonderful as the bliss of your arms."

All her resistance melted and Gwen growled as she jerked the button loose on his jeans and yanked down the zipper.

He laughed triumphantly and pulled her blouse off over her head.

Consumed with passion and love and desire, Gwen kicked off her shoes and shucked her shorts and thong as she backed toward the bed. Stede followed her, peeling off his own clothes and shoes before joining her on the white chenille bedspread.

She scooted down and, seizing his hips, guided him to straddle her face. He smelled of the sea and sex and Gwen lifted her head to take his cock into her mouth.

Stede tensed and complied when she slid her hand over his hard buttocks to pull him down farther. She wanted all of him in her mouth, down her throat. She wanted him to fuck her mouth. Hard. She wanted his balls slapping her chin as he drove his big cock into her.

Encircling the fingers of one hand around the base of his shaft, she took as much of him as she could, relishing the idea that in this position, she was at his mercy. The other hand found and cupped his balls, squeezing and rolling them gently in her palm.

Stede blew out a ragged breath and slowly began to rut in her mouth. Gwen was exultant. She wanted him to come this way, deep down her throat. She opened for him, raking her tongue up and down his thick phallus, sucking his head and then drinking him into her mouth as he slid past her lips and teeth until she felt the rigid tip at the threshold of her throat.

Her clit swelled and her pussy ached to have him inside her. She squeezed her thighs together and writhed and then suddenly, he withdrew his cock from her mouth—but only long enough to twist in the bed, roll onto his back and drag her on top of him so her pussy was positioned over his mouth and she was facing his rearing penis.

Her thighs burned as she spread and lowered herself onto his tongue. His big fingers locked around her legs and he nuzzled his face into her sopping pussy and sucked her distended clit into his mouth.

Every fiber of Gwen's body constricted as she flipped her long hair over one shoulder and dropped back down to Stede's cock. The head was crimson with surging blood. One thick vein popped out down the rigid length and she felt it throb when she took it in her hand. Her mouth enclosed on the head and she worked and sucked him, darting the tip of her tongue all around and under and over and then sucked down to the black curls at the base. All the while, his tongue prodded her wet hole and then swept forward to tease her clit. Gwen ground down on him, riding his face as she fucked him with her mouth.

His balls tightened and the muscles in his thighs quivered just before he voiced a molten moan against the oh-so-sensitive folds of her pussy. And then he was spurting in her mouth, filling her with his spicy cream while his body was racked with uncontrollable spasms. She sucked and swallowed and then sucked some more, wanting every last drop of his essence. While she was laving the head of his cock, he pulled her down hard on his mouth and chewed on her lips and clit.

Still gripping his phallus, Gwen dropped her head to his hip and she braced her other hand on the soft chenille as his hungry mouth brought her to orgasm. She cried out and pushed her clit into the wet heat, riding his tongue and lips to bliss.

For a moment, she thought she'd passed out because when she opened her eyes once more, she was enveloped in his arms with her head at the top of the bed, resting on his shoulder.

His fingers threaded through her long hair and, her body tingling, she allowed herself to flow completely into the safety of his embrace. Underneath her ear was the steady thumping of his heart and Gwen fought against the welling crest of panic.

His chest rose with a breathy yawn and she realized he had gone twenty-four hours without sleep—and Roger had gone several more wide awake before Stede had possessed him. "Are you tired?" she asked.

"Exhausted," he said, hugging her closer against him.

"Why haven't you slept?"

"It told you I'd keep watch."

She propped on one elbow and looked into his tired eyes. "Stede, you could have at least taken a nap."

One side of his mouth eased into a smile. "And miss one moment with you?" He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Are you sore?"

Her forehead furrowed.

"Between your legs," he murmured seductively. "Are you sore?"

She swallowed thickly. She was raw but it was a damn good raw. "I'm not *too* sore."

"Good," he said as he lifted her on top of him. "Because I want to watch you ride my cock."

Her breath left her lungs in a rush as she felt his stiff pole breach her opening and slide inch by bone-hard inch up her sodden cunt. Bracing her hands on his broad chest, she melted atop him. Time was racing forward fast—this would be the last time they made love before Blackbeard appeared and Gwen resolved to make it the best.

Her heated gaze locked with his and held as she rocked her hips, riding up the length of his long, thick cock and then sliding all the way back down to grind her clit against his pubis.

Her silky black hair fell forward, brushing his chest and shoulders as she fucked him.

"My lovely lady witch...you are so beautiful." His gaze raked her with blatant appraisal. His hands followed, moving over her shoulders, lingering on breasts, sliding over the curves of her waist and hips and around to squeeze and guide her ass up and down and up and down again.

Gwen held his gaze, basking in the potent connection she felt to this man. She'd never felt this with anyone in her life. She wanted him inside her. She wished she were able to crawl into his skin and be a part of him. More than that, she wanted her soul to meld with his now and forever.

Somehow, this love for him had blindsided her. When she'd done everything her whole life to keep many people at arm's length—at a safe distance—an eighteenth-century pirate had, in one day, stripped her defenses with a subtlety that made her head spin and her heart ache.

She longed to close her eyes and ride him to gratification but she refused to allow herself that luxury. She wanted to watch him come undone inside her. She wanted to watch his expression as he succumbed to the ecstasy she was giving him.

She rode him harder, reveling in the feel of his hard pole stretching and filling her. Leaning forward to take more of him, she gasped when she felt the ridge of his head skidding against that perfectly sensitive little spot inside her and she had no choice but to surrender to her own body.

Her lashes fluttered and her breaths came in short, ragged gasps.

"Aye, witch! Ride my prick." His big, hot hands locked on her hips and he pumped furiously.

Everything inside her rushed downward and then uncoiled with the ferocity of a bullwhip. "I'm coming, Stede," she mewled, fighting to hold his searing gaze and projecting all her love and desire for him from her body to his.

Giving voice to an extremely male, guttural roar, he bucked up hard beneath her. One of her hands slammed the headboard as his hips arched upward to meet her, lifting her knees off the bed with the force of his body, his cock pulsating thickly inside her.

As soon as the waves of pleasure receded, Stede grasped her face in both hands, gazed into her eyes for a heart-stopping moment and then drew her down to claim her mouth.

Gwen had never experienced such a rush of despair and delight at the same time. She kissed him as if she would never kiss him again, taking her fill of his luscious mouth, plundering inside with her tongue, loving him with her lips.

I love you. Goddess, Stede, I am so in love with you.

What am I going to do without you?

She whimpered into his mouth and then he pushed her back just far enough to look into her eyes.

"It is time, Gwendolyn." His eyes were grave and dark.

Panic surged. *No! I won't let you go. I won't.*

I can't.

She started shaking.

His gaze dropped to where the little silver cross dangled near her collarbone. "I cannot express my gratitude at your strength." His eyes found hers. "Because I haven't any."

She didn't feel strong. She felt terrified.

* * * * *

Gwen watched as Stede kneeled in front of her, patting every inch of her body with a thirsty white towel. With his day-old stubble, he looked rugged and devastatingly handsome.

Roger had never gone a day without shaving but Gwen found something innately sexy and primal about Stede with a day's growth on his face. She brushed her hand across his jaw and he looked up, his eyes finding hers.

She raked her fingers through his damp hair, wishing, praying that something would happen so she could keep him.

He swallowed thickly. "How will it happen, Gwendolyn?"

Part of her didn't want to tell him. She shook her head.

"I need to know," he whispered as he came to his feet. "For your grandmother's sake."

Gwen inhaled sharply. Why had she ever begged her grandmother's spirit not to move on to the Other Side? It had been selfish of her. And now look what it had gotten her. Gwen knew this was all her fault.

"How, Gwendolyn? Will you have to kill me?"

A tear escaped her eye and coursed down her cheek. She nodded.

A muscle in his jaw clenched. "I see." His dark gaze scanned the bathroom and then he nodded with a sense of inevitability and determination.

"Stede—"

His smile was strained and taut. "We should dress ourselves."

"Stede—"

"Gwendolyn," he said sternly. He was shaking. "Get dressed." It was an order.

She tried to swallow against the lump in her throat but she couldn't. She stared for a moment before she whirled and, with trembling hands, went to her suitcase and pulled on a pair of jeans and a sleeveless navy blouse.

Morbidly drawn to the window like the gaze is to a corpse, Gwen drew back the curtains. The sun was low in the sky. It would be twilight soon.

Too soon.

Stede exited the bathroom stark naked. He looked so strong and so full of life Gwen couldn't imagine his spirit leaving the body. Not for any reason.

His gaze scanned the room and Gwen realized he was looking for his clothes. She rushed to Roger's suitcase and handed Stede a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. After he dressed, he rummaged through the suitcase and withdrew a black leather belt. He slid it through the belt loops and buckled it before putting the damp Chuck Taylors back on.

Gwen couldn't help but notice that he looked pale and preoccupied.

His gaze slid into hers and he opened his arms to her. She fled into them and sobbed against his chest.

"Don't cry, luv," he cooed into her hair. "I need you to listen to me."

She sniffled, shaking uncontrollably. Nausea welled and she swallowed the overwhelming urge to vomit.

"Are you listening?"

She managed a nod but how could she listen when she was about to lose him?

"When Blackbeard arrives, do whatever he says. He's a bully but he's not a madman. If you cooperate, he will take the chest and leave and when he does—"

Panic flooded her. "I can't do this, Stede! I can't."

"Listen," he said harshly. "When he leaves, you get in your car and get as far away from Charles Towne as you can."

"Why?"

"Just do it. Promise me you will do it."

She searched his eyes.

"Promise me," he repeated.

She nodded.

"Do not try to stop him when he leaves with the treasure."

She sucked in an uneven breath. "Stede, I can't do this."

His shoulders rose and dropped with a deep, resigned breath. He stared as if trying to memorize every facet of her face and then a little chuckle erupted from his throat. "I find it humorous and ironic that I am the pirate and yet you are the thief who has stolen my heart."

Gwen's knees turned to gelatin and she sagged against him. She would have fallen if it were not for his strong arms around her. "I love you," she said raggedly, feeling as if her insides were being rent from her body.

He raked her hair off her face and swept her tears away with the pad of his thumb. "It is almost twilight, Gwendolyn. Kiss me, once more." Even as he said the words, he slanted his head down to hers and claimed her mouth.

His kiss was so soft Gwen could scarcely believe a man as big and strong as Stede was capable of such tender sentiment. "Who lit this flame in us?" he whispered against her lips and then dragged her hard against him and kissed her thoroughly. Finally, he tore his mouth from hers and held her head against his chest. "I was a prisoner before I heard your voice and now, you've set me free."

With that, he drew away from her, his fingertips clinging to and then releasing hers as he backed away. "Go outside, Gwendolyn, and whatever happens, whatever you hear, don't come back for fifteen minutes. By then it will be twilight and Blackbeard will be here. Be firm with him but do not challenge him."

Gwen felt faint.

"Go," he ordered.

When she noticed his eyes were rimmed with tears, her breath left her lungs in a rush and she fled once more into his arms and kissed him for the last time as he lifted her bodily off her feet and walked her to the door.

He ended their kiss and opened the door while she protested vehemently. He set her outside and then, avoiding her tear-filled eyes, closed the door in her face.

Sobbing uncontrollably, Gwen sank to the concrete walk and wilted against the door. She drew her knees up to her chest and rocked back and forth. She could only imagine what Stede was doing inside the room and the idea of it made her sick.

Her stomach lurched and she twisted onto her knees and wretched. Why had she ever tried to bring Roger back? Why?

She hated herself. She hated Blackbeard.

She hated this feeling of vulnerability that was eating up her insides like a cancer.

As the sun dropped and darkness descended on the crepe myrtles and tulip trees in the courtyard, the wind picked up and Gwen's spine tingled with the dismal knowledge that Blackbeard's ghost had come for the body.

Chapter Ten

Had it been fifteen minutes? It felt like fifteen hours.

Gwen twisted the knob and opened the door. The room was deathly quiet and she would have thought it was empty but for the pervading sulfurous odor of brimstone.

Blackbeard stood with his legs braced wide, staring down at the chest. "How'd you ever trick Bonnet into giving it to you?"

Hatred for the oily dead pirate burned in her gut.

Blackbeard's gaze swept the room. "Speaking of the *gentleman pirate*, where is he?"

Gwen's heart skipped a beat. The bathroom door was closed. What had he done? Terror filled her as she rushed to the door and threw it open.

A scream tore from her throat. She gripped the doorjamb to keep from falling.

Stede's lifeless body dangled from a belt strapped to the steel shower curtain rod. His feet were only a foot or so off the floor and he could have easily stood on the side of the tub to save himself. Gwen raced to her suitcase and with trembling hands, withdrew the knife she'd used to trace the pentagram on his chest the day before.

She ignored Blackbeard's raucous laughter as she sped back to the bathroom and climbed onto the edge of the tub to saw through the belt.

Her hand brushed the body and she recoiled at the total lack of life energy there.

He was dead.

Stede was dead.

Avoiding looking at the protruding bluish tongue and wide-open eyes, she sliced into the leather. Her heart tightened into a rock-hard knot in her chest. He'd hanged himself so she wouldn't have to kill him. The only man she'd ever loved had done this—for her.

Grief overwhelmed her and she turned away and leaned against the cold tiles and sobbed.

"Gwennie?"

Gwen held her breath. That was her granny's voice. Opening her eyes, Gwen batted her tears away with the back of her fists. "Granny?"

Granny's spirit was transparent and luminous and Gwen reached out to touch her but her hand went straight through. She shook. "I can't do this, Granny."

But Granny smiled reassuringly. "Yes, you can. You're a witch."

Steeling herself, Gwen nodded and then turned back to cut the body down. The weight of the corpse brought it tumbling in a heap on the tile floor.

Gwen's hands trembled as she dropped and then drew up the shirt to once more scratch a pentagram into the chest.

She refused to succumb to her grief and instead focused on her grandmother and the incantation. "I invoke the Watchtowers of the Elements to assist me. The Earth and North for flesh, the Air and East for breath, Water and West for blood, and Fire and South for essence." Still, her voice cracked with emotion.

She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. *Damn you, Blackbeard.*

Angrily, she opened her hand and hissed as she sliced sideways across her lifeline. Once more, she chanted the spell as she had done only a day before, invoking the Egyptian Goddess Nekhbet and ordering Blackbeard's spirit into the body.

She pressed the bloody palm down hard on the pentagram. "I demand it!"

The body lay still.

"Get in there you bastard!" she yelled and stood to kick him hard in the ribs.

Her toes burned from the force but she ignored the pain. Right now she was too full of fury and spite.

Suddenly, the mouth opened and sucked in a strangled breath. The eyes popped open and Gwen instinctively backed toward the bathroom door.

Blackbeard?

Or had she miraculously brought Stede back?

Her heart pounded in her chest as he flipped over, struggling to breathe. He finally pushed himself up and ran his hands over his chest, his gaze running rampantly over his hands and body.

Gwen stared. Who was it?

She twisted her head. Blackbeard's ghost was gone and her grandmother was filled with blinding White Light. Gwen shielded her hand against it—and then it was suddenly gone, along with her grandmother.

Leaving her utterly alone with whoever was in Roger's body.

Anger and fear and anguish vied thickly in her veins. She whirled to face the man she'd brought back. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"Don't you know, lass?" His voice was low and breathy. Dangerous. A smile that did not reach his eyes stretched his lips as he stalked toward her. His presence seemed to lower the room temperature dramatically.

Yes, she knew.

Oh Goddess, why had Granny been ripped away from her so abruptly?

His eyes were hard and dark and the way he stared at her filled her mind with awful images of the artistic and peculiar ways he would torture her. The raw, red ring around his neck only added to his macabre appearance. "I could grease ye up and swallow ye whole," he murmured as if it were something he might say during foreplay.

Gwen shrank. Her spine found the unyielding doorjamb. "Stay away from me. Take the treasure and go."

"All in good time, lassie." His lurid gaze raked her body from head to toe and back up again, lingering in all the wrong spots.

Gwen shivered.

"Did yer gentleman pirate regale ye with tall tales about me?"

Gwen wished he had. She was hardly prepared for a man who took pleasure in the torment of others. "Take your treasure and leave," she repeated. Her eyes stung with fresh tears but she refused to shed them in front of this insufferable, sadistic pirate.

Stede's energy had made Roger's body attractive and refined. Blackbeard was anything but. His accent was much more pronounced and his voice was not much more than a guttural growl. He exuded the same sort of maniacal fascination as a cat toying with fresh prey.

