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## ***Dedication***

Thanks to Leigh and Jess for giving this story a chance and for encouraging me to expand it and helping it to grow. Thanks to my editor, Tea. Love ya, baby! And special thanks to Shannon, Jo and especially Maura, who held my hand when I cried on her shoulder and said, “this isn’t working,” and heard her say, “what about this?” You guys are great!

## Chapter One

“What is this?” Melani Cantor held up a small white blouse between her thumb and forefinger as if it were contaminated.

“Your work outfit.” Ellie Winton burst into laughter at Melani’s look. “What did you expect to wear? You are working at a pirate theme park for a week.”

Melani’s eyebrows shot up and she shook her head, even as a smile appeared on her face.

“Look, you know I love you and would do anything for you—within reason. But this piece of material hardly looks big enough to cover one breast, much less two.”

“Oh, that one’s not yours, exactly. That’s just one I grabbed off the shelf to show you. We’ll go down to the employee building in a bit to get you fitted for the top, and for your Maid of Honor dress.

“Yeah.” Melani grinned. “You know, when most people get married, they have satin dresses, beautiful flowers and a big church. You, on the other hand, are getting married on a pirate ship and wearing a gown that will more than likely shock most of your guests.”

Ellie laughed. “Russell thinks the wedding part of our business is going to go over well. Your article will give us some great publicity.”

Melani shook her head and dropped the blouse on top of a long black skirt and numerous petticoats. When her best friend, Ellie, had left college for a year and taken a job at *Ahoy, Matey*, her mother almost had a stroke. Melani could just imagine what the woman was thinking now that Ellie had worked at the theme park for seven years and was engaged to marry the “Pirate King.”

“What does your mother think of the clothes?”

Ellie frowned. “Let’s not go there. Russell and I are taking bets on whether or not she shows up for the ceremony. She practically threatened me with death if word of this got into the hometown newspaper.”

“So in other words, she doesn’t know I’m attending as a worker, writer, and Maid of Honor?”

“Are you kidding me? She’d have tried to kidnap you before you even got to the airport. She’s going to freak when she sees your story.”

Melani shook her head. She knew Ellie was right, but the story was going to be interesting. Russell’s park, *Ahoy Matey*, was now in its tenth year and growing stronger. It had been Ellie’s idea to offer wedding packages to the hotel guests. The ship would sail away from the coastline and the wedding would be performed just as the sun slipped below the horizon. The reception would take place on the resort’s private island, which contained the new hotel and several secluded cottages.

Ellie’s plan had been for Melani to work at the park for a week and write an insider’s take on how things worked, with the wedding as the highlight to get people interested. Melani’s editor had loved the idea, but he’d made Melani use some of her vacation time instead since she was technically going for a friend’s wedding. Melani had agreed, but only if he’d paid for her travel. He’d reluctantly paid for her airfare, and now here she was.

“This is going to be great publicity. I can’t wait to see the stories.” Ellie clapped her hands together like an eager child and Melani grimaced.

“El, the subscription numbers for the *Gazette* hardly constitute good publicity.”

“No, but if you do it up good, you know it could be picked up by the Dallas paper. They picked up your Christmas article last winter, along with several others. And if the AP sees it, then it could go national. Besides, you’re my best friend and nobody writes like you do.”

Melani preened. “Thank you, thank you very much.”

Ellie shook her head and then looked at her watch.

“Oh crap. We’re already late for an appointment with the park costumer about your work outfits. He’s making the wedding clothes, too.”

Ellie took off at a brisk clip and Melani fell into step behind her. Ellie had always been a handful, usually trying to go in nine different directions at once. Melani had been the more staid of the two. Not that she was boring. She just preferred to think of herself as practical, more logical than her lighthearted friend.

As they walked through the streets of the “pirate town” Melani marveled at how different their lives were. They’d met in daycare in the West Texas town of Lubbock, where they’d grown up. They’d become fast friends and remained that way all through school.

At Texas Tech, Melani had studied journalism and Ellie had studied what she termed “Frat Boys 101.” That was until she’d dropped out and moved to Florida. Melani had been devastated at the loss of her best friend. She’d thrown herself into her studies and hadn’t made many other friends. Now she was a reporter for a small, independent newspaper called The Lubbock Gazette.

She lived a routine existence. The only friends she had in Texas were co-workers. Many times she envied Ellie her carefree lifestyle, especially now that she and Russell had decided to settle down together.

When El linked arms with her and pulled her close, Melani gave her a friendly hug. “So, seeing anyone special?”

Melani shook her head. “No. Not since Charles.”

“I’m sorry. I really thought he would work out.”

“Me, too. But he wanted to get married too fast. I worked too hard for that degree to let it sit on the shelf. Even a year would have worked for me, gotten me established as a writer. Then we could have been married.”

El squeezed her friend’s arm. “I know it was hard on you when he married someone else.”

Melani nodded. “You know, I really thought I loved him, and I thought he felt the same. But four months after he leaves me he’s walking down the aisle with someone else? Shows all he wanted was someone to cook and clean for him.”

“Forget him. Listen, I have a great guy I want you to meet.”

“No. N-O. No. No men for me, thanks.”

Ellie giggled, and Melani could swear she heard her whisper, “we’ll see about that,” as she trotted off to an employee who had called her name.

Melani watched as Ellie greeted park guests and employees alike, and marveled that her friend had found such a wonderful life at a theme park. Melani was much more at home in her business suits and doing interviews over the phone.

It had always been that way. When they were kids, Ellie would want to go to the park and Melani would want to know what they would do once they got there. As teenagers, Ellie would want to go to the mall and Melani would want to know which stores they would visit so she could plan her spending for the day.

In college, Ellie would want to go from party to party, and Melani would want to know who was going to be where and if Ellie had any plans for extra curricular activities that night.

“Here we are.” Ellie led them into a large building that was mostly empty.

“The dressing rooms are in the back. Jace is waiting for us there. He’s a little picky about the clothes he designs, so if you have a problem with something, approach the subject with care.”

Melani nodded. She was about to become a pirate wench. She wasn’t thrilled about the idea, but for Ellie, she would do anything.

## Chapter Two

“No fucking way.” Melani winced inwardly when the words left her mouth. She never cursed, but being stuffed into such a ridiculous outfit seemed to bring out the worst in her.

Ellie’s laughter filled the room as Melani stared into the mirror.

The designer, Jace, crossed his arms over his chest and gave Melani a disapproving look. “I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me. There’s no way I’m wearing this in public. I look like a stripper in search of a pole. Did you even use the measurements I sent you?”

“I assure you, I made that outfit according to the dimensions you provided. Have you gained weight since then?”

“You’re blaming this on me? I have not...”

Ellie stepped in between the two of them and held up her hands. She pushed Jace backward and Melani could hear her whisper to him softly.

Melani turned back toward the mirror and stared at herself. She didn’t look half bad really, except for the fact that her breasts were practically spilling out of the blouse. Her voluptuous figure was made for something like this. Too bad her personality wasn’t.

She put her hands on her hips and twirled. The outfit consisted of a low-cut white blouse, a tight, red, corset-type vest that laced up the back, and a black skirt that was poofed out by three petticoats.

If Jace expected her to wear this out in public, and bend over tables where everyone would get a good look at her girls, he was out of his mind.

She shook her head. This just wasn’t her.

The wedding outfit was similar, except it was red with a black vest, as Ellie had chosen red, white and black as her colors. Melani felt naked just standing in front of the mirror. She knew that she couldn’t expose herself to the wedding guests this way.

“Can’t we pull the blouse up a little?”



“Who’s the designer here? You or me? That dress is perfect, except for the fact that the vest is a little too...snug. We just won’t lace it up so tight. I will not have my creations ruined by an amateur.” Jace stomped his foot and ran from the room.

“Oh, Ellie, I’m so sorry. I guess I was less than tactful.” Melani gave her friend an apologetic look.

Ellie laughed as she headed toward the door. “That’s OK. It was worth it to hear you say ‘fuck’. I’ll go after him. Everything will be fine. Change your clothes and I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Melani moved away from the mirror and stepped out of the skirt and petticoats. She put her fingers up to the front of the vest and sighed.

“How am I supposed to get out of this thing alone? It laces in the back. Ellie!” No answer came and Mel shouted out her friend’s name again. When no one came she was tempted to use the dreaded f-word again. Twice in one day would be new record for her.

She reached behind her back and tried to grab the vest strings from the top and from the bottom. On her third attempt an exasperated sigh escaped her lips. She imagined what she looked like as she danced from foot to foot, moving her arms behind her back in a strange parody of the Hokey Pokey.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Her breasts were pressed tight against the material and each attempt to reach the tie pushed them against the scooped neck of the blouse until the material strained under the pressure. She was sure that she now looked more like a stripper than she had before.

The tie was at the top of the vest, which meant it was really in the middle of her back. She moved both hands behind her back and tried again to grab the bow, then let out a sigh of relief when the door opened.

“Finally. Could you help me with this, please? I can’t reach the tie.”

Reassuring footsteps resounded against the walls. Her breasts would be freed of their prison soon.

“Did you find him? Is he really mad?”

Fingers pulled on the string and began unlacing the vest. Melani heaved a sigh of relief as the pressure on her chest decreased. The vest fell away and the low cut blouse lowered, exposing most of Melani’s cleavage.

“I mean I’ll wear it, he just needs to do something about how tight this vest is.”

“It looks fine to me.” The deep voice forced Melani’s eyes open. She whirled around and stared at a... pirate?

The man standing in front of her was dressed in a white blouse cut to his navel, tight black pants and thigh high boots. His shirt revealed a muscled chest lightly covered with dark hair. He had a sword attached to his hip and near that sword, oh lord, a package that looked like it would make the porn star happy.

Melani tried not to stare but it was hard. He was gorgeous, from top to bottom. She raised her face to his and was met with mischievous green eyes and a dazzling smile. His black hair was long and curly, tied at the nape of his neck.

“How dare you!”

“I was only doing what you asked. This is a communal dressing room, you know, so you need to get over your shyness. Plus, with a body like yours you’ve got nothing to be shy about.”

Melani’s hands flew to her chest as redness spread across her cheeks and neck.

“Get out! Now!”

“Sorry, love, no can do. I took a dip in the drink earlier and I need to change before the next show, which is in fifteen minutes.”

He sat down on a bench and put his foot out toward Melani.

“Care to help me with my boots? These things are a bitch to get off.”

“I will not. Please, leave so I can get dressed.”

“Hey, we’re all friends here and I’m in a hurry. I wouldn’t have pegged you as the shy type with the way you were checking out my, um...” his eyes drifted down and then lifted back up to hers.

A devilish grin gleamed in his eyes and Melani knew that her blush increased. He was so gorgeous, and she was half-naked. Her blush moved down to her neck and she shivered.

“I was not checking it, you, that...out. I was ...dammit, I was....”

Her mind went blank as she fumbled for a reasonable excuse and none came. She *had* been checking him out. She had stared at the bulge and wondered what was hidden beneath, what it would look like when it was freed from its prison.

She fought to get her breathing under control. Melani Cantor did not ogle men she'd just met. At least Melani Cantor the writer didn't. But what about Melani Cantor, the pirate wench? Surely she was allowed a look or two. Or three. Or four.

She licked her lips as he continued to undress.

"You have a name, shy one?"

"Melani." The word was a whisper. She stared as he dropped the second boot on the floor next to him and began to work the tight pants from his frame. A little bit more. There, almost. Would he be hard? She stifled a gasp and turned her back to him.

A low whistle filled the room. "I hate to tell you this, but you're not wearing a skirt, so your back's as naked as your front. I'm Royce McKenna. Welcome to *Ahoy, Matey*, Melani. Or should I call you Red?"

Melani fought not to turn around. She bent and recovered her discarded skirts, which she held up to cover her behind. She knew he must be naked by now. She closed her eyes and counted to ten.

"My hair isn't red." She knew her voice sounded wobbly and she hated it. Damn! Why was Ellie not here to save her from this embarrassment?

"No, but your face is," he said, humor evident in his voice. "I'm decent now. You can turn around. I must say, it disappoints me that you didn't want to see me *au natural*." When she faced him again he was strapping a jeweled cup to his crotch.

"The last one got lost in the water," he said with a laugh. "Good thing we have several backups. I must say, Melani, you're the prettiest wench they've hired in a while. Where will you be working?"

"I'm only here for a week. For the wedding."

"Really? Then you must be Ellie's friend from Texas." He strapped on his sword and then let out an expletive. "If I don't hurry, I'm going to miss my cue. See you later, Red."

He winked and left the room in a hurry. Melani dropped the skirts and cursed herself for being such a fool. He'd been flirting with her and all she'd done was stand there and stare. Had her social skills deteriorated so much? She ran her hands over her breasts. Peaked nipples met her fingers and she smiled. Her physical reaction to Royce was right on target. She knew that if she put her fingers between her legs they would come back wet.

For the first time since Ellie had moved to Florida, Melani could see the attraction. She'd never had a wet pirate undress in front of her at home.

### Chapter Three

“I was beginning to think you’d taken a wrong turn at the tavern.” Russell frowned at Royce as he made his way to the ship. “We have a packed house again, and you and I are almost on.”

“I met the most extraordinary woman in the dressing room. Ellie’s friend, Melani. She has these great...” Royce held his cupped hands out in front of his chest and wiggled his eyebrows.

“Yes, she does,” Russell said. “Oh, shit, there’s my cue. Pay attention.”

Royce watched Russell swagger onto the stage. He was a fantastic pirate king, and Royce was the perfect foil who was always trying to take over the ship. It sucked that he failed every time. Just once he wanted to defeat the king and come out the winner.

Royce’s mind wandered back to Melani. When he’d seen her in the dressing room his cock had hardened instantly. She was so lush and full. He’d stood in the doorway for several minutes, watching as she tried to reach the tie for her vest.

Her movements had sent his senses into overdrive. Every time she’d wiggled and jumped his cock had hardened more. He’d wanted to bend her over right then and there and pound himself into her wetness. Then he wanted to take her again, slow and easy. He wanted to feel her clit dance under his tongue, hear her cries of passion. Her nipples had been hard, that much was obvious. And he was positive that he’d caught that sweet smell of arousal drifting from her body.

His cock pounded uncomfortably in the codpiece. He was so focused on the fantasy of Melani in the middle of an orgasm that he missed his cue. He darted onto the stage seconds later and engaged Russell in battle.

The pirate king gave him a knowing smile as they fought. Royce tried to concentrate on his footwork, but failed miserably. The fight was scheduled to last three minutes. A minute and a half into the battle Royce tumbled over the side and into the water. The crowd roared its approval and the defeated mutineer swam toward shore.

After he’d reappeared and they’d taken their bows, Russell pulled him aside.

“You’re supposed to think with the big head. You didn’t put up enough of a fight, which makes me look bad.” Russell grinned and patted his friend on the shoulder.

“Sorry, Matey, I just couldn’t help myself. She was practically naked in front of me.”

Russell’s eyebrows shot up. “Really? You were in there all of what, ten minutes.”

Royce threw back his shoulders. “Well, I’ve always had that effect on women. I’d barely stepped inside the room when she was asking me to undress her.”

Russell laughed. “You wish.”

“It’s the truth. Of course, I think she thought I was Ellie.”

“That didn’t stop you, did it?”

“Let it be known that Royce McKenna never turns down a lady in distress. She was having a hard time with her ties.”

“Right. And you’re going to have a hard time going back to the changing room, putting on dry pants, and making it back here in time for the next show, so hurry up.”

Royce started for the gangplank and stopped when Russell’s voice rang out.

“Ellie and I are going out to dinner with my parents tonight. Do me a favor and entertain Melani for us?”

Royce ran a towel over his head and nodded. “I can do that.”

“You might practice your thrusts and parries with her. That’s the second time today you’ve ended up in the water.”

Royce shook his head as Russell walked off. Oh they’d thrust and parry, all right. But it would have nothing to do with fencing.

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Melani stared into the open refrigerator. There was nothing but cheese, bread and milk inside. A few cartons with leftover take out lurked behind the milk jug, but there was no telling how long it had been there. If she wanted to eat, she’d have to walk down to the park restaurant. Since Ellie and Russell lived in a cottage near the park hotel it would be a quick stroll. A glance at her watch showed that it would be open for three more hours. She put money in her skirt pocket and locked the house using the spare key that Ellie had given her.

Then she turned, and ran into the brick wall of Royce McKenna’s chest.

“Going somewhere, Red?” He pressed her into the door and she resisted the urge to look down so she could see how his bulge looked in his jeans.

“To the restaurant, for dinner.” At least her voice wasn’t as wobbly as it’d been that afternoon.

“Good. I made us reservations for eight. I don’t know about you, but I’m starved.”

He licked his lips and then lowered his eyes to her chest. Melani’s blush returned and she chuckled nervously.

“I don’t think my breasts are on the menu.”

“Are you sure? Maybe we can talk to the chef about a special request.”

“Sorry, no substitutions,” she said saucily.

Royce raised his eyes to her lips. His look was pure sex. She felt naked and open for his perusal, and she loved the way it made her feel. Sensual and hot. Wet and warm.

“I’ve waited all day for this.” His voice was husky and her already hardened nipples shot out further.

He leaned in, caressing her lips lightly before taking full possession, pressing down just hard enough for Melani to feel the kiss to the tips of her toes.

“I want you, Melani. I’ve thought about you all day.” Royce’s breath was hot against her mouth. Melani felt the stirrings of wetness between her legs. She fought against the feelings rising inside her. She didn’t know this man. Lord knew she wanted him, but sleeping with him would be a bad, bad idea.

“I don’t sleep with men I’ve just met.”

Royce pressed his body harder against her and Melani moaned. The bulge was definitely not built into his costume.

“It’s not as if I’m some stranger you met in a bar. After all, I’ve already seen you naked.”

Melani laid her forehead against his chest and laughed. She looked up into his beautiful eyes and shook her head.

“Do you put Pirate King on your occupation when you fill out forms? Or just ‘seducer of women?’”

“Ouch.” Royce grabbed his chest in fake pain. “I’m not the king, just a peon who’s always trying to take over the ship. And the only women I seduce are the beautiful ones who undress in front of me the first day I meet them.”

He kissed her again, this time his tongue darted out and demanded entrance. Melani opened her mouth slightly and he pushed his way inside. Both of them moaned and he pulled back, grinning.

“Admit it. You want me, too.”

“That’s not the point. The point is...”

Royce put his hand over her mouth and shook his head. “You’re a very analytical person, aren’t you?”

Melani nodded and he smiled. “Russell says you’re a journalist. So, during dinner, I’ll give you my life story. You can ask me anything you want, and I won’t be a stranger anymore.”

Melanie nodded in agreement and they made the short walk to the restaurant. The hostess quickly led them to a reserved table in the corner. The restaurant looked as if it had been built during the time of the pirates. The lighting was low. The wood was old, or made to look that way. Wooden tables spread throughout the room were decorated with kerosene lanterns.

Tourists crowded the tables and Melani let her gaze wander around the room.

“You like?” Royce’s voice was deep.

“Yes. Very piratey. It’ll make great copy.”

She turned back to Royce, who was studying her intently. She felt her blush come back over her.

“So, Red, what do you like to eat? The restaurant has a little bit of everything, meat, fish, poultry. Chef John makes a mean hamburger. But he also does great steak and shrimp, which is what I would personally recommend.”

“Sounds good.”

The waitress approached the table and Royce looked at her with raised eyebrows. She nodded and he ordered the steak and shrimp for both of them, looking back at her to ask how she wanted her steak cooked.

Once the waitress had delivered two mugs of ale, Melani shifted in her chair. She started to go into interviewer mode, but Royce beat her to the punch.

“I was born July 22, 1971 in Rapid City, South Dakota. My parents are free spirits and moved to Florida soon after that to work at a homeless shelter. They were rather disappointed when I decided to become a lawyer. They said I was betraying my upbringing and joining the establishment.”



“You’re a lawyer?” Her eyes widened and he nodded.

“It was the hair that threw you, right? I quit to become a pirate. The lawyer money was good, but offered absolutely no job satisfaction.”

He grinned at Melani and then winked at the waitress when she delivered salads.

Melani hid a smile behind her napkin. He was a natural born flirt. She wondered how many park employees he’d taken to his bed. A man like him probably didn’t sleep alone very often.

She took a sip of her ale and searched her mind for questions she could ask Royce about the park, but once again, Royce beat her to the punch. The waitress was barely away from the table when he started talking again.

“Now, where was I? Oh, yes. I own a dog. I’ve only been married once. I don’t have any kids. I’ve never had a venereal disease. And yes, I’ll wear a condom.”

Melani almost choked on her salad. She swallowed the lettuce and took a drink of her ale.

“You make a convincing case, counselor.”

“Well, you’re only going to be here for a week, and I hate to waste time.”

“Just the same, I’m not used to falling into bed with men I’ve just met.”

“OK, I guess I can wait a night.” He took a bite of salad and washed it down with ale. “Your turn.”

“No, you see how this works is I ask the questions and you answer them. The public doesn’t want to read about me, they want to read about modern day people who dress up every day as pirates.”

“But I want to know about you.”

Melani finished her salad and pushed the bowl away. “Do you live here, at the park?”

“Shouldn’t you have a tape recorder, or a pen and paper?” He piled his salad plate on top of hers. The look he gave her told her that he was thinking about matters other than pens or paper. She squirmed and felt her nipples harden.

“Worried about being misquoted? Don’t worry, I have a great memory.”

“Fair enough. Yes, I live here at the park, on a houseboat.”

Melani’s eyes widened.

“You live on a ship?”

“No, I live on a houseboat. How do you expect to quote me accurately?” He grinned to show he was teasing. “When the park first opened, Russell lived on the boat and used it as a changing station for the performances. Once we went big time and built the hotel, we added new buildings for that and I took over the houseboat. Kidd and I have lived there for years.”

