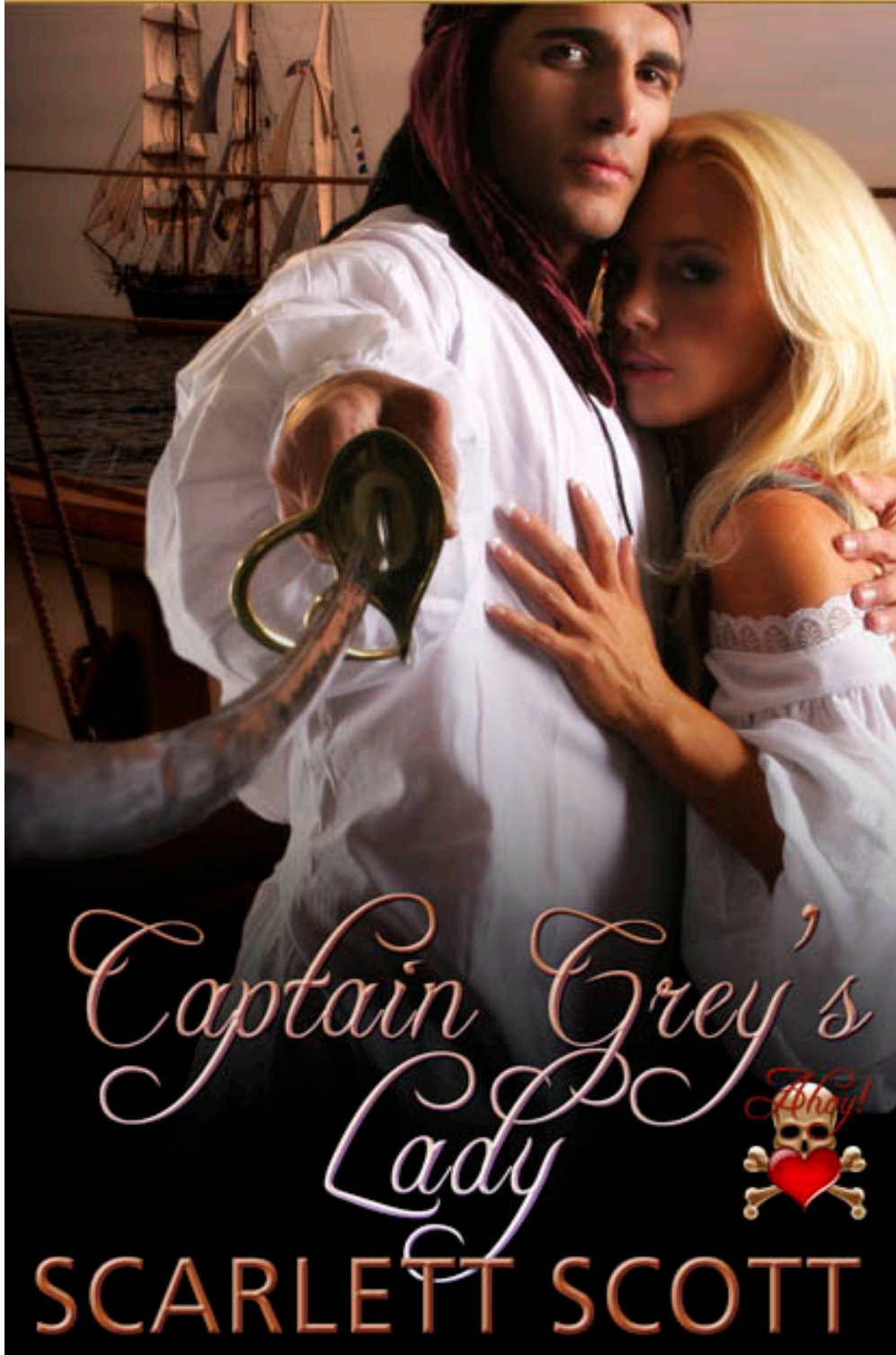


ELLORA'S CAVE *Legend*



*Captain Grey's
Lady*



SCARLETT SCOTT

Captain Grey's Lady

Scarlett Scott

When a dangerous-looking stranger raps on Lizzie Winstead's door in the middle of a stormy night, the peace of her humdrum life is shattered. She's shocked to discover her visitor is Captain Edmond Grey, one of the most feared pirates of the realm—and her lost love.