"Aye witch, in good time," he repeated but Gwen fiercely held his gaze as he came toe-to-toe with her and chucked her under the chin. His leering smile was sickening. "Tell me, witch. How did it feel having that jib-flapper, Bonnet, root up yer tight, wee cunny knowing ye were sending him like a lamb to the slaughter?"

She flinched. She'd guessed he was cruel but what she hadn't grasped was that he was downright *evil*.

"Ye've got more gumption than I gave ye credit for having," he taunted. "Witch." He said the word derisively. "Yer not a *real* witch."

Her chest heaved with panicked breaths. She was determined to outthink him.

"Aye," he snarled. "Ye know it too, don't ye?"

It took every ounce of iron control Gwen possessed to stare him down. She hated him. Her fists ached to punch him but she knew that would never be enough. She wanted him dead for threatening her grandmother's soul—and for taking Stede from her.

"Ye hearkened ter witchcraft because ye was afeared o' the alternative."

Gwen was livid. The worst part was that there was an ounce of truth to his words.

She made an attempt to swallow but her mouth was too dry. And yet, as if drawn like a helpless moth to a flame, she asked, "What alternative?" She instantly regretted it.

Triumph crackled in his dark leer. He looked like a man who was about to cut into a succulent piece of steak. "Of bein' *powerless*." He dragged out the last word like a hissing snake.

"Control and power appeal ter ye, do they not, witch?"

He had no idea how much.

The stun gun lay on the bedside table. She'd never stunned anyone before but the news was full of accounts of people being killed by them. She swallowed thickly. But

then, those were high voltage law enforcement stun guns, not purse-sized mugger zappers.

Still, it would work well enough to keep him from raping her, which from the look in his red-rimmed eyes, was only one of his heinous intentions.

Gwen inched toward the bedside table.

He pursued her.

Heart rioting, she lunged and seized the stun gun, switched it to stun and jabbed his chest with the weapon.

At once, he jerked wildly and dropped to his knees.

Breathless, Gwen held the stunner in both hands and readied herself to stick him again.

Blackbeard's expression was thunderous as he shot to his feet. Gwen dodged his first swipe and attempted to stun him again but a swift wave of his arm knocked the gun from her hand. He had her pinned against the bed before she could take her next breath. She screamed and thrashed beneath him but he was too strong.

"I'll show ye power, witch! I'll show ye what a real man can do," he said, reaching between them to wrestle with the zipper on his pants. "I've got a raging hard in me breeches that's just aching to crawl up yer cranny."

Terror consumed her but he grabbed her and roughly held her wrists with one hand while the weight of his body pinned her legs down.

"Get off me, you pig!" she wailed.

"Take the treasure and leave, Teach!" a familiar voice boomed behind Blackbeard.

Blackbeard released her and spun.

Gwen gaped.

Standing between Blackbeard and the open bathroom door was her gentleman pirate.

Instantly Gwen knew why he'd earned that nickname, for Stede Bonnet was the epitome of an early-eighteenth-century gentleman from head to toe.

She gasped as her gaze swept the nearly transparent sight of him, from his long, curled black wig to his silver-buckled pumps.

Her heart soared at the sight of him only to come hurtling back down around her with sickening force. Why hadn't he gone to the Other Side? The soul collectors would be hungry and Stede's soul would be in danger as long as he remained on the earth plane.

Blackbeard let out a hearty but humorless laugh. "Aye, Bonnet, I see ye've hearkened back to yer dandified self."

Stede's eyes narrowed menacingly. He jerked his head at the sea chest. "Take the plunder and leave the witch be, Teach."

"Or what?" Blackbeard shrugged.

"She put your black soul in the body," Stede argued. "Is that not enough for you?"

"Aye, but the witch gouged me with some infernal poker."

Stede's lips eased into a conspiratorial smile. "Teach, I spent a day in that body. I saw what the world has come to in three hundred years. 'Tis a fascinating place with many *willing* women, especially for a handsome man of means." He gestured once more toward the treasure chest. "Why would you bother with a woman who doesn't want you when you can have all of Charles Towne groveling at your feet?"

Blackbeard sighed audibly with exasperation.

Stede's face tightened. "She gave you life. She offers you the treasure. You made a *gentleman's agreement* with her. Has it ever been said that Blackbeard is not a man of his word?"

A terrible silence descended.

Gwen's mind raced. If her grandmother was safe and Stede's spirit had not yet crossed over, then she could kill Blackbeard and reinstall Stede in the body. If Blackbeard walked out that door, he might never come back. Why was Stede trying to get rid of him?

"Yer a killjoy, Bonnet. Ye always were," Blackbeard muttered dismally as he strode across the room, heaved up the treasure chest and started toward the door.

Gwen shot an angry glance at Stede. "But —"

Stede raised a hand to silence her as Blackbeard pulled open the door. Holding the treasure, he bowed his head in Gwen's direction. The gesture was mocking. "'Twas my pleasure, witch."

And with that, he — and Roger's body — disappeared into the Charleston night.

"Lock the door," Stede ordered and without thinking, Gwen scrambled off the bed and bolted the door.

Her lungs heaving with deep breaths, she whirled and leaned against the solid wood for support. Anger flared, overriding her joy at seeing him. "Why did you do that? Why'd you chase him away when I could have killed him and put you back in the body?"

Stede stared. "I had to."

"Why?" She was so near breaking down she thought she would succumb to a hysterical bout of crying at any moment.

Anger mottled his slightly transparent face. "I warned you not to cross him."

Gwen inhaled. "Why did you do it, Stede?" She fought to push the ugly image of the body twisting and turning in the shower that reared in her thoughts.

"I couldn't very well let *you* do it."

"But now your soul is trapped because of what you did!" *Just like Granny's had been.* Guilt surged.

"I couldn't let you face Blackbeard alone."

"I could have handled him."

"The hell you say!" Stede's voice reverberated in the room.

Gwen cringed.

"The instant I was gone, you attempted to use that...that thing on him," Stede said, pointing at the stun gun on the floor. "He would have raped you, Gwendolyn, and then he would have killed you."

"Why didn't you tell me that priceless piece of information before you...before you..." She sank until her bottom was flat on the floor and her knees were under her chin. She fought to tamp down the hideous images of him hanging from the shower rod.

Stede started toward her. Her heart ran wild at the sight of him. His scarlet brocade coat fanned out from the waist and rustled stiffly as he walked. Underneath was an elaborately embroidered canary vest, the front of which hung down nearly as long as his coat. His breeches were a pale bone color and hugged his sinewy legs like a second skin. Silk stockings clung enticingly to his calves, which bulged from the lift of the heels of his black pumps.

He wasn't quite as tall as Roger but his bone structure had a much finer appearance. His preternatural aura projected an air of utter confidence and elegance that thinly masked a ribald romanticism that made Gwen's insides clench.

It occurred to her that he had only been thirty-one when he'd died and although his face showed no signs of age, his eyes reflected maturity far beyond his years.

He didn't stop until the toes of his shoes were only inches from her bare feet. "I didn't want to frighten you." The apology was evident in his tone.

She swallowed hard. Emotions rioted within her. Unable to discern whether she was angry or afraid or heartbroken, she stared. "Why'd you encourage him to leave? I could have put you back in his body."

Stede blew out a breath. "Because, my dear—I switched the treasure."

"You *what*?"

"When we were at that dry goods store, I nicked the false treasure we saw while you were securing our goods. I placed it in the chest when we returned this afternoon—the real booty is in the hold of your car."

Gwen's lips parted. She was stunned. "Why?"

"I realized it must be a fortune by your standards and I wanted you to be taken care of." One lace-cuff-adorned hand found his hip. "That's why I told you to leave here."

Gwen tried to absorb it all. "What?"

"You need to leave, *now*."

The refined accent was the same although his voice was slightly different in timbre, but Gwen couldn't get used to looking at him dressed as an eighteenth-century gentleman.

One thing she knew for certain, however—she was not about to leave Charleston with Blackbeard running amok in Roger’s body, not when she could put Stede back in it.

He reached out to help her up but when she tried to take his hand, her fingers passed through his energy like water. Trembling, Gwen stood. Her horrified gaze locked with Stede’s. “I can’t touch you.”

She reached out to touch his chest but once more, her hand moved through him. Panic flooded her. “Did you feel that? Tell me you felt that!” she wailed.

Stede looked stricken.

He hadn’t felt it.

Gwen squeezed her eyes shut. Her friend, Amy, had been able to touch the ghost who’d haunted her. Why couldn’t she touch Stede?

Every fiber of her being made her long to break down and give in to the misery that was eating her up alive. Her mind reeled with the events of the past twenty-four hours. She’d fallen in love with a man who’d been dead for nearly three hundred years. He’d given up his life to save her grandmother and Gwen realized he’d put his soul at risk in order to protect her.

And in an attempt to ensure her future, he’d even stolen fake doubloons from a Wal-Mart!

“Gwendolyn.” His voice was but a whisper. “You need to leave. Blackbeard *will* return when he realizes the treasure isn’t real.”

Her eyes snapped open. That was it. That was how she would lure Blackbeard—and the body—back here.

But this time, she’d be ready for him.

“What are you thinking?” Stede asked.

Gwen studied his face. In Roger’s body he’d been ruggedly handsome but as the ghost of an eighteenth-century gentleman pirate, he was beguilingly gorgeous, his out-and-out masculinity a striking contrast to his embroidered velvet, brocade, silk and ruffles. His eyes were the same color blue as Roger’s but the hair visible beneath the edge of his wig was darker, blacker. His eyebrows were less brooding and one was arched dramatically as he awaited an answer.

“He’ll be coming back.” She suddenly felt brighter.

“Yes. You must leave now.”

Gwen shook her head.

Stede’s forehead furrowed. “Do you not comprehend what’s happening? He will most certainly murder you for trying to trick him and I will be helpless to stop him.”

“That’s just a risk I’ll have to take,” she said as she brushed past him and then bent to pick up the stun gun. She eyed the knife on the bathroom floor.

Apparently, Stede saw where she was looking. "No!" he wailed. "Are you mad, Gwendolyn?"

"I'm *damn* mad," she said as she stalked into the bathroom and snapped up the knife.

Stede traced her steps as he strode toward her. He blocked the bathroom door with his presence. "Get in your car and leave this instant!"

Chest heaving, Gwen stared. She felt a surge of determination and strength. For once, she felt as if she were the one in the driver's seat – and she liked it.

This was the power Blackbeard had so boorishly reminded her she didn't have.

"Gwendolyn, he's off kilter. He will *kill* you!"

Her gaze clashed with his. "There are worse things than being separated from you for eternity." At once, she regretted her barefaced admission. Telling him she loved him when she thought she'd never see him again had been safe. Admitting she would risk anything to be with him—one way or another—was something else. Something dangerous.

She'd never risked her heart with anyone before and she suddenly felt as if she were on a slippery slope with nothing to hold on to.

The tempest in his eyes died down. "I know, luv. But perhaps this is just not meant to be."

Gwen shook her head. "I refuse to accept that." She clutched the knife in one hand and the stun gun in the other. "You said you heard my voice. You said I called you to me."

He nodded.

"Do you remember what I said?"

He stared.

Gwen continued. "Because *I* do."

His ghostly face colored. "Of course I remember," he told her. "If there be a perfect match for me, Goddess, hear my plea. The perfect one who is meant to be shall find his way home to me. In perfect love and perfect lust, I send this out with all my trust. This spell will guide us to unite, free will remains with us tonight."

"Spells, incantations or any appeal to the Other Side are always taken very literally," she explained.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that you *couldn't* have entered the body if the calling weren't true—you are my *soul mate*." Her heart froze in her chest. What if he laughed at her? What if he told her that her feelings were stupid? She'd be crushed. He hadn't exactly told her he loved her.

He looked as if she'd stabbed him with the knife. A muscle at the corner of his mouth twitched. "I'm not the kind of man a woman should love, Gwendolyn."

"But you *are* the type of man who could love a woman." She'd stepped onto a flimsy limb but her gaze was unwavering.

A self-deprecating simper claimed his perfectly shaped lips. "Too much," he murmured. "Far too much." His wide cuff rustled as he lifted his hand to caress her cheek.

Gwen's heart swelled. She closed her eyes as the energy brushed her face. It wasn't a human touch but she felt it, gentle as a feather and as imperceptible as a sigh.

He took a step toward her and she tingled from head to toe with his life force. "I wish I could really touch you." His voice was soft and utterly seductive.

She opened her eyes. A relentless tide of desire crested over her. "How long do you think it will be before Blackbeard realizes he's been tricked?"

"The first place he will go is a grog house."

"A grog house?"

"A place to imbibe spirits. Is there such an establishment nearby?" He came closer until there was only an inch or so between them.

"I think I saw a few on King Street," Gwen said, vibrating with his energy. His masculinity was overwhelming and she longed to launch herself into his hard embrace. The knowledge that she couldn't turned her stomach.

"If he tries to pass the false coins for tender, what will the proprietor do?" Stede asked.

"Throw him out, most likely," she said. "But if he causes a scene, they'll call the police to arrest him."

"Let's suppose he'll be smart enough not to cause a...a scene, as you say. How long would it take him to get there and back?" The jeweled buttons on his vest glimmered in the light.

She swallowed. "Longer than I intend to wait." Her gaze swept upward to his.

"Oh no!" He shook his head. "I'll not have you traipsing about the streets of Charles Towne in the evening looking for a rogue like Blackbeard!"

Gwen balked. She crossed her arms over her chest and lifted her chin defiantly. "And I'll not have him running off with *your* body."

"Gwendolyn, I forbid it!"

"Forbid it?" A sarcastic laugh burst from her lips.

"I cannot protect you like this." He gestured toward his ethereal body.

Gwen's gaze clung to his for a moment and then she shoved the stun gun into her jeans pocket. After laying the knife at the foot of the bed, she began to rummage through the metaphysical assortment in her suitcase.

Stede's hands found his hips. "What are you doing?"

"A binding spell."

"A *what*?"

Gwen withdrew a white candle and a cone of patchouli incense from her bag. "A binding spell. In this case, to bind the will of Blackbeard to prevent him from harming me."

"A spell?" Stede inhaled and blew the breath out briskly. "Gwendolyn, shouldn't we be formulating a strategy to thwart—"

Gwen interrupted. "Are you saying magic is foolish?" She pinned him with a hard stare.

"Well...I..." Stede stammered.

"Didn't magic bring *you* to me?"

"Well...yes."

"Then magic will keep Blackbeard from harming us."

Stede merely arched an eyebrow and gestured grandly with his lace-cuffed hand. "Then, by all means, my lovely lady witch..."

Smugly, Gwen snatched a plastic sandwich bag from her luggage to go along with her other goodies. After lighting the candle and the incense, she closed her eyes and forced herself to take several calming breaths. Thankfully, Stede was silent while she meditated and invoked her spirit guide of protection—her Gatekeeper. After that, she withdrew a scrap of paper from her purse and took up her pen. With resolved intent, she wrote Blackbeard's name on it and stuck it in the sandwich bag.

She knew Stede was watching dubiously but she continued as if he weren't there, reciting the words she knew well. "I freeze Blackbeard to be bound by this spell!" As she said his name, she crossed it off on the paper with a forceful stroke of her pen. "Unable to cause further harm to Stede or to me!"

Focusing her energy, she channeled it toward Blackbeard. "As I will, so mote it be!"

She glanced at Stede before she rummaged through her bag for the last item she needed to complete the spell. "Shit! I didn't bring any coffee grounds."

"Can you use those?" He glanced at the two-cup inn coffeemaker on the corner table.

"Yes! Duh! You're a godsend."

Stede shrugged but the little smile that claimed his lips made Gwen's heart skip a beat.

Darting to the coffeemaker, she opened the filter to find the damp grounds from the coffee she'd made earlier that morning. She pinched some of the fragrant grounds and put them in her sandwich bag along with the paper with Blackbeard's crossed-out name.

After that, she closed the bag and stuck the whole mess in the ice bucket. "There. That should take care of him."

"Luv," Stede said carefully. "While I do not doubt your power as a witch...Blackbeard will still be a formidable foe. I strongly advise you not to pursue him."

Gwen's mind grappled with the thought of going after Blackbeard as she stared at Stede. Did she really have a choice? She could stun him...but on the streets of Charleston? That wouldn't work.

And they still had nearly twenty-four hours before the next twilight.