“Kidd?” Melani shook her head as the waitress delivered their meals, along with new glasses of ale.

“My dog, Captain Kidd. He’s an English bulldog. You’ll love him.”

“And you live on a houseboat with him?”

“Yup. He loves the water. He thinks he’s a seal or something. You should see him in there, doing the dog paddle.”

Royce brought his hands close to his body and moved them around in an imitation of the dog paddle.

Melani burst out laughing at the image of a short, squatty dog doing the same thing in the water.

“I won’t tell him you laughed at him.”

“Thanks.”

“You can meet him tonight, if you like.” Royce’s voice was low. He reached across the table and took her free hand, caressing her palm with his thumb.

“Do you pick up all the new park employees?”

“Only those who let me undress them before I know their names.”

Melani blushed furiously.

“That was a, well, uh...”

“Yeah, it was. It got my attention.” He raised his eyebrows up and down.

“I’m not in the habit of sleeping with men I just met.”

“You’ve said that before. Several times. But what about when the man you meet’s a nasty little pirate who’s used to getting what he wants?”

His deep voice made Melani tingle. Her breasts rose and fell with the rhythm of her breathing. Royce’s eyes fastened on them and she felt her nipples tighten. His gaze lifted to hers and she knew that all was lost.

The tension between them was thick, almost like a physical caress. He was so handsome, and the look he gave her made her feel as if she was already under him, his lips trailing across her neck.

“I...we should, uh...”

“Is everything all right?”

Melani jerked back and stifled a laugh when Royce muttered, “crap,” under his breath.

He turned to the waitress, a smile plastered on his face. “Yeah, Jess. Everything is fine. We’re just chatting.”

The young woman turned toward Melani “You’re that writer friend of Ellie’s, right?”

“Yes, I am.” Melani took a drink of her ale.

“Cool. I hope you come in here with your camera. Is this like, a national thing? Is it going to be, like, on TV?”

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Royce sat back in his chair and watched Melani talk with Jess. It had been years since he’d felt such a strong pull toward a woman. He flirted a lot, true, but he was very picky about the women he became involved with. Melani easily met all of his standards and then some.

It wasn’t just her curvaceous figure that caught his eye. It was her intelligence, and the way she carried herself with grace and self-assurance. He took a bite of his steak and chewed slowly as Melani promised Jess that she would be back into the restaurant to include the restaurant staff in her story.

When Jess was gone, she turned to him.

“Sorry about that.”

“Me, too.”

“I’m very attracted to you, Royce.”

He grinned. “That’s always nice to hear.”

“But I just can’t go to bed with you. I’m sorry.”

“You’ll change your mind tomorrow.” He took another bite of his food.

“I’m working tomorrow.”

“Not all day. The park events close down at nine. How about you come to the boat about thirty minutes later? I’ll fix us a late dinner, and you’ll be able to meet Kidd and see that I’m a really nice guy.”

“I’m going to have to work on my story tomorrow night. I have to transcribe notes and make sure I don’t forget anything.”

He watched her eat for a few minutes, then leaned across the table.

“It’s the last boat on the end. You can’t miss it. It’s the only tall ship that doesn’t actually sail. It’s built into the dock.”

Melani swallowed, then wiped her mouth with her napkin.

“What else do you do at the park, besides fight with the pirate king?”

Royce leaned back in his chair. “In the mornings I give tours of one of the ships and provide a history lesson on pirates. There’s one at the top of every hour from ten until two. The pirate fights start at four and run until eight.”

“Sounds interesting. I might have to come to one of your lectures.”

“You’ll distract me and I’ll forget the difference between buried treasure and treasure that’s right in front of your eyes.”

Heat spread through Melani’s body. “Well, all you have to do is look for the X, right?”

“I don’t know. In this case I think the treasure may be marked with a Y.”

## Chapter Four

Melani leaned back in her chair and listened to Royce as he lectured the crowd. Well, she wouldn't exactly call it a lecture. They were entranced by his words, his use of funny voices and his gestures, most of them the done as if he were in the middle of a sword fight.

She'd smiled when he began his talk by saying that the pirates who so enthralled people today were the romanticized version. That in real life, pirates were bloodthirsty men, and women, who sailed the seas in search of riches.

"They were not particularly nice people," Royce said. "But, here at *Ahoy, Matey* we try to make up for that."

Now he was telling them the difference between a pirate and a privateer, a buccaneer and a corsair.

Melani allowed herself to enjoy the presentation, making sure that she took plenty of notes to include in her copy. She also enjoyed the view.

Today, Royce wore tight black pants and another fluffy white shirt cut to the waist. His sword had been replaced with a long, red sash that wrapped around his lean hips, its ties hanging to his knees. At the foot of his shiny black boot sat a beautiful, brindle-colored English bulldog, who had a red bandana tied around his neck.

Kidd seemed to be enjoying himself. From time to time, Royce would hand him a small package tied in a bandana, and Kidd would trot out to an audience member to give them the gift. Royce had explained early in the talk that the packages actually contained small treasure maps. Tourists could use the maps to locate treasure that was hidden around the park. Kidd seemed to love his job, and the attention he received from people in the audience.

Melani didn't think it was possible, but Royce looked more attractive today than he had the day before. He was in his element, giving the tourists an education while they soaked up the park's fun atmosphere.

Royce gave his talks on the deck of the pirate ship where the crews held their fights later in the day. The beautiful cove provided a stunning backdrop, with the water glistening and the trees blowing in the gentle wind.

Royce looked right at home.

Melani, however, didn't feel so at home. She wasn't comfortable with the idea of wearing her costume and feeling so exposed. She'd convinced Ellie that donning her "pirate wench" outfit while she was gathering information for her story was a bad idea.

"People will come up to me and expect me to know things," she'd said. "When, in essence, I'm just as confused as they are. I've only been here once before."

The excuse had worked, at least for the time being, and Melani was dressed in a flowing skirt and short-sleeved blouse that helped her blend in with the other tourists. She would change into her pirate wench outfit before she went to work in one of the ticket booths at three that afternoon. She planned to work until seven, leaving just enough time to catch one of the pirate shows that Russell put on aboard one of the ships.

And then...who knew?

She bit her lip. She couldn't decide if she was going to take Royce up on his dinner offer or not. Doing so would surely put her in a situation that would be very, very dangerous. She'd barely gotten away from him the previous evening before succumbing to the desire to melt into his arms.

If she went to his house tonight, dressed as a pirate wench, she was sure that she would act like one and take him up on his offer of lovemaking. No, not lovemaking. Sex. He'd never once mentioned the word love. He'd simply made it obvious that he wanted her body.

And Melani was sure that if she were on his ship—scratch that—his houseboat, she just might let him have it.

Not exactly something she could include in her copy.

A loud bark caught her attention. Kidd sat in front of her. He'd dropped a package at her feet and she knew that the bark was a demand for payment—several good pats on the head. She did just that, scratching his ears and laughing when he barked his thanks and trotted back to Royce.

She picked up the package, amazed that it wasn't covered in dog drool, and offered it to the women next to her, who sat with two small children and a man who was obviously her husband.

The children were wearing pirate hats that they'd bought in the gift shop, and the boy, around seven, wore an eye patch.

"Oh we couldn't," the woman said. "He gave it to you."

"No, I insist. I'm here doing a newspaper story. All I ask is that you let me see the map, and then meet me later so I can see what you found."

The family readily agreed to meet Melani at seven at the main ship. Then, the mother unrolled the map to the obvious delight of her youngsters. The parchment displayed a diagram of several park attractions with a large X near the food stations.

Great marketing ploy, Melani thought. Get them moving toward the areas where they had a chance to buy something.

Royce was now talking about how pirates became romanticized, focusing on their roles in literature and movies.

"The movies always showed the swashbuckling hero battling the bad guy, and getting the girl in the end."

He looked directly at her and winked.

"And we all know a pirate gets what he wants," Royce said. "Some riches are just different than others."

She returned his grin and laughed when he invited a young audience member up to fence with him. He chose a young boy, who looked to be about nine, and in the end, Royce fell to the deck while the audience cheered for the victor.

Afterward, Melani watched him pose for pictures with the ladies and shake hands with the men. When the crowd cleared and the seats started to fill again, she went up to him.

"I'm impressed. You're very entertaining."

He gave her a private grin. "You have no idea. But you will."

She pointed to the gold hoop he wore in his ear. If it was possible, the earring gave him an even more roguish look than he'd had the night before.

"I didn't notice that last night."

“I forgot to put it on. Terrible of me, huh?” He took a step closer to her and she could feel the heat of his breath against her skin. Her body tingled in response. “Maybe tomorrow morning you can make sure I’m properly dressed before I leave the house.”

His voice was low and before she could respond, he stepped back and slapped his hand against his thigh.

“Come here, Kidd. Meet Melani.”

She bent down to pat the dog as he eagerly appeared for his introduction.

“How’d you train him to deliver the maps?”

“Kidd’s a natural ham,” Royce said. “We practiced with him a few times, and he got the idea of what he had to do. He knows that it earns him his kibble.”

A family came up then, and Royce shook hands with the father, pinched the mother’s cheek and leaned down to give the children small bags that contained chocolate coins.

Melani took the time to exit gracefully, catching Royce’s eye and mouthing her good-bye. He nodded, winked and went back to his work. The more she watched him, the more she knew that she wouldn’t be able to resist him for much longer.

She still had a week to go, so she had to make sure that she didn’t put herself in a situation where she would fall into bed with him, something she was sure she would regret.

Or would she? How many women could say they’d actually slept with a pirate?



## Chapter Five

Selling tickets and answering questions from park attendees wasn't nearly as easy as Melani had thought it would be. She'd spent the afternoon in a front booth with a woman named Jaynie Monvale, who looked to be in her mid-thirties. Jaynie seemed unflappable, laughing and smiling no matter what.

She deftly handled difficult customers and always had an answer for every question. Having never worked anywhere but in journalism, Melani was amazed by the number of people who wanted freebies, or were angry at Jaynie if their credit card was declined—as if she had something to do with it.

"You learn to go with the flow," Jaynie had said. "We want people to have fun, and that fun starts at the front gate. So you smile and let them know that you'll do anything you can to help them. And they're usually very appreciative."

Melani didn't doubt that the fun started at the front gate. The huts were all shaped like the bow of a ship, with railings at the front where customers lined up. Once at the gate, they inserted the gold coins given to them by the attendees and spun the wheel, shaped like a ship's wheel, which opened the gates for them to enter.

Each person got to spin the wheel, but Melani enjoyed the children's reactions the most. They giggled and laughed as they took a hold of opposing pegs and sent the wheel flying.

"Do you work here all year?" Melani asked Jaynie as she handed coins to the children.

"No, I'm a teacher," Jaynie said. "I only work at *Ahoy, Matey* during the summer to earn some extra money. Plus, I love being out in crowds and watching the kids have a great time."

"So, can I assume that since you work here you are interested in pirates?"

"Are you kidding? When I was a kid, I used to watch Errol Flynn movies with my mother on Saturday mornings. It was a ritual. She'd pop popcorn and we'd drink sodas and watch TV. It was so much fun and I became fascinated with pirates. I have a whole room dedicated to them."

Melani's eyes popped open. "Really? That would make a great sidebar to my story. Would you mind if I came over to see it, maybe take some pictures?"

“Sure. I’d love it. Can I wear my saucy outfit?” Jaynie wiggled her hips and Melani laughed.

“It’ll make the pictures even better. At least you wear yours well.” Melani tugged on her blouse in an effort to show less of her breasts.

“So do you. You just need to get more comfortable in your own skin.”

The cry of “shiver me timbers!” ran through the air and Melani froze.

“What was...” She stopped mid-sentence and leaned out to watch as a group of about six pirate men ran into the crowd and grabbed a family, heading them toward the gate.

Jaynie laughed. “They just started that last week. Twice each day, a group of pirates “kidnaps” a family from the line and that family gets free admission.”

“Great PR tool.”

“Yeah, Royce came up with it.” Jaynie passed coins to a family and told them to have a good time.

“Really?” Melani tried to keep the interest out of her voice, but she knew that it didn’t work.

Sure enough, Jaynie turned to her with a gleam in her eye.

“So, has the park’s Errol Flynn caught your attention?”

“Errol Flynn?” A shiver ran up Melani’s spine.

“Yeah, the gorgeous swashbuckling hero that always get the girl in the end. He’s pretty handsome.” Jaynie singsonged and Melani laughed.

“He’s the park lothario, huh?” She tried not to put too much emphasis on her words, so that Jaynie wouldn’t know that she was too interested in her answer.

“He’s a flirt, that’s for sure,” Jaynie replied. “He catches the eye of a lot of the female workers here.”

*Are you one of them? Does he do more than flirt? Does he do more than look?*

She couldn’t figure out a nice way to ask, so she kept her questions to herself. Asking too many questions about Royce would indicate an interest, and she wasn’t interested.

Or was she?

A soft grin lit up her face when she remembered their conversation from last night. If Jess hadn’t interrupted them, Melani had no doubt that she would have gone to his houseboat with

him and enjoyed a night of uninhibited sex. And while the idea was nice, in the long run it wasn't practical, or safe.

She would have to make sure that she wasn't alone with Royce again. He was one pirate that was just too tempting.

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Melani didn't bother to go to Ellie's and change clothes once she finished her shift. She went straight to the ship. She needed to view the "battle" between Russell and Royce so that she could write about it. Her plan was to go to the back of the ship, watch, and then hopefully make her escape without Royce noticing her.

The clatter of steel blades fighting for dominance reached her ears long before she walked the gangway onto the ship.

Royce and Russell were fighting, both of them thrusting their swords at each other and expertly dodging the blows. After a few minutes, Royce tumbled onto the deck and Russell put the tip of his sword near his throat.

"Do you yield?" His cry was met with applause from the audience, who yelled for Royce to "walk the plank, walk the plank, walk the plank!"

Melani bit back a smile. She knew that the true ending to the "battle" was Royce stepping off the edge of the plank that went into the lagoon. Ellie had told her that the "splash" that could be heard was faked, and that Royce actually landed on an inflated mattress to keep him from getting wet during each performance. Sometimes, though, he missed and ended up wet.

When Russell walked him toward his fate, at sword point, he caught her eye. So much for him not noticing her. He calmly walked to the edge of the plank, saluted in her direction and took a step off the end. The splash threw the crowd into a frenzy, as did Russell's announcement that the ship was his, and always would be.

Seconds after Royce fell overboard, Melani walked back down the gangway and made her way toward the food court. She'd promised Ellie that she would help her hand out treasure to the people who used their maps. Plus, she really didn't want to see Royce again. It was going to be difficult enough to resist his offer of dinner tonight without having to see him face to face.

Close to the time she was supposed to be there, she would call him and tell him that she wasn't going to attend. It would be easier to reject him over the phone. In person, he was just too

damn appealing. If she went to bed with him, it would be little more than a one-night stand. She'd never done that before, and she didn't plan to start now.

When she arrived at the food court, she was surprised to find so many people waiting to claim treasure. The people had followed the maps given to them at Royce's talks that morning. The treasure ranged from discount tickets for a return park visit to free food to coupons for toys for the kids.

Ellie immediately put Melani to work, explaining that the families were given a choice of what they wanted. They worked for almost two solid hours before there was a lull in the action.

Ellie reached into a cooler under the table and brought out two bottles of water, giving one to Melani and taking a deep swig of her own.

"Is it always this busy?"

"Most of the time, yes. June is especially busy right after the kids get out of school. Business really picks up in July, and doesn't start to wind down until the end of August. Of course since it's Florida, we're open year round, but December and January tend to be the slowest months. After that, things pick up a bit."

Melani pulled out her notebook to jot down figures and facts that Ellie gave her.

She took advantage of the crowd to talk to a few people who agreed to be quoted in a small newspaper, with the possibility of the article going national.

When Ellie left her to go count tills for the day, Melani stored the rest of the pirate loot in a small shed, locked it up and headed toward the main park. She was near where the path diverged to go to the main park or the docks when she saw Royce. He leaned against the railing, still dressed in pirate attire.

She slowed her step and tried, unsuccessfully, to hide the grin that appeared on her face.

"You've been avoiding me," he said, his voice deep.

"No, I've been working. That's why I'm here, remember?"

"Come on, Red. You don't have to lie to me. I know that you left the boat so you didn't have to talk to me. We have dinner plans, remember?"

She shook her head. Her pulse raced and she fought to get the image of him naked out of her mind. It didn't work.

"They were never finalized."

He sighed deeply and shook his head, a huge smile appearing on his face.

“Well, I guess I’m just going to have to be a good pirate and take matters into my own hands.”

Melani’s eyes widened, at first misunderstanding what he’d said. Then, when he took several steps toward her, she realized what he meant. He wasn’t talking about sex. He was talking about abducting her. Pirate style.

## Chapter Six

Royce grinned. Melani cocked her head in return and then gasped when Royce bent down, put his arms around her thighs, lifted her, and put her over his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” Melani tried to push away but couldn’t break free of his hold. He had her firmly attached and he wasn’t letting go. He started to walk back toward the shore at a brisk clip.

“I’m doing what every good pirate does. I’m taking what I want. And what I want right now is you.”

Since the park was closed, the only people left were stragglers, who thought Melani’s “abduction” was part of the park activities. Twice, Royce had slapped her ass and yelled for her to “behave, wench!”

Several park employees laughed as they walked by.

“Where are you taking me?” She’d given up yelling and pounding on his back. It wasn’t doing anything but wasting her energy. Besides, being captured by a pirate was the most fun she’d had in ages.

“To my ship.”

Minutes later he walked up the plank to his houseboat, which was decorated just like a pirate ship. He made his way below decks and unceremoniously dumped her on a large bed that fit into the bay window of the ship, facing the water.

“You’re mine, wench.”

Royce’s chest heaved from exertion, and Melani, somewhat shaken by the short trip, knew that she could probably run off and he would let her. But she had no intention of doing so. Three hours earlier she’d been convinced that she wouldn’t make love to him. Now she wanted nothing more.

They stared at each other for a minute, and then Melani trailed one hand down the front of her bodice. “Don’t hurt me, Captain, for I am a virgin.”

*Where the hell had that come from?*

“Not for long, wench.” He cupped his crotch and Melani moaned.

“Now, strip.” His voice was deep with desire.

“But my father is the governor. He will give you money, jewels, anything for my return.”

Royce moved toward her and placed his hand at the vee between her legs, cupping it gently through her skirts and petticoats.

“This is the only jewel I want. Now, do as you’re told, or I’ll punish you. Then I’ll take what I want.”

Melani raised her eyebrows as if she were considering which option to take. Then she stood and turned.

“You’ll have to unlace my vest.”

She trembled as he went to work, his fingers as strong and sturdy as they had been yesterday when he’d performed the very same chore.

This time, however, when the vest was undone she shrugged it off her shoulders and pulled her blouse over her head. She unhooked her bra, faltering for a moment before completely uncovering her breasts. It had been a while since she’d been naked in front of a man. The bedroom was dark save for the light drifting in from the living area, but still, she wasn’t sure she wanted him to see her. She crossed her arms over her chest and turned to him. Royce’s sharp intake of breath let her know that he appreciated the sight of her breasts, and bolstered her confidence.

“You promise to be gentle?”

“I promise nothing.”

An evil thought ran through her head. She was making it too easy for him. What pirate captive would just say, “OK, take me”?

Melani shook her head, and then said. “I’ve changed my mind.”

The look of disappointment that spread across Royce’s face was priceless and Melani knew in that moment that if she truly meant she didn’t want to have sex with him, he would stop. He took a step back and she gave him a coy look.

“My virginity means too much to me. If you want my maidenhead, Captain, you’re going to have to fight for it.” With her arms in place in front of her bra she bolted for the door. Seconds before she reached the portal, Royce’s arm came around her waist and pulled her back into him.

“Your maidenhead will be mine, wench.” He picked her up and tossed her back on the bed. Then he moved to a dresser and began rummaging in the drawers.

While he searched, Melani made another halfhearted break for the door. Royce gave a cry of triumph and then captured her again. He straddled her and stared, the desire in his face evident.

Seconds later he held up a long, red sash, his lips turned up into an evil grin.

“You had your chance, wench. Now we do it my way.” He dropped the sash on her stomach as he pulled the bra off her body. Then he placed her hands together and wrapped the sash around them, securing them tightly before attaching it to the headboard.

With her arms bound above her head, Melani felt exposed and vulnerable. She also felt wicked and delicious. She struggled halfheartedly and fought to keep a smile from spreading across her face.

“Let me go or I’ll see you hung.”

Royce looked down at his crotch and then grinned at Melani.

“I already am. You’ll see that fact for yourself soon enough.”

He kissed her lips and rained kisses on her neck and shoulders. Then he pushed her breasts together and massaged them, his thumbs caressing each nipple.

“Oh, Royce.”

He gently pinched a nipple.

“Captain Royce.” His voice was low, deep and seductive.

She giggled and he pinched the other nipple.

“Say it.” The words were a playful command and Melani moaned.

“Captain Royce.”

For a reward, Royce took a nipple into his mouth and suckled her gently, running his tongue around the sensitive nub until Melani cried out in pleasure. Then he moved his mouth to the other nipple and did the same.

“You’re so beautiful.” He twirled her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers and Melani sighed.

Never in her wildest dreams had she expected to be tied to a bed in a pirate ship while a handsome swashbuckler lavished her breasts with licks and kisses while telling her how beautiful she was.



She bucked under his attentions, and then laughed when he wiggled his eyebrows at her.

“Don’t tease me,” she said. “Take me, Captain Royce.”

“Take you how, my little captive?”

“You know.”