Edmond is a wanted man throughout the Colonies, but despite his formidable reputation, he desperately needs her help to nurse his wounded brother back to health. Only Lizzie can be trusted not to turn Edmond over to authorities for the price on his head.

Lizzie can't quell the feelings Edmond stirs in her heart or the fire he ignites in her blood. Before long, both succumb to the reckless desire renewed between them. She follows him aboard his pirate ship and sets sail into a world rife with passion and peril. Together they brave fierce battles and frightening storms, determined to discover whether the love they once shared is strong enough to reunite them forever and conquer the demons of Edmond's past.

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Captain Grey's Lady

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CAPTAIN GREY'S LADY

Scarlett Scott

Dedication

To my family for their wonderful and amazing support and to Steve, who saved this story with a marathon brainstorming session.

Prologue
London, 1709

Edmond Grey knew he damn well didn't want to be a baker. Apprenticed from the time he was but a lad, he'd grown weary of flour, of baking buns, of never leaving the tedious life of shopkeeper. He'd finally settled upon the path that would lead him far away. There was only one snag in the fabric of his otherwise flawless plan, and it was a large snag indeed.

Her name was Lizzie Crawley.

He'd been wooing her in secret from the moment she'd first stepped inside the shop, the loveliest girl he'd ever seen, with golden hair and eyes the color of the ocean. She'd given him a hesitant smile and he'd known she would be his. Their courtship had been whirlwind, filled with stolen moments and kisses. Now he had no choice other than to tell her goodbye.

He found her in the herb garden she kept at her father's house. She didn't hear him approach, and he allowed himself a moment's pause to admire her for the last time. Her blonde hair had been plaited into a fat braid and she wore an old mantua stained with mud, but she was still the most gorgeous creature he'd ever seen.

"Lizzie."

She spun about, holding a hand to her breast. "Good heavens, Edmond. You startled me."

"Pray forgive me." He crossed the distance between them, feeling like the worst sort of cad for what he must do. He didn't want to hurt her.

"Of course." She smiled, wiping at the smears of dirt upon her dress. "You must forgive me for my appearance."

"You are lovely as ever." Edmond took her hands in his, not caring that they were encrusted in dirt from her ministrations. He breathed deeply. "It is I who needs forgiveness."

Her blue gaze searched his, questioning. "Why do you say that?"

He plowed ahead, knowing there was no kind way to break ties with her. "Lizzie, I'm leaving."

"Must you be off already? You've only just arrived."

Her innocence stabbed at his heart. "No, Lizzie. I've decided to join the navy."

"The navy?"

He nodded. "I'll be leaving on a ship in the morning."

"I see." Her expression became cautious. "When will you be returning?"

"I won't be."

"Not returning," she said slowly, her mind obviously taking in the full implications of his revelation. "Never?"

He released her hands and brushed a stray tendril of hair from her cheek. "I don't belong here, Lizzie."

She flinched away from his touch. "You don't belong here? How dare you court me and lead me to believe you harbored tender feelings for me? What was I to you? A lark?"

Guilt skewered him. In truth, he'd developed much affection for Lizzie. He'd never wanted to cause her pain. But she didn't know the man he was, the man he could be, and he'd never forgive himself if he didn't leave. London wasn't for him. A quiet life was not his idea of happiness. He was hungry for adventure, travel. The sea called to him.

"Of course not. I treasure our time together, but the truth is I'm not happy. I don't want to spend the rest of my life as a baker. I have to leave, find my own fortune rather than the one my father chose for me."

“Have you made this decision because of your father?” she demanded.

Edmond despised his father. He made no secret of the sad fact, nor did he make any apologies. Indeed, for the majority of his seven and ten years, he’d done his best to ignore his sire’s very existence.

He was one of two brothers, both born bastards. His mother was an utter saint, and she’d done her utmost to raise Edmond and Thomas as proper young men. John Grey was a fine gentleman who had no wish to be saddled with the illegitimate get produced by his youthful follies. He used his influence to obtain apprenticeships for Edmond and Thomas both, and had only bothered to meet them on one occasion. Edmond had always been brutally honest with Lizzie about the truth of his lineage.

Yes, he supposed his father had a great deal to do with his decision. One day he would prove to John Grey he was a man worthy of his father’s respect. “I need to make my way, Lizzie. This is my choice.”

“There will be no changing your mind?”