Still, she couldn't risk the possibility that he might forgo the treasure altogether and escape with the body. She had to find him but Charleston was large enough for him to disappear without a trace. They could spend all night searching every bar and brothel in the city and Gwen knew she needed strong magic to draw Blackbeard back.

Now that he was magically bound, however, she felt much better about her prospects. But she knew her powers weren't enough to ensure success. She needed someone else who was versed in the ways of magic to assist her.

Someone like Mama Zulie.

* * * * *

"Saints, chile!" Mama Zulie stopped packing up her sweet-grass baskets and swiveled around to pin Gwen with the bluish eyeball. "I don' wan' no trouble with dat ghost!"

"Please, Mama Zulie! I need your help." The Charleston Market was desolate and Gwen's voice echoed through the shadowed passageway.

Mama Zulie straightened to her full height of four-feet-eleven inches. "I done warned you 'bout dis and you no more listened to me dan a goat!"

Gwen begged the grizzled old woman with her eyes. "I can't let Blackbeard keep the body. I know I was foolish but my granny was—"

Mama Zulie stabbed a finger into Gwen's breastbone. "I tol' you, yo' grummah knew she din' have no business on de earth plane! She knowed dat. You cannot have it all, missy."

Gwen's heart sank. Mama Zulie was right. She *had* wanted it all. That was what got her into this mess in the first place. She'd wanted Roger's love so much she'd cast a love spell on him that had instead brought her Stede Bonnet. Then, she'd wanted to save her grandmother and have Stede too.

But was it so wrong to want it all?

She refused to believe it was. There was only one way to handle this. "Mama Zulie, I respect you but I'm going to do this with or without you. If there is anything—anything at all—you can do to help me, to help Stede, I would appreciate it."

Mama Zulie's gaze drifted over Gwen's shoulder to where Gwen knew Stede was standing. Although his apparition had faded when he left the White Point Gardens area, she'd known he was still with her.

"Dat haint's soul is in danger long as he stays on de earth plane."

"Please help us. I can pay you," Gwen said desperately.

Mama Zulie laughed outright. "I ain't in dis fo' de money, chile. And neither is you." A broad smile stretched across her mocha-colored face, revealing her gleaming gold tooth. "We is in it fo' love."

Gwen felt Stede's energy warm behind her. He drew closer and she almost felt as if he were embracing her. "I do love him," she blurted to Mama Zulie. "I would do anything to have him back."

"Good," Mama Zulie said with an emphatic nod of her head. "Coz dat's what it gon' to take."

* * * * *

Gwen trembled as she followed Mama Zulie's waddling figure through a wrought-iron gate into the darkened cemetery.

"Close dat gate, chile," Mama Zulie said without looking back.

The hinges let out an ominous groan as Gwen pushed the gate closed. When the latch caught with a clang, she jumped. Charleston's cemeteries were beautiful respites in a busy little city during the day. At night, it was a different story. Ancient crepe myrtles loomed over leaning tombstones. Spanish moss dripping from thick oaks swayed in the sultry breeze.

Gwen had followed her granny into graveyards at night to gather dew from a loved one's grave or to bind a wayward spirit who had been haunting a house, but Gwen had never accompanied a voodoo priestess to cast a spell of revenge.

"Dis way," Zulie said as she weaved with surprising dexterity through the weathered grave markers.

"Stede?" Gwen whispered. "Are you still with me."

Aye, luv, said a voice in Gwen's head.

Although the energy around her bristled with tension, she found it comforting. Stepping over the exposed root of a live oak, she joined Mama Zulie who was already kneeling on the ground beside a highly decorated tombstone. Beads and talismans hung from the corners. Symbols were painted on it in what Gwen suspected was blood. The earth around the grave had been turned up, as if others had buried objects or tributes here recently.

"Dis here was my mother. She was de mos' powerful voodoo priestess in Chawlston when she was alibe and she still be mighty powerful on de spirit plane too."

Gwen's gaze scanned the name on the stone. *Dr. Cleo Payroux*. Under her dates, her epitaph read, *I have done actions desired by men and those which are commanded by the gods*.

Zulie closed her eyes as a look of bliss overcame her careworn features and then she patted the grave and nodded. After a moment of tribute, she opened her eyes and took up the leather pouch she wore strapped around her thick waist like a belt. Gwen watched as she removed a plastic bag with white powder inside. Zulie kneeled over the grave and began to scratch a symbol in the earth with her hand while muttering

something in a language Gwen didn't understand. Zulie then took a pinch of the white powder and blew it over the symbol.

Inhaling deeply, the old woman crossed herself as she chanted, "*Linsah, mawu, vovo-lin-v-hwe, hevio-zo.*"

Mama Zulie then called in her spirits in the same foreign language, reciting the names of her gods three times each before withdrawing a small white candle from her bag. She lit it and stuck it firmly in the middle of the symbol she'd drawn.

Gwen's gaze scanned the thick growth of leaves overhead as the branches began to sway in a stout breeze. Chills ran up and down her arms as Mama Zulie recited a spell and cast droplets of holy water around the edges of the symbol from a tiny glass vial.

"Now you gots to dig a hole right here," Zulie said, pointing a thick finger at where she'd drawn an arrow coming down from her voodoo symbol.

Gwen scooted closer as Zulie handed her a small spade from her bag. As Gwen began to dig, the griot produced an assortment of other items from the pouch, one of which was an empty Dole pineapple can. Mama Zulie caught Gwen's dubious glance at the can. "It has to be Dole or dis spell won' work."

In all of Gwen's spell work, she'd never used an empty can for anything. *Magical product placement*, she thought, stifling a hysterical giggle.

Mama Zulie placed a bit of taro root in the can. "I need something dat belonged to yo' husband."

Gwen sucked in a breath and then remembered she had Roger's wallet in her purse. Setting the spade aside, she snatched up her purse and rummaged through it until she found the wallet. She emptied the contents and handed the empty, monogrammed wallet to Mama Zulie.

"Dats perfeck," Mama Zulie said. "If you have a photo, de spell will work faster."

The business cards she'd taken from the wallet had Roger's picture on them. Gwen excitement ratcheted up a notch as she added one to the pineapple can.

"Put dis in de hole." Mama Zulie handed Gwen the can, which Gwen then placed in the little depression she'd dug in Cleo Payroux's grave.

"Now as you fill de hole back up, you got to say a spell to yo' gods." Mama Zulie turned her palms up to the sky for emphasis.

"Anything?"

Zulie nodded. "Anytin' you tink will bring him back."

Gwen's mind photographically raced back over her grimoire for a spell and all she could come up with was a love spell. "Beautiful Goddess, hear my prayer! Gods of fire, burn my desire times three and bring Roger's body back to me!" She looked to Mama Zulie, who was nodding her approval.

"Dat should do it, chile."

Gwen exhaled the breath she'd been holding after she tamped down the last of the earth over the pineapple can.

"He'p dis ol' lady git up off dis ground." Mama Zulie held up her hands. Gwen took them in hers and braced herself as the heavy old voodooienne labored to her feet.

Mama Zulie dusted her hands off on her muumuu and then removed a necklace bearing a little brown cloth bag tied shut with a string. "You gon' need dis mo' dan me."

The griot slipped what Gwen knew was a talisman of protection over her head. "Thank you, Mama Zulie. Thank you for everything."

Mama Zulie nodded and smiled and the bluish eye took on an eerie glint in the moonlight. "Now chile—what you gon' do when dat vexed thang come back?"

* * * * *

Trembling, Blackbeard crouched in an alley clutching the heavy chest against his belly. His heart pounded like a thundering cannon in his chest and his head swam.

Ears ringing with an indistinct voice, he shrank against the stucco wall as another one of those strange-wheeled rigs rolled by. *Gods of fire, burn my desire times three and bring Roger's body back to me...*

He shook his head as if he could wrest loose the haunting voice but still, it was there, pulling, drawing.

Damn that infernal Bonnet! And damn the wily witch!

Revenge burned hot through his veins. *Bring Roger's body back to me...*

Instinctively, he knew he would have to return and murder the witch to get the damnable voices to stop.

Losing his balance, he careened against the wall and with a fierce shake of his fist, cursed Stede Bonnet aloud. This was *his* fault. The rascal had cozened him into leaving and now there was no way he'd be able to find his way back through this cursed labyrinth of a town.

His gaze darted around the cobblestone alley. Charles Towne was different. Very different. He didn't recognize a blasted thing. *Burn my desire...*

He opened the chest and in the odd glow from the street lamp above, he saw the glimmer of gold. A smile stretched his lips. At least Bonnet and the witch hadn't befooled him on that account.

Perhaps a drink would ease this madness—and then, he would hunt the witch down and kill her.

Chapter Eleven

The second Gwen opened the door to her room, Stede's spirit appeared. He stared openly and Gwen's breath caught when she glimpsed the fire smoldering in his eyes.

Desire for him welled and she was crushed when she realized she couldn't even embrace him.

As if he could read the plea in her eyes, he moved to her, lowered her head and tentatively brushed his phantom lips across hers. Gwen's lashes fluttered shut as she felt an unmistakable pressure and a gentle frisson of what she could only describe as chi—life energy.

All of a sudden, he pulled away. "No, Gwendolyn."

When her eyes focused she saw him standing a few feet away, his back turned to her. He was trembling and his hands were balled into tight fists.

"Stede?"

He glared over his shoulder at her. "We were foolish getting that old woman to cast a spell to bring Blackbeard back here. I am begging you to leave!"

But for the first time in over twenty-four hours—even longer—Gwen felt calm. She shook her head. "I'm not leaving here, Stede. I'm not leaving you and I'm sure as hell not going to give up the one chance I have at putting you back in Roger's body."

Stede gave voice to a throaty growl as he raked off his curled wig and shed his scarlet coat.

Gwen inhaled sharply as his own wealth of dark, wavy hair—slightly longer than chin length—tumbled around his face. His sapphire gaze held hers. "Gwendolyn, I beseech you to see yourself safe. Blackbeard is not a man to be reckoned with."

"Stede—" she protested.

"On one of the ships he plundered there was a passenger who was wearing a rather remarkable diamond ring. Teach asked him to give it up and when he refused, Teach took the diamond—and the man's finger." He made a motion as if he were chopping something.

Gwen shuddered.

"After he married his fourteenth wife—a sixteen-year-old girl, mind you—he rogered the very devil out of her all night and then offered her to any crewmember willing to pay."

Gwen searched Stede's eyes. He was sincere and she knew he wasn't just making up these stories to frighten her.

"He was killed in the most heinous manner just short of a month before I was hanged." A lock of his dark hair tumbled across his forehead.

"What happened to him?" Her hands ached to run through that wealth of waves, to push the errant strand off his face.

He shifted from one foot to the other. "His sloop was engaged in a sea battle with Lieutenant Robert Maynard. Teach had holed up in his hideaway at Ocracoke Island in the Carolinas and there, Maynard engaged him in battle. When Blackbeard's men boarded Maynard's sloop, Maynard fought him in one of the bloodiest sea battles of the age. I heard that Maynard actually sliced Blackbeard's head nearly clean off but Blackbeard held it on by the beard and continued to fight." He gestured, pretending to grab a phantom beard at the chin.

Gwen listened, eyes wide.

His pupils darkened. "After being stabbed more than twenty times and shot five, Blackbeard finally died. His head was then cut off and spiked on the bowsprit of Maynard's sloop as a trophy." Stede's voice dropped nearly an octave and he assumed the look of a camp counselor telling ghost stories around a bonfire. "They say when the decapitated body was thrown overboard it swam four laps around Blackbeard's sloop before finally sinking into the ocean."

Gwen scoffed. "That's a tall tale."

"Is it?"

"You're just trying to scare me into leaving."

His eyebrow shot up. "Blackbeard is a man who relishes torturing others. Believe me, he is also the kind of man who possesses cunning insight into the precise thing that will hurt a person the most."

Gwen trembled as she thought of her grandmother. Blackbeard had certainly known exactly what would get to her—what would torment her. A cold chill swept her body. Because he'd given her no choice, she'd even been prepared to sacrifice the man she loved.

But now Granny was safe. And Stede...

Well, unless she killed Blackbeard, she could never have Stede.

She took a deep breath. "I realize he could kill me. That's a risk I'm willing to take."

"Not for me."

Gwen's heart turned over hard.

"Besides," he whispered. "There are far worse things than death in this world."

Anger and heartache rose in Gwen like a rogue wave. Tears stung her eyes. "And what could be worse than losing you?" Her voice sounded strangled. A lump welled in her throat and she shook violently. "I can't even touch you. What more can he take from me?"

Stede stared.

But perhaps there *was* something more. Although she had Stede's spirit with her, what if Blackbeard could somehow summon the soul collectors again? She felt as if she and Stede would never be safe.

The reassurance she'd felt in the presence of Stede's spirit had been an illusion. There was no way he could protect her – not as long as he had her heart.

He reached out to touch her hair and although she could see his hand, she couldn't feel anything more than a wisp of cool air.

"Luv, I cannot pretend to know how or why you care so much for me," he said, his voice low and rich as soft velvet. "But if you do, then get in your car and drive away from this place – from him."

But Gwen was resolved. Inside, she felt more confident and stronger than she'd ever felt in her life. This time, she was not a child at the mercy of others. She was a woman who knew what she wanted, who was willing to fight and, yes, even die for it. She shook her head. "No, Stede. Because I love you, I'm going to stay right here and wait for Blackbeard and when he comes, I'll be ready for him."

* * * * *

Blackbeard's nostrils flared as he detected the scent of ale. He smacked his lips. His mouth was dry and his throat was parched. A pint of grog would shut that witch's voice out of his head. "Aye," he muttered to himself as he peered at a strangely glowing sign over a door.

Club Pantheon.

A strange name, to be sure, but everything in Charles Towne was strange. Since he was toting a chest filled with valuable doubloons, he debated whether to go in or straight back to murder the witch—but his thirst was maddening and Charles Towne no longer looked to be a town full of yobs and rowdies. He was tough enough to hold his own with this crowd.

A heavily painted woman, nearly as tall as he was, sashayed toward the door. Her gaze raked him in blatant appraisal.

He figured her for a courtesan because no respectable woman would dare enter such a place. "Madam, be this a grog house?"

A velvety laugh erupted from her throat. One of her hands found her hip. "Why honey, I have no idea what a grog house is but if that's what you want it to be, then I'll personally make it a grog house." She held out a shiny pink-gloved hand.

Blackbeard gaped and then took it.

She pursed her glossy lips. "Well, I don't guess you're what they call Continental," she said as she sidled up against him and led him into the grog house.

The door opened and he nearly bolted at the sight of harsh flashing lights and heart-thumping music. At least, he thought it was music.

And at least Bonnet was right about willing women but a fuck would be far more satisfying *after* killing that spiteful witch.

The place was dark but he could see several very striking, mostly tall wenches, drinking and dancing. Several heads turned in his direction as he made his way to the bar.

A sense of excitement flooded him. He liked this modern world. He liked it very much.

The barkeep sized him up as he approached and hoisted the chest onto the bar.

"What you got there?" The wiry blond man winked. "Bootay?"

Burn my desire times three...

Blackbeard's skin crawled with heat. "Aye, I can pay," he said impatiently. "Pour me up a draft and do it now!"

He opened the chest just far enough to withdraw a gold doubloon. It felt strangely light in his hand but perhaps it was just the difference in the body he remembered and this hearty one. "How many pints will this get me?"

The barkeep took it, looked it over and then chuckled. "I like you. You're funny."

Blackbeard didn't feel funny and this swab and the prickling heat on the back of his neck were quickly setting him on edge. He didn't like the way the little git looked at him—with the lust of a woman in his eye. "Listen up, ye wee Molly," Blackbeard said, resisting the urge to reach across the bar and throttle the boy. "Is me money no good here?"

"Not unless you're playing Monopoly."

"Don't think ter tangle with me, ye miscreant."

"I really find the whole 'argh' pirate thingy so last year," he said and batted his thick blond eyelashes. "If you want a drink, honey, you'll have to show me some real money."

"Are ye sayin' this ain't real?" His guts looped like a mooring knot.

The sodomite struck a pose and gaped.

The sweltering heat had become unbearable and now it crept into Blackbeard's face from his neck. He'd been duped. Bonnet and the witch had gulled him again—and had cast some manner of spell against him. His nerves twitched inside and he thought he would howl from the frustration it caused him.

He twisted his head so that his neck cracked with a satisfying pop. His now-knowing gaze swept over the innards of the bar and he made an attempt to swallow against the dryness in his throat as realization sank to his toes.