Royce looked down. He ran his hands up her thighs, stopping just short of the aching spot between her legs, then sliding back down. When he pushed his hands up again, he brought material with them, gathering her skirts and petticoats above her hips and gently tracing his fingers over her satiny panties before removing them.

“Take you here, wench?” His fingers dipped into her damp curls and Melani struggled against her bonds.

“Yes, Captain Royce, take me there.”

“As you wish, my sweet little virgin.” He leered at her.

He gently pushed her folds apart, lowered his head and took her clit into his mouth, sucking hard.

Melani bucked her hips against his face as he darted his tongue around her sensitive core, sending shock waves of pleasure through her body. Her orgasm built and threatened to break free. As if sensing it, Royce took her clit between his teeth and bit gently. The sweet pain pushed her over the edge and Melani came, her hips shooting off the bed. She begged him for more as he continued to suck on her clit. She pulled against her bonds and heard his laughter as he broke contact, and then ran his tongue around her aching nub.

“That’s not what I meant.” Melani was panting, her breath coming in uneven gasps as she felt another firestorm build in her womb.

“No? You didn’t want me to suck your little clit? Since you didn’t say, ‘Fuck me, Captain Royce.’ I figured you wanted a little more play, first.”

“I’ve never said those words to a man, and I don’t think... Royce, please!”

Royce sat back on his knees. One hand gently worked her clit while the other parted her folds. He pushed two fingers inside her pussy and she moaned.

“Please what? If you want it, you’re going to have to ask for it. I want to be the first man to hear you say those words.”

His fingers increased their pressure and Melani could feel the need building higher. She was going to peak again, something she’d never done before.

Royce rolled her clit between his fingers, leaned over and ran his tongue over the enslaved flesh, and Melani came again, her hips shooting off the bed as she did exactly what he wanted. She begged him.

“Fuck me, Royce, fuck me! Take me! I want your cock. Now!”

Royce lay down on top of her and kissed her. She could taste her own juices and she relished the feel of his tongue in her mouth.

“Anything you say, wench.”

He stood and quickly removed his clothing, grabbing a foil packet from his pocket. Melani’s eyes widened as he sheathed himself in a condom. He was huge. Long and thick.

When he was above her again their gazes locked.

“I want my hands.” Her words were low and Royce shook his head.

“You can play later. Right now I take my wench my way, remember?”

She felt the tip of him probing for entrance and a soft cry escaped her lips.

“More.” She closed her eyes and relished the feel of him inside her.

“Now, now. Don’t be so impatient. You’re a virgin, remember? We have to go slowly.”

He pulled out and then gently pushed back inside. Melani thought she would go crazy as he repeated the slow, even thrusts. She tried to buck up into him but his weight held her down.

“Look at me.” He pushed his in cock deeper and Melani opened her eyes.

“Tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m yours, Captain Royce.”

With one hard stroke he was inside her, sheathed to the hilt. Melani gasped at the way he filled her. She wrapped her legs tighter around his hips as he slowly stroked in and out of her wetness.

He lowered his head to her breasts and nuzzled each nipple until Melani cried out in delight. Then he brought his face up over hers and cupped her face in his hands.

“Come with me, Melani.”

“I can’t. Not again.”

“You can.” He shifted slightly, and his next thrust awakened a part of her that she didn’t know existed. She moaned out his name as he thrust over and over and over again. Each push caused more heat to build and she knew that he was right. She could come again.

His thrusts became harder and she whimpered.

“That’s it, baby. You feel so wonderful; so wet and warm and tight. Are you almost there? Are you ready?”

Melani nodded and bit her lip as Royce thrust harder and harder, until Melani thought she couldn’t stand it anymore. Then, suddenly, the dam burst.

“Royce!” It overtook her like an avalanche, raining down pinpoints of pleasure all over her body. She giggled when Royce muttered, “Fuck yeah,” in her ear as his orgasm overtook him.

When they were both aware of their surroundings again he kissed her gently. He freed her hands and lifted himself from the bed.

“I’ll be right back.” He left for what Melani assumed was a bathroom, returning moments later with a warm towel that he used to gently wipe the engorged flesh between her legs.

Royce threw the towel on the floor and lay down next to her. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her head into his chest.

“You OK? Did I hurt your arms?”

“No. It was fantastic. I’ve never done anything like it before.”

“Well, we’ll have to think of other fun things for you to try, now that you’re a pirate wench.” He stroked her hair as he held her close.

Seconds later, Melani heard his deep, even breathing and she knew that he’d fallen asleep. He may have thought himself to be “just a peon,” but to her, at this very minute, she couldn’t think of a more worthy pirate king.

Chapter Seven

Melani watched Royce as he slept. It was amazing how quickly she'd gone from being a "virgin" to being a wanton little wench. It had been years since she'd allowed herself to experience physical pleasure with a man, and now she wondered why.

Royce had taken her to new heights, places she'd never been before. It made her feel so very warm and tingly. She watched his chest rise and fall in gentle rhythm and she felt stirrings of desire deep inside her. This was so unlike her. She was lying here, half naked, after being thoroughly fucked by a man she'd just met.

The practical side of her was as disapproving as ever, telling her how awful she was, and how she'd regret going to bed with Royce. The pirate wench side of her begged for more.

She listened to the two sides debate for a few moments.

*What happens when it's time to go home? Do you think he'll give you anymore than a kiss and a "thanks for the fuck?"*

*Who cares about what happens then? I want to have more of him now.*

*Yeah, but six months from now you'll be kicking yourself in the ass. What if you get pregnant? What if he's diseased? You're an idiot.*

*Geeze, he wore a condom. Plus, it's not like he's a guy I picked up in a bar. He's a friend of Ellie and Russell's.*

*Yeah, but you're known him for all of what, two days? You're a whore.*

*Yeah, I am. Bring it on!*

*Humph. Well, when you're sitting alone in your apartment, I won't say I told you so.*

*Yes you will, but I don't care.*

A smile drifted across her face. She reached out a finger and traced the outer line of his lips. He twitched, but he didn't waken. Practical side be damned. This was her one chance at being a lusty wench, and she planned on taking advantage of the situation.

She pushed back the sheet and examined his cock. In slumber, it was still impressive. The memory of it sliding in and out of her wet pussy sent shivers of delight down her spine. She

stood, pulled the sheet to the bottom of the bed and then crawled over him so that her mouth was right above his cock.

Her tongue darted out and licked the tip. His cock moved in response and she did it again, reveling in the idea of taking him in her mouth, of feeling him deep in her throat.

She ran her tongue around the head, dipping it into the center. She licked up and down the shaft, and smiled when she heard him moan. "Oh baby. That feels so good."

"Does it? How does this feel?"

The tip of his cock disappeared inside Melani's mouth and his moan turned into a loud growl.

"Fuck, yeah. You're a naughty little wench. I thought you told me you were a virgin."

In answer, she slid her mouth down his length and sucked him in as far as she could. Then she lifted up and tossed back her hair.

"I lied." She took him back in her mouth, savoring the sounds of his laughter as he wove his fingers into her hair. The idea of doing something so naughty, so out of character, spurred her on.

Melani moaned around his cock and abruptly stood up.

"What? Baby, what's wrong?"

"I want to take all of you. I can't do that from this position."

"You're wicked. I thought you didn't do things like..."

"Are you going to scoot over here, or are you going to lay there and talk?" Melani stood and put her hands on her hips. He moved closer to her and ran his hand along her thigh.

"You nasty little thing. Take off that skirt."

"Not yet." A moan escaped her lips. Then she bent over and sucked him back in. Royce's caresses sent the soft material of her petticoat over her thighs and ass, spurring her on. She took him deeper, then pulled back and repeated the movement, going deeper with each thrust.

He felt delicious in her mouth, warm and hard and throbbing. His fingers tickled her curls and Melani's pussy tingled.

"Take it off, Red. I want you naked."

She didn't hesitate, sending the material sliding to the floor and going back to her task, loving the feel of him in her mouth.

"Spread your legs for me, baby."

She complied immediately and moaned when his fingers dipped into her wetness. He sought her clit as she continued her up and down dance.

Finally, when she thought she'd adjusted to his size, she relaxed her throat muscles and pulled him fully inside her mouth. She sucked with her throat, fighting the reflex to push him out, and loving the feel of his hardness as he pulsed inside her. She'd only done this a few times before, and she'd forgotten how much she loved it.

Royce's fingers slipped inside her, pumping her harder and harder as she sucked. She could tell he was close. His loud moans and groans filled the room and gave her a powerful feeling she'd never had before. She'd never, ever allowed Charles to come in her mouth, but she wanted Royce to.

She wanted to taste him, to feel his essence slide down her throat. When he bucked his hips up gently, she moved her fingers from his thigh and gently cupped his balls, sending him over the edge.

"Fuck!" Royce bucked harder and she felt him erupt in her mouth as she sucked as if her life depended on it, loving the feeling of doing something so nasty, so out of character for her.

When she released him from her mouth she licked the tip, threw her head back and gave a cry of delight. She'd done it, and it was exhilarating.

Royce pulled her across him onto the bed. He covered her body with his and slipped his fingers back inside her, pumping her hard. His thumb found her clit and he nibbled on her earlobe.

"You like that, baby? Tell me you like it."

"I like it, Royce. So good."

"I wanna know every inch of you, every dimple, every curve, every spot that makes you tingle."

Melani nodded. His fingers were making it hard to concentrate on conversation. She could still taste him in her mouth; taste the salty maleness of him.

"I want you to come for me, Melani. I want to watch your face, see the pleasure seep into your bones."

"Royce, I..."

"Here, or here? Which is better?" He moved his finger around on her clit as Melani rolled her head from side to side.

“Tell me, tell me where. Here? Here?”

“I, I., oh THERE!” Melani’s hips shot off the bed. Royce captured her head in the crook of his arm and she could feel his eyes on her as he continued to stroke her with his talented fingers.

When she’d settled back down he kissed her softly. Then he settled down next to her and pulled her into his arms.

“You’ve never let a man come in your mouth before, have you?”

“Was it that bad?” She looked up into his face.

“No, it was that good. Thank you.”

He kissed her again and she snuggled deeper into his arms. Practical Melani had become a wild woman. And she’d loved every minute of it.

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“I’ll have her home in a little while, *Dad*.”

Royce’s annoyed words floated to her from somewhere outside the room. Melani rolled over and stretched. Her body was sore, from her arms to that sweet spot between her legs that hadn’t been used in so long, and never so deliciously.

She hugged herself as she remembered Royce’s erotic touch. She loved the way he’d caressed her breasts, and sucked her clit into his mouth. She’d loved the way he’d felt in her mouth.

Then, abruptly, she slapped herself upside the head. What was she doing? She’d gone to bed with a man she’d known less than two days.

Panic set in as she wondered what Royce must think about her. He would think she was like all the women he’d probably bedded in his life. Use them once and throw them over the side.

She peered at the windows and was mortified to see daylight drifting in through the sheers. A quick glance around a room located a clock that read seven forty-two. She’d spent the whole night in his arms. What would Ellie think? What would park employees think when they saw her leaving his boat, still wearing the clothing she’d been wearing the day before?

Crap. She should have listened to her practical side the night before and told him that sex was out of the question until she knew him better.

She scrambled off the bed to search for her clothes, and came up empty handed. Where had she put them? She'd been standing next to the bed when she'd wiggled out of them while deep-throating "Captain Royce."

Oh. My. God. She'd deep-throated him. She'd swallowed his cum. Lord, had he put some sort of pirate spell on her? She searched around the bed and found nothing. She'd just bent down to search under the bed when a low, husky laugh hit her ear.

"God, that's a gorgeous sight. If you wanted me to take you from behind, all you have to do was ask."

Melani stood quickly and pulled the sheet in front of her naked body. "I was just looking for my clothes."

Royce stood in the doorway with a box in his hands.

"I hid them."

"Excuse me?"

He crossed to the bed, sat the box down and grinned.

"I went to get food. I was afraid you'd wake up and leave before I got back, so I hid your clothes. I brought breakfast. Bagels, cream cheese and some orange juice. I have coffee brewing in the galley."

"It sounds delicious, it's just that..."

"I know. Practical Melani is panicked that she slept with a man she just met."

"How did you know that?"

"The look on your face. Here, I'll even the playing field for you." He took off his clothes and Melani couldn't help but stare. Even flaccid, his cock was magnificent.

"Let's have a little mattress picnic, shall we?"

"Who were you talking to earlier?"

"Russell. He said Ellie was panicked that I'd kept you out all night. I told him I'd drained you of all energy and that you were passed out from pleasure."

Melani blushed and Royce threw back his head and laughed.

"Red, you blush more than any one person I've ever met. Come on, I'm hungry."

He sat down in the middle of the bed, cross-legged with his back propped against the footboard.



Melani let her eyes gaze across the room again. Not finding her clothing, she sat down and tucked the sheet around herself.

“Are you sure you’re the same woman I made love to last night?” The humor in his voice was evident and Melani grinned.

“I’m sure. I just, well, in the daylight, I, um...” Crap. She sounded like a kid apologizing to her parents for breaking curfew.

“Take the sheet off, Melani.” His voice was deep and commanding. “Show me the woman you were last night.”

Melani blushed at the memories of their lovemaking, how she’d done things with him that she’d never done before. Better than the memories, though, was the prospect of doing even more wicked things with him.

To hell with her by-the-book attitude. For this week she was going to be a pirate wench. She fixed him with a wanton gaze, then let the sheet drop past her breasts, pooling around her waist, hips and legs.

She enjoyed his sharp intake of breath, its meaning evident.

Royce slathered a bagel with cream cheese and passed it to her. After she’d palmed it, she dipped her finger into the cheese and traced the inner edge of the bagel, coating it liberally before poking her finger into the middle and wiggling it around.

She pulled it out and stuck her finger into her mouth.

“There’s my girl,” Royce said softly. He took a bite of his own bagel, and then cleared his throat.

“How about a midnight sail tonight? Just you, me and the water.”

“I thought this boat was attached to the dock.” She took another bite of her bagel, after lapping up a bit of the cream.

“It is, but we have others. At least three of them can be manned by two people.”

She laughed. “I know absolutely nothing about sailing.”

Royce’s eyes narrowed. He moved the bagels and cream cheese to the bedside table. Then, Melani gasped and laughed when he pushed up and launched himself across the bed at her.

He pushed her back onto the bed and kissed her greedily, his tongue plundering her mouth as his hands massaged her breasts.

Melani sighed, then moaned when he took the last bite of her bagel, ran his tongue through the cream and then sucked her nipple into his mouth. The cold, creamy treat coated her nipple and he sucked it dry.

Melani cradled his head as he suckled her, closing her eyes and marveling at the sensuous feel of his tongue and the gentle pull of his teeth. He pushed her breasts together and took both of her nipples into his mouth.

She arched into him, moaning out his name as feelings of warmth and need crept down her body and centered in her wet pussy.

“Royce. Fuck me.”

*She'd said the word fuck more this week than she had in her whole life. In this context, though, she loved it.*

“I like those words,” he teased, seeming to read her mind as he trailed his tongue over her breasts and up her neck. “Will you sail with me tonight, wench?”

“Yes.”

“Will you stay with me the rest of the week, without trying to find excuses about why you can't?”

“Yes.”

He kissed her, then leaned back to the bedside table where she heard the familiar sounds of a condom wrapper.

“Let me.”

He turned to her, his brows raised in question. Then he laughed and handed the open packet to her. He scooted to the middle of the bed, lying on his back with his head cradled in his hands.

Melani had never put a condom on a man before, but she was eager to try. She took the latex out of the package and examined it as if studying a new species of animal.

She trained her eyes to his and their gazes locked. Chills ran up her spine and she leaned over and placed the condom on his cock, which seemed to be pulsing with energy. She gently traced her fingers over the vein that ran the length of him, marveling at the shiver that ran through his body.

Then, she slid the condom on, stretching it over his girth and lightly teasing the skin as she covered him. She felt powerful and wicked as she stroked him. He quaked under her touch

and she lifted her eyes to his face. His eyes were closed and he was biting his lower lip, as if fighting to control his actions. She loved that her touch did that to him, put him on the edge of pleasure.

“Melani.” His voice was rough, his breathing ragged. “You fuck me. Straddle me, baby. Take us both for a ride.”

He bucked his hips and it was all the invitation Melani needed. She centered herself over him, her hand still firmly grasping his rigid length. She placed the tip of his cock at her wet opening, sliding down just enough to send them both into pleasurable tremors.

With her hands on his stomach, she gently lowered herself down, fighting the urge to make the descent in one swift stroke. She didn’t want the fantastic feeling of fullness to happen so quickly. She wanted to savor every inch of him, every part of his hard maleness, every pulse of his hungry cock.

“Royce. You feel so good.”

“Oh baby, you’re killing me. Please.” He pushed his hips up, but Melani did the same, keeping just enough of him inside her as if to tease them both.

“Mmmm, I love it. You’re begging for me.”

“Yes, I am. Begging for your warmth, for your sweet, tight pussy. Faster, baby, faster.”

She pushed down a bit more, loving the fact that he was now growling, actually growling for her.

“Melani. Baby, please!” He grabbed her hips in an effort to bring her down more but she stilled them.

“No. I want to relish this. To savor the feel of you sliding inside me. I want to take it slow.”

He dropped his hands from her hips, clenching them into fists and moaning as she pushed down another inch.

She put her hands on his hips to steady herself as she lowered down, fighting the urge to do as he wanted and rush through this delicious moment. Finally, when he moaned and began to wiggle under her, she dropped down, feeling him scrape against her womb as she began to move.

She leaned back and thrust her breasts out, bracing herself against his thighs as she rode him. She shivered and moaned as his hands found her breasts, tweaking her nipples and then

gently squeezing each mound before his fingers again found the puckered, straining tips of her breasts.

They didn't talk; there was no need. Their bodies and hands said it all. He continued to caress her breasts as she kneaded his thighs, bouncing on him, the movement sending little shockwaves of pleasure to her clit.

When she came, she bit her lip and clamped down on his cock with her inner muscles, pounding herself down onto him over and over and over. She felt his orgasm hit, his cock jerking inside her as he abandoned her breasts and grabbed her hips.

As soon as they came down from their climax, she toppled onto him, shivering as his hands caressed her sweaty back. When she'd recovered enough, she lifted her head from his chest. "Sailing, huh?"

"Yeah. With sails, and a boat and wind. Moonlight on the water. You'll love it."

"You're just trying to get me away from everything so you can take advantage of me."

"Damn straight."

She laughed and tried to move off him, but his arms held her firmly in place.

"Just stay there for a while before we have to face the real world. I want the memory of your softness to carry me through to tonight."

"Sweet talker," Melani said, even as his sweet words sent a flutter through her body.

"Yeah, I said the same thing to the last Texas journalist who came through the park, and then rode me into oblivion."

"Was she prettier than me?"

"Nobody's prettier than you."

"Now I know you're just a sweet talker. Maybe I should ask the park ladies about Captain Royce's ladies. What would I find out if I did?"

"That Captain Royce had only one lady, until now. And that was the sea."

His words echoed in her mind. *Until now. Until now. Until now...*

She swallowed and kissed his chin. "I need to get to work," she said softly.

"Me too," he answered. "I have a pirate ship to attack, again. Meet me back here around ten tonight."

It wasn't a question, so Melani didn't answer. She'd already told him that she would go sailing with him. She just hoped that by letting herself stay with Royce this week, her heart wouldn't go adrift, and become lost in the ocean.

Chapter Eight

“So, Ms. I-don’t-sleep-with-men-I-just-met, where have you been all night?”

Melani turned from the mirror where she’d been adjusting her blouse to find Ellie in the doorway of her bedroom, rapidly tapping her foot, a huge smile on her face.

“Where do you think?” She blushed and decided at that point, Royce was right. She did blush a great deal.

“I’m so proud of you. Did he fuck you good?”

“Ellie!”

“Well, did he? Come on, enquiring minds and all that.”

“I’m smiling, aren’t I?”

“Yes you are. Oh, I can’t believe this, it’s just so perfect.” Ellie clapped her hands together and turned round and round. “My maid-of-honor and Russell’s best man, together.”

“I’m staying with him the rest of the week. We’re going sailing tonight.” Melani grinned, then stopped. Maybe Ellie wanted her company, so they could talk wedding plans. “I mean, if that’s OK with you. If you want me to stay here...”

“Are you kidding? I want you to go have wild monkey sex with Royce. And I want some details of the wilder stuff. Maybe I can get some ideas for my honeymoon.” Ellie stuck her tongue out in a panting fashion and Melani laughed.

“Like you need any help. You could write ten books on lovemaking and never once touch on a subject featured in past books.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” Ellie shrugged her shoulders, her grin firmly in place.

“Where am I working today, boss?”

“Back out front,” Ellie replied. “I put you with Jaynie again. She’s the best of our sellers. Then, after that, I thought you could take a turn through the Swashbucklers School. Kids can take it and learn how to fence. Well, they fence kiddie-style.”

“Cool. That will make great photos.”

“Great. So, Ms. Cantor. Do you need anything for your story at the moment?”

“No, Ms. Winton. I believe things are under control right now.”

“Good. Then get to work.”

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Seconds after she entered the ticket booth, Melani knew that something was up with Jaymie. The older woman smiled at her, but it wasn't the same. Melani wanted to ask what was wrong, but felt that she might be intruding into something that was none of her business. They talked for a few minutes, then Jaynie turned her attentions to the crowd of people who were flocking to get into *Ahoy, Matey*.

There was none of the jovial banter from the day before, and as the day progressed, Melani felt that something was seriously wrong with the woman. And she wanted to know what it was.

Finally, an hour before she was scheduled to go to The Swashbuckler School, there was a short lull in the line. She laid her hand on Jaynie's arm. “What's wrong? Tell me.”