He did his damndest to ignore the sheen in her eyes. He was not for her, he told himself. He was doing both of them a favor. “It’s far better for me to leave you now than to roam from you after we’re wed,” he said simply. “Please understand.”

“I don’t think I ever shall.” Her tone was hushed as she rose on tiptoe to press a kiss to his cheek. “I wish you well, Edmond. Know that wherever you go I will always hold you in my heart and prayers.” Tears streamed unabashedly down her soft skin.

“Thank you.” Hell and damnation, this was difficult. Leaving her was not easy, and he hated himself for having to do it. In the end, he knew one day she’d thank him. She deserved to be loved by a true man, not by a bastard who was filled with the hunger to roam. “I will never forget you, Lizzie.”

“Nor I you,” she whispered.

And then he left her to a life without him. As Edmond walked away, a fine mist began to fall. He’d never felt more like a bastard than he did in that moment.

Chapter One

Philadelphia 1719

At first listen, Lizzie mistook the commotion for thunder from the angry spring rainstorm that had been assaulting the city since sundown. She stilled at her writing desk, pen poised above the notes she'd been transcribing on one of her father's medical treatises. No indeed, the loud pounding sound was not caused by a storm, she realized with growing concern, but someone at the front door.

She dropped her pen in its inkwell and stood. Only a desperate person would call at the house of a physician at this hour, someone in dire need of aid. With her father gone to Boston to visit with an old associate from London, Lizzie would have to see to the patient as best she could. Although she had not been permitted to attend university, she had served as her father's apprentice for nearly half her twenty-eight years. She only hoped the problem was one with which she was already familiar. After all, she was unaccustomed to practicing on her own.

The knocking grew in intensity. There was no time to tarry. She secured the wrapper she'd donned over her night shift. Although she was hardly dressed to receive a visitor, it would seem she had little choice. Taking a candle with her, she left her bedchamber and navigated her way downstairs.

By the time she reached the front hall, the ever efficient Jeremiah and Judith, her father's faithful retainers, waited.

"Shall I answer, Mrs. Winstead?" Jeremiah asked in grim tones.

Philadelphia was still relatively young and could, at times, be quite rough. However, Lizzie could never deny care to someone in need on account of a misplaced sense of caution. Indeed, her father had asked her to carry on in his absence should the need arise.

Praying it was not merely some drunkard or scoundrel at their door, she nodded to Jeremiah. "Please do, Jeremiah. I'm certain it must be one of Papa's patients."

"Yes, madam." Raising his candle high, he swung open the front door to reveal a large silhouette.

"I need to see Dr. Crawley at once," announced their guest in a voice as low as it was commanding.

"He's not at home," Jeremiah responded. "Can I help you in some way, sir?"

"Rouse him from bed if you must. Damn my blood, I don't have time for a servant with a cane up his arse."

Irritated at the man's rudeness, Lizzie swept forward. Jeremiah was of slight build with graying hair and a gouty limp. If their unexpected guest wanted to cause trouble, he easily could. Best to try to tamp down a problem before it began.

"I'm afraid my father is out of town, sir," she began, trying to peer through the murkiness of the night to see the man's face. She could discern only long hair too straight to be a wig. The brim of his hat hid all else from her view.

"Lizzie?"

His use of her father's pet name for her more than startled her. She stiffened. "Sir, do I know you?"

"Indeed. I'm an old family friend. Might I have a private word with you?"

When she hesitated, he spoke again. "I beg of you. It is a matter of life and death."

He spoke like a gentleman but hardly looked like one even in the dim light. That he would not reveal himself before the servants was particularly telling. Her instincts told her to shut the door in his face, bar it and never think of him again. But there was an urgency in his tone, a pleading almost. Her heart was ever too soft.

"You may come inside," she conceded after a long pause. "Judith, please put on a pot of water for tea."

"Mrs. Winstead," Jeremiah protested, giving voice to her private concerns.

"Our guest is a family friend, Jeremiah. Please stand by should we need you." She would give the man the privacy he requested, but not the opportunity to do mischief. If Jeremiah remained within earshot, she would feel somewhat safe, at least. She inclined her head to the mysterious man before her. "Follow me, sir."