This was a damned Molly house.

He'd wandered into a bar filled with wretches and sodomites.

Those women weren't women at all!

He shook with murderous rage, which only caused the inner fire to burn hotter. His fists clenched so hard his knuckles cracked. He ached to hit something—someone. To kill.

The she-male in the pink swaggered toward him and he landed a punch right in the miscreant's face before he swept the chest and its sham contents across the bar.

Voices warbled around him but he pushed through the sea of sodomites and stalked toward the door.

The witch was going to pay.

She was going to pay—and then she was going to die.

* * * * *

Stede joined Gwen where she sat thinking on the bed. He propped one booted foot on the bedrail. "The best thing to do," he sighed, "if you truly intend to go through with this crazy scheme, would be to lure him back here and hold him until twilight."

Gwen agreed. She glanced at the clock. She had discarded several flawed plans since returning from the graveyard—and argued incessantly with Stede—and now it was nearly dawn. Twilight was still a long time away. "But how?" Anticipation nagged at her insides. Blackbeard could burst through that door at any moment and all she had for protection was a stun gun, her magic and the talisman Mama Zulie had given her.

"You'll need some rope," Stede said.

"There's no way he's going to sit still while I tie him up."

"True," Stede mused. "And he's going to be angry by the time he makes it back here."

A new rush of terror rippled through her at the thought of facing an angry Blackbeard. *Think. You've got to think!*

But that was impossible with the dashing spirit of Stede Bonnet sitting next to her on the bed—and recalling the tales Stede had told her about Blackbeard continuing to fight with his head half cut off. Right now, holding him captive seemed about as daunting as killing a horror movie villain.

"Will your binding spell hold him in any way?" Stede asked.

Gwen sighed. "Yes. What I really need is a potion but getting the right ingredients and then actually getting him to drink it would be tricky."

Stede's gaze dropped to the rug.

"Unless I made it look like I was temporarily gone and left an open liquor bottle spiked with a Mickey."

Stede's eyebrow arched in askance.

"A drug. Something to knock him out."

A muscle in Stede's jaw clenched as he mulled it over. "I think perhaps that would be the best thing to do."

Roger had a prescription for sleeping pills in his shaving kit. She formulated the plan aloud. "Blackbeard's got no money. No ID. And you said he imbibes."

Stede laughed. The sound was disarming and entirely seductive. "Imbibed, my lovely witch, is not a fitting enough description."

But then, Stede's charming smile faded. "He can become quite the devil when besotted. I know of one instance where he and several of his crew took drunk in the hold of his sloop. He set the brimstone pots on fire just to see who could withstand the fumes the longest."

Gwen wet her dry lips with her tongue. "Blackbeard stayed the longest?"

Stede gave a grim nod.

Inhaling, Gwen rose and searched through Roger's shaving kit until she found a little brown bottle with only three sleeping pills inside.

"Will that do the trick?" Stede asked.

She gnawed her bottom lip. Truthfully, she didn't know. She'd never taken a sleeping aid in her life and although only one seemed to render Roger stupid, she didn't know how they'd react on Blackbeard, especially mixed with alcohol. Surely three combined with alcohol would be enough to knock him out long enough to tie him up.

Roger's neckties and shoestrings would work well enough to tie the bastard but disappointment surged when she remembered she and Stede had drunk all the champagne—aside from the glass she'd thrown at Roger. A twinge of guilt about that incident niggled her.

Still, he'd been an insufferable ass about the champagne *only* being Korbel—

Her lips parted. That was it! The owners of the inn probably kept several bottles in the kitchen.

Her veins surging with adrenaline, she rushed toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Stede demanded.

"The kitchen to get more champagne." Gwen reached for the doorknob.

Her heart in the throat, Gwen twisted the knob and opened the door. She half expected Blackbeard to come reeling around the corner as she skulked across the cobblestones toward the lobby and kitchen area. She'd never been so terrified in her life but it wasn't the fact that Blackbeard could kill her that was foremost in her racing mind.

What if she couldn't put Stede back in the body?

What if Mama Zulie's spell didn't work and Blackbeard decided to let her keep the treasure and never come back?

"He'll be back," Stede said as if he could read her thoughts.

"How do you know?" she whispered as she pulled open the tinted glass door to the lobby.

"Because I know Edward Teach," Stede said. "And I also know the power of that voodoo woman. I could feel it." His apparition shuddered.

The sun was just beginning to crest and no one was at the phone desk. Gwen tiptoed around the corner and spied the kitchen. A massive stainless refrigerator sat humming and unattended and just waiting to be raided. It couldn't be any easier.

But just as she started toward the fridge, a voice stopped her in her tracks. "Good morning, Mrs. Wyse."

Gwen whirled to find the inn manager. She cleared her throat and willed her heart rate to return to normal. "Hello," she said, forcing a smile. "It's Mike, isn't it?" Her gaze darted around the lobby for Stede's ghost but he was nowhere to be seen.

Mike pushed his wire-frame glasses higher on his nose. "How can I help you?" Medium height and wiry, he reminded Gwen of Hank Azaria. His accent betrayed he was originally from parts well north of Charleston.

She shuffled her shoes on the tile floor. "You know, Mike, that champagne was just so...so, well, romantic, I was hoping to surprise my husband with a Mimosa this morning. Would you mind putting another bottle on my tab?"

"I'm afraid I won't do that, Mrs. Wyse," he said—but then a lopsided grin claimed his thin lips. "But I will most certainly give you another."

Some of the tension melted out of Gwen. "Thank you," she breathed and had to resist the temptation to jump up and down as he removed a chilled bottle from the refrigerator.

"How is the second honeymoon coming along?"

"Just wonderful," she managed. "I've fallen in love all over again."

Mike smiled and walked her to the door.

Gwen's gaze scanned the courtyard. Was Blackbeard out there lurking in the shadows? Goddess, she hoped Stede was keeping watch.

When Mike opened the door, Gwen repeated her thanks and then walked out into the balmy Charleston dawn.

"There's no sign of him."

She gasped at the sudden sound of Stede's voice as he materialized right beside her.

"Hurry, Gwendolyn," he said and she ran back to the room.

At least there's one perk to having a ghost around, she thought as she opened the door and then sped inside.

Frantic, she peeled the gold foil off the stopper and then wedged the bottle between her legs as she tugged and pulled on the plastic top. The blister on left her hand from digging the treasure popped and she yelped and shook out her hand. She sank onto the side of the bed and, determined, gripped the bottle and gritted her teeth as she thumbed the stopper out.

Gwen turned the bottle up and gulped a couple swallows of the champagne. A little false courage wouldn't hurt. Scrambling off the bed, she darted into the bathroom and emptied the contents of the brown medicine bottle onto the vanity. She snatched a can of hairspray and used it to crush the pills.

With her fingers, she raked the powder into a straight line and then carefully swept it over the edge of the vanity and into the mouth of the bottle.

"You should leave the bottle here and go outside to hide," Stede said insistently.

That sounded like a damn good plan. Gripping the neck of the bottle, she carried it to the little cedar chest at the foot of the bed and sat it prominently on top. "That should be tempting enough for the bastard."

"Yes. Now get your reticule and keys and make haste!"

Good idea. Gwen seized her purse, twisted the doorknob and jerked open the door.

"Well, if it isn't my dear lady witch," Blackbeard said with a scowl.

Chapter Twelve

A gasp tore from Gwen's throat.

Blackbeard's look was murderous.

Stede made an attempt to come between them but Blackbeard pushed right through him and shoved Gwen hard with both hands.

The breath was knocked out of her even before she hit the floor. Her purse flew against the wall and its contents spilled all over the rug. The stun gun. The knife. Her keys. Dazed and fighting desperately to keep her wits about her, she crab-crawled backward until her head slammed against the cherry chifforobe.

Blackbeard stormed toward her and stood, hands on hips, legs braced wide. He tugged at the collar of his shirt. "What have ye done to me treasure, witch?"

"She doesn't have it, Teach!" Stede interjected.

Gwen's pulse pounded as Blackbeard shot a nasty glare in Stede's direction. He then hauled Gwen up by the front of her shirt and curled a big hand around her throat. She cried out, too frightened to move or fight. Wide-eyed, she stared at Stede as she kicked and struggled. But she was no match for Blackbeard's strength.

"Tell me what manner of spell she put on me, Bonnet, or I'll kill her slow."

Gwen tried to swallow. She fought down the stampeding panic. She needed to conserve her energy, to keep her wits and to get him to drink the champagne.

Stede's gaze darted from hers to Blackbeard's. "Wouldn't you rather know about the treasure?"

Blackbeard pulled Gwen up against his chest hard. "I be more concerned about this fire blazing in me belly."

Gwen fought to breathe as his fingers tightened around her throat.

"I took your treasure," Stede said, trying to divert Blackbeard's attention.

"Ye always thought yer superior intellect would keep ye from hangin'."

Gwen winced at the metallic tang of his breath.

"Ye even thought ye'd outwitted me!"

Stede shook his head.

"Aye, ye did. I can see it in yer eyes," Blackbeard growled. "Ye were a bottom-rate pirate, Bonnet, and from what I hear, ye weren't much of a husband ter yer wife or father ter yer bairns."

Gwen squeaked when Blackbeard's hand cruelly cupped her breast.

"Did ye think ter start fresh with the witch? Did ye think ye'd overcome murderin' yer own child?"

Stede's ghostly face became mottled with rage.

"And do ye think by savin' the witch, ye've somehow redeemed yer wicked self for killin' the babe?"

Stede was obviously stricken and Gwen could stand it no longer. "I have the treasure!" she gasped. "And I'm the one who put the spell on you."

Blackbeard's death-grip loosened and Gwen felt a tiny bit of tension melt out of her body.

"It's in my car. I'll take you to it if you'll just let go of my neck."

At once, she was free. She stumbled, almost losing her footing as her hand flew to the place he'd held her and she rubbed the soreness away as she gulped air. Desperately, her gaze swept the room. The knife and stun gun lay just out of reach but seemed a million miles away.

At least the champagne still sat on the cedar chest but she had to be smart about this. Blackbeard was far too intelligent to fall for a ruse like "aren't you thirsty" or "drink this".

Her knees felt weak as she moved toward the cedar chest. "I feel faint," she said truthfully as she plopped down on the chest right next to the bottle. Hopefully, the pirate bastard would see the champagne and drink it without encouragement.

She glanced at Stede, who looked sick and angry. Thank Goddess he was smart enough to keep quiet for the moment.

Steeling herself, she lifted her gaze to Blackbeard's. The malice in his eyes made her blood run cold. "The treasure is in my car," she said.

"And where be this...*car*?"

"Outside parked on the street," she told him. "Just let me catch my breath and I'll take you to it." Anything to stall him. Anything to get him to drink.

Drink, damn you!

If she ever wished she had the power of persuasion, she wished she had it now.

Blackbeard started toward her and she summoned every ounce of iron control she possessed not to avert her gaze toward the bottle. *Don't look at it. Don't draw attention to it.*

She forced herself to endure his dark eyes—and then repressed the sudden surge of triumph when his gaze slid to the bottle and brightened. Holding her breath, she chanced a glance at Stede as Blackbeard reached for the champagne.

"Ah, tell me this be spirits," he said and smacked his lips. "I'm dyin' of thirst."

"You have no time for that," Stede said.

"Ye'll not be telling me what I have time fer and what I don't, Bonnet." With that, he lifted the bottle and drank heartily.

Gwen had to clamp her lips together to keep from sighing her relief.

"Aye, that's better." Blackbeard wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Where's this car, witch?"

"Just outside," she said. "But it's locked and I'll need my keys."

Stede stealthily moved across the room to obscure the view of the knife and stun gun with his ethereal body.

Blackbeard nudged Gwen with the butt of the bottle. "Then by all means, get yer...keys."

Her heart slammed so hard against her rib cage, she was certain it was audible. Warily, she moved toward her keys which lay just under the edge of a Queen Anne wing chair.

Knowing Blackbeard was behind her guzzling the champagne did little to calm her nerves. Thick tension bound her gaze to Stede's as she kneeled and scooped up the keys.

"After all we've been through, Bonnet," Blackbeard railed. "Ye tried ter trick me."

Stede stared.

Gwen had never seen him like this. The thinly masked fear and helplessness in Stede's expression terrified her.

"I would have done the same," Blackbeard continued. "But that does little to lessen the fact ye've broken me heart, Bonnet." He grinned mirthlessly.

Still wagging the bottle, Blackbeard took a stride toward Gwen and reached out with his free hand, snatching her long hair. "And that's why I have to take what ye prize the most, Bonnet."

A cry tore from Gwen's throat as he yanked hard on her hair.

"She had nothing to do with it!" Stede railed.

"Aye, Bonnet. She has *everything* ter do with it." He chugged the champagne and then loudly sighed his satisfaction. "Ye see, since yer dead, there ain't much I can take from ye. But I've seen the lust in yer eyes fer the witch and dare I say—more? Could it be love, Major?"

His face tightened with rage, Stede lunged at him, swinging frantically while Blackbeard laughed heartily.

Gwen felt as if her whole being were drawing up inside, as if she were disappearing into herself. The strong probability she was going to die sank like a stone in her stomach and she prayed to the Goddess that Blackbeard would soon succumb to the concoction of champagne and sleeping pills.

"Blast it, Bonnet. Ye've done gone and made a fool o' yerself over a foolish woman." Blackbeard's arm locked around Gwen and his fingers dug into her biceps. "Let's take a trip ter that thing ye call a car, witch."

Her mind raced crazily as they moved in tandem out the door and down the cobblestone walk toward the car. The morning was deathly quiet. She'd hoped someone would be out here to help her. What if she ran?

But that wouldn't work. If she got away, she would forfeit the body and lose the chance of putting Stede back in it. She had no choice but to play along and hope the pills would work their magic.

Hope surged when he turned up the bottle again. Gwen glanced at Stede's spirit, which already hovered near the car.

As they approached the Honda, she clicked a button on the key remote and the trunk popped open. The early morning sun illuminated the scattered coins and jewels.

Blackbeard's face brightened and he hugged Gwen closely. "Bonnet thought ter send ye off with my booty." He twisted his gaze in Stede's direction. "Now ye'll pay fer yer backstabbin' ways, ye filthy bilge rat."

Hauling Gwen up on her tiptoes, he walked her hurriedly back toward the room. She stumbled but his powerful arm held her up as he shoved her through the door. Panic flooded her. Thoughts scrambling, she considered going for the knife but she was too terrified he'd use it on her and she was not about to damage Roger's body beyond repair.

Blackbeard closed the door behind him and then finished off the contents of the bottle before tossing it aside.

Horror struck as she watched him fumbling with the button on his trousers. When the zipper stumped him and he looked down to see how it worked, he stumbled a step backward.

It was working! The champagne and sleeping pills were working!

But would it render him stupid enough to knock him out? It couldn't happen soon enough.

"What the devil is this infernal thing?" he demanded, fingering the zipper. His speech was becoming slurred.

He staggered into a shelf beside the door. The curios on it scattered across the floor. In an attempt to focus, he turned his gaze on Gwen. He tried to point but his index finger wavered recklessly. "What kind of demonic spell have ye cursed me with, witch?"

Tottering toward her, he lunged clumsily, falling to his knees. Gwen darted out of his grasp but he was between her and the door—the only way out of the room.

Her heart pounded and she had to remind herself to grab the knife. But when she turned, Blackbeard caught her around the ankle and dragged her down to the floor with him. Gwen landed with a hard thud, her fingertips barely grazing the knife as Blackbeard twisted her onto her back and crawled heavily on top of her. His breath reeked of champagne as he made an attempt to kiss her.

Twisting her head to the side, she sank within herself as his hands fumbled between their bodies, groping and reaching. *Please, please pass out! Please Goddess!*

When he rocked his hips against her and she felt his flaccid penis through his jeans, she had to fight the wave of nausea that welled in her throat. Disgusted, her gaze locked with Stede's and the sheer look of determination and anger in his eyes frightened her.

With effort, she tried to push Blackbeard off—but a sudden burst of clarity flared in his eyes and his fingers curled around her slender neck. Gwen gasped as her horror-stricken gaze flew to from his bloodshot eyes to Stede and then, once more, she was swirling into the abyss of her own consciousness.

Chapter Thirteen

Out of the corner of her eye, Gwen was aware of Stede's image fading into a gray mist. The spirit swirled toward her and then Gwen suddenly felt as if the breath had been knocked out of her lungs. Her consciousness spiraled inward and looked out of her own eyes as if looking through a tunnel. Oddly, she could feel Stede within her, his soul, his thoughts.