The woman burst into tears and Melani let out a soft exclamation. She grabbed a tissue and handed it to her, then pushed past her to wait on a customer who wanted to buy advance tickets for the following day.

Melani completed the transaction under Jaynie's watchful, yet tearful, eyes. When he was gone, Jaynie sniffled.

“I'm sorry. Please don't tell Ellie that I'm bawling on the job.”

“Are you kidding me? Ellie's human, too. Tell me what's wrong.”

“It's my ex. The bastard.”

Melani nodded in encouragement, wanting Jaynie to continue.

“We've been divorced for about six months. We had a lot of money because he's a successful guy. He had a great lawyer, though, and kept most of it. I happened to get one of the things he really wanted. A beautiful yacht that we'd bought and refurbished together. It's where I'm living now, since I lost the house. I'm trying to save up enough money to put a down payment on something decent.”

“That sucks.”

“It's not so bad. I love that boat. But...” Jaynie's voice cracked, then she swallowed back tears.

Melani put her hand on the woman's arm. “What?”

"I had some beautiful jewelry that my grandmother left me. A pearl necklace, a ring to match and some beautiful earrings. They were absolutely stunning family heirlooms that have been handed down for generations. The bastard stole them from me while I was at work yesterday."

"You're kidding!"

"I wish. It's quite easy for him to get onto the boat. I found a note lying on the counter when I got home from work. It said, 'I'll give them back, in exchange for you know what.'"

Melani shook her head.

"He knows that the jewelry is my most prized possession."

"You should go to the cops."

Jaynie shook her head. "Why? He didn't sign the note. It was typed, probably printed on a public computer. He's a lawyer and knows what the cops would look for."

"Royce is a lawyer. Take it to him. Threaten to sue."

"I can't prove anything with just a note. It doesn't even say 'give me the boat,' it just says, 'give it back.' He'd say that I'd stolen something from a new lover and we were fighting."

Even though she didn't want to believe her, Melani knew that Jaynie was right. There was little proof that her ex had done the crime.

"We could try to frame him somehow."

"No, I just want my jewelry back. I'm thinking about just making the trade."

"You can't do that," Melani said forcefully. "If you do, then he wins. And it leaves you with what? Nothing. Where will you live?"

"It leaves me with the jewelry my grandmother gave me," Jaynie said, sniffing. "That's the most important thing to me right now. And I can always rent an apartment."

She blinked back tears, then plastered a smile on her face to wait on customers that had come up to the booth.

Melani marveled at the woman's resilience. If the same thing had happened to her, she would be blubbering in the corner right now.

When the customers were gone, Jaynie turned to Melani.

"He knew exactly where to strike. If my mother finds out those pearls are gone she'll blame me, and it will cause even more trouble. So I'll trade him the boat, and he'll get everything. I'll end up with a big old goose-egg."



Anger seethed inside Melani. She knew that people like Jaynie's ex-husband existed, but she'd yet to come across one. It wasn't right that the jerk should get everything and Jaynie should end up with nothing.

A dangerous plan took root in her mind. She pushed it aside, and it crept back inside. She straightened her back and handed Jaynie another tissue.

"Don't do anything until I talk to Royce, OK?"

"No. I want them back, tonight."

"Jaynie, listen to me. You do this and you'll get the pearls, yes. But you'll lose part of yourself, and I'm not talking about the boat. I'm talking about the fact that you let him push you around. Self-confidence. Let me talk to Royce."

Jaynie let out a loud sigh.

"OK. But one night only. Tomorrow I make the exchange and sign the deed to the boat over to him."

"No, you won't," Melani said. "We'll get your pearls back, and leave him with egg on his face. Trust me."

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The Swashbuckling School was a great deal of fun. Melani took a lot of pictures and talked to parents and children alike. Some parents agreed to sign release forms and have their child's photo used with the articles.

She'd gathered e-mail addresses and promised to send out photos to different parents. By the time it was over she knew that the school itself would make more than just a paragraph in the story. It would be a nice little sidebar to the main story, and a great attraction for potential park guests.

When it was over, she glanced at her watch and saw that the last show on the pirate deck was about to end. She gathered her skirts and hurried toward the ship, hoping to catch the end of the act, and get a chance to talk to Royce before they set sail tonight.

She shivered as she thought of the midnight sail. Her body still tingled from their early morning lovemaking, and she longed for what was going to happen tonight.

Would he make love to her on deck, out under the stars with the moon high overhead? It would be perfect, and highly erotic.

But first, they had things to talk about. She wondered what he would say about her idea. She wondered what Ellie and Russell would say about it. She thought it was perfect because not only would it get Jaynie's pearls back, it would be a fitting way for it to happen.

The clatter of steel blades fighting for dominance reached her ears long before she walked the gangway onto the ship.

Royce and Russell were fighting, both of them thrusting their swords at each other and expertly dodging the blows. After a few minutes, Royce tumbled onto the deck and Russell put the tip of his sword near Royce's throat.

"Do you yield?" His cry was met with applause from the audience, who yelled for Royce to "*Walk the plank...walk the plank...walk the plank!*"

When Russell walked him toward his fate, at sword point, she caught his eye. He calmly walked to the edge of the plank, saluted in her direction and took a step off the end. The splash threw the crowd into a frenzy. Russell announced that the ship was his, and always would be.

Seconds after the end of the performance, Royce appeared from below deck and headed straight for Melani. He stopped along the way to shake hands and pose for pictures and she marveled at the way that he handled the crowds. Everyone seemed to love him, even though he was "the bad guy."

"Bravo," she said as he pulled her into a hug. "You're very talented."

"You can tell me that again later tonight," he said into her ear.

She giggled like a schoolgirl, she laughed nervously when someone asked to take their picture. Royce kept her snug at his side, his arm slung down her back with his hand resting possessively against her hipbone.

"I need to talk to you about something."

"You just can't wait, huh?" He wiggled his brows at her.

"No, I mean yes, but this is about something different." She bit her lip and rushed ahead before she lost her nerve. "And I want Ellie and Russell to be included in the discussion."

Royce's eyebrows shot skyward.

"So now you're a kinky wench? I like that idea."

"I'm serious." She playfully slapped his chest. "This has nothing to do with sex."

"Oh." She laughed at his disappointed look. "OK. We can all eat dinner at the restaurant. It'll cut into our sailing time, though."

“I’ll make it up to you.”

“You’ll take a midnight skinny dip with me?”

“In the ocean?”

“Yeah. It’ll be fun.”

Staid Melani balked. Wench Melani grinned in agreement.

“Deal.”

Chapter Nine

“I think you’re out of your mind.” Russell leaned over the table and shook his head. “I have no desire to spend my wedding night in jail.”

“We won’t get caught,” Melani said, trying to sound confident.

“Who are you?” Russell shook his head. “You’re not the Melani I’ve met before, that’s for sure. That Melani would never suggest breaking and entering as the solution to a problem that should be taken to the police.”

Russell turned an accusing look at Royce, who shrugged, then cleared his throat as Jess approached the table with a basket of bread.

“Your food should be out anytime now,” Jess said. “Y’all want more drinks?”

“Yes,” Russell said. “Huge ones. Tell Kenny to use the extra-large mugs.”

Jess laughed and left to fill the order.

Melani shook her head. “This is the perfect plan.”

“Perfect until we get arrested,” Russell replied. “The guy’s a lawyer. I imagine he has the police on speed dial. He’s probably friends with the mayor.”

“I’m a lawyer and I don’t know the mayor,” Royce said, a mock hurt look on his face. Russell scowled at him.

“The guy’s a louse,” Melani said. “He stole her most precious possession so that he could hold it for ransom. Are you a pirate or not? She’s the underdog who needs help.”

“I’m not a pirate, Melani,” Russell said. “I’m a businessman who plays like a pirate everyday. I’m also getting married Saturday afternoon, and have better things to do than break into someone’s house and steal back an employee’s pearls. I’m sorry for Jaynie, really I am. But, this is ridiculous. You can count us out.”

“What if *I* don’t want to be counted out?” Ellie said. “I happen to think this is a perfect plan. And I want to help.”

“Absolutely not,” Russell said. “You want to trade your wedding dress for stripes?”

“Russell, that’s so unfair. I...”

“OK, hold up,” Royce said, setting his glass on the table with a thump. “I have to agree with Russell on this one. The danger of arrest is there, and you two have a major event to attend on Saturday. Melani and I can do this. It’ll be easier with just two people anyway.”

“And safer with four,” Ellie said. “More lookouts. Plus, you guys have to go, too. Who would stand up for us if you weren’t there?”

“Shit.” Russell leaned back in his chair and ran his hands through his hair. “I don’t believe this. Four days before our wedding and we’re planning a heist?”

“It’s more of a retrieval,” Melani said. “After all, he stole them from Jaynie. We’re just taking back what’s hers. So, instead of being pirates, I guess we’ve being privateers, right? Pirates who are hired for a specific purpose?”

“We’ll need blueprints of the house,” Royce said. “Plus the access code to an alarm, if there is one.”

“We’ll have to figure out a way to see if anyone is home without leaving a number on Caller Id,” Ellie said. “And we have to get in without the neighbors seeing us.”

“We’ll have to figure out where he would hide them,” Russell said. “He might have the jewelry in his glove box for all we know. X doesn’t mark the spot on this one.”

“And we have, basically, two days,” Melani said. “If we plan tomorrow, we can do it on Thursday and be ready for the rehearsal dinner on Friday night.”

“Red, don’t act so excited about this,” Royce said. “Russell’s right. This could be dangerous. If he catches us, he could shoot at us.”

“Well, we’ll have Jaynie set up a meeting with him and then we know he’s out of the house,” Melani said.

“Does he live with anyone?” Russell leaned forward and Melani fought back a laugh. Despite his misgivings, she could tell the idea excited him.

She gently caressed Royce’s leg. He’d had no misgivings. When she’d told him about the theft, and about her plan to steal the jewels back, he’d laughed and said, “Let’s do it, Red.”

“I don’t know,” Melani said. “We’ll have to ask Jaynie those questions.”

“Fine,” Russell said. “Tomorrow morning, you ladies sit down and discuss it. Get a lay-out of the house from Jaynie and find out where she thinks the most likely hiding place would be. Then, we’ll meet again tomorrow night and steal the things on Thursday. Maybe Jaynie will bail us out of jail in time for the wedding.”

“Think about it this way,” Royce said, raising his glass. “If we get caught, my license is still good and I can defend us, pro bono.”

“Yippee,” Russell said. “That makes me feel so much better.”

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Melani stood on the deck, looking out over the moonlit sea. She wasn’t sure exactly how much help she’d been to Royce on the trip out, but it had been a great deal of fun.

“Tell me again what type of ship this is.”

“This is a Bermuda rig sloop,” Royce said, bustling around the deck. “The rigging consists of a mainsail and a headsail. She’s controlled by the halyard, the outhaul, the sheet, and the kicking strap. She’s thirty-two feet wide, and comes complete with berths, a galley and a head down below.”

Melani nodded. Royce had explained all those things to her before they’d set sail, but she’d been more interested in watching him hoist the sails and control the boom. She’d done what he’d told her to do, when he’d told her to do it. And it had been a great deal of fun.

Now, they’d dropped anchor and Royce was storing the sails.

“You know, sloops like these have been around since the 1600s,” Royce said. Melani smiled at his professorial tone. It was the same one he used when he gave his lecture on pirates. “Of course most pirates wouldn’t have used them. They would be too small. Pirates used tall ships like the one we’ll be sailing Saturday afternoon for the wedding.”

“Do you think the idea will catch on?”

“Is this part of the interview?”

“Would it make a difference in your answer?” She sat down on the narrow planks in the stern.

“No. Because yes, I think it will catch on. I mean it holds more than a touch of romanticism. Getting married on the deck of a pirate ship, and then holding the reception on Pirate’s Isle? The couple gets their own private cabin, complete with hot tub? It’s pretty cool.”

“Yes, it is. And you’re the brains behind it, right?”

Royce tied his last knot, then sat down next to Melani. He put his arm around her shoulder and leaned her into his chest.

“Not really. Russell and I have been friends and partners, for years. If you want the truth, it was Ellie who came up with the wedding idea, which is very interesting considering the fact she and Russell have been together forever, and never once talked about getting married.”

“I’ve thought that too,” Melani said, leaning further into him. “I even asked her about it and she just said that it was time. She assured me she wasn’t pregnant, but I think they’re thinking about it.”

“A rather cool idea, having babies.”

She turned her face to his. “You think?”

“Yeah, I do. Sarah and I, we...”

He stopped mid-sentence and Melani watched him turn toward the sea.

“Tell me.”

“Nothing to tell. I was married, now I’m not.”

“Royce?” When he didn’t say anything, she cleared her throat. She tried to make her next statement come out as a joke. “I’ll make you walk the plank if you don’t tell me.”

“Speaking of walking the plank. Someone promised me a midnight skinny dip.” He leaned down and kissed her. “Time to pay up.”

He stood so quickly that Melani almost lost her balance. She watched in appreciation as he stripped off his clothing and made for the edge.

“How are we supposed to get back on the ship?”

“It’s a little thing called a ladder,” he said. He picked up the object in question and tested its ropes, then threw it into the water before going over the side himself. Melani heard the splash. She eased toward the side, watching as his head broke the surface.

“Is it cold?”

“Yes. Come and warm me up, Red.”

She shook her head. “Cold wasn’t part of the deal.”

“Get in here. Don’t make me come after you.”

“Hmm, well, I think not. I prefer making love in the nice warm berth. Or on the deck. It’s small, but I’m sure we could make it work.”

“Melani.” The warning in his voice was clear. “Get naked and get in this water. Now.”

“Do you think my editor would appreciate the sidebar, *I Had An Affair With A Pirate?* And not just any pirate, but the bad pirate. Might make for some interesting reading. Tell me, Mr. Bad Pirate, what first attracted you to the sea?”

“I’m warning you. If you don’t get in here, important parts of my anatomy are going to shrink due to the cold water. Then you’ll go to bed without an orgasm.”

“Oh my goodness, Mr. Bad Pirate has a complex about shrinkage. That will be an interesting tidbit to include in my story.”

Melani squealed at Royce’s growl. He swam toward the ship, and too late, she realized there weren’t many places for her to run. The deck was crowded with sails and rigging, and the stairs leading down below would take her to the small galley, and the two berths, one of them with a double bunk.

Somehow, though, she didn’t think it would matter much. Royce wouldn’t be interested in taking her in the berths. He wanted her in the water. She could pull the ladder up, but that would be just plain rude. She walked to the side and peered down at him.

He grinned. “Are you chicken?” He made a squawking noise and Melani bristled.

“Hey, I’m not chicken. I skydived for a story once.”

“Really, and yet you won’t get in the ocean?”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t. But you said it was cold.”

“I’ll warm you up.”

“Are there sharks?”

“Only one. And he’s a real woman eater.” He put his hands together in a fin shape and moved them through the water.

“Will you protect me?”

“Of course I will.” In the moonlight, she could see his face light up in another angelic smile. She grinned back and quickly shed her clothes. She swung her leg over the side on the ladder, easing herself down.

Seconds later, Royce grabbed her around the waist and pulled her into the water, ducking them both under the surface. He brought them back up quickly and Melani spurt out water, laughing as she wiped her face.

“That wasn’t fair.”

“I told you I was a shark. Are you OK?”



“Yes.”

He let go of her and swam a few feet away. The water was cold on her bare skin but still, she felt warm. She knew it came from Royce swimming nearby. He could probably make the temperature shoot up in a hot tub, she thought with a grin.

He swam up next to her and took her hand.

“Come on.”

“Aren’t you worried about getting too far away from the boat?”

“Relax. Trust me. Lie on your back.”

She did as he asked, focusing on the stars above instead of the fact that her body floated over several feet of ocean and nothing more.

“Just relax.” He gently caressed her breasts, his fingers finding the hard pebbles and twisting them gently.

Melani moaned under his ministrations, wiggling and relaxing.

“Close your eyes.”

She did, relaxing into his touch, feeling the waves flow gently over her body. When he swam under her and fitted his body to hers, she gasped. He put his arms under her breasts and she could feel his hard cock in the ridge of her ass.

“Float with me. Just relax. Let the water take us.”

She laid her head on his shoulder. She could tell from his muscles that he wasn’t relaxed. His body supported both of them. He pushed away from the boat and she didn’t balk, loving the feel of being alone with him, and so wonderfully free.

“I want to know you,” he whispered in her ear. “I want to know your stories. Tell me the most embarrassing thing you and Ellie ever did when you were kids.”

“Well, we shoe-polished a friend’s car one night, and cut a few classes.”

“Child’s play. I want the juicy stuff.”

“She’d kill me.”

“Tell me.” His voice caressed her ear.

“Royce.”

“Tell me.” His breath was hot against her skin, cooled by the water.

“We got arrested once. Well, not really arrested, but detained.”

Royce laughed so loud that Melani felt his chest rumble against her back.

“You’re kidding me?”

“I shouldn’t have told you.”

“So, Thursday’s little B&E won’t be the first time you’ve broken the law. Interesting. Give me the story.”

“OK, but you have to promise not to tell Ellie that I told you.”

“We’ll consider this attorney/client privilege.”

She laughed and took a deep breath. She knew they were floating farther and farther away from the boat, but she didn’t care. In Royce’s arms, she felt safe and protected.

“We were in high school. One teacher in particular, Mr. Michaels, didn’t like Ellie. He said she was smart, but played dumb and that bothered him. He used to call on her all the time in class, and then make her stay after school for detention for the least little offenses.”

“Okay, go on.”

“Well,” Melani said. She focused on the stars above her. “Ellie wanted to toilet paper his house. But she wanted to do it during a time when we couldn’t get blamed for it. That meant doing it during school.”

“In broad daylight?” Royce’s voice sounded incredulous. “That’s pretty ballsy for teenage girls.”

“Ellie has always been ballsy.”

Royce turned them back toward the ship, and Melani kicked her feet along with his.

“Anyway. Her plan was for us sneak out of school after roll had been taken in one class, do the deed, then sneak back in, just in time for our next class. No one would know we were gone. And Michaels couldn’t blame us, because we were in school, and had the roll sheets to prove it.”

Royce laughed. “Criminal masterminds. Go on.” His hands found her breasts again and began to massage.

“Anyway,” Melani said, moaning softly. “His house wasn’t far from the school, and he wasn’t married so we knew there would be nobody home. Still, there was the possibility of neighbors. So we parked a block away and walked down the alley.”

“The alley?”

“Yes, we’d decided to do the backyard. Less chance of someone seeing us, and an even lesser chance of someone driving by.”

“Good point. Then how did you get caught, because I assume this is where this is leading.”

“It is.” She sighed when his hand slipped down between her legs. “You’re making it awfully hard to concentrate on this story.”

He didn’t answer, just continued to gently caress her slit.

“So. We did the deed, using four rolls of toilet paper. We walked back to the car, congratulating ourselves on getting it done and not getting caught. Then, the car wouldn’t start.”

Royce barked out a laugh. He put his hands around her again and turned them back toward the open ocean, kicking off from the side of the boat.

“So you got caught because you had to walk back to school?”

“No, we got caught because when we were trying to get the car started again a cop drove up behind us. He said the woman who lived a few doors down had noticed us in the alley and wondered what we were doing. We tried to lie, but it didn’t work. A second cop had driven down the alley and seen the toilet paper. We were busted.”

“They arrested you for criminal mischief?”

“No. We just got tickets and had to pay a fine. Plus, we had to clean up the mess. But they took us back to school in the back of the squad car. People were changing classes and saw us. One of the school photographers was outside with his camera and took pictures of us getting out. The little stunt made the yearbook, which made my parents furious.”

“My little jailbird.”

“I wasn’t in jail,” she said with a huff.

“Sure. All my clients were innocent.”

She tried to break out of his arms but he held her close, chuckling lightly.

She settled back into his chest.

“This feels so good.”

“What would feel even better was if I was buried deep inside you, holding still and just enjoying the warmth of your sweet little pussy.”

Melani gasped when he moved further down on her body, his chin resting on her shoulder. She spread her legs and left the tip of his cock probing for entrance.

“Can I come in?”

“Oh, yes. Royce.”

“Hush, Red. No more talking until I say so. Hush and just float with me. Watch the stars twinkle. Feel me as I feel you.” He slipped into her wetness, his hard length filling her completely.

Melani focused her eyes on the heavens, even as she thought that the real heaven was below her, holding her safe in his arms as they floated on the ocean waters together. She knew that it must be hard for him not to thrust. She could feel even muscle in his body, tight with tension as he held back from the natural inclination to push in and out of her pussy.

They floated together for a few moments, both of them trembling with need and desire. The water lapped at their bodies and soft moans escaped their lips from time to time.

Melani felt as if she were floating on a cloud, freer than she'd ever been in her life; more alive than she'd ever felt.

After a few moments, his hands gently caressed her torso, teasing her bellybutton and tracing over her breasts.

“Play with your clit. Come for me, Melani. Tighten around me.”

Melani dipped her fingers into her slit, her natural wetness mixing with the water around them. She found her clit easily, the bud hard and ready for attention. It pulsed under her touch and when Royce hissed, “Do it,” in her ears, she almost came undone.

Her fingers began to whirl around her button, warmth spreading through her body. She traced the vein above her clit, then parted her hood to press against it more firmly.

It didn't take long. A few hard strokes and she felt the wonderful beginnings of an orgasm blossoming in her stomach. Under her she could hear Royce fighting to control his movements.

The hardness of his body fit so perfectly with her own. She took one final hard stroke against her clit and she came.

“Royce! Oh fuck me, please!”