Lizzie led him into her father's study and lit a handful of tapers. The light afforded her the opportunity to make a closer inspection of the man. He wore a greatcoat over the customary fearnothing jacket of seamen, and a pair of breeches and boots much finer than the rest of his garments. He appeared thoroughly sodden from the rains. His hair was dark, perhaps black, his features mostly obscured by a beard. He looked, in fact, like a man who was dangerous.

She placed her candle on her father's desk and clasped her hands at her waist, trying to staunch the unease sliding through her. "Pray explain who you are, sir, and what brings you to our door at this time of night."

"First, I must have your word that what I tell you remains between us only."

Lizzie scoffed. "I hardly think you're in a position to make demands of me."

In two strides he closed the distance between them. His large hands clamped on her waist, nearly naked without her customary stays and stomacher. She felt the heat of him through the thin fabric as the salty scent of sea water assailed her. He yanked her flush against his body.

Excitement mingled with fear as he held her. It had been years since a man had touched her so intimately and she was shocked to discover the stranger made heat settle low in her belly.

"Listen closely, Lizzie. You've a gouty old man and woman for protection and nothing else. I haven't the time to play bloody games with you. I'll have your promise or you'll pay the price," he growled.

Comprehension hit her with the force of a runaway stallion. She knew his voice. She knew the man before her. Hand shaking, she reached up and traced the strong edge of his jaw. The bristles of his beard tickled her fingertips. She studied his eyes, his

sensual full mouth. He had changed much, but beneath the grizzled façade of a seaman she recognized the first man she'd ever loved. "Edmond," she whispered. "Can it be? Is it you?"

"I'll have your promise, damn you," he insisted, giving her a soft shake.

"I promise." She said it with ease, knowing now why he'd been so secretive, so distressed.

The suitor of her youth had run off to the navy and instead of pursuing an honorable career, he'd become one of the most feared pirates in the realm. Captain Edmond Grey's exploits were legendary. He was a wanted man, the Scourge of the Atlantic. If anyone learned of his presence on shore, he'd be arrested or killed. Just the year before, the infamous pirate Blackbeard had been killed in Virginia, his severed head hung from a ship's bowsprit as warning to all who presumed to follow in his path.

"I'm entrusting you with my life, Lizzie." He paused. "Where is your husband?"

Sadness swept over her. Her hand stilled at Edmond's chin. She had loved her husband, but never as she'd loved the wild man before her. "He passed on five years ago."

He swallowed. "Hell, I'm sorry to hear it. I'm sure he was a good man."

"He was, thank you." She forced a small smile to her lips. "He has gone on to a greater reward. Now tell me, Edmond. What has brought you here? Have you any idea how much danger you've put yourself in?"

"Of course I know." His grip on her waist tightened. "I wouldn't be here unless it was absolutely necessary. I need a physician, Lizzie. We ran into a skirmish with a navy frigate. The *Freedom* is faster and we outran them, but our casualties were heavy. Our ship's surgeon was killed, many others wounded." He stopped, his voice breaking. "My brother Thomas among them."

The physician's daughter in her suddenly took precedence over the woman who had once loved the man before her. "How bad is it?"

"Very bad." He set her away from him and turned to pace the length of the room. "He took a musket ball to the head."

Lizzie gasped. "He is still alive?" It was almost unheard of for any man to survive an injury to the head.

"He is breathing, yes. I haven't any idea how bad it is. I'm afraid...damn my blood, Lizzie, I'm afraid he's going to die. It's all my fault. I should have bloody well told him no when he asked to come away with me. I knew the risks I was taking and I didn't give a goddamn. I shouldn't have allowed it." With a cry, he slammed his fist into the wall.

She pressed a hand to her mouth, feeling his pain as keenly as he must. Hesitant to intrude upon his anguish, she approached him slowly. She placed a hand on his coat. "Edmond? You must not blame yourself. It was Thomas' choice to follow you."

A knock at the door interrupted them. Judith entered at Lizzie's request, bearing a tray of tea. Lizzie smiled to reassure her concerned maid. "Place it on the desk, if you please, Judith. You may go, thank you."

Lizzie turned to the tea service, very dear to have in the Colonies, and fixed two steaming cups. She offered one to Edmond. "You look as if you could use warming."

He let out a bark of bitter laughter. "I prefer rum, dear Lizzie."

"I'm afraid we haven't any. Besides, tea is far better for the constitution."

Edmond accepted the cup, his dark brown gaze searching hers. "You sound like my sainted mother."

"I am no one's mother," she said softly. Many times she had wished she