Protect her...

Terrified...

Love her more than myself...

Gwen felt like a passenger in her own body as she tried to assimilate his thoughts and then she watched her hands as sudden strength permeated her limbs and hurtled Blackbeard off her.

Panting, she struggled to sit, feeling as if she were being yanked forward as Stede's spirit vacated her body. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. She knew she should get up but she could only gape at Stede, sprawled beside her. His thoughts still echoed in her head. *Love her more than myself...*

And worse, his apparition wavered, slipping in and out like static reception on a television.

Alarm welled and then eddied away as his spirit assumed its previous transparent state. She could still feel the tingle of his energy and she wanted nothing more than to have him come back inside her but she knew she had to move.

Blackbeard wallowed on the floor making feeble attempts to push himself up. He made one last futile grasp at Gwen but she easily dodged his hand. An insensible, garbled string of words spilled thickly from his lips and then his head landed with a heavy thud on the Oriental rug.

"Poisoned me!" he gasped and then his head lolled to the side.

Gwen sighed her relief and poked at him with her foot. He didn't move. He didn't even moan. She just hoped she hadn't inadvertently killed him. "It worked, Stede," she breathed. "He's out."

"Tie him up!" Stede ordered as he wearily pushed himself up into a sitting position.

She scrambled to her feet and dumped Roger's suitcase, dismayed to find only one necktie. "I'll have to use his shoestrings too."

"And the belts."

Even though Blackbeard was unconscious, rolling him over, pulling his hands behind his back and tying him was a lot harder than Gwen had ever imagined. Still

terribly transparent, Stede oversaw her progress with pointers to loop here and tie tighter there. His knowledge of boating knots was invaluable but his voice crackled like bad cell phone reception and his image wavered in and out.

She had the sinking feeling that channeling through her had somehow weakening his energy.

After she secured the knot around Blackbeard's ankles, she looked up from her position on the floor at Stede. "Whatever you did," she said, gesturing with her hands, "that whole jumping in me thing. Don't do it again."

"He wou—ha—killed you." His voice faded in and out with the image of his apparition.

She pushed herself up. "I need you here with me." She raked her hair off her face and moved tiredly to the bed. Her whole body ached. Her heart ached.

He followed her to the bed, his image becoming a bit stronger as he reached out to caress her cheek. "If this goes badly... If you can't put me back in the body..." He grappled for the right words. "I want to stay with you—even as a ghost."

Her heart skipped a beat. She stared.

A tinge of color infused Stede's spirit as he sank onto the bed beside her, his blue eyes warm with emotion. "Gwendolyn, if you will have me, I want to remain with you until...until you say otherwise."

Her mind wrapped around the possibility and she stubbornly tried to work out the logistics of being involved with a ghost. All her knowledge of Wicca swelled to the forefront and screamed at her she would have to help his spirit cross over and into the Light. It was only right. It would be selfish—and dangerous—to keep him.

Mama Zulie had warned her as well.

But she couldn't imagine life without him. Not now. Not ever.

Before she realized it, tears were spilling unchecked down her cheeks.

Stede slipped an ethereal arm around her. "You're breaking my heart," he said so softly she was barely able to make out the words. "I can't even console you. I can't brush away your tears."

Common sense told her she was being ridiculous but her heart told her something altogether different.

"Lie down, Gwendolyn. You're tired." He tried his best to soothe her.

"No." She shook her head and sniffed back more tears.

She debated calling her psychic friend, Amy, and asking her why Stede's energy wavered after he'd channeled through her but Gwen knew intuitively the act of entering her body had sapped his energy.

It was downright dangerous and she knew those soul collectors—the ones that didn't get her granny—would still be lurking and waiting, hungry for a soul. Stede's soul. She swallowed thickly.

"Hush, now," he cooed. His mouth was against her ear and she shivered from head to toe with his energy. "Be still. Blackbeard should be sodden for a while and we can't perform the ritual until twilight. Put your head down and rest. I'll keep watch." His voice was hypnotic and she wanted so badly just to close her eyes and feel safe.

Just for little while...

Curling into a ball, she snuggled against one of the goose-down pillows and closed her eyes.

She didn't intend to fall asleep and when unconsciousness swept over her, she jerked and sat up.

"Be still," Stede whispered. "Everything will be all right."

As she settled back down with his energy to comfort her, she felt numb and heavy. Her thoughts were thick and scattered, grasping at the events of the day before like flashes from her most wonderful dreams—and her worst nightmares.

And then, that almost palpable energy she recognized as Stede's spirit nestled around her and she reluctantly drifted on a stormy sea of sleep.

* * * * *

Gwen arched back toward the probing fingers which delved between her legs. She lay on her side with her lover behind her. *Stede?* She moaned as a finger worked its way through her pussy lips, finding her hole and then wriggling inside.

It felt so real. So wonderfully real.

She had the sensation of being lulled. Rocked. The rhythmic creaking and groaning of wood sounded strange but comforting.

Inhaling deeply, she breathed in the scent of the sea and some sort of exotic, spicy incense—and something purely, utterly masculine.

Where was she?

And who was this dream lover who so expertly fingered her eager pussy?

Heavy with sleep, she shifted her legs under the soft, cool covers, pulling one knee higher to give him better access.

A warm mouth teased the back of her neck and Gwen writhed with pure pleasure. The soft vibration of his chuckle only enhanced her delight and then she felt her lover shift down in the bed, drawing her onto her back.

Her thighs opened willingly as he nudged his face between them, kissing the soft, sensitive skin on each leg, working his way higher and higher until she felt the tip of his tongue sweep her clit.

Gwen gasped and reached, threading the fingers of both hands into his long, thick hair.

The hot mouth descended and she felt his rigid tongue push into her hole. She spread for him, mewling when his tongue slid downward over the hypersensitive

bridge between her pussy and her anus, down to circle that aperture as well, teasing the rim and then nudging just inside only to dart out and repeat the maddening dance again and again.

Pushing up with her heels, she lifted her hips off the bed and rocked toward the insistent, inquisitive mouth as she slid her hand down to massage her swollen clit.

One strong arm suddenly braced her hips as a slippery index finger breached the tight opening of her anus and pushed inside until she felt his hand pressed hard against her body.

A surge of liquid desire pooled in her pussy and she shuddered as his tongue lapped it up. The combined sensation of his finger, his mouth and her hand left her reeling and reaching and climbing until orgasmic waves crashed over and through her.

Her whole body still hummed as he withdrew his finger and kissed his way up her tummy to lave the hollow between her breasts and then tickle each nipple with the tip of his tongue. His mouth brushed the tiny silver cross just below the dip of her collarbone and then locked on the curve of her neck.

Gwen inhaled and fresh desire spiraled downward to meet the nudging head of his cock.

Weaving her fingers into her lover's thick hair, she opened her eyes to look her fill at the man who seemed to know just how to please her.

Her lips parted with surprise as her breath caught in her throat.

As a spirit, Stede Bonnet was beguiling. As a flesh and blood man, he was rakishly handsome.

"Am I dreaming?" she murmured.

"Don't think, luv," he said as he reached between them to guide his cock into her hungry channel. "Just feel." His words were nothing more than a breath as his midnight blue eyes mirrored the bliss of his thick, hard shaft sliding all the way up inside her cunt.

He lowered his head to run his tongue along the shell of her ear and Gwen's passion-filled gaze swept the confines of what she could only describe as a ship's cabin. A slightly bowed, thickly beamed wooden ceiling arched above them. Two candles flickered in lamps undulating from wrought-iron brackets on the walls. The bed was made of heavy, dark teak with luxurious sheets and an embroidered scarlet overlay.

The idea flitted through her mind that Blackbeard had murdered her in her sleep and she had somehow awakened in heaven, but all her thoughts were erased when Stede lifted his head and a one-sided smile claimed his lips. His hair cascaded forward in gentle, dark waves and Gwen couldn't resist the urge to sweep it behind his ear.

"Where are we?" she asked, drawing her silky calf up the hard flesh and bone of his leg.

He rocked his hips slowly but with determination. "The *Revenge*, luv."

"But how?"

"Don't think or you'll break the spell, my lovely lady witch." He dipped his head to graze her lips with his.

When he moaned into her mouth, all coherent thought fled. Gwen's hands slid up his hard, strong arms, roaming over his broad back to enjoy the tensing and releasing of his muscles as he continued his gentle assault between her legs.

He felt *so good*. The scent of him was a mixture of crisp ocean brine and a masculine fragrance belonging only to him. His hair fell forward, tickling her cheeks as his mouth moved once more to hers. Gwen gave voice to an indistinct cry as his lips coaxed her to open so his tongue could slip between them, mating with hers, exploring her mouth, mimicking the rhythm of his hips.

In Roger's body, he'd made her crazy with physical desire. But in his own body, he *made love* to her.

She wept with joy as he continued to kiss her. Although she realized this was nothing more than an illusion—a dream—Blackbeard and all her other cares and troubles seemed so far away and insignificant as long as she was safe in Stede's arms.

When he kissed her tears and then propped on his elbows to look into her eyes, Gwen's heart turned over. Hard.

"What's the matter, luv?" The concern in his gaze made her melt.

Unable to speak, she merely shook her head and then lifted her mouth to his so he would kiss her again. One of his hands wound into her hair and he cradled her head in his palm as he plundered her mouth again.

Gwen's moan set him aflame and she actually felt a ripple of heat run beneath her hand, down the length of his spine before he began to buck, his groin slapping hers as he thrust inside her. His mouth moved to her forehead and she felt his hot breath fan her face as his pace increased. She clutched his hard buttocks and urged him to fuck her.

Arching beneath him, she pressed her breasts against his chest, reveling in the feel of his heat and the wispy hairs brushing her distended nipples.

When she entwined her calves around his hips, he slowed his movements. His whole body tensed. Gwen whimpered and writhed, desperately wanting that pounding, slapping sex again. "Why'd you stop?"

"Still...be still, luv." His voice was ragged.

"Stede?" She moved beneath him.

His face tightened impossibly. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Gwendolyn, *please* be still." He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "I was about to lose myself in you."

Gwen's forehead furrowed.

His face relaxed and that sexy one-sided grin curled his lips again. "I didn't want to spill my seed in you—yet."

She smiled. "No. Not yet."

He kissed the tip of her nose playfully and then rolled, pulling her on top of him. Gwen loved the way his massive shaft filled her in this position. Her gaze found his and a wave of heat unfurled throughout her body. He had the sculpted features of a GQ model. A hint of dark stubble shadowed his chiseled jaw. His nose was straight, his cheekbones sharp and angular, softened by the mass of dark waves of his hair that cascaded across the white pillowslip. His eyes held a mischievous sparkle that took her breath away. Neither thin nor thick, his lips were sensuous and glistened with her kisses.

She found him stunningly attractive and could hardly believe a man like him would ever be interested in a woman like her.

Warming, his gaze followed his hands as they moved over her arms, caressed her breasts and swept her long black hair behind her shoulders to render her completely bare to him.

He pinched one taut nipple between his thumb and forefinger and Gwen gasped from the utter pleasure of it. Ripples of desire shot straight to her pussy and she rocked against him, bracing her hands on his broad chest for balance as she lifted her ass and then sank back down, taking his cock all the way up her tight, wet channel. She shuddered and repeated the ride up and back down again, all the while watching his eyes, watching the muscles in his face contract as she loved him.

"Pinch my nipple," she begged. "Harder. Yes! That's it! Oh..."

His other hand cupped her ass and guided her up and down while he kneaded that nipple just to the edge of pain. But Gwen wanted more.

"Harder!" she cried, covering his hand with her own.

That last white-hot tweak was all it took to send her rushing headlong into a mind-shattering orgasm. Bearing down on his cock, her hand flew to her clit and she worked it furiously, wresting every spasm, every ounce of bliss she could from his body and from hers.

Collapsing on his chest, she breathed in the scent of him, still feeling his cock pulsating thickly inside her. He hadn't come yet.

She arched off his cock and kissed her way down his flat stomach. His eyes glittered like sapphires as he drew another pillow under his head in order to watch.

"God, you're bewitching with my cock in your mouth," he said as he swept her hair into one hand and roped it over his fingers.

Gwen ran her tongue from the plum-colored tip down along the dark vein that ran the length of his shaft all the way to the balls. The heady scent of male and sex wafted around her and she breathed it in, loving it, loving him—and the taste of her own sweet cum on his cock. After laving his scrotum, she worked her way back up to suck him between her lips.

He muttered some antiquated expression she didn't understand while his hand tightened around her hair to guide her head up and down. Gwen had to curl her fingers around the base of his cock to keep him from thrusting it too far down her throat. Her

lips made a popping sound as they slipped off the head before parting to engulf him again.

Cutting her gaze at his face, she gauged his expression. His eyes were squeezed shut. His mouth formed a long, taut line and his whole body grew rigid as he bit back a groan and erupted in her mouth.

Gwen voiced her pleasure as she sucked the last drop of cream from his cock. A violent shudder racked his body as her tongue darted around the underside of his head.

"I'm still hard, luv."

The raw, just-came look in his eyes sent tentacles of fresh desire seeping into Gwen's core.

"Get on your knees for me."

It wasn't a request and the idea of him taking her like that made her wet all over again but there was some unidentifiable spark in his eye that gave her cause to be a little nervous.

Trembling, she complied.

"Spread your legs, luv."

She swallowed, still tasting his tingling cum as she spread her knees. With her head down on the mattress, she knew he could see *everything* and the idea of it made her pulse pound heavily.

Her breath stilled in her chest as she felt his heat sidle up behind her. A spasm made her pussy clench when his fingers brushed her nether lips.

"Yer quim is all glistening and wet, Gwendolyn." His fingers explored her with the lightness of a feather.

She bit her bottom lip. Why was he teasing her? She wanted his fingers and his cock up her hole — now. "Put your fingers in my pussy," she groaned.

"Like this?" One finger worked its way into her and wriggled around.

Gwen melted on his hand. "Yes!"

"And this?" He inserted another finger.

She thought she would die. It felt so good.

And then the fingers disappeared. Her breath froze and she stiffened but then she felt the tip of his finger coating her anus with her cream. "Stede," she moaned instinctively.

"Are you protesting? You're not in any position to tell me no, luv." His voice was silky and thoroughly seductive.

"I want you there," she mewled.

She tensed as his finger delved between her juicy lips again to draw more of her cum up to her anus.

Her pulse ran hot, throbbing in her clit. Boldly, she glanced over her shoulder. The sight of her ass in the air with him kneeling behind her, stroking her with one hand and

his rock-hard cock with the other, made her heart run wild. A little grin tugged at the corners of her mouth.

"I think you've come to like my prick up your arse," he said as he bent over her.

She felt his hot breath fan her backside and moaned when his warm, wet tongue swept around her anus. She'd never thought that could feel so good. But it did and she found herself spreading and arching, begging him with her body language. When the tip of his tongue teased inside her there, she cried out.

She wanted more. She wanted his cock there again.

She squirmed on his tongue and brought her hands underneath her to knead her own nipples.

Once more, his finger delved up her pussy and Gwen shuddered, clenching around him. The intense combination made her feel intoxicated.

Her legs trembled as she felt his finger slide from her pussy over the junction between and then into her tight anus.

Gwen's fingers tightened on her nipples and she whimpered against the coverlet.

"My finger is in your arse, luv."

"Yes!" she moaned.

Just like her pussy, she could tell it was slick and wet in there and when he fingered her she thought she'd never felt anything so good. Her clit pulsed but she knew if she touched it, she'd come immediately.

She wanted this to last.

She wanted to come hard with his cock burrowed to the hilt in her ass.

On her knees, she felt completely at his mercy and she reveled in the feeling of giving him full control of her pleasure.

"Do you still want it?"

She groaned.

"Tell me, luv."

She bucked like an animal in heat when she felt him shift and recognized the rigid head of his penis prodding her cunt and then sliding up to replace his fingers in her ass. Although he held still, she pushed back, crying out when the thick tip breached the opening and then sighing her pleasure when he slid inch by bone-hard inch all the way inside her.

His scrotum nuzzled against her pussy and she spread her legs impossibly wider to give his body better access.

When he began to gently move, she gritted her teeth and rode the thin line between pleasure and pain, loving every mind-numbing moment.

"I believe my little witch likes a good ass priggling."