Her muscles clamped around him and he growled. His hands went to her hips and he began to pump furiously. She felt his seed fill her and panic hit, but left just as quickly. They hadn't used a condom but right now she didn't care. All she cared about was Royce, and the pleasure that both of them were feeling.

His hard thrusts took them both under the water. Despite the fear she felt at being so in the open, Melani relished the feelings that were running through her. She touched her clit and

came again, opening her mouth and swallowing water before shutting it quickly. He brought them up just as fast, both of them sputtering water as he continued to pump.

“Melani!”

He clasped his arms firmly around her waist and held her tight as she spit out the water she’d swallowed.

“Are you OK? Talk to me, baby.”

“Are you kidding me? I can’t believe. That was so...so fantastic.” Her body trembled as her nipples and clit continued to tingle. She’d never had an orgasm hit her that fast, or that completely. She felt like she’d come down to the ends of her toes.

“Yes, it was. You were so relaxed. And you came so hard.”

“Yes. I did.” She giggled. “So did you.”

“Yeah. Some pretty little minx was squeezing my cock. Kinda like a vise grip.”

She chuckled, then gasped when something hard pressed against her feet.

“What? Oh my lord, it’s the boat. How?”

“I didn’t let us get too far from it. I am a sea-faring man, remember? I wanted to fuck you, not drown you. I’m going to let go now. You ready?”

She nodded and bobbed in the water as he ducked under the waves and came back up.

He turned her toward him and clamped his lips to hers as if to claim her as his own. The kiss was demanding and oh so sensuous. Royce gently bit her lower lip.

When he finally pulled back their gazes locked.

“We didn’t...”

“I know. It’s OK. I trust you.”

“I trust you, too. But there’s other things to worry about.”

“Yes, there is. But we’ll worry about it together.”

His words hit her square in the chest. Charles had never asked about birth control, or wanted to have anything to do with it. Once they’d become exclusive, he’d sworn off condoms and made Melani go on the pill, which she’d quickly dropped when they broke up.

To hear Royce say they’d deal with something together scared her, more than just a little bit. She didn’t need to get too close to him. After all, she had a life in Texas and he had one here. They would have their week together, nothing more.

She started to open her mouth to say it, but closed it just as quickly. To bring that up would ruin the moment, take away from the fantastic lovemaking they'd just experienced together.

"What are you thinking?" He kissed her lips gently.

"I'm not thinking," she lied. "How about you?"

"I'm thinking I want you again, and again and again. But I'm getting chilly, so we'd better get back on the boat."

Melani pouted. "I was hoping to tangle with the shark again."

"Geeze, woman, you're going to kill me." The words hung in the air, but the smile on his face showed that he, too, wanted the shark to reappear.

"Let's rest. Then we'll see if the shark is talented enough to make an appearance out of the water."

"A shark that could swim in the boat. *That* would make a great story."

## Chapter Ten

Melani woke on deck the next morning, wrapped in a blanket. The sun barely peeked over the horizon and the boat bobbed gently in the waves.

The smell of bacon frying hit her nose and she sighed in appreciation.

After their “nap,” she and Royce had talked for hours, exchanging information and tidbits about each other’s lives. It had been fun, but she’d noticed that anytime she’d brought up his marriage, he’d changed the subject.

After the second attempt she hadn’t pushed it. Instead, she’d been content with his stories of broken bones and holiday memories.

Then, as the stars had begun to fade, he’d made slow, sweet love to her, his tongue lavishing her body and his hands caressing every inch of her. They’d taken another quick dip, then climbed back aboard and fallen asleep in each other’s arms, wrapped in a blanket he’d brought from below deck, cuddled together in the tight space.

She sat up and propped her back against the railing, looking out at the endless expanse of ocean and wondering how she’d been so lucky to stumble across Royce. He was certainly someone she hadn’t expected to meet on this trip.

She licked her lips, then jumped when his voice shattered the silence.

“Eek gods, it’s Medusa. Look at that hair.”

Melani let out her own eek and put her hands to her head. Her hair was indeed sticking out on all ends, stiff from the seawater and the fact that she’d fallen asleep with it still wet.

“Well, I guess the blush has worn off our relationship if you tell me I look like Medusa.”

He chuckled and waved a fork at her.

“Breakfast is ready. Bacon, eggs, toast and orange juice. Come and eat.”

She wrapped the blanket around her and ducked down as she went down the steps. Royce was back in the galley, clad only in jeans, his long black hair trailing over his shoulders. He looked every inch the pirate. And he made her body bubble with need.

“How is it that your hair is perfect?”

“Well,” he said, looking at her sheepishly. “I took a swim this morning. You looked so beautiful that I didn’t want to wake you. Before that, trust me, I looked like Medusa, too.”

She laughed and sat down, snatching a piece of bacon from the counter.

“So did you sleep at all?” She crunched on her treat.

“A little. Mostly I just sat and watched this absolutely beautiful woman who was sleeping next to me.” He sat the food down on the table, then squeezed in across from her.

“You watched me sleep?”

“Yes. You snore.”

“I do not.”

“Yes, you do. It’s a light little snore, but a snore just the same.”

He took his own bacon and began to chew in contentment.

“Man, you’re not very charming this morning. First you say I look like Medusa. Then you tell me I snore.”

“They weren’t complaints. Just observations.”

“Yeah, well they sounded like complaints to me. You should never tell a woman she snores.”

She poured herself a glass of orange juice and sipped from it daintily.

He smiled at her and didn’t respond. They watched each other for a few minutes and then Royce cleared his throat.

“We need to get back.”

“Right, you’ve got a ship to try and take over, and I’ve got a heist to plan.”

He nodded, a smile absent from his face. His expression made her stomach churn.

“Is something wrong? Did I do something wrong last night?”

“Oh, no.” He stood and gathered her in his arms. “Last night was perfect. So very perfect.”

He caressed her cheeks and kissed her gently.

“I agree. If it’s not last night, then what’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar. Reporters can read people as well as lawyers can. Something’s up.”

He separated from her and looked down. “Not yet, but there’s a possibility.” He gave her a sheepish grin.

“That’s not what I meant.” She frowned at him, examining his face with care. “Something’s wrong.”



“Nothing’s wrong. I just didn’t get enough sleep. I’m sorry.”

“Right.”

He sighed and took a step back, keeping his hands on her forearms.

“We have to go to work.”

“True. You have a pirate ship to try and take over.”

“And you have a heist to plan.”

“That’s a new one for me. We’ll see how it goes. We’re all meeting for dinner around nine, right?”

“That’s right. At Ellie and Russell’s place.” He brought her hands up to his mouth and kissed each knuckle.

“I thought we had to work.”

“We do. I just wanted one last taste before the day started.”

He kissed her lips, breaking off quickly and going back on deck without saying anything.

Melani stared after him. No matter what he said, she could tell that something was wrong. He’d changed since last night. She wasn’t sure exactly what was different but she knew that something was up. Tonight at dinner, she’d have to watch him again to see if he acted differently.

Whatever it was, she was sure she would figure it out.

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Royce stepped out of the lagoon and shook his head, drops of water flying everywhere.

He stepped into the main room to find a scowling Russell staring at him.

“Crap, Royce. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Geeze, you thinking with your little head again? Melani on the brain? You’ve missed cues and hit the water twice today. I mean, this isn’t Broadway, true, but it would be nice if things went according to plan for a while.”

Royce brushed passed him. “Sorry to disappoint you.”

“Hey man, don’t walk out on me. Tell me what the...”

“...fuck is going on? It was the last show of the day. I’m tired. I’m sorry, I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Bullshit. You may be tired, but you’re always right on the money, tired or not. Did something bad happen between you and Melani?”

“No. She’s perfect. Absolutely perfect.”

The room grew quiet, and then Royce shook his head, looking toward the open doorway, or toward the wall. Anywhere but at his friend.

“Oh holy fuck. You’re in love with her.” Russell’s voice was teasing, and he broke into laughter. “Good job. Ellie will love it! And so do I. She’s perfect for you.”

“Is she? Because she’s made it clear that she doesn’t want anything from me but what we have right now.”

“Oh really? Have you said, ‘Melani I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you?’”

“No. Listen, Russell, don’t say anything to Ellie, or Melani. This is my business, not yours and I, well, shit—I don’t know.”

“OK, OK, tell me why you’ve come to this decision to keep your feelings secret.”

Russell moved to a bench and sat down. “Last night was great. We made love in the ocean and we talked. Did you know the two of them got picked up for toilet papering a teacher’s house?”

“Yeah, I heard about that. Ellie thought it was a hoot. I gather she was the only one who did, though.”

Royce laughed. “Yeah.”

“So, continue about last night.”

“I woke up while she was sleeping, and I sat up and watched her. The moon was just light enough that I could see her face. She looked so beautiful, so soft and vulnerable. And I realized that in the six years since my divorce was final from Sarah, Melani was the first woman I’d slept with, actually slept with, as in same bed.”

“That’s a big step for you. It means that...”

“It means that once again, I’ve chosen a woman who doesn’t want me.”

“Bullshit. I agree about Sarah. All she wanted was the prestige of being married to a lawyer and being able to spend his money. But Melani’s not like that.”

“You’re right, she’s not. But she’s made no bones about the fact that her life is in Texas. She has a home and a job there.”

“She has an apartment and a cat,” Russell said. “She can get a job anywhere. And I’m sure Kidd will learn to love the cat.”

Royce stretched out, pulling at the wet clothes he wore. “That job is important to her.”

“She threw herself into that job when her relationship with Charles ended. She wanted a home and she wanted a family. Trust me. You two are perfect together because you want the same thing. You just don’t want the house and the picket fence. You want a house boat, and a dog that delivers treasure maps.”

“I don’t know, Russ. It just seems so...”

“Listen. You’re my best friend. You’ve been my best friend for years. So do me a favor. Don’t act like an idiot and make me beat the crap out of you. Tell her how you feel. Tonight.”

“You think you could beat me up? Without a script, I could best you any day of the week.”

“Not acting like an idiot you can’t. And that’s what you’ve been doing all day.”

“Fuck you.” Royce stood up and stalked across the room. “You have no fucking idea how I feel.”

“Listen to me. When Sarah left you turned into a basket case. I don’t want that to happen again. You let Melani go, and you’re making the biggest mistake you’ve ever made in your life.”

Royce wheeled toward his friend, who was now bounding up the stairs of the ship. Royce knew he was right. Sarah’s betrayal had hit him hard. It was a year before he could talk about it, and a year more before he allowed himself to become close to a woman again.

Oh he was a terrible flirt, true. But he used that flirting to keep from getting too close to women. He’d only had two lovers since Sarah had left. Both of them fun, lively women who loved the sea. But they hadn’t been right for him. He hadn’t found anyone right for him.

Until now.

He’d never, ever felt about a woman the way he’d felt about Melani while he’d watched her sleep this morning. Her vulnerability and creamy skin had made him itch to wake her and take her again and again and again.

He loved everything about her. From the way she bit her lip when she talked to the way she moaned his name when she came. She was, without a doubt, a woman he could live with forever.

The only thing that held him back was the knowledge she was going back to Texas. And he was sure, no matter what Russell said, Melani wouldn't stay here. Royce just couldn't be that lucky.

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Melani took a sip of her soft drink and looked over the layout of Jaynie's former house. At first, her new friend had been very, very reluctant to participate in the event, saying that she didn't want to put anyone in danger because of her.

"No, no way. Listen, The Creep is tricky. It won't work." She'd shook her head emphatically with each word and Melani had finally given up. There was no way she was going to talk her into it.

She'd left the booth and thought that was that. She'd have to tell her friends that it was over.

But, several hours later, when Melani was selling souvenirs and interviewing a couple from Kansas, she'd been surprised to see Jaynie standing near the store entrance, an anxious look on her face.

Melani had frowned at her and Jaynie had nodded forcefully.

When the couple had exited the store, Melani had taken Jaynie's arm and led her to the back room.

"What's up?"

"Let's do it."

"What changed your mind?" Melani had been taken aback, but happy that Jaynie wanted to follow through instead of giving in to her lousy ex.

"The ex's new girlfriend, the one he left me for? Well, she just called me. He's left her, too. Dumped her for someone even younger than she is. She's royally pissed."

"So?"

"She said he talked about stealing the pearls, about how he could use them to get the boat back."

"That asshole."

"Yeah, but the best part is...are you ready for this?" Jaynie had been so excited, Melani thought she would scream loud enough for the whole room to hear.

“She has the key to his house, and the alarm code. She’s bringing them to me this afternoon.”

“You’ve got to be kidding? Can you trust her?”

“Well, she has been a bitch to me. But now that she’s been screwed, I think she’ll play nice. They only broke up a few days ago, and she doesn’t think he’s changed the lock, or the code.”

They’d laughed, and now, sitting in Ellie’s dining room, Melani wondered about her sense of right and wrong. Was she really planning to break into someone’s house and steal something? And could it be stealing if you were only taking back what was already stolen?

Of course the semantics of it didn’t matter. If they were caught in someone else’s home, the cops would only see it one way. As a theft. If that happened, Melani would take a ride in a police car for the second time in her life.

Only this time, she was pretty sure she’d be wearing handcuffs.

She took another sip and glanced at her watch. So far, it was just her and Ellie, who was busy in the kitchen. Even though Ellie had ordered in food from the restaurant, she had to get “just the right bowls” to serve it in.

Royce, Russell and Jaynie would be along soon. Melani stared at the plans and let her mind wonder.

Her body still tingled from last night. Making love to Royce in the ocean had been a dream come true. Actually, it had been more than that. It had been something she’d never even dreamed about.

She closed her eyes and could still feel him pulsing inside her as the waves washed over them. Her nipples tightened and she sighed.

“That good, huh?”

Melani’s eyes popped open to find Ellie staring at her, a huge grin on her face.

“Yeah, that good.”

“Oh, I’m jealous. I’m fixing to be relegated to old-fashioned married sex.”

“Oh please. I’m sure there will be nothing old-fashioned about your sex life after Saturday night. You’ll still be tying each other to the bed.”

“You peeked!” Ellie threw her head back and laughed and Melani blushed.

“So, can I have details?” Ellie sat down and batted her eyes.

“No.”

“He loves you, you know.”

Melani turned to her, her lip captured between her teeth.

“He does not.”

“He does. I saw it the first time he talked about you. Do me a favor. Don’t break his heart.”

“What do you mean? He knows I’m only here for a week.” Melani looked at the table and suddenly Royce’s actions that morning made sense. The remark about Medusa, and her snoring. He was trying to find faults with her; something that would make it easier for him to let her go.

“He may know it in his mind, but his heart doesn’t.”

“Does this have something to do with Sarah?”

Ellie’s eyes widened. “He told you about Sarah?”

“Well, sort of. He told me that he’d been married. But he didn’t say anything about why the marriage broke up. Will you tell me?”

“No. That’s for Royce to do, not me.”

“Was it bad?”

“Yes.”

“Please tell me.” Melani stared at her friend, her eyes pleading.

“No. Royce is my friend, too. To tell you that would be to break his trust. I can’t do that. I hope you understand.”

Melani sighed deeply and nodded.

“I just want him to trust me enough to tell me.”

“That’s a two-way street, you know. You need to trust him with your feelings, too.”

Melani smiled. “Yeah, but I’m leaving. We both know that.”

“Yes, but…” A knock at the door made them both jump.

“Come in,” Ellie yelled. Seconds later, Jaynie bustled into the room.

“I’m so excited.” She took a seat next to Ellie and dropped a key onto the table. “And here it is, nine-one-three-eight. Then press star.”

“Where’s the…” Melani closed her mouth when Ellie held up her hand.

“Let’s wait until the guys get here. That way we’re all on the same page.”

They nodded in agreement and talked about business at the park that day.

"I'm going to have to go and take pictures tomorrow," Melani said. "It's Wednesday already, and I only have three more days. My plane leaves Sunday morning."

Ellie nodded, her eyes sad.

"It's going to be a great article," Melani said. "I think your mother's going to love it."

Ellie laughed, then grinned at Russell as the men came into the room. He leaned down and kissed her hungrily.

Melani turned her eyes to Royce. She was happy to see that he didn't seem quite as pensive as he had that morning. He leaned over, kissed her, and murmured, "hello," against her lips.

"Hi."

"Did you guys start without us?" He ran his fingers down Melani's hair and she shivered.

"No, but we have a key, and a code."

"Did you call and tell him we were coming?" Russell frowned as Melani held up the key. Jaynie quickly explained about the ex's new ex.

"A woman scorned," Russell said. "But I want to eat first. I'm starved."

They ate steak and shrimp, then quickly cleared the table. Jaynie put out the paper she'd used to draw a floor plan of the house.

"OK," she said. "The front door opens into the living room, which opens onto a large deck outside. The house is tri-level. Almost immediately after you get into the front door you will see the stairs that lead up. Right next to them are the stairs that lead down. The living room, kitchen and dining room are on the main floor. The bottom level has a living area, two bedrooms and a bathroom. The upper level has three bedrooms and two bathrooms."

"Wow," Melani said. "It's huge."

"Yes. The Creep likes space."

"Does The Creep have a name?" Melani lifted her brows at Jaynie.

"Tim. But I prefer The Creep. Anyway, the master bedroom is at the back of the house. If I had to guess, I'd say that's where he hid the pearls. I'll call and set up a meeting with him, he leaves, you go in and take them."

"Good idea," Royce said. "But I see more than a few flaws."

"Spit it out," Russell said. "I see more than a few myself."

"OK. If you're setting up the meeting to trade jewelry for the boat deed, he might have the jewelry with him. Tit for tat."

“Doubt it,” Jaynie said. “He’d want the deed first.”

“True,” Royce said. “But, he might take at least one piece to the meeting, to prove to you that he has them.”

Melani smiled. She loved the way Royce’s mind worked, always coming up with a different way to look at things. She supposed that was the lawyer in him. Or maybe it was just the free spirit in him, who saw everything differently.

“I know Tim,” Jaynie said. “He’s not going to bring those jewels anywhere near me until he has the deed in his hot little hands. Besides, I’ll tell him I’m not ready to trade yet, that I just want to talk. That will ensure that he won’t bring them with him.”

“Still, it can’t hurt to look,” Melani said.

“This whole thing is very, very risky,” Russell replied. “I think we should just call the cops.”

“No!” Jaynie’s forceful word shocked them all. “What if he decides to sell them? Or give them to his new *friend*? Calling the cops would just ensure that one of those things happens.”

The table fell silent.

Finally, Jaynie shook her head and sighed. Tears swam in her eyes. “Russell’s right. This is too dangerous. I’ll just give him the deed to the damn boat and be done with it.”

“We’ll do it,” Royce said. “It’ll be okay. You’ll see.”

Melani reached under the table and took his hand. He squeezed hers and smiled.

“Tomorrow night,” he continued, “around eight. The sun will be going down and neighbors might not be keeping an eye on the house that late. They’ll be watching TV.”

“The neighbors aren’t close,” Jaynie said. “That’s one of the reasons The Creep wanted the house when we bought it.”

“Fine,” Russell said. “That’s settled. Royce and I’ll do our cat burglar thing. You ladies will stay here. Except for Jaynie, who will be meeting The Creep.”

Both Melani and Ellie started to protest at the same time. Russell held up his hand and shook his head. “That’s final. Any complaints and the whole thing’s off.”

“This is my idea,” Melani said. “You can’t just...”

“But I can, because I’m the pirate king. Understand?”

“I can’t believe you would...”

“Mel, don’t argue with him,” Royce said. “Trust me, you won’t win.”



“That’s right,” Russell agreed. “He doesn’t win and he’s a lawyer.”

Melani turned to Royce, who shrugged. “I let him win. It feeds his ego.”

Russell let out a loud growl and Ellie laughed. She winked at Melani who silently fumed.

“I won’t let you keep me out of this,” Melani said. “You were against it from the start, yet you now want to be in charge. How wrong is that?”

“Listen, Melani, this—”

“If you say this is man’s work, I’m going to deck you. This has nothing to do with male or female and everything to do with righting a wrong. Weren’t there female pirates? Um...”

Melani snapped her fingers. “Anne Bonney.”

“Very good, Red,” Royce said. “We also have Mary Reade, Grace O’Malley, Charlotte de Berry, and Rachel Ward. Let us not forget, Russell, that sweet Charlotte killed the captain of the ship in a mutiny.”

“All right,” Russell said. “I get the point. But those women weren’t due to be my fiancé’s maid-of-honor in three days time. And if you go, she wants to go.”

He pointed toward Melani, then cocked his head at Ellie.

“So true,” Ellie said. “So true. I have to agree with Melani. All for one, and one for all.”

“Those were the Musketeers,” Russell said with a frown. “The proper pirate term is every man for himself.”

“That’s not true,” Melani said. “Didn’t they follow a code?”

“Pirates were cutthroats, Melani,” Russell said. “Popular fiction has turned them into romanticized heroes.”

“Which makes us a lot of money,” Ellie said. “But, darling, remember we’re not pirates for this mission. We’re privateers, hired by Jaynie to perform a service. They had more ethics.”

“And they could be killed, or jailed, just as easily as pirates.”

“Not if they had authority from the king,” Royce said. “Technically, they were acting under his rule, giving part of their plunder to the crown, so they were above the law.”

“Is everyone against me on this?” Russell shook his head.

“No,” Royce said. “I agree with you. But I can also see their point. It would be hard to be excluded from something you’d help plan.”

“Fine.” Russell exhaled loudly. “You can come along as lookouts only. Royce and I go into the house. Alone. Agreed?”

“But, baby, looking for the treasure is half the fun,” Ellie said, shaking her head.

Melani nodded enthusiastically, but the men held their ground. Finally, in the end, they decided to use the ladies as lookouts while the men went inside. One would be stationed in the car, and the other would stay in the backyard.