Liquid lust spread like wildfire in her body, settling deep in her pussy and ass.

"Do you want it slow?" he asked. "Like this?" He braced her hips and rocked up slowly. "Or would you prefer it harder?"

"Hard," she muttered.

"Once more, luv?"

He was playing with her again.

"Hard!" she said with more conviction.

Her body was open and relaxed for him now and by Goddess, she wanted to be fucked. "Dammit, I said *hard*!"

His hands tightened and he gave her what she wanted. His balls licked at her pussy lips as he impaled her ass, thrusting time and time again and just when Gwen was on the verge of begging him to stop, she felt the promise of an intense orgasm building and then reaching a plateau, only to increase once more.

The rush came over her in one crushing wave and she cried out as the relentless pleasure continued to render her mindless.

"Come with me, Stede!" she heard herself say and then she felt two more thrusts before his fingers dug into her flesh and she heard an animalistic groan tearing from his throat.

Without quite knowing how she got there, she became aware of the warmth of the covers and the heat of his big body as she snuggled her head against his chest. Her body felt heavy with bliss and here, in Stede's arms, everything seemed far away and she felt safe and loved and protected.

She could almost forget that a fight for her life and Stede's soul loomed on the horizon.

Almost.

Chapter Fourteen

Gwen's eyes snapped open and with a gasp she bolted upright in the bed.

"Easy, luv." Stede's spirit was instantly at her side.

She raked her hair off her face as reality came flooding back in a sickening wave.

Blackbeard snored obliviously on the floor. A pool of drool dribbled from his gaping mouth.

Nothing had changed. She was still going to have to perform the necromancy spell again at twilight – after she killed Blackbeard.

"I must have been dreaming," she said softly.

One corner of Stede's sensuous mouth eased into a grin. "Aye. That you were."

Her gaze caught his and for a moment, she thought it might not have been a dream at all. But how...

Light peeping through the curtains snapped her mind abruptly back to the present and she scanned the room for a clock. "What time is it?"

"Just after four."

"Holy shit." She rubbed her face with her hands. "I must have been on some other plane."

"You could definitely say that," Stede teased.

Vivid flashes from her dream flitted through her thoughts and Gwen realized she had indeed been on some astral plane with Stede. "How'd you do that?" she asked, suddenly flooded with love for him.

"Desire is an entity unto itself, luv."

Every fiber of her being yearned to slip into that world once more with him but the stark reality of what she had to do prevented it. Her gaze was drawn to Blackbeard.

Stede's ethereal energy caused her spine to tingle. "You don't have to go through with this."

She swallowed thickly. Yes, she did. She couldn't allow Blackbeard to run amok in Roger's body. What if he killed someone? The man was pure evil. Gwen could see it in his sharklike eyes.

When Stede had been in that body, it had seemed filled with love and compassion. With Blackbeard in it, the personality seemed like a man beyond redemption, a psychopathic, unconscionable murderer.

Besides, she desperately wanted Stede to have the body back. The Universe had sent him to her. He had answered her call.

Mama Zulie had been right – about everything.

"I told you once before, killing a man is not as easy as you think, Gwendolyn."

She shivered.

"I will...come into your body and do it for you."

"No!" she wailed. "You can't do that anymore. It weakens your energy. What if you aren't strong enough to come back into Roger's body?"

"At least you will be safe."

She searched his eyes. "I don't want to live without you."

"Gwendolyn –"

"Don't patronize me, Stede! You, more than anyone, know what it's like to feel responsible for someone's death. You know what it is to survive when the one you love has died." A lump rose in her throat. "My mind's made up."

Her gaze swiveled to where Blackbeard slept. "I'm going to kill that bastard – and then I'm going to bring you back."

She could feel Stede's gaze on her and she turned her gaze to him once more.

"I had hoped I could persuade you not to do this," he said. "But I would never condemn you to the existence I've endured."

In the riot of emotions, she grasped for a shard of calm but then Stede asked, "How do you plan to kill him?"

Her whole body quaked. She bit her bottom lip as her gaze scanned the room and stopped on one of the thick feather pillows beside her. "I could smother him."

Stede crossed his arms over his chest. "You're aware that's not a quick death." It wasn't a question.

She took a deep breath and blew it out, all the while envisioning straddling Blackbeard and holding a pillow over his face while he wriggled and bucked underneath her – while she took his life. She shuddered. "I'm aware."

What if the sleeping pills wore off and he was awake when it was time to kill him?

Her stomach seized into a knot. She simply had to steel herself to do it – and a quick glance at the clock told her she had four full hours to prepare.

* * * * *

Blackbeard had hardly moved.

It was almost twilight.

Gwen sat silently on the bed next to Stede's spirit. After discussing their options, they had decided smothering Blackbeard would indeed be the easiest way to kill him. At least then Gwen wouldn't have to look at his face as he died. Tension knotted her stomach at the prospect. Although she knew Blackbeard inhabited the body, he was still *Roger*. Killing him was not going to be easy – even for Stede.

The past few hours had been both the longest and shortest of her life. She knew that if this didn't work she might lose Stede and although he was holding her hand, she couldn't feel anything but a slight frisson of energy.

Aside from the danger to her pirate lover, Gwen knew there were other complications. If she couldn't bring a spirit—any spirit—into the body, she risked being arrested for murder. But even that wouldn't matter if she didn't have Stede.

How could she have lost her heart so thoroughly in such a short time?

She looked at him, from his black-booted ankles crossed at the foot of the bed up to where his light breeches strained against the thickness of his thighs. Although his leg touched hers, she could not feel the warmth, the hardness or the life he'd radiated when he'd been in Roger's body.

Their entwined hands rested on her thigh. His hand dwarfed hers and the fact that his was transparent and hers was not looked dismally strange to Gwen.

"Stede?"

"Yes, luv?"

"If something happens, if this doesn't go according to plan and I can't put you back in the body, will you promise to wait for me on the Other Side?"

"It will go as planned."

"But what if it doesn't?" She pursed her lips and tried to control the welling hysteria inside her.

"I told you, Gwendolyn. I'll remain with you in spirit until you decide otherwise."

She inhaled. This was going to be harder—much harder—than she ever thought possible. "That's just it. I can't *keep* you."

His black brows descended menacingly. "Why not?"

"Didn't you hear what Mama Zulie said?"

He tensed. "I don't give a damn what—"

Gwen interrupted. "She's right, Stede. Now that you've seen the soul collectors—those beings Blackbeard summoned to take my grandmother's soul—they'll be after you. They prey on earthbound spirits and once they take your soul...there's no getting it back short of a miracle from the Universe."

"I didn't encounter them before," he bickered.

"But you had no connection to the living," she explained. "I'm not certain about this but if a spirit needs the help of a living person to cross to the Other Side, then it would make sense a connection to a living person could *endanger* a spirit's soul as well. That's why Blackbeard was able to use the soul collectors against my grandmother. She was still connected to me."

"Connected to you?"

A lump hardened in her throat, making it difficult to talk. She nodded. "When she...passed...I begged her not to leave me." A tear spilled down her cheek.

"And you feel guilty for what happened to her." His voice was riddled with accusation.

Her stomach turned a somersault. Biting her bottom lip hard, she nodded. "That's why I need you to let me help you find the Light if...if this doesn't work."

He stared for a long time. "It's nearly twilight," he finally snapped.

Gwen's gaze shot to Stede's.

"You don't want me?" He folded his arms over his chest and glared.

She sucked in a breath as she twisted around on the bed, sitting on her knees to face him. She could tolerate anything but his anger. "I didn't mean that I don't want you with me, Stede. I do! More than anything."

"We haven't the time to discuss it." A muscle in his cheek twitched.

"I only want to keep you safe."

"I understand completely," he said curtly. "You're going to need your knife."

Frustration rose. "Stede..." She clenched her fists at her sides to keep from trying to touch him. Tears poured unchecked down her cheeks. "Don't be angry with me. I don't want to lose you the way I nearly lost my grandmother."

The hardness in his eyes suddenly softened. "Gwendolyn, you're beautiful. You're young. You're full of...of *life*. I know you deserve a man, a living man who can touch you and feel you. I can't give you that and I know it's selfish but I don't want to leave you—I love you." He exhaled slowly, his mouth turning up in a soft smile. "I *love* you."

Gwen's heart pumped in frantic bursts. She searched his eyes.

The smile faded. "Don't ever make me leave you."

She ached to touch him, to kiss him—but she couldn't. Sorrow permeated her soul. She couldn't make him that promise, either.

She glanced at Blackbeard. Renewed resolve flooded her. She had to do this. Her gaze flew to the clock. It was nearly eight. It was time.

Trembling, she lifted the pillow off the bed and stared at it. Nausea roiled. Taking a life was against all her Wiccan values. *And ye harm none, do as ye will*.

Stede apparently noticed her hesitation. "Let me do this. Let me inside you."

She shook her head vehemently. "No. I started this. I must be the one to finish it."

"Gwendolyn—" he began but she cut him off.

"I can't let you accept the karma for this." Her gaze found his and clung.

"I shouldn't let *you* accept it," he said, his voice feather soft. "You're going to kill a man—for my sake."

Love for him blazed like fire through her veins and settled like molten lead in her heart. "You deserve the body. Like Mama Zulie said, you're the one who answered my call. As far as I'm concerned, Blackbeard stole the body from you." She clutched the pillow to her chest. "When you came into my body," she said, gesturing toward her chest, "I *felt* you. Your emotions. Your need to protect me. Your love for me." In an

uncharacteristic gesture of timidity, she lowered her lashes. "And I don't ever want to lose that feeling."

Stede's eyes rimmed with moisture and emotion.

The desire to throw herself into his arms reared again and resisting it felt awkward and wrong.

Her gaze lifted to his when his energy swept her cheek. "It's time, luv."

She nodded slightly and looked at Blackbeard, who still snored on the floor. A sharp, icy shard of fear replaced the warmth in her heart.

Inhaling harshly, she slid off the bed and then, still clutching the pillow, she inched toward Blackbeard. Shaking uncontrollably, she poked him with her toe. He smacked his lips and grumbled sleepily but otherwise, did not move.

Gwen glanced back at Stede.

"The knife, luv," he whispered urgently.

Terror reared. She shook her head. She wouldn't need the knife until he was dead—until she needed it to perform the rite.

She certainly didn't want to risk having to use it on him and killing the body beyond reclamation. *But what if...*

It wouldn't hurt to be prepared. Just in case. Tucking the pillow under her arm, she wet her dry lips with the tip of her tongue and stepped around Blackbeard to retrieve the knife. She laid it on the floor and drew in a deep breath.

He was lying on his belly and she knew she'd have to roll him over in order to smother him.

Once more, she looked to Stede for courage.

"Let me inside you," he said urgently. Suddenly, his spirit was only inches away from her.

She shook her head. "I can do this." She drew in a sharp breath and then slowly dropped to her knees on the rug.

Her hands quaked violently as she gripped the pillow by the sides. Her mouth was dry as cotton and her heart felt as if it were pounding in her throat. Adrenaline coursed through her veins.

Just do it. Put the pillow over his face and do it.

Stede was right. Killing a man was not as easy as it seemed. Even a man like Blackbeard.

Hesitating, she looked up at Stede. Concern flashed in his eyes and a muscle in his jaw twitched when he swallowed. He looked stricken. "Gwendolyn...don't do this for me!"

Tears flowed freely down her cheeks. She fell heavily onto her backside. Every fiber of her being was at war. She wanted Stede in the body. The thought of living without him made her sick inside.

But she couldn't do it. She couldn't take a life even if it belonged to the man who'd used her love for her grandmother to blackmail her.

Stede knelt beside her and swept his ethereal hand over her long black hair. "I won't let you do this, Gwendolyn."

She searched his eyes as a sob tore from her chest. "I can't. I can't kill him." Anguish flooded her and she wanted to fall into his embrace and feel his body, his arms around her, comforting her. "I can't." Her shoulders shook as she buried her face in her hands and wept.

"Gwendolyn!" Stede yelled a warning and Gwen's breath left her lungs in a rush as a sudden kick pitched hard onto her back. Her head slammed the floor and she fought away the swimming blackness that threatened to render her unconscious.

Her eyes snapped open.

Blackbeard wriggled madly, rolled onto his side and had the knife in his bound hands in seconds. Gwen scrambled up and lunged at him but he had already freed himself. One quick swat of his hand to the side of Gwen's head made her see stars. Before she could react, he was on top her. "Ye meant to kill me, did ye?"

Gwen gasped. Horror consumed her.

Blackbeard blew out a rough, sour breath. Gwen winced at the stench.

"Leave her be!" Stede ordered but Blackbeard only laughed.

"Be gone, Bonnet. This time, it's between me and the witch."

Gwen struggled to no avail. He was far too heavy and far too strong and consciousness was slipping out from under her. *Don't pass out!* Grunting, she wrested one hand out from beneath him and slapped his face. With lightning speed, he caught her wrist and pinned her arm to the floor.

Pain shot through her arm and she cried out as she writhed uselessly under his weight.

Sneering, he ensnared her other wrist, easily holding both her arms down with one hand. "Come now, witch," he seethed. "I'm not nearly so fearsome without me beard."

She twisted her head and squeezed her eyes shut. She had to think. She had to get away from him because she knew without a doubt he was going to kill her this time.

"Don't go all weepy on me," he said and caught her jaw in his hand to force her face to his.

Gwen pursed her lips and whimpered. Her attempts at kicking him proved useless.

"Let her go!" Stede commanded. "You've got what you want."

"That's just it," Blackbeard purred as he trailed his finger down her cheek. "I haven't had a woman in nigh three hundred years and I'd say it was about time I cut me out a slice of flat tail." With that, his hand flew between their bodies to fight impatiently with the button of her jeans.

Gwen bucked and screamed until her throat was raw.

When he couldn't get the button undone, he plunged his hand down the front of her jeans and between her legs.

Panic surged.

Gwen wriggled and kicked and when his finger slid between her folds, she jolted.

"Let me inside you!" Stede demanded.

"No!" she wailed.

But she didn't have a choice.

She gasped in a quick breath as Stede's spirit pounced into her body. Strength flooded her limbs and as her consciousness spiraled inward and she lost all control, she gaped from deep within as Blackbeard was flung onto his back.

And then, as if in slow motion, she watched as her own hand reached across the carpet and curled around the knife. Somewhere deep inside she was screaming but her mouth wasn't making the sound. It felt as if she were in the midst of a nightmare.

No, Stede! Don't kill him that way! Don't stab him!

Anguish wrapped around her heart and squeezed as, powerless to stop it, she saw her own hand plunge the knife into Blackbeard's side.

He reeled away, covering the wound and staring wide-eyed. An animalistic groan tore from his throat.

A fierce shudder ripped through her body when Stede's energy relinquished her. Gwen gaped in utter horror, searching for Stede but he was nowhere to be seen. "Stede!" she called but there was no time to think because Blackbeard was staggering toward her.

"You'll never be rid of me now, witch," he babbled, grasping at her.

Still holding the knife, she scrambled to her feet. "Get back!"

He lunged forward and seized her hand before his face paled and he dropped to his knees. Blood gurgled in his throat.

He was dying.

He was in Roger's body. And he was dying—and along with him, all hope of keeping the body intact in order to return it to Stede.

Gwen was in shock.

Blackbeard sagged the rest of the way to the floor. Blood pooled at his side. He made one last attempt to reach for her and Gwen darted back from his blood-drenched hand.

"What did you do?" she screamed but Stede still didn't appear. Anger warred with terror for prominence in her being.

But she knew why he'd done it. Blackbeard would have raped and killed her. Stede was not the type of man who would—or could—have stood by and watched.

A ragged breath throttled loose from Blackbeard's throat and then all life slumped out of his body.

Doubt surged, but Gwen knew what she had to do.

Frantic, she searched the floor for her cell phone. When she found it lodged underneath the cherry wardrobe, she raked it out with the point of the knife and then with trembling fingers, flipped it open and dialed 9-1-1.

When the dispatch officer answered, Gwen began babbling. "I need an ambulance to come immediately to the Battery Carriage House Inn. My husband has been stabbed. He's dying. Come quickly!"

"Have you checked for a pulse—" the voice on the other began before Gwen flipped the phone closed and tossed it aside.

She didn't have time to impart the details to the lady at the dispatch office.

Inhaling deeply, she sank to the floor and heaved Roger's body onto his back.

So much blood...

I'll never bring him back. Not now.

But she had to try.

His face was a pale shade of blue. His eyes were open and staring, his mouth hanging agape. A glaring red burn stretched across his throat where Stede had hanged himself.

Gwen shuddered. How was she ever going to explain any of this? The obvious marks on his throat...her prints on the knife...

Don't think about it, now. Bring him back. Get Stede back into the body!

If Roger hadn't been a strong man, he could never have withstood this many spirit possessions.

Swallowing the bile in her throat, she gingerly lifted his blood-soaked T-shirt and then, steeling herself, she began the rite of necromancy for what she hoped would be the last time.

"I invoke the Watchtowers of the Elements to assist me." She bit out the spell as she lightly traced the pentagram in his chest once more. And as she'd done before, she opened her palm and sliced the knifepoint across her lifeline. When blood beaded at the wound, she began the chant to invoke the Goddess.

This time, she knew her intent. Her heart felt like a cold stone in her chest as she uttered the command. "If there be a perfect match for me, Goddess, hear my plea. The perfect one who is meant to be shall find his way home to me. In perfect love and perfect lust, I send this out with all my trust. This spell will guide us to unite, free will remains with us tonight."

Her voice was soft and uncertain although the emotion behind it was stronger than ever. She pressed her stinging palm to the pentagram. "Please come back to me, Stede!"

A tear splashed on the back of her hand and then another but she didn't bother to wipe them away.

Sirens wailed in the distance.

Thank Goddess.

It didn't matter that the authorities would think she had tried to murder him. All that mattered was that the body was dead—and she could no longer feel Stede.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she began the chant over and over, muttering the spell until two EMTs burst through the door, followed by a throng of firefighters.

"Please save him," she managed to utter to the EMT in front.

A woman behind him swept her out of the way as her partner immediately began work on the body. The firefighters swept through the tiny room and into the bathroom yelling, "Clear!"

"There's no pulse," the male EMT said.

Gwen felt sick.

The female joined him and began oxygen treatment before she hurriedly checked vitals. "His blood pressure is too low."

"No kidding. The man was stabbed," the man said.

"He's lost a lot of blood," the female said. The bleak look in her eyes frightened Gwen.

Her knees quaked as she hugged her arms to herself and stared, silently willing Stede's spirit to return to the body.

Before, she'd felt a tremor when his energy was near but she hadn't felt anything—not a shiver, not even a tickle of spirit vibes—since he'd left her body after fending off Blackbeard.

Heedless of the blood on her hands—hers and his—she covered her mouth and stared. Her mind was frantic and numb all at the same time. She could hear her heart thumping in her chest as if it were beating out loud for everyone to hear.

"I'm still not getting a pulse," the woman EMT said under her breath but Gwen heard.

Her stomach sank straight to her toes. He was dead and Stede was gone. Gwen dug her fingers into her hair and pulled as she sank to her knees on the rug. *Don't leave me, Stede! Come back. I love you. I'll never loved anyone but you. Please, come back to me!*

She turned her head as the EMTs began CPR with a bag that looked like a bellows that forced air into the lungs. Gwen couldn't bear to watch but neither could she bear to look away.

When they still couldn't get a pulse, the male placed electrodes onto Roger's chest. Gwen covered her ears to shut out their voices as the paramedics spoke in urgent tones to one another. Drawing her knees up to her chest, she rocked back and forth, begging Stede incessantly in her thoughts to return to the body.

As the male placed a third electrode on Roger's chest, the female cut away his shirt and worked to stem the flow of blood from the knife wound.

Gwen buried her face against her knees and wept as the past forty-eight hours fled through her thoughts.

Stede's smile...

Stede watching her in the mirror while she rode him...

His arms around her...

His spirit.

His eyes filled with love.

So much love. She loved him for his selfless behavior, for risking his own life and then his soul to protect her. How could she live without him?

"I've got a pulse!"

Gwen's eyes flew open as another set of paramedics with a stretcher filed into the tiny room. Two police officers followed.

"Is he alive?" Gwen shot to her feet and craned to see around the throng of paramedics. Hope caused her heart to soar but it quickly came crashing back down around her.

There was no telling who was in the body.

She lunged forward. The EMTs were placing the body, now on a spine board, onto the stretcher. One of the police officers caught her by the shoulders, abruptly halting her. "Ma'am—"

"Let me go!" She struggled but he held her fast. Her gaze collided with the officer's. "He's my husband!" She knew she was shaking uncontrollably and that she seemed desperate but she didn't care.

Right now, all that mattered was finding out who was in that body.

"My husband..." Alarm flooded her. They were taking him away! She struggled harder.

"Get this woman back!"

Gwen didn't know who said it and frankly, she didn't care.

"We can't stabilize him here."

Someone had placed a portable oxygen mask over his face. A plastic IV bag swung riotously from a short pole attached to the stretcher. Its occupant still looked so, so pale.

Despite attempts to drag her away, Gwen curled one hand around the cold steel side bar of the stretcher. "Stede?"

His eyes fluttered open and his head lolled in her direction.

Gwen didn't dare let herself hope. "Stede?"

"We've got to get this man to a hospital, *now*. He's already lost too much blood."

Tears flowed unchecked down Gwen's cheeks. Who was in the body?

Stede? Blackbeard? Goddess forbid, what if Roger had come back?

When his eyes sagged shut once more, she released the bar and took a step back as the emergency techs wheeled the stretcher toward the door.

One of the paramedics approached Gwen, blocking her view as the others rolled the stretcher out the door. "Are you hurt, ma'am?"

She shook her head but the paramedic was lifting her hand. "You've got several nasty cuts, there. May I treat them?"

"Yes, yes, of course," she said but she didn't care. The stinging gash in her hand was the least of her worries. "Where are you taking my husband?"

"Roper St. Francis, on Doughty."

Gwen twisted her head to look at one of the cops while the EMT swabbed something on her wounds. "Will you take me there?"

"Of course," he said. "After you tell us what happened."

The other officer was squatting over the knife. He looked up at her. "Ma'am, did you stab your husband?"

Gwen shook her head vehemently. "No! I love my husband!"

"What happened?"

"I...I cut my hand and when he rushed to help me, he stumbled and fell on the knife. It was an accident." Did she sound as if she were lying? Cops were smarter than most people gave them credit for being. Gwen suspected she wasn't fooling anybody.

The contents of her purse were scattered on the floor. She no doubt had bruises where Blackbeard had tried to strangle her. This didn't look good at all.

But then a voice came from the door—a voice Gwen recognized immediately.

"Officer Gist," Mama Zulie called. "I needs to speak wit' you. Outside."

Gwen felt her tension melting away as the officer rushed to join Mama Zulie outside the inn. Somehow, she knew with certainty the old griot would make everything all right.

When the officer finally returned, his face was ashen. "We'll take you to Roper, Mrs. Wyse."

Gwen's gaze darted from Officer Gist's to Mama Zulie's, who stepped to her side.

Zulie gave her a nod and a wink. "Ol' Cleo Payroux still do have some power in dis town."

Gwen smiled her thanks but her relief faded when Mama Zulie seized her hard by the arm. "You listen clos', chile. You ain't heard de' last from ol' Edward Teach."

Chapter Fifteen

The policeman—whom she'd since learned was named Delbert Gist—handed her a cup of coffee Gwen really didn't want. She shifted in the uncomfortable hospital waiting room chair and sipped the lukewarm, bitter liquid. Delbert had been more than kind, especially since he'd found out she knew Mama Zulie, but Gwen could practically feel his fear. After seeing the mess in her room, including the divorce papers, he undoubtedly thought she'd stabbed her husband in a fit of rage—but he wasn't about to cross Mama Zulie or her voodoo.

Somehow, Mama Zulie's connections had miraculously prevented Gwen from facing murder charges in a South Carolina courtroom.

But her mind was numb to all that.

Who had those paramedics brought back?

And what had Mama Zulie meant when she'd told Gwen she hadn't heard the last of Edward Teach? Did that mean Blackbeard was in the body?

Not knowing was driving her crazy.

She'd mentally summoned Stede but had not felt his presence at all and couldn't determine if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Should she have hope or should she be grieving because the only man she had ever loved was gone?

She wanted to scream from frustration. What was taking so long?

She sat the Styrofoam cup on the floor and stood to pace just as a man in scrubs burst through a set of doors.

"Mrs. Wyse?"

"Yes?" Gwen hugged herself to keep from trembling. She couldn't read the man's expression, couldn't tell if he was here to announce good news or bad.

"I'm Dr. Drayton. I'm the surgeon who treated your husband when he arrived."

Gwen swallowed thickly.

Drayton drew in a deep breath. "Your husband should have died from that injury."

Gwen's mind grasped at the words "should have". Her lips parted.

The doctor's hands found his hips. "He's in stable condition and we've moved him to intensive care."

But his words of encouragement did little to relieve Gwen's anxiety. Who was in that body? She shook. "Can I...can I see him?"

"Of course. He's been asking for you." Dr. Drayton turned and pushed open the double doors for Gwen. The officer followed them down the hall.

Gwen wanted to feel joyous but she didn't dare. Not yet. Not until she found out who was in Roger's body.

Her nerves were on edge as the doctor led her into a hospital room. She stared at the man lying in the bed. A bevy of tubes and wires connected him to a varied display of monitors. He still looked pale and his eyes were closed.

Gwen's legs went weak as she crossed the floor to him and gingerly brushed her fingertips across his hand in the hope she would somehow *feel* who was in the body.

His eyes fluttered open and when he saw her, his lips eased into a sideways smile. Gwen's pulse sped up. Her mouth went dry.

He parted his lips to speak but had to clear his throat before he could form words. His fingers slid through hers and he gave her hand a weak squeeze. "I feel you, luv."

Tears gushed. *Thank the Goddess!*

It was Stede.

She never should have doubted him—or her own ability to cast a spell.

Joy flooded her. She wanted to throw herself on him and kiss him and hold him but she was afraid she'd hurt him. She glanced back at the doctor. "Is he really okay?"

The doctor nodded. "It's nothing short of a miracle he lived." He took a step closer. "But I noticed something during the surgery. It looked like someone had scratched a pentagram on his chest."

Gwen swallowed thickly. Her gaze shot nervously to Officer Gist and then back to Dr. Drayton.

Gist stepped up and whispered something to the doctor. Drayton tensed and then eyed Gwen with something akin to horror.

"I owe my life to this woman," Stede interjected. His voice was ragged and weak but overflowing with emotion.

Gwen's gaze swiveled to Stede's and her heart swelled with warmth. When she closed her other hand around his, he furrowed his forehead and then managed to hold her bandaged hand up so he could see it. "You're hurt."

She shook her head. "It's nothing."

Stede made an attempt to shift in the bed before he winced and dropped his head back on the pillow.

"Are you in pain? Can I ask the doctor to get you something?" The thought of him hurting made Gwen ache inside.

Dr. Drayton swiftly checked his chart. "It's time for his pain meds. I'll get the nurse."

"Thank you," Gwen said, hoping she was sharing gratitude for everything the doctor had done to save Stede.

Drayton gaped, the look of alarm never leaving his eyes before he rushed out of the room. Gwen knew Officer Gist had mentioned Mama Zulie to the doctor and wondered

what they were thinking. Had Mama Zulie explained everything? Or had she been cryptic enough to scare Gist silly?

Whatever she'd done, Mama Zulie had done it well. No one was asking any question. Apparently the griot's name carried a lot of weight in Charleston.

Gist gave Gwen a curt nod. "Let me know if I can do anything for you, Mrs. Wyse."

She thanked him with a smile before he followed Drayton out of the room.

All the tension melted out of Gwen when the two men were finally out of earshot. "Stede? Is that really you in there?" she asked but she knew it was.

"Did you have any doubt?"

Her lips parted. "I didn't know who they'd bring back. I..." Her voice cracked. "I thought I'd lost you." Fresh tears flooded her eyes.

"No, luv."

"Are you okay? Are you in pain?"

"I am alive and I'm here with you. I couldn't ask for anything more."

This time, Gwen couldn't resist. Tucking back her hair, she bent to kiss his lips, losing herself in the feel of his soft lips and the warmth of his tongue, the hard pressure combined with the gentle sucking of mouth. Desire unfurled through her limbs, followed by frustration that he was confined to a hospital bed for who knew how long.

"Well, you're feeling better than you oughta be," the nurse said as she blustered into the room and shot Stede's IV up with body-numbing meds.

He chuckled and Gwen looked her fill at his beautiful face as she affectionately brushed his hair back from his forehead.

"This is going to put him down fast, honey," the nurse said before she marked something on a clipboard and headed out the door.

"You're not going to leave me, are you?" he asked. Already his eyes were getting heavy.

"They won't let me stay in your room," she said. "But I'll be down the hall. I promise. All you have to do is ask and I'll be right here."

He nodded slowly as his eyes fluttered shut.

Gwen blew out a breath and stooped to kiss his forehead. Even though he was lying in a hospital bed hooked up to a billion dollars worth of machinery, Gwen felt as if everything were right with the world.

A heavy twinge of remorse that Roger had died tugged at her heart and she said a silent blessing for his spirit. Gwen's Wiccan beliefs were such that she realized the soul left the body when its time on earth was finished. Apparently, Roger's was. Stede's, however, was not—and Gwen was grateful he'd come to her.

But then, what about Blackbeard's spirit? And Mama Zulie's dire prediction that she wasn't rid of him?

She shuddered. He was gone. Stede was back. *You're safe now*, she told herself.

And with Stede, she knew she was safe in so many ways – protection from physical harm and more importantly, she knew her heart was safe.

* * * * *

When Stede was released from the hospital two days later, Gwen picked him up in a comfortable van to take him back to her home in Franklin. They had discussed flying and although Stede wasn't afraid of the prospect of getting on a plane, they decided airport security would prevent them from getting the fortune in treasure safely home by air. Driving would be their best bet.

Well stocked with pain meds, Stede slept most of the way. Gwen considered stopping at a hotel for the night but the trip was only a little over eight hours and with him blissfully asleep, she drove on.

She glanced at him as he lay back against a pillow in the reclined seat. He'd left his home and wife to become a pirate when he was alive. A man like him yearned for adventure. How could he ever take over Roger's position at the record company?

She felt as if she were trying to cage a wild bird and it seemed very wrong.

When she pulled into her own driveway in Franklin, Tennessee, and switched off the ignition, she breathed a heavy sigh of relief and patted Stede on the thigh. "We're home."

Stede opened his eyes and took in the sprawling three-story brick structure. "This is where...you live?" he asked sleepily.

She chuckled. "This is where *we* live." Somehow, that statement didn't ring true to her as she got out and went around to the passenger side to help him out of the van.

He could walk unaided but Gwen slipped her arm around him anyway and guided him to the front door.

But Gwen's heart skipped a beat when she noticed the door was open a few inches. "Someone's in the house," she whispered, exchanging a quick glance with Stede.

Mama Zulie's prediction about Blackbeard surged in Gwen's thoughts.

The door suddenly opened wide and despite Stede's injuries, he had Gwen behind him in a second. A woman's scream echoed from inside the house.

Realization flooded Gwen.

Daphne!

"You scared the hell out of me!" Daphne McKissack yelled and then smiled her relief. Two deep dimples appeared in her cheeks.

Gwen blew out a sigh. Daphne had no idea how much she'd frightened her. "Where's your car?"

"I walked over to water the plants. I wasn't expecting you home until tomorrow," Daph said and tucked a strand of her shoulder-length brown hair behind her ear.

"I drove straight through," Gwen said. As Daphne's brown-eyed gaze swiveled to Stede, trepidation welled within Gwen that didn't have anything to do with Mama Zulie's foresight about Blackbeard.

"How're you feeling, Rog?" Daphne asked him. "You look a little pale."

"I—" Stede began but Gwen quickly cut him off.

"He's had a bout of food poisoning. I need to get him upstairs and in bed."

Daphne's perspicacious gaze moved from Stede to Gwen and back again. "You look different."

Stede shrugged. "Holiday," he muttered and then flashed her smile.

Gwen put her arm around Stede's waist. Daphne practically gaped—and Gwen realized her young friend had never seen her be affectionate with Roger. Daph would be calling to grill her later. Right now, Gwen couldn't think quickly enough on her feet to explain. She urged Stede inside past Daphne's prying eyes.

"Thanks for taking care of the plants," Gwen said, looking back over her shoulder at her friend. "Let's do lunch soon."

"Sounds great," Daphne said. "I hope you get better soon, Roger."

Stede glanced back and gave her a nod.