“Are there dogs?” Melani asked, wondering why she hadn’t thought of that in the first place.

“No,” Jaynie said. “The Creep hates animals. Says they’re messy and noisy.”

“A real charmer,” Royce replied.

“He was, at first. It wasn’t until after we were married that things started to change.”

“That happens,” Royce said. He looked at Russell and Ellie.

“Not to us,” Ellie said. “We’ve put safeguards in place.”

“I don’t think I want to know,” Melani laughed.

“Probably not,” Royce said.

When Jaynie said it was time for her to go, Royce and Melani offered to walk her to her car in the employee parking lot.

Outside, the scent from the ocean air wafted across the silent, darkened pirate village. In the moonlight, with gas lamps instead of streetlights, a person could almost believe they were back in the time before electricity.

Melani eyed the sight wistfully. She’d become attached to people here, as well as the feel of the village. It would be hard to go back to her apartment and her cat, living with take-out food and a steady diet of TV and books at night, when she was alone after work.

She would miss seeing Ellie every day. And she would miss Russell’s rough exterior and his commanding ways. But most of all she would miss Royce, his sweet eyes and his gentle touch.

She never thought she could find a man who would attract her as much as he did. In the short time that she’d known him, he had become part of her. Giving him up would be the hardest thing she’d ever done. It would be much harder than losing Charles. That had hurt for a few weeks.

Right now, she knew she’d feel the loss of Royce long after she was gone. She thought about the feelings he invoked in her. She’d fought her initial attraction, despite the pull between them.

Then, she'd gladly given in to his charms, loving the heady feelings he produced and the fantastic orgasms he created. Not once, though, was it ever implied that their relationship would go past this week.

He'd never said anything to her about staying, and she knew that even if he did, she couldn't. It would take more than a week for her to trust him enough to change her life completely. She would need several months to get used to the idea, several months of talks and planning.

And, truth be told, she knew that once she left he would more than likely forget about her. That was what generally happened in relationships. Out of sight, out of mind.

"Are you going to say goodbye to Jaynie, or are you going to stand there and stare?" The humor in Royce's voice shocked her.

She jerked her head back and looked around. She'd been so lost in thought that she hadn't realized they were in the parking lot, standing next to Jaynie's car.

"Sorry. I was just, um..."

"Never mind," Jaynie said, pulling her into a hug. "Thank you so much. All of you."

"That's what mates are for," Royce said. "We'll see you tomorrow. Drive safely."

Jaynie nodded, got into her car and drove away.

Royce pulled Melani close to him. "What were you thinking about?"

She sighed. "Photos. I have to spend tomorrow taking photos."

A look of disappointment crossed his face, and quickly vanished. "Okay. Make sure you come by the ship." He turned his head from side to side. "Either side is good."

She giggled and he kissed her gently. "Hungry?"

"We just ate."

She moaned when he rubbed his pelvis against hers.

"Who said I was talking about food?"

## Chapter Eleven

“I thought you weren’t talking about food.” Melani stood in the middle of Royce’s cabin, her hands on her hips and a smile on her face.

“I just want to play a little game, that’s all.”

She shook her head as he held up a banana.

It was amazing to her that she’d become so comfortable with him that she could stand before him, naked, and calmly discuss what he wanted to do with a banana.

The walk back to the houseboat had been fun. They’d taken their time and gone by various sites in the park, discussing what might be best used for photos. At midnight, the gas lamps had gone out, and Melani had sighed as moonlight washed over the scene.

“The switch is on a timer,” Royce had said. “Actually, they’re run by powerful batteries instead of gas. Rechargeable batteries. That way there’s no wires. Keeps the illusion of times past.”

He’d stopped her in the middle of the walkway and taken her face in his hands. Their gazes had locked and he’d lowered his lips to hers slowly, kissing her gently several times. She’d moaned when he’d pulled back.

“We’d better hurry. Kidd will be crossing his legs by now.”

Indeed, the poor bulldog had run for the grass the minute Royce opened the gate on the ship. Then, he’d stalked back onto the boat and plopped down next to his empty dish, a frown on his wrinkled face.

Royce had quickly fed him, then led Melani into the bedroom.

Now, she stood watching him peel a banana, an impish grin on his face.

“So what’s the game?”

Royce raised his eyebrows in answer. He crossed to the desk and moved a straight back chair into the center of the room.

“Come here.”

“You think you’re going to put that... um, no, I don’t think so.”

“You nasty minded little wench. No, I’m not going to fuck you with it, although it is a tempting idea. We’re going to eat it, together.”

He sat down on the chair and crooked his finger at her. When she was standing next to him he indicated his lap.

“Straddle me.”

Melani settled herself onto his lap. She grabbed the back of the chair for support, uneasy about the chair supporting both Royce and herself. She kept her feet planted firmly on the ground and glanced down at him.

“I thought we were going to play a game?”

“We are.” Royce held the banana up in front of her. “We’re going to eat this, together. The first person to let their piece drop out of their mouth loses.”

“And what does the winner get?”

“Full control over where, and how, we make love next.”

“I’m not sure I want to give you that much control.”

“Then you’d better win.” He held the banana up in front of her face. “Open up. Don’t bite down yet. Just take it in between your lips.”

Melani opened her mouth and Royce put the banana between her lips. Then he pulled her closer, wrapped his arms around the small of her back and took the other end in his lips.

She could feel his rigid cock pressed against her thigh and she wanted to sigh in pleasure. But if she did, she would drop the banana. She took a bite and started to chew. Holding the banana in her mouth while she chewed was harder than she’d thought it was going to be.

It was also highly erotic to watch Royce struggle with the same issue, to see the fruit stretched between their lips. She swallowed her first bite and sucked more of the slippery fruit into her mouth at the same time as Royce did. Both of them laughed around the obstruction as they took another bite.

She was just about to swallow the second bite when Royce brought a hand from behind her back and cupped a breast, his thumb pressing her nipple into the soft flesh. She groaned and almost dropped the banana. She caught it at the last minute and flashed him a look of feigned anger.

He opened his eyes wide and then dropped his free hand down to her pussy, cupping her lightly before pushing his fingers past her wet folds. With the support of his hands gone she gripped the back of the chair.

“Not fair!” She opened her lips enough to utter the words and then grabbed the banana before it dropped out. She wanted to touch him in return, but if she let go of her hold, she would fall backwards, drop the banana and lose. But would that be a bad thing, really? She wondered what wicked way he’d make love to her if he won the game.

His laugh was muted and he took another bite, sucking the banana farther into his mouth as his fingers sought, and found, her clit.

Melani fought to keep her lips around the banana. Royce’s fingers worked his magic on her clit and she could feel an orgasm building. When it hit, she knew that he would win. She sucked harder on the banana in an effort to get it away from Royce. He in turn did the same and doubled his assault on her clit, his fingers pushing and teasing the area around the sensitive nub.

She tried to wiggle away by raising up as much as she could on her tiptoes, and was rewarded by a triumphant laugh. Royce placed his thumb on her clit and dipped his fingers through her wetness to her opening, inserting them as far as space would allow him.

The pressure was all it took. Melani came, and she came hard, dropping the banana from her mouth as she cried out Royce’s name and writhed against his fingers. The orgasm spread through her body like wildfire and she was vaguely conscious of Royce’s hand, which had been on her breast, moving to the small of her back to hold her in place.

“Good girl. That’s it. Good. Oh, baby.” His words floated around her and she shivered as she collapsed against Royce’s shoulder.

“I win.” His voice was husky and Melani could feel his cock twitching against her thigh.

“You didn’t play fair. You knew that if I let go of the chair I would lose my balance.”

“I am a pirate, remember?”

His hand continued to gently stroke her pussy.

“I love to see you come,” he whispered. “You get all flushed, and your body quakes in the most perfect way.”

“Royce.” She laughed nervously, biting her lip gently.

She reached for his cock but he captured her hand with his free one.

“Not yet. I just want to enjoy looking at you. Feeling you. Stroking you.”

She gently rocked back and forth on his hand as he cupped her.

“Is this your prize for winning the game?”

“You’re my prize. Every delectable inch of you.”

The look he gave her made her blush furiously.

“I don’t believe it. All the times I’ve been inside you and you still blush at the idea? I love it.”

She laughed and he put his hands on her hips to help her stand.

He led her toward the bed, lowering her down, then moving to open the windows that surrounded the bow of the ship.

When the windows were all open, and the cool ocean air wafted across the bed, he lay down next to her and gathered her in his arms.

“So, wench. How would you like to serve your captain tonight?”

“Why captain, anyway that you like. How would you like to take your wench?”

“Roll over.” His breath was hot against her neck and Melani shivered.

She did as he asked, placing her hands above her head and relaxing into the bed.

He immediately began to caress her back with soft, gentle strokes, lightly running his fingers up and down her spine.

“You’re so soft.”

“Don’t tease me. Make love to me.”

“Shush. Relax. I want to share something with you.” He took a deep breath.

Melani turned her face toward his. “Yes?”

He laid his head down on his arm, his free arm continuing to stroke her. Several long minutes passed where the only sound was the lapping of the water against the boat.

Melani closed her eyes and moaned softly as he trailed his fingers up and down her back. His movements were soft and gentle and she loved every minute of it, every inch of his touch.

When he finally did speak, she could hear the tension behind his voice.

“Are you relaxed?”

“Very.”

He inhaled deeply. “You’ve asked about Sarah. Several times. Did Ellie tell you?”

“No. She said it would be betraying your friendship.”

He chuckled. “I appreciate that.”

He took a deep breath and exhaled even deeper.

“Sarah and I got married right after I got out of law school and got my first job. I was working with a criminal defense firm, one of the best in Miami.”

“Getting the bad guys off, huh?”

“Yeah. Everybody’s entitled to a defense. But after two years I realized that I’d made a mistake. The money was terrific, and we were buying things right and left. My parents scoffed at me for being so materialistic.”

She turned on her side, dropping a hand to his chest and caressing the soft hairs there.

“Is that why you quit?”

“No. I could easily find myself loving money and the things that it buys. I know that’s bad to admit, but it’s the truth.”

She smiled. “At least you’re honest.”

“What made me quit was one case I had to take on. The guy was a jerk. He tried to kill his ex-wife and he pretty much told me he’d done it, and that *when*, not if, *when*, I got him off, he’d try again and again until he was successful. Said he was tired of giving her money. With her dead he could take the kids and not pay any child support.”

Melani shivered violently. She knew all too well from stories that she’d done about crime that people like Royce’s client really existed. She scooted closer to him and kissed his chest. Then she lifted her face to him.

“Did you get him off?”

“No. I could have, if I’d called the right witnesses. But I wanted to see his ass in jail. I knew at that point that my life was headed down the wrong path. I came home and told Sarah and she went ballistic.”

“Royce. I’m sorry.”

He ducked his head and she could tell how very hard this was on him.

She reached over and stroked his cheek. “You don’t have to...”

“No. Just listen.”

She nodded and put her hand on his hip.

“She figured that I wanted to leave, that I was being forced to leave, because I’d lost a case. I told her no, that it was my idea. We had enough money to live on for a while until I figured out what to do, but she ranted and raved, tried to get me to change my mind, and when I wouldn’t, screamed that I was ruining her life. Then, she stormed into the bedroom and locked me out. I slept on the couch and the next morning she was gone.”

“That’s awful. Did she take everything with her?”



“No, she didn’t take everything. She didn’t leave as in leave. She’d gone to the law offices, to talk to my boss. She still thought I’d done something wrong, and she went to make it right. By giving my boss a blow job.”

Melani’s eyes widened. She didn’t know what to say. The idea was so ludicrous, so totally unbelievable. The woman sounded like a complete idiot.

“How did you find out?”

“I didn’t, at first. By the time I got to the office she was gone. I’d given a month’s notice. We didn’t talk about me leaving again after the first night. And every day for a week, she came and sucked Jeremy off. In his office, right under my nose.”

“I can’t believe that.”

“I walked in on them one day, during lunch. She was on her knees and he had his hands in her hair. He saw me, but she didn’t. She just kept going at him. When I yelled at her, she stopped and stared at me, wide-eyed. She screamed at me that it was the only way to save my job. Seems the asshole had told her that yeah, blow jobs would keep me on staff, even if I had lost a major case.”

“We were screaming so loud that we attracted quite a few people who ate lunch in the office. They all thought it was rather funny. At that moment I finally convinced her that I was leaving the law offices because I wanted to, not because I’d been fired, no matter what Jeremy said.”

Melani snuggled closer to him.

“That was what drove her away?”

“Oh yeah. When I came home, she was gone. And she’d taken quite a bit of stuff with her. She left me a note that said she didn’t want to be married to a bum, she wanted to be married to a lawyer who showered her with gifts. She as much as said the only reason she married me was because of my law degree and the lifestyle it would provide for her.”

“Oh Royce. I’m so sorry.”

She put her forehead on his and they lay together for a while, each of them caressing the other one’s arms. The need to comfort him was strong, but she didn’t want to initiate sex. He seemed to be enjoying the intimacy they were experiencing as much as she was.

When he kissed her forehead, she sighed.

“So how did you become a pirate?”

He laughed. “Well, you know. Lawyer. Pirate. They’re pretty much the same thing.”

She playfully pushed against his shoulder.

“I’m serious.”

“Okay. I’ve known Russell since college. He’d inherited *Ahoy, Matey* from his uncle, and it was losing money hand over fist. One night after the divorce was finalized he asked me to sit down with him and make a plan. So we did.”

“The more we talked the more I thought, this could be fun. Plus, I had some money. The first few years were tough. But for the last three we’ve made quite a tidy little profit. And I get to live on the sea with Kidd. Plus, I get to meet saucy little pirate wenches.”

He pushed her back and buried his face in her neck, kissing her over and over until she began to giggle.

She pushed at him as he tickled her sides. Finally, he settled his mouth on hers as if to devour her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him close.

The sound of their lips meeting filled the cabin and after a few minutes, he broke away and laid his head on her chest.

“Then I guess my real question is if you’re happy. I mean you’re still basically a businessman. You have to hire and fire employees, pay bills and keep customers happy.”

Melani gently stroked his hair and for a moment, she thought he might not answer her. Then, he lifted his gaze to hers, a mischievous glint peeking out of his eyes.

“Come with me.” He stood and held out his hand.

She took it and when he led her to the outside deck, she didn’t balk. It was amazing to her that in a few days time she’d become so accustomed to being naked around him that it didn’t matter if someone could come up and see them.

She was with Royce. She felt safe and wonderful in his presence.

Royce led her to the side of the ship. He put her hands on the railing and stepped behind her, gathering her in his arms and covering her hands with his own.

“Close your eyes.”

Melani moaned softly as she did so, the wind drifting gently across her face. Royce laid his cheek against her hair and rubbed gently. She pushed herself back into him, content to be held in the cocoon of his arms.

“Take a deep breath. Tell me what you smell.”

His breath was hot in Melani’s ears. She inhaled deeply.

“I smell the ocean.”

“That’s a given. What else?”

“Your aftershave.”

“Try harder.”

He laid his cheek on hers and began to gently rub them together. The soft friction sent tendrils of pleasure down to Melani’s nipples and parts further south.

“Royce, make love to me.”

“Tell me. I want to know what you smell.”

Melani inhaled again. “Flowers. Wood. You, not your aftershave but the smell of your skin, sweat and salt. The water smells like ... I’m not sure how to describe it.”

“It smells like freedom.” He cupped her breasts and massaged gently.

His hands began to massage her sides as he kissed her neck and shoulders.

Melani tried to concentrate on her imagination instead of those masterful hands. He caressed her everywhere, kneeling down to touch her legs and feet, pushing her thighs apart to tease the damp curls at her apex before standing back up and pushing himself against her.

As she relaxed more she could almost feel the ship moving, feel the waves hitting the hull, feel the gentle rock.

“You want to know the difference between being a lawyer and a pirate?”

“Yes.” She whispered, her eyes still shut and caught up in the idea of sailing again with Royce.

“I’m still a businessman, but this is my office. I have to hire and fire, but I do it in such a way as not to totally destroy a person. I still have to pay the bills, but I have more fun making the money to do so. And yes, I still have to keep customers happy. But it’s easy to be happy when you’re laughing and having a good time. And then, there’s this.”

She laughed. “What? Making love on the deck of your boat?”

“That too,” he laughed in return. “But mostly, it’s just the freedom of the sea. You smell wood and flowers. I smell freedom. Freedom to be the man I want to be and to hell with what other people think. Freedom to make love to a beautiful woman on the deck of a ship, my ship.”

He pulled her hips back and entered her slowly. Melani bent until her breasts touched the wood of the railing. She felt the wind against her back. Royce rocked into her and she knew that she’d never felt anything so glorious in her entire life.

In that moment she felt the same thing he did. Freedom. She didn't care if anyone saw them. All she cared about was Royce and the way he was making love to her.

There were no deadlines, no schedules, no one to judge her if she stepped out of line.

He moved slowly and gently, his hands stroking her hips as he pushed in and out of her wetness. When his thrusting intensified, he gripped her harder.

She could hear his breathing increase and when he whispered her name she thought she would melt right on the spot.

"Royce, I..."

"Shush, just feel. Feel us. Feel the wind. Feel the movement of the water. Give yourself over to the sensation of us sliding together. Of us being one."

They rocked in unison, both of them moaning softly. Melani had never felt anything so sensual, so heady in all her life. Last night had been wonderful, almost carnal, as the water had lapped at their bodies.

Tonight was a polar opposite, sweet and caring. When he took her hand and guided it down to her clit she thought she'd come undone. Their fingers locked together and easily slid into her wet slit, finding the swollen bud and caressing it gently.

He nibbled her ear as they rubbed and rocked until Melani thought she would explode. The sensations were overwhelming, and when she came, she felt as if the feelings shot out of her toes and fingers and wrapped around their bodies.

Royce groaned softly in her ear, but instead of the hard, eager thrusts of orgasm he kept a steady, slow pace, drawing it out for both of them, keeping them together, as one.

When he was still, he kissed her neck and shoulders, lighting nipping and licking her skin.

"You amaze me," she said. "Every time we make love I feel as if it's the first time, the most wonderful time."

"Every time I'm with you it's wonderful." His voice was deep in her ear and it made her shiver.

"Royce, we need..."

"I know. Tomorrow's a busy day. We need sleep."

"No. I mean yes, but that's not..."

He put his finger to her lips.

“Hush. No real world, not now.” He cocked his eyebrow at her when she opened her mouth to speak again. “I mean it. If you’re a bad girl and disobey me I’ll spank you.”

She returned his cocky grin.

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

“You wish.”

“Try me, baby. Just try me.”

## Chapter Twelve

Melani woke alone. Sunlight streamed through the open cabin windows along with the fragrant ocean breeze. She smiled and put her hand out to caress the spot where Royce had lain. It was cold to the touch so she knew that he was long gone.

She lifted her watch from the bedside table and groaned. It was after nine and she had so much to do. She had to take photos today of many of the different park attractions, and she had to work on getting her notes into some semblance of order. If not, she would spend a ton of time doing it when she arrived home.

She knew that she should jump from the bed but she didn't. Instead she lay back, pushing the sheet down far enough to bare her breasts. Her nipples pebbled until the cool air wafting in from the windows and she closed her eyes in sweet remembrance of Royce's lovemaking the night before.

Her body still simmered, and as she closed her eyes, she could almost feel him slowly rocking back and forth inside her.

In her years with Charles, she'd never felt as close to him as she did to Royce right now. The idea made her heart soar. And it made her heart ache.

It was Thursday. Which meant Sunday was just around the corner. Three more full days at the park and she would be gone. Today would be spent working, taking photos and conducting interviews for her stories. Tomorrow would be the rehearsal dinner, and Saturday the wedding.

The wedding was in the afternoon, giving time for a full-fledged party that night. Then, she hoped that Royce would bring her back to his ship and make love to her again. Her eyes watered as she thought about their final night together and how bittersweet it would be.

It would be so hard to give him up. She wanted to stay here, forever. But there had been no talk of her staying, no mention that he wanted anything more than the week they'd spent together.

And if he did mention it, would she agree? Her heart wanted to, but her mind knew that she couldn't. Her life was in Texas, with her job and her apartment and her cat. Reality flooded back over her.

She'd hired one of the younger staff members, Lacy, to stay at her apartment and care for Wallace. That gave Lacy time away from roommates, and it meant that Wallace would not be alone the whole week.

Melani bit her lip as she stood and searched for her pants. She pulled out her cell phone and dialed the newspaper office, chatting with the receptionist about how wonderful the weather was in Florida before being connected to Lacy.

"Hey," Melani said when she picked up the phone. "How's it going?"

"Perfect," Lucy replied. "I love your apartment, it's so quiet. And Wallace and I are getting along fine, although he was none too happy the first night. He even slept at the bottom of the bed last night."

Melani laughed. "Then he likes you. How's work?"

"Busy. We've had some interesting story ideas come in, and Josh put two of them back for you, which we all know is unfair. I wanted one but he told me it had your name written on it. I'm still going to try and steal it, though."

"Go ahead," Melani replied. "You have my blessing to sneak into his office and take it from his desk."

The phone got quiet. Then Lucy cleared her throat.

"Excuse me? You usually guard your stories with your life."

"True," Melani said. "But there's no sense in it sitting there while I'm here. You enjoy it. If you get caught, tell him I said it was fine."

"Okay," Lucy said. "I don't know who you are, but when you find Melani, say hi for me and tell her that Wallace is fine."

Melani forced a chuckle. "Will do. Thanks, Lucy." She snapped the phone shut and turned her head toward the stairs. Kidd was barking at something. She went to the bed and retrieved the sheet, wrapping it around her body.

Once she could see around the wall at the top of the stairs, she poked her head around the corner toward the pier where the houseboat was secured. Kidd stood on the other side of the waist-high door, his tongue hanging out of his mouth as he panted.

He saw her and barked a greeting.

Melani unlatched the door and Kidd leaned down to pick up a plastic bag, and then trotted inside.

She sat down on the top step and he dropped the bag next to her, barking furiously until she petted him.

“Good boy. Is this from Royce, huh?”

He barked several more times then went toward his water dish.

Melani used the sheet to clean off the dog drool, then tore open the bag. Inside she found a bagel, sealed in a baggie, and a banana. On the banana Royce had used a black marker to draw a smiley face. The words, ‘Soon, you wicked wench’, wrapped around the fruit’s peeling.

She threw back her head and laughed. Thank heavens Kidd had delivered the package to the right person.

She went into the galley, Kidd trailing after her. She toasted the bagel, then reached inside a bag and pulled out a bone, handing it to the happy dog and saying, “good job.”

He sat down to munch while she slathered her bagel with peanut butter. She ate quickly then hopped in the shower.

Sometime yesterday, Ellie had delivered her suitcase to Royce’s home. She searched through it and found a sundress, dressed, put on makeup, and added sunscreen in record time. When she was done, she made the bed, then stepped back with a smile.

She went to the galley and retrieved the banana, laying it on Royce’s pillow with a grin. She retrieved her notebook, recorder and camera and headed topside.

Outside she found Kidd waiting anxiously at the door.

“You going to stay with me, or are you going to see Royce?”

He barked his answer, and when she opened the door, he took off up the pier.

“Thanks a lot,” she yelled after him. “You could have stayed, you know. I offered.”

But the dog was already gone. She pulled the gate shut and stopped. She’d offered and he’d left. If Royce offered for her to stay, would she stay, or would she go? She shook her head at the thought.

She doubted he would make such an offer. Despite the fact that he’d shared his feelings about his ex, and about life with her last night, she didn’t think he was doing it as a prelude to a relationship. Sarah had hurt him very much. And Royce obviously didn’t open up to people easily, despite his teasing manner.



Melani was happy that he'd opened up to her, but she was sure that, in the end, he wouldn't ask her to stay. It would take months to get him to trust her enough for that kind of commitment. And time was something neither of them had.

A wave of sorrow over her trip back home clutched at her heart. She quickly pushed it aside. She'd known that it was only for the week. No one had given her any illusions, and there was no sense being sad about it. She should enjoy the time they had together, and be grateful for the fantastic memories.

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Royce sat down on the bench and propped his booted feet on the table. He grabbed his sword and rubbed a clean cloth over it. Although everyone who worked the pirate fight shows were excellent fences, the blades were dull, just in case.

He liked to keep his shining, though, so he tried to polish it every chance he got.

A grin split his face as he imagined Melani as he'd left her that morning, deep in slumber, her glorious hair spread across the pillow, her beautiful breasts rising and falling in a gentle rhythm. It had been so magnificent to hold her last night as she slept, her body soft against his.

He loved the way she'd shivered under him as they'd made love the previous night, the way she'd focused inward on the feelings, and not on the physical aspects. Their quiet joining had been almost more than he could take, and when he'd come he'd felt himself on the edge of tears.

It had been hard not to let her see. Leaving himself open emotionally was a tough thing for him, but he found himself wanting it more and more as his week with Melani progressed. And he'd given in to that feeling quite a few times, his heart pounding at the sight of her and his nerves tingling when she was nearby.

This week. Only three more days and she would be on a plane and out of his life. The thought almost ripped him apart. Not even Sarah had affected him the way Melani did. He loved the look in her green eyes when she questioned people, and the way they lit up in anticipation of the answer.

Her inquisitive nature demonstrated how much she loved life, and how much she wanted to learn. Other than that one feature, they were polar opposites. He loved to fly by the seat of his pants while she liked to plan things out, know what went where, and exactly how to get from point A to point B.

Still, she'd let go this week and allowed herself to experience each day in a way that had made them both happy.

And tonight. She'd been the one to plan their theft of Jaynie's jewels. He shook his head at the idea. He might have thought about doing something like this, if for no other reason than to put Jaynie's asshole of an ex in his place. But he never would have sat down to make an actual plan for it. He might have done it on his own, so as not to endanger the others.

And there was danger. If Tim The Creep found out what they were doing, they could all end up in jail. Or worse yet, at the business end of a gun.

Of course, the idea of danger was exciting, too. And the idea of pulling off this little caper with Melani just made it better.

"It's a good thing that's dull. The way you're wiping it right now, you might lose a finger."

Royce lifted his face to Russell, who stood in the doorway, shaking his head at his friend.

"My mind's not exactly here."

"Is it on a busty little wench? Maybe you should take the afternoon off and see what comes up."

They both laughed and Royce shook his head. "I wish. Melani insists on working today. Says she has to take photos and get some more notes for her story."

"She's dedicated, that's for sure." Russell sat down on the other bench and stretched his legs out in front of him. "So, are you keeping her?"

"She's not a dog, Russ. She has a mind of her own. And no, she's not staying."

"Have you asked her?"

"No." Royce turned his face toward the open window that faced the ocean.

"Well, I've already voice my opinion on the matter."

"Yeah, if you were me she'd be tied to your bed right now."

"Damn straight. It's what I did to Ellie. And look where it got me. I'm getting married on Saturday to the little tart. I can tie her to the bed all I want now."

Royce laughed. "Look, I'm thinking about it, it's just..."

The room grew silent.

"She's not Sarah, Royce. I've known her for a few years now. True, I've only seen her during brief visits, but I don't believe that Ellie would have a superficial friend. Melani is a real

flesh-and-blood woman, not some barracuda who will bite you in the ass. She's honest and up front with people."

"Yeah," Royce said. "I agree, in my mind. I just don't know if I can convince my heart. If she says no, I'll feel like I've lost part of myself."

Russell shook his head and stood. "If you let her go, you will lose part of yourself anyway."

Royce stared at Russell's back as he walked up the stairs. He looked toward the window again, knowing his friend was right. In a few short days, Melani had become a part of him. Convincing her to stay would be tough. But, he knew it would be worth it. He just had to find the right way to bring it up.

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Melani smiled at Jess as the young waitress wrote down her name on the piece of paper. True to her word, she'd come back to photograph Jess in the restaurant, and to get quotes from her about why she enjoyed working in a pirate-themed amusement park.

Her answers had not been surprising, and had dealt with fun and meeting new people. She glanced at her watch and saw that it was after three. She hadn't eaten since the bagel Kidd had delivered around eight that morning, and her stomach let her know that it wanted some attention.

"I think I'm going to sit and have a late lunch," Melani said. "How about a cheese-burger?"

"Sure," Jess said. "You want a soft drink, or some lemonade?"

Melani selected the lemonade, then sat down at the table to look through her photos. She smiled at the beauty of digital cameras, where you could instantly see your work and correct it if there was a problem.

She had photos of the Swashbuckler's School, the treasure-hunting pit where young kids could dig for buried toys, several of the rides, people eating food at the food court, and now, the restaurant. She still needed photos of the pirate fight that Royce and Russell staged several times a day.

She took a sip of the lemonade that Jess sat on the table. She hadn't realized how thirsty she was, and it tasted like champagne as it slid down her throat.

Worries about their upcoming heist pushed her thoughts of photos aside and centered in her mind. She couldn't believe what she'd proposed, and not only that, what they'd all agreed to. If something happened to one of them she would never forgive herself.

She tried to tell herself that things would be fine, that Jaynie would keep Tim out of the house long enough for them to break in, find the pearls and take them back. But she knew that the chances of things going off so easily were slim.

Something would go wrong. Something always went wrong. But it was too late to back out. Jaynie would be crushed. Not only that, she would lose everything. Tim had seen to that.

Melani smiled as Jess placed a huge cheeseburger in front of her.

"Wow."

"They're delicious," Jess said. "Chef John is known for them."

Melani cut the burger in half then took a bite, chewed, and swallowed with a grin.

"You're right. Very, very delicious."

When Jess was gone, Melani took out her notes and began to jot down any park attractions she thought that she'd missed during the week. She had just finished half her burger when Jaynie burst into restaurant, looking frantically from side to side before spotting Melani and rushing toward her table.

"He's screwed me again. He must know I'm up to something."

"What? Slow down. Sit down, and tell me what's wrong."

Jaynie shook her head and wiped away tears.

"Tim just called. He said he would meet me in an hour at a café near the beach. And only there and only at that time. If I try to change anything the deal's off. He said to bring the deed and he'd bring the pearls."

"Crap." Melani threw down her napkin and took a deep breath. "OK, relax. There's no need to panic. We still have an hour. We can think of something between now and then."

"Like what? It's not too far from here, true, but if he has the pearls on him we're screwed. He won't give them to me unless I sign the deed."

Melani shook her head. "He won't have them on him. He might leave them in his car, but he would never have them on his person. Too much chance of you calling the cops and having him searched. He's smarter than that."

"Smarter than I am," Jaynie said, frowning.

“No, he’s not. More devious than you, maybe. You would never pull a stunt like that.”

Melani sat back and sipped her lemonade, the wheels in her mind turning.

Jaynie was right. He had made sure that they would meet in public, and at the time that he specified. That kept him in control. The wheels continued to turn. He was a control freak. He felt he was invincible.

She smiled at Jaynie.

“I have an idea. It just might work.”

“What?”

“How well known is your husband?”

“Very. He’s a prominent business attorney, very well known. His firm represents some of the biggest businesses in Miami.”

“Then, if people found out he was a thief, it would hurt his reputation.”

Jaynie smiled. “I would say so.”

“Well, Tim needs to meet a reporter. One who can convince him that all his dirty little deeds are about to come to light. Don’t you think?”

Jaynie’s smile widened.

“You wouldn’t.”

“I would. Now, give me some dirt. Just enough so I can give it to him and let him think I’m writing an expose on his dealings. If he gets scared enough, he’ll hand over the pearls without a fight.”

Jaynie laughed, and the two ladies put their heads together. Twenty minutes later, Melani paid her check and wrote Royce a note to let him know there had been a change of plans and that she was going to Bruno’s on the Ocean. She ended it with the words ‘wish me luck’ and gave it to Jess.

“Give this to Royce when he comes in, please.”

At Jess’ nod, Melani and Jaynie left on their quest. Melani smiled. Her thoughts about someone getting hurt tonight had been for nothing. She would handle crappy little Tim all by herself. She’d dealt with creeps before while writing criminal stories, and she could handle him.

Then she’d come back to the park a hero, and she and Royce would have that much more time together before it was time for her to go home.

## Chapter Thirteen

“What? Son-of-a...” Royce crumpled the paper in his hand and ran his fingers through his long hair.

Russell bounded down the stairs and stopped in the doorway, a frown on his face. Ellie was behind him, peering over his shoulders.

“Something wrong?”

“Read this.” He passed the note to Russell, who uttered an expletive.

“Jess had it delivered when she thought something was wrong,” Royce said. He glanced at the wall clock. “She says the meetings at four-thirty. If we hurry we can catch up to them before they get there.”

“Like hell,” Ellie said. “I know Melani and she’s probably already there, lying in wait.”

“If he hurts her...” Royce’s face turned thunderous. “I’m going to tan her... Damn!”

“Let’s run,” Russell said. He started for the door then stopped.

“No wait! I have an idea. Change into street clothes. Hurry.”

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Melani stood at the corner of the building, watching as Jaynie nervously fiddled with her coffee cup. She was sitting at out outdoor table in the crowded shop, and her horrid ex had yet to show.

The plan was simple. Jaynie would sit with him for about five minutes, talking about the pearls and the deed. Then, she would turn on him, and let him know that instead of calling the cops, she’d called a reporter. Someone who could let the world know that he was a thief and a blackmailer. And, the woman would be here any minute to ask Tim questions.

Then, when Melani felt he looked like he was suitably worked up, she’d approach the table and tell him that if he didn’t hand over the pearls, that she’d write an expose on him and print it in the newspaper.

She knew that he’d threaten to sue, but she’d dealt with threats like that before. She’d be able to keep her cool while he ranted and raved. In the end, she knew that his need for approval by the public would win out. He was superficial enough to think that way, just like Royce’s wife Sarah.

The idea made her belly clench. She knew that Royce was going to be angry with her for going off on her own, but she was sure he would see it was the right thing to do. If she'd waited any longer, their window of opportunity would be closed. This way, the situation would be resolved and they wouldn't have to break the law.

Melani scanned the crowd as they continued to wait. She watched the cars that parked on the street and frowned. The asshole really wanted to be in control. Being late proved that.

About ten minutes after the scheduled meeting, Melani watched a sleek sports car pull up to the curve. A handsome man in his later thirties got out and straightened his jacket, hitting the button for his car alarm before crossing the street toward the café.

It had to be Tim.

She watched him scan the crowd and find Jaynie. He walked toward her quickly, setting his keys on the table and taking a chair. The conversation started and Melani smiled as his face turned from calm to anger.

It was just about time for her to make her entrance. She gave him a few more minutes, then stepped away from the wall and started toward the table. She was about ten steps away when someone pressed a large cup of iced coffee into her hands.

She turned her face to see Royce, his eyes unreadable.

"Just play along," he whispered in her ear as he moved toward the table. When they were inches away from Jaynie and Tim, Royce jostled her arm, turning it so that the cold drink spilled down the front of Tim's suit.

"Son of a bitch!" The lawyer stood quickly, turning his back on the table and brushing the iced drink from his front as he continued to cuss.

"Sorry, man. My wife can be a little clumsy," Royce said with a laugh.

Out of the corner of her eye, Melani saw Ellie grab Tim's keys and turn the remote toward the street, hitting the unlock button several times until it dinged on the sports car.

"You stupid bitch!"

"Hey, that's my wife you're talking to!" Royce yelled, pushing Melani behind him. "It was an accident. Get over it."

Melani turned her gaze toward the street where Russell was opening the door of Tim's car. He disappeared into the passenger's side and closed the door.

"Fuck you! Do you have any idea how much this suit cost? You're fucking paying for it."

“You think? Get over it, man, it’s just a suit,” Royce said with a laugh.

Melani kept her gaze trained on the car. It seemed like forever before Russell got out. He waved a bag in the air, then put it in his pocket and began calmly walking down the street.

Royce was now up in Tim’s face, yelling and pointing his finger at the older man and demanding an apology for his “wife.”

Ellie hit the remote and Melani laughed as the car dinged to signal that it was again locked. She sat the keys on the table, winked at Melani and disappeared.

Jaynie, who had not moved from her seat, bit back a laugh and stood to push Tim and Royce apart.

“It was an accident Tim,” Jaynie said. “Get over it.”

“I want a name and address,” Tim replied, pushing his finger into Royce’s chest. “You and your wife are paying for the cleaning bill.”

“Like hell,” Royce said. “You look like you can afford it. Come on, babe. We’re leaving.”

He took Melani’s hand and they headed toward the gate. The other diners, who had stopped to watch the floor show, made way for him as they walked away. When they were on the sidewalk, and out of view of Tim and Jaynie, Melani stopped.

“Brilliant.”

“You think? Why didn’t you come to me first instead of dashing into the situation?”

“I could handle him. We had a great plan. I was going to be a reporter, which I am, pretending to do an expose on his dirty dealings with his divorce.”

“Really. And you don’t think he would have hit you? I thought he was going to deck me.”

“You’re a man. He never would have tried to hit me.”

“The man’s a blackmailer and a thief. Do you think he would have stopped to think about the ethics of hitting a woman?”

Melani took a step back. “It would have worked.”

“Not very likely.” The anger in Royce’s voice hung thick in the air.

“Why are you mad at me? We got what we came for.”

“Because, Melani, you rushed into something without, without...”



“Without what? Your permission? I’ve got news for you, Royce. I’ve been doing things on my own for a while now. I don’t need your permission for anything, even if we are lovers.”

Royce took a few steps back. Melani look at him. “Royce. I didn’t mean...”

“No. I understand. Perfectly.”

“It’s just—”

“You don’t have to explain yourself. And you’re right. You don’t have to answer to me.”

Melani took a step toward him. “That’s not what I meant. I knew you were busy and we were in a hurry. I just thought that...”

“It’s okay. I understand. Perfectly.”

“You’re reading something into this that’s not there. I swear it.”

He captured her face in his and kissed her forehead. “It’s okay.”

But when his eyes met hers, Melani knew that it wasn’t. There was a shield up that hadn’t been there before, blocking his emotions. He was unreadable, and she supposed that it was his lawyer training, keeping him distant from what was happening around her.

With one fell swoop she’d managed to close a door between them. And she wondered how she would get it open again.

## Chapter Fourteen

Melani took Royce's hand as she jumped from the ship to the pier. Ellie had decided to have the rehearsal dinner at the island where the reception would take place.

On Saturday, the wedding ceremony would be held on the tall ship that they'd sailed over on tonight. Then, the guests would convene on the island for the reception. Throughout the night, those who were ready to leave would be ferried back on party barges.

Melani knew it was this island where Ellie and Russell had first fallen in love three years ago, so the place had special meaning for her friend.

She turned her face toward Royce, who smiled at her. It didn't reach his eyes. Just like every smile he'd offered her since the previous afternoon. He was doing his best to show there was nothing wrong between them, but Melani knew that there was.

Last night, they'd both been invited to dinner with the happy couple and their parents. Melani had been shocked when Ellie's parents had shown up unannounced. Not as much as Ellie had been, but still shocked.

Ellie had welcomed them with open arms, and then insisted on a big dinner so she could discuss wedding plans with her mother.

Melani had fought back several grins as Martha Winton had grimaced at the idea of a pirate wedding. But, to give the woman credit, she'd kept her mouth shut, saying nothing to her beloved daughter that would ruin her day. Melani was proud of her.

After dinner, Melani was sure that Royce would send her back to Ellie and Russell's house, but he hadn't. They'd gone to his boat, where they'd each set up separate work areas, she to work on her stories and he to work on the books.

When she'd gone to his room at a little after eleven it was to find him sound asleep. The banana she'd placed on his pillow sat forgotten on the nightstand. She'd stripped and climbed under the sheets, hoping to wake him so they could make up from their afternoon tiff.

After a few attempts at kissing him, he hadn't stirred. She'd turned around and spooned herself against him, falling asleep with tears stinging the back of her eyelids.

When she'd woken up that morning he'd been gone. The only thing that had brought a smile to her face was the appearance of Kidd, delivering a bagel wrapped in two plastic bags. This time, however, no banana or fun note awaited her inside the package.

She turned to him now and watched as he traded jokes with Russell.

Both men were dressed in white shirts tucked into blue jeans, and both of them looked spectacular. Of course, Melani thought Royce looked much better. His long, black hair cascaded down his back, tied at the nape of his neck.

She'd watched in wonder as he'd instructed the sailing crew on the way over, using terms she didn't understand but was fascinated to hear. Watching him on the ship had brought back memories of their night on the ocean, and made her blush. She'd wanted him to turn and talk to her, to call her Red and tease her about being the same color.

But he hadn't. They'd stopped in the middle of the ocean for the rehearsal. It had been a fun affair, with everyone laughing and having a good time. Melani had put on her good face, but underneath she was crying.

Crying for what she was losing. Part of it, she admitted, was the fear that her relationship with Ellie would change after the wedding. She'd had lots of friends who, once married, no longer had time for their friends.

She didn't think that was going to happen now, but it was always a possibility.

Three-fourths of it, she knew, was the idea that her relationship with Royce was over. Tonight she would be with Ellie at the bachelorette party, and he would be with Russell at the bachelor party.

And tomorrow?

She sighed as she turned and walked toward the gazebo and nearly completed dancing area outside the hotel. She wasn't sure what would happen tomorrow. She hoped and prayed that Royce would gather her in his arms and make love to her one last time.

Maybe, just maybe, he'd take her sailing again and they could make love in the ocean. Or they could lie on the deck of his houseboat and cuddle under the stars. She was going to have to do something to make sure that their last night together was memorable.

She jumped when she felt an arm on her elbow.

"You okay?" Ellie's voice was full of concern.

"I'm fine. I was just thinking how beautiful this place is, and how stunning the wedding is going to be tomorrow."

"Yes, it is. And if you think that after all these years I don't recognize when you're lying, you're wrong. You're full of crap. I know something happened between you and Royce yesterday. After the party I want to hear all about it."

"Ellie, it's your..."

"Melani. Kiss my ass. You're going to tell me, and you're going to like it. Or I'll have Russell keelhaul you."

Melani cocked her head. "What exactly is keelhauling?"

"A bad pirate is tied to a rope, thrown overboard and dragged under the ship's keel to the other side. Very, very painful. And possibly could result in death."

"Gee, thanks."

"I just want you to know how serious I am about our talk. I want to know what's going on. In explicit detail. Got that?"

"Aye-aye, captain." Melani saluted as Russell came up behind Ellie and gathered her in his arms.

"She's not the captain. Just the first mate." He turned her toward the hotel and they duckwalked over the path toward their guests.

"You ready?" Royce's voice was low and she could feel his breath against her ear.

"Of course," she turned her gaze to his. "I suppose you have a heavy-duty party planned tonight."

"Naturally," he said with a grin. "I even have Kidd ready to pop out of the cake."

She laughed. "He'll eat most of it first."

"Probably so, but it'll be great fun."

He offered his arm and she took it. Heat radiated through her body when they touched. She resisted the urge to steer him toward a quiet clearing and tear his clothes off.

"I missed you last night," she said softly.

He stepped in front of her and put his finger under her chin, lifting her gaze to his.

"I haven't had much sleep this week. Some saucy wench has been keeping me up, and I do mean *up*, all week."

She smiled and he leaned down and kissed her forehead. She bit her lip, not knowing what to say. When she'd finally thought of a response, he'd taken her hand and led her toward the party.

Her opportunity was gone, drifting away on the air just like her relationship with Royce. And she wasn't sure how to bring it back.

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"So, do you think I can talk my mother into wearing pirate garb?" Ellie took another drink from her wine bottle, then threw back her head and laughed. It was after two a.m. and Melani knew that her friend had consumed more than her limit. It was a good thing they didn't have to drive. Right now they were sitting on the dock, listening to the ocean.

"Doubt it. But I do think we should go and look for some soft drinks. Or some food. You don't want to have a hangover at your own wedding." She tried to grab the bottle from Ellie, who took another swig, then reluctantly handed it over.

"It would just be so perfect, though. My mother dressed as a pirate wench. I would love it."

"You should be happy she's here."

"I'm thrilled. It says a lot, because she's so royally pissed that I'm not wearing a white dress with a six-foot train."

They both laughed, then Ellie put her arms around Melani and pulled her close.

"Thanks for being here. And thanks for doing the stories."

"You're welcome. I've had a great week."

"I would say so. You've had more sex than I have this week."

Melani giggled nervously. "Probably."

The two friends sat, their arms around each other.

"You love him, don't you."

"No. I told you, you can't fall in love with someone in a week."

"Bullshit. You love him. Don't let him get away."

Melani brushed back tears and turned her face toward the ocean.

"I don't have a choice. The only hope I have is for him to make love to me tomorrow night, and then drive me to the airport on Sunday."

"No, it's not. Don't give up so easily."

Melani whipped her head back toward Ellie.

“You think this is going to be easy?”

“No, that’s not what I meant. Put up a fight. Let him know that you love him.”

“Yesterday I as much as told him I didn’t need him in my life.” Melani related the story of the blow up after the pearl incident.

“Well, I know that Sarah screwed him royally, but he opened himself up to you.”

“Yeah, for sex.”

Ellie shook her head. “He told you about his ex, didn’t he? That’s opening up for more than sex.”

Melani stared at her friend. “You’re right. And I never once told him about Charles, or anything.” She shook her head and sniffled. “You know, this is why you don’t jump into bed with people. I knew this would end badly.”

“It doesn’t have to. Let him know what you want. Show him that you care, and that you want to be in his life.”

“How do I do that? Mark an X on my chest and ask him to dive for treasure?”

“Cute,” Ellie said with a sarcastic grin. “But I have a different idea. How are you at fencing?”

“Excuse me?”

“Lunge and parry? Foil and thrust?”

“Right. I know nothing about fencing.”

“Then it’s a good thing I’m not that drunk. Let’s go.”

Ellie stood and dusted off her pants.

“Where are we going?”

“To help you win your very own pirate.”

## Chapter Fifteen

Melani tried to focus on Ellie as she spoke her vows, but her mind kept wandering to the gorgeous hunk of man standing opposite her. And from the way Royce's eyes wafted over her body, she would say he was having trouble focusing on the wedding, too.

She knew that she looked pretty good, even if her breasts were on display. Her maid-of-honor outfit was in red, with a full skirt poofed out by several petticoats. The red blouse was low-cut, and cinched in by a white vest, beautifully decorated with small diamonds and pearls.

She'd about choked when Jace told her the jewels were real, and the outfit hers to keep.

"I'll have to talk to Ellie about that."

"She's the one who told me," the designer had said as he'd pulled the vest tighter. "And, about that... *other thing*."

Melani blushed. "Yes."

"You'll have to hurry to find me after the boat leaves with the bride and groom. I want this to work for you."

"Thanks, Jace, for being so nice to me."

"No problem. He's so delicious that I hate to see him alone. Just give him a few licks for me."

Melani stifled a grin at the memory. She could see rough and ready Royce being licked by Jace. Somehow she didn't think it would go over too well.

"Melani." Ellie's voice was low. "The *ring*?"

Melani jumped, then reached into her pocket and pulled out the box with Russell's ring. She handed it to Ellie with a smile.

Her friend looked so beautiful in the cream colored dress that was an exact match of Melani's except for the colors. Ellie's skirt and blouse were cream, and her vest was red. The men were wearing tight black pants, boots that rose above their knees and white shirts that showed off their chest. They even had swords on their hips.

Ellie winked at her, took the ring and handed Melani the box. The rest of the service passed very smoothly, and when the couple was pronounced man and wife, confetti and bubbles

were released from machines. The ship's guns sounded, rocking the deck and breaking the crowd out into nervous laughter.

Melani sighed as Russell pulled Ellie into his arms and kissed her, his hands tenderly caressing her cheeks before he broke the kiss, and then claimed her again.

Melani turned to Royce, who was staring at her, his face unreadable. He smiled at her, but it wasn't the smile he'd always given her this week. It was a sad smile, as if he was sorry that things hadn't worked out between them.

A grin lit Melani's face and she lifted her eyebrows at him. He, in turn, cocked his head in question. She just smiled.

*Just wait, buddy. You've got the surprise of your life coming to you.*

His confused smile remained in place until the justice of the peace introduced Mr. and Mrs. Russell Todd. The crowd broke out in applause while Ellie and Russell kissed again. She turned and took her flowers from Melani, winking at her friend before heading back down the stairs and the makeshift aisle to the bow of the ship.

Melani took Royce's arm and they followed them down the aisle.

Russell held up his hand.

"We want to thank you all for coming. Of course, you are all invited to attend the dinner and reception on our private island. When you're ready to leave, there will be boats ferrying guests back to the mainland in fifteen-minute intervals. All you have to do is go to the dock and wait. But, we hope that you stay until the very end, so that we can party our way into our new life together."

The crowd cheered and Royce let go of Melani's hand, kissing it lightly before turning toward the stern.

"Raise the anchor and let go the sails!"

The crew went to work immediately and Melani watched as Royce joined in. It really was magnificent to watch him. Seeing him bounding up the stairs, a grin on his face and a light in his eyes, she knew that there was no way she could lose him.

She wasn't sure when her lust had developed into love. She closed her eyes and thought back over the week. Maybe it was the night they'd talk about his wife. To see the emotions on his face as their lay in bed and talked about Sarah, and what she had done to him.



Or maybe, just maybe, it was Thursday, when he'd been so mad at her for rushing off to the coffee shop without him. That right there showed that he cared for her. If he didn't, he wouldn't have been angry with her.

And she had shot him down, with just a few words.

She sighed as she remembered the look of pain on his face. Hopefully tonight would change all that. Hopefully, she would be able to show him that she cared about him as much as he cared about her.

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Royce put his hands on the railing of the top deck and stared at Melani. She looked so damn beautiful. His cock had come painfully to attention when she'd walked down the aisle, which was a horrible thing since his pants were tight like the skin on a piece of fruit.

He'd put his hands in front of his crotch and prayed that no one noticed the bulge. Then, he'd tried very, very hard to concentrate on the wedding. It had worked for a few minutes, and then he'd looked at her. And she'd given him that mischievous smile.

That smile reminded him of their first night together, when she'd taken him in her mouth and swallowed everything that he'd offered. It was at that moment that he knew that he had to have her.

But he was a realist. He knew there was no way she would stay here with him in Florida. No way whatsoever. She'd proven that Thursday night when she'd told him that she'd done things on her own for some time now. She didn't need a man in her life. She probably didn't want one.

The sex, though, had been fantastic. Once she'd gotten over her "I don't know you" phase, she'd been game for everything that he'd thought up. He had plenty of other ideas, too, but giving in to them would be too painful.

It was going to be hard enough to let her go. She would fuel his fantasies for years to come, and somehow he doubted that another woman would come close to capturing his heart the way she had.

Even though she was by the book, and he wasn't, he knew that they would be perfect together. But convincing her of that would be too painful. He'd lose in the end. He knew that. And letting her leave tomorrow was going to be bad enough. One more night would only pile the hurt on top.

Besides, who said she'd even agree?

He yelled instructions to the crewmates as they neared the docks. Sails started to rise and the one hundred and fifty people gathered for the wedding moved to the sides to watch the island come into view.

The reception would be beautiful, he knew. He just had to make sure to keep his distance from Melani. She would cause his mast to rise again, and this time it would be hard to hide it from the guests.

Most importantly, he wasn't sure his heart could take one more night, despite what his cock said. He could take matters into his own hands after the wedding was over. It was a poor substitute for Melani's soft, warm body. But at least it might keep him sane for the evening.

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"So, you're ready to sail into the sunset," Melani said, smiling as Ellie pulled her close for a hug.

"We are." They held their hug for a moment. "Good luck, tonight."

"Thanks. I think I'm going to need it. He's been avoiding me."

"Just remember what I taught you last night. Hold your sword firm and level. And make sure he knows it's the real thing."

They laughed together, and Melani wiped away tears as Ellie kissed her cheek and ran toward Russell. She followed them out toward the boat and watched them board. Large bubble machines had been placed around the area, the tiny, shimmering orbs filling the sky as the crew pushed off from the dock, with Russell in charge.

It hadn't been hard to convince Russell to ask Royce to stay behind. When he'd heard the ladies' plan he'd laughed until Melani thought he was going to cry. Then, she'd watched him walk toward his friend and ask him to stay behind and make sure everyone was off the island before he left.

"Take the last slip back, if that's okay with you."

Royce had looked confused, but had agreed.

When the boat was away from the dock, Melani turned and raced toward one of the bungalows. Jace was waiting for her.

"Hurry up," he said as he pulled her inside the building. "Most of the guests have gone already and if we're not careful we'll be stranded here."

He quickly undid her vest, pulling her clothing off her and handing her the new items Jace had created for her. She donned them quickly, amazed that in a short week she wasn't ashamed to be naked in front of someone that she'd just met.

She jumped when Jace put his hands inside the blouse she was wearing and pushed her breasts together, tucking the material tighter into the pants.

"What are you doing?"

"Making sure the merchandise is arranged properly. These are my creations, remember? I want them displayed to perfection."

Melani pushed at his hands. "My breasts are your creations?"

"No, but this blouse is, and I want you to look perfect." He finished poking and prodding, and then took a step back.

"Perfect. Just one more touch." He reached behind himself and picked up a tri-corner hat from the bed. He placed it on her head, tying the silk bandana so that the ends trailed over her shoulder. He fluffed the huge feather that hung over the back and then sighed.

"Absolutely magnificent. You make the perfect pirate, my dear. Now, go and do some treasure hunting." He handed her Ellie's sword. "And don't take no for an answer."

Melani took a fortifying breath and headed out of the bungalow, ready to do her first bit of piracy with a man who was already a perfect mate.

## Chapter Sixteen

Royce checked the area again to make sure no one was lingering about. He was a more than a little ticked that Russell had asked him to perform this job, which should have gone to one of the boat hands.

But then again, it was good that one of the park owners was around to make sure that no one was left. And he was sure that everyone was gone. Except for one person. Melani.

He'd watched the boats load and had not seen her since Ellie and Russell had left. He'd asked several people and they'd all said they hadn't seen her either. He figured that she had slipped by him and taken an earlier boat.

He waved at Jake, who was piloting the last boat away from the dock. He turned to walk toward the smaller boat that he would take back to the main land, stopping when the sound of footsteps resounded through the quiet.

"Hello? I thought everyone was gone. I..."

Melani stepped out of the forest, dressed in full pirate regalia. She wore a black skirt, complete with numerous petticoats that were tied up at the sides, displaying her legs and a white shirt that was open to her navel, giving him more than an ample view of her magnificent breasts. Her hat looked perfect. And she was holding a sword, which she proceeded to aim at him.

"Melani, I..."

"Silence, prisoner. It's Captain Melani to you."

Royce laughed and shook his shoulders. "You can't be serious. Look, let's go back to the..."

"Did I say you could talk? One more word out of you and you walk the plank. She stepped toward him and he felt his cock spring to attention, stifled by his own tight pants.

"What are you doing?"

"What every good pirate does. You taught me that. I'm taking what I want. And what I want is you."

"One last night, huh?"

"Did I give you leave to speak?" She gently touched the sword against his chest and Royce pulled back.

“Shit. That’s real.”

“You’re my prisoner,” she answered. She waved the sword toward the bungalows. “Go to number three. And don’t make any sudden moves.”

Royce bit back a grin. If Melani wanted one last night with him, then who was he to argue? Right now his cock would commit mutiny if he turned her down.

“Aye, aye, Captain Melani.”

He headed toward the cabins, trying not to laugh. He wondered if this had been her idea, or Ellie’s. And he knew now why Russell had asked him to stay behind and make sure everyone was gone from the island.

He made his way to the bungalows and went into number three.

Every surface in the area had been lined with white candles. The glow was brilliant.

Melani stepped in behind him and closed the door.

“Wow. You’ve had this all planned...”

“Strip.”

“But Captain,” Royce said. “I’m a virgin.”

He grinned as Melani bit her lip. “Not for long. Strip and lie on the bed. I’m not afraid to use this if I have to.”

She wiggled the sword at him and when she did, her breasts jiggled.

Royce nodded and did his best to paste a frightened look on his face. He was harder than he’d been all week.

He quickly stripped, his cock springing out with joy when his pants were gone. He moved toward the bed and stopped. Were those...crap!

“Um, Melani.”

“Did you hear me, prisoner. I said lie down.”

“You’re not going to tie me up.”

“Oh yes, I am. Tit for tat, captive. Now lie down, before I use my sword to convince you properly.”

Royce stood rooted to the spot. He’d never been tied to a bed in his life. He’d always been the one doing the tying. Still, he trusted Melani, and playing along with her game might be fun.

He lay in the center of the bed, relaxing into the mattress.

“Raise your hands above your head and secure them in the ties.”

He did as she asked, amazed to find that the silk scarves were ready to be used. He pushed his hands through the loose knots.

Then he took a deep breath.

“All right captain. Do your worst.”

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Melani placed the sword on the able, careful to put a protective cover over the tip. She crossed to the top of the bed and smiled down at Royce, leaning over to tighten the bonds around his wrists.

Her breasts dangled in front of his face and she moaned softly when his tongue ran over her flesh.

“Stop that. Who’s the captain here and who’s the captive?” She crossed to the bottom of the bed and secured each of his ankles to the posts.

“Comfortable?”

He grinned. “I will be when you climb on top of me.”

“Who said I’m going to?”

She watched panic flutter across Royce’s face. His cock stood hard and proud in the air. Her words seemed to make it harder.

“Melani.”

“Captain Melani.”

He remained silent, relaxing his head against the pillow.

“Say it.”

“No.”

“Do I need to get out my sword?”

“I think we already have one of those.” His eyes drifted to his cock. “Fuck me, Melani.”

“Not yet.”

She sat down near the foot of the bed, trailing her fingers up and down his legs. “Say, ‘fuck me, Captain Melani.’”

“When did you get so bossy, and how come you’re not blushing?”

She tickled his balls, grinning when his cock jumped in response.

“Or how about, ‘fuck me, Captain Red.’”

“Melani.”

“Do you want me, Royce?”

She straddled him, sitting on his stomach and pushing the blouse aside so that her breasts spilled forth. She pushed them together, massaging them and plucking at her hard nipples.

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes, Captain Red.” He smiled, then darted his tongue out. “Please, baby.”

She leaned over him, placing her nipples inches away from his mouth. His tongue darted out again and she felt the wetness sliding from her slit.

“Suck me, my captive.”

She leaned further down and moaned when he captured her nipple in his mouth, sucking it deep into his mouth. After a few seconds, he abandoned it for the second one.

Melani felt like she would topple over the edge. His teeth were doing wicked things to her, gently nibbling on the hard buds.

“Delicious,” he said softly. “Are you wet, Captain?”

“I am, but that doesn’t mean I’m ready to take you quite yet.”

She leaned over and kissed his nose, trailing her tongue down the slope to his lips. She meant to pull back but Royce leaned up, capturing her lower lip between his own.

“Stop that. I’m in charge.”

“Says you. You’re going too slow.”

“You think?” She leaned back. “I rather enjoy watching you ache for me.”

She lifted herself from his body, stepping away from the bed and twirled away.

“Would you like to see me naked?”

“Melani, you’re killing me.” Royce pulled against his bonds and she laughed. She inched the skirt and petticoats from her body, leaving the shirt in place.

She straddled him again, sitting on his thighs and running her fingers up his stomach. Their gazes locked and for a moment, she thought she would lose it. The plan was for her to take him, and then tell him that she loved him, that she wanted to stay with him.

It was hard to stick with it, though, sitting on top of Royce, her body aching for him as much as her heart was. She brought her fingers down and trailed them over his cock, up and down the sides, reveling in the hissing noise that escaped from Royce’s lips.

“Baby. Please.”

She teased the tip, sliding her finger over the slit, moving the small amount of liquid over the head. She trailed her fingers down to his balls, gently cupping each one and then moving back to stroke his shaft.

“Melani, please. A few more movements like that and it’ll be all over. I’ve wanted you the whole damn night.”

“Really? Cause I wanted you all night, too.” She wrapped her hand around him and gently pumped him.

“Melani!” He pulled against the bonds and a ripping sound rent through the air. Melani groaned, placing herself over him and centering his cock at her opening. She slid down gently.

She felt him pull on his bonds again and this time the ripping noise was louder. Seconds later, Royce’s hands were on her hips, pushing her further down on his shaft.

“Oh, God. I can’t stand it any longer.” He encouraged her to rock back and forth on him, his hands moving from her hips to under the shirt, gently caressing her stomach and teasing her bellybutton before moving to her breasts.

Melani rocked faster as he tweaked her nipples.

“That’s it, faster, harder. Oh yeah, so good. So very good.”

Melani closed her eyes and concentrated on the feeling of Royce moving inside her. It was as if they’d become one person, joined together forever. Each thrust of his cock in and out of her body brought her closer to orgasm and she knew that she wouldn’t be able to hold back what she wanted to say.

She leaned over and kissed him, plundering his mouth as he pulled her face closer.

When her orgasm hit she screamed out his name. She heard him groan out his own release. She bore herself down on him as he pounded inside her, his release sending her over the edge again.

“Royce. Oh fuck, Royce.”

“That’s it. Oh yeah. My Captain Red.”

She collapsed against his heaving chest, her own quaking body pressing into him. When she’d recovered her breath, she said softly. “I love you. I love you so much. Please, Royce, please...”



He pushed her back, capturing her face between his hands. He caressed her cheeks with his thumbs, a huge smile on his face.

“Please what, Red?”

“Please tell me you feel the same way.”

She could feel his cock, hard and pulsing inside her.

“What do you think?”

“No. Please, tell me.”

“Oh Melani. I fell in love with you the minute I saw you.”

Tears slipped from her face.

“Do you mean it?”

“Yeah, Red, I mean it.”

“Good. Because I’m staying here, if that’s okay with you.”

He laughed, the booming sound echoing off the walls.

“Well?”

“There’s just one condition we need to discuss.” He pulled her face down to his and kissed her.

“What’s that?”

“I do the tying, and you get tied. Got it?”

“I don’t know. We’ll see.”

He made an effort to pull her over, but groaned in disgust when his legs wouldn’t move.

“Untie me,” he growled.

“Make me.” She jumped from the bed and ran for the sword. She turned in time to see him jump from the bed. She knew the ties weren’t that tight, but still. That had been awfully quick.

She lifted the sword toward his chest.

“Pledge your fealty to my sword, pirate.”

“With pleasure, wench.” He kissed the sword and then gently pushed it aside. “Now, about that condition.”

He pulled her close and kissed her deeply, his tongue taking possession of her mouth.

When he started to trail kisses down her neck, she pushed him away. “You will marry me, won’t you? Because I was thinking...”

“Hush, Red. No planning tonight. Just you and I together. Tomorrow we’ll plan.”

“But, you will...”

“Yes, I will.”

Epilogue

“Cantor! In my office.”

Melani shook her head and then skipped toward Josh Martin’s office.

“What? I have things to do, you know.”

“Yeah, like packing, which really sucks. Tell me, how am I supposed to edit these stories if you’re not here?”

“Oh please, Josh. I gave you notice two weeks ago. Besides, there’s e-mail, and faxes, and phones. You can call me, you know. Florida is just on the edge of the country, not the other side of the world.

“I can’t believe you’re leaving us. You go to Florida in a business suit and come back in jeans and a risqué blouse like I’ve never imagined.”

Melani laughed.

“Look. I promised Royce I’d be home an hour ago. I don’t want to keep him waiting any more. Our plane leaves in two hours.”

“Fine. I guess...what the hell?”

“Where’s my wench?” The voice boomed across the newsroom and Melani shook her head.

“I guess I left him waiting too long.”

She turned to watch her pirate stride into the newsroom. He wore tight jeans and a loose white shirt. His long hair was unbound and cascaded over his shoulder. He instantly made her wet.

“I can’t believe you’re leaving us for a pirate.”

Melani ran to the door, covering her mouth with her hands at the sight of her former co-workers gaping at Royce.

“Okay, wench. Time to go.” He cocked his finger at her. “We have things to do, you know.”

“I know. But Josh said he needs...” the air left Melani’s body as Royce leaned over and pulled her over his shoulder.

“Royce!”

“If you need her, call her. We have a plane to catch.”

“Royce, put me down!”

“Hush, wench.” Royce started to walk from the room as several staff members clapped and gave wolf-whistles.

When they were near the elevators he set her down and pressed the button.

“You know, just because you’re my fiancé now doesn’t mean you can be so bossy and carry me out of rooms, I mean, I’m my own person and...”

Royce pulled Melani into his chest, silencing her words with a kiss. After a few minutes, he pulled back.

“You talk too much,” he said softly. “And you think too much. Tell me what you’re feeling right now.”

“Love. Absolute love.”

“Good. Then we’re on the same track.”

“It’s just that I think we should...”

“Red. Shut up and kiss me.”

Melani bit her lip and then did just that.

THE END