Daphne stepped out the open door but before she closed it, she flashed Gwen a thumbs-up and whispered loudly, "He's like a new man!"

Sister, you have no idea. Gwen nodded and sighed her relief as Daphne closed the door behind her and left.

"That was close," she said.

But Stede was unconcerned. His gaze scanned the foyer with its massive chandelier and winding staircase with a leopard-print runner, the marble-tiled floor and the expensively furnished rooms on either side. "Amazing," he muttered. "But it's not what I would have pictured for you."

Gwen waved her hand in dismissal. "Roger had this all done by a decorator. I hate it. But that's neither here nor there. Can you make it up the stairs? I'll put you to bed."

That gorgeous sideways grin claimed his lips and he growled his approval. Gwen hit him playfully on the arm. "You're in no shape for that."

"My prick tells me otherwise," he argued as he carefully ascended the stairs.

Gwen's gaze couldn't help dropping to his crotch where his glaringly obvious arousal strained against the jeans. No wonder he was having trouble walking. Desire heated in her stomach and spiraled downward.

But he still had a nasty row of stitches in his side which didn't need to be ripped open. Gwen flinched at the memory of the sight of it. "You're not well," she said as they reached the top step. She took his hand and guided him down the upstairs hall to her bedroom suite. "See, you can hardly walk."

"That's because I have a cockstand that's aching to be inside you."

Gwen giggled. Goddess, she wanted him. She drew back the goose down comforter and arranged the pillows but when she turned around Stede had already shucked his shirt and was in the process of freeing his cock from his jeans.

She gasped. "Shit, Stede." It *was* hard—and so much bigger than even she remembered. The head was dark crimson and swollen and when he took it in his hand and worked it slowly, Gwen felt her own cream gathering in her channel.

She swallowed thickly. Her whole body shook with need. "You're hurt," she whispered raggedly.

He stalked toward her, his eyes locked with hers as he took her hand and wrapped her fingers around his shaft. The silky moan that spilled from his lips was nearly her undoing.

"Lie down," she ordered.

Stede climbed onto the bed and Gwen darted to her dresser. She pulled open her lingerie drawer and withdrew a shiny, bullet-shaped vibrator.

"What's that, luv?"

"This is my toy." She switched it on and it hummed to life.

Stede arched an eyebrow.

"I'll show you how it works," she said as she turned it off and then tossed it on the bed. "After I take care of you." Smiling wickedly, she teased off her clothes and then climbed onto the king-sized bed with him.

Admiration filled his eyes as she moved between his legs, swept her long black hair over her shoulder and held his gaze as she bent to run her tongue along the length of his cock.

A shudder tore through his body. "It's been a long time, luv."

"Too long," she murmured and then engulfed him in her mouth.

He cried out and one of his hands threaded into the hair at her nape as he arched beneath her, filling her mouth with his luscious cock. His body trembled violently as she sucked him and Gwen relished the sexual power she felt with him. This was more than a physical attraction. This was something deep and dangerous and life altering.

It was love.

Gwen moaned around him as she worked him with her mouth and hand. The thick veins along his length pulsed in her hand. He was already about to come.

"Yes." His voice was laced with need. "Oh luv. Yes!"

And then he tensed and erupted in her mouth. Gwen swallowed and sucked and licked until she had gotten every last drop of his shimmering cream.

He blew out a breath. "That didn't take long." Still holding her at her nape, he drew her up to kiss his mouth. A new surge of desire uncoiled through her body and settled in her swollen clit as his mouth claimed hers in a kiss so filled with love and lust, Gwen thought she would melt in his arms.

When he finally dragged his lips from hers, he gazed into her eyes. "Come up here and straddle my face."

Gwen quickly complied, throwing one knee over him and lowering her pussy to his mouth. When his tongue touched her, she jolted as if it had scorched her but his hands locked around her hips and he pulled her back down, grinding her nether lips and clit against his mouth.

An orgasm was already budding and Gwen fought off the urge to come but when his tongue swept between her lips and into her hole, she gripped the headboard and went weak. His tongue darted out and over her clit and then back into her hole, over and over again, and she was completely at his mercy.

She tensed as she felt the promise of an orgasm crest and then...bliss. Her channel spasmed and she ground her pussy on his mouth, wresting every bit of pleasure she could from him before she crawled off and fell heavily onto her back beside him.

He reached across her and picked up the bullet. "Show me how this *toy* works."

Gwen snuggled her back into the pillows and spread her legs before switching on the vibrator for him. She knew after that earth-shattering orgasm she would be sensitive, but she was still aroused and knew she wouldn't be appeased until he was able to slide that beautiful cock into her pussy again.

Tentatively, he brushed the buzzing bullet over her thighs and the sensitive skin of her tummy before she felt it dip between her legs. Gwen mewled and writhed as he rubbed it over her clit and when she felt his finger delve inside her, she cried out as another orgasm crashed over her.

Unable to move, she listened as Stede switched off the vibe. Lying in her own bed next to the man she loved, she'd never felt so physically exhausted and satisfied at the same time.

With her eyes closed, she felt the thick comforter being drawn over her and then she was drawn into Stede's arms. She snuggled against him and slept peacefully.

* * * * *

When she awakened hours later, Stede was still holding her but he was propped up on two pillows watching television.

"Good morning, luv," he said and pressed a kiss to her hair.

Gwen stretched and yawned but was reluctant to leave the warmth of his arms.

"Gwendolyn," he asked softly.

"Yes?"

"Your friend was aware of something different about me, wasn't she? Won't everyone here who was acquainted with...with your husband...know I am changed as well?"

Gwen's breath froze in her chest. She hadn't expected him to bring it up so soon but she had already made plans to keep Stede as far away as possible from anyone who knew Roger.

For the first time in her life, she was thankful Roger's parents had already passed away. Certainly her best friend, Amy, would understand, especially since she'd had a similar experience.

But what about Daphne? She'd already seen Stede and had quickly picked up on a change, but Daph was a historian and was as analytical as they came. She missed nothing. Besides, she had known Roger well enough to know he wasn't supposed to have an English accent.

Locally, she was Gwen's best friend, and despite the fact Daphne was only in her twenties and wasn't into the metaphysical, they spent a lot of time together. How could Gwen ever explain to Daphne that the spirit of a three-hundred-year-old pirate had possessed Roger's body?

And then there were Roger's colleagues at work, who would assuredly notice the dramatic change. Gwen sighed. There was no way she could—or would—prepare him for a career in the recording industry.

Besides, Stede was a man who craved adventure and loved the sea. How could she ever keep him satisfied landlocked in the middle of Tennessee?

She pursed her lips. "I think we'll probably have to move away from here."

"But this is your home."

Gwen smiled at Stede. "Wherever *you* are, that is my home."

He drew her closer and kissed the top of her head. "What about the treasure?" he asked. "How much do you think it would be worth?"

"A fortune," she said. "But the trouble is selling it. I had a friend who inherited a collection of gold coins and he had to go the Grand Caymans to sell it."

"Why there?"

"I'm sure there was something sketchy about it. Probably tax evasion."

Stede shrugged. "That's not so different from piracy."

Gwen propped on one elbow. Her gaze collided with his as an idea struck. "Let's buy a sailboat."

Stede stared but Gwen could see the light glinting in his dark blue eyes.

She continued. "We could go to Barbados and the Bahamas and all the islands in the Caribbean and just live on the boat."

He kept staring.

"If...if that's what you want," Gwen added. "I want you to be happy, Stede. You'd just be bored here in Franklin."

A sexy laugh rolled up from his chest. "Bored? With you? That's out of the question."

He was so handsome and the look of love sparkling in his eyes made him impossible to resist. She scooted up to kiss him and when her lips brushed his, he moaned and drew her tightly against him, deepening their kiss. A rush of desire trailed downward and, frustrated, Gwen pulled away. "We can't," she said roughly.

"Why not?"

"Because you're hurt."

He caught her hand in his and pushed it down to where his turgid cock tented the sheet. Gwen gasped.

"This is where I hurt," he growled playfully.

She wanted him inside her so badly she ached but she wasn't about to risk his sutures.

He threw off the covers. "Please, luv," he said seductively.

His expression warmed as Gwen tucked her long hair behind her ear and then dipped to take him in her mouth.

As she sucked him, he sighed. He felt and tasted good sliding all the way into her mouth and then back out again. She lifted her head and gazed into his eyes. "How does it feel?"

"Warm. Wet."

He reached across the bed and Gwen gasped when she heard the buzzing of her vibrator. Roger had never been this adventurous and she'd never sucked his cock and vibed herself at the same time. Anticipation thrummed through her veins as she took the bullet and pushed it between her legs, pressing it to her swollen clit. Instantly, her pussy clenched. Her stomach tightened and she arched over him, gripping him with her other hand as she sucked him and held the vibrator to herself.

The combination of the intense vibration and the way his cock filled her mouth, slipping in and out as he guided her head with his hand, was too much. Gwen soared within to the heart of her pleasure. Her awareness overflowed with the feel of his big hands, the hardness of his cock, the sound of his ragged breaths and the hum of the vibrator. The sensation was overwhelming and just when she thought she couldn't stand the heightened sensations any longer, ripples of orgasmic bliss swept over and through her. She wilted and moaned, still pressing the vibe to her clit while Stede pumped into her mouth.

She moaned on his cock, still in the midst of an intense climax.

And then she heard his own moans in harmony with hers as he jerked savagely once, twice, before she tasted his spicy cream.

Somehow, she managed to switch off the vibrator before she collapsed in his arms, mindful of his stitches. His warm hands swept up her back and into her hair where he cradled her head against the curve of his neck. He squeezed slightly. "I love you, Gwendolyn."

Warm tingles skittered over her limbs and into her heart and she said a silent prayer of gratitude to the Goddess for bringing their two souls together, despite the boundaries of time and space.

In a few short days, her entire life had changed. A week ago, she'd been a bored and troubled wife grasping at a love and a life that had never been real and had never been hers to begin with.

Now she was miraculously lying in the arms of a man who'd lived and died a pirate—a man she respected and loved inside and out.

Although she knew her life was about to take a huge turn, she welcomed the change and the adventure—because she knew Stede Bonnet would always be at the helm, keeping her safe and keeping watch.

Epilogue

Gwen stretched lazily on the deck of their seventy-six-foot catamaran sailboat. The tall canvas sails rippled and snapped in the breeze and the warm sun felt like heaven on her skin. She had to remind herself it was January. With her broad-brimmed hat pulled down over her face to shield it from the rays, she had to rely on her hearing to tell her Stede was walking toward her and carrying a glass of something cooled with ice cubes.

She peeped out from under her hat and saw he had her favorite drink—a mojito. When she sat, her bikini top fell away and Stede voiced his approval. She started to snatch it back up but he caught the string in his toe and pulled it away before he sat next to her.

“Hey!” she protested with a grin.

“I think I’m going to have to throw all your clothes overboard.” He handed her the drink.

“You wouldn’t.”

He arched an eyebrow. “You, luv, are a captive on my boat and you would do well to remember it or I’ll have to restrain you—again.”

Gwen giggled as the memory of the previous night rushed over her—on her knees, tied to the bed at the wrists with Stede slowly fucking her in the ass.

Her pussy clenched as she sipped her drink. She breathed in the fresh salt breeze of the Caribbean Sea, hedonistically delighting in the warmth of the sun, the tickle of rum and the rush of desire at the promise of Stede making love to her right here on the deck.

Her nipples tightened and she arched toward him, sighing her pleasure when his cool palm cupped her breast and squeezed. He slanted his head down and sucked the other nipple into his mouth. Gwen watched him, threading her fingers into his dark hair as he laved and suckled her nipple.

Their life was absolutely perfect. They’d sold the house, the business, the treasure and had bought this boat Stede had named *Necromancer*. Living on the sea was far more adventurous than Gwen had ever dreamed possible. He’d shown her where his plantation had been on the island of Barbados and when they’d visited his daughter’s grave at Christ Church Parish, Gwen felt as if Stede had released his guilt and had come to some sort of acceptance about little Mary’s death.

Resigning from the record company had been a bit more difficult. Gwen had stayed by his side the entire time but Stede handled it like a pro, pretending to know people he’d never met as he recited a well-rehearsed, American-accented speech and tendered his letter of resignation—effective immediately. When they’d left the record company, they’d shared a big laugh over the wide-eyed stares from his coworkers.

Stede could never have worked in an office. He loved the sea. It was as if he were a part of it and Gwen watched him in amazement, filled with love for him as he captained their boat, tied off the mooring lines, hoisted the sails and simply enjoyed the swell and fall of the waves and the fresh salt air.

He took a swig of his drink and then set it aside. "Get those drawers off, lass."

"Aye, aye, captain," she teased as she put down her drink and then wriggled out of her bikini bottoms.

Impatiently, Stede raked the scanty fabric off her ankles and dove between her legs, spreading her thighs wide and burying his face in her pussy. Gwen dropped back on her towel, kneading her own nipples as he laved her. He knew just where to lick and precisely where to suck. She arched her back to rock her clit into his mouth and then moaned as he took it, flattening his tongue and teasing it languidly back and forth.

Gwen entwined her fingers in his hair and pulled, drawing him closer. It felt so good and was only enhanced by the gentle rocking of the catamaran. When he slid a finger up her pussy, she cried out. "Oh! Suck my clit. Yes! Oh yes..."

She was just on the verge of exploding when he raised his head.

"Don't stop!" she wailed.

But he was kicking off his shorts and moving between her open legs to impale her with his engorged cock. The feel of it breaching her and tunneling inside sent her over the edge and she came instantly.

Although she'd reached her first climax, he wasn't about to stop until she'd come again and again. His groin slapped hers with each furious thrust and Gwen clung, knowing her ass would be bruised later but that didn't matter. All that mattered was this mindless fusion of their bodies and souls.

It was always this way with him.

His mouth grazed her ear and she turned her head to give him access to the sensitive shell. "Your pussy was made for my cock." His raw words and ragged breaths made her heart run wild and when he lowered his lips to kiss the curve of her neck, Gwen groaned and raked her nails down his back.

He growled and then slid an arm under her hips to hold her off the hard deck as he plowed into her. The feel of the head of his cock slipping out and then breaching her again and again made her feel intoxicated and when he rammed up hard inside her and ground his pubis against hers, molten heat radiated from her center outward.

"Cream on my cock, luv. Come for me." He nipped her lips. "Come, Gwendolyn. Come now."

She realized she'd been holding back and when she relaxed into his thrusts, her body complied in a powerful, mind-shattering orgasm that made her scream out loud in order to release the pleasurable intensity that racked her body.

"Yes, luv. That's it," he managed to say before a very seductive, raspy moan emanated from his throat.

Gwen opened her eyes. She loved watching him come and she wasn't disappointed. With his eyes closed and his forehead wrinkled in little pleasure furrows, his lips parted and his breath caught. His body jerked and went motionless and then he melted down on top of her, still undulating deep inside her and whispering in her ear how good her body felt.

They lay together, touching and kissing until he softened and slipped out of her. He rolled onto his back, sat and took up his own mojito again. With one leg propped up, he appeared rakishly comfortable with being nude on the deck of their boat and Gwen loved him all the more for it.

Just as she started to sit, she heard the satellite phone ringing. Although they made a few calls, they rarely received any.

"I'll get it, baby," Gwen said as she got up and padded naked across the deck and down into the cabin. She retrieved the phone off the docking station. "Hello?"

Her greeting was met with a salty laugh. "Aye witch. How have ye and Major Bonnet been these past few months?"

Gwen froze. "Who is this?" But she knew all too well who it was. *How is this possible?*

"Ye don't remember? Aww, I'm offended."

The timbre of the voice was slightly different but she recognized the accent with overwhelming dread. "Dammit, who is this?" she demanded—but the phone went dead.

"What's the matter?" Stede asked as he descended the stairs into the galley. "Who was it, luv?"

Gwen stared. The phone tumbled from her hand to the floor. "How did *he* get into another body?"

Stede's eyebrows knitted together. "Who was it?"

Gwen swallowed thickly. Her gaze collided with Stede's. "It was...Blackbeard."

About the Author

Debra Glass' previous experience as a medium inspired her interest in writing Alabama ghost stories, although she's also got a passion for spine-tingling paranormal romance. Since 2002, Debra has written several books on regional folklore and has had numerous articles published in Fate Magazine and various Civil War magazines.

Now she's writing steamy erotic romance and dabbling in the paranormal with her Phantom Lovers series which features passionate and sexy ghosts who are guaranteed to keep you up at night!

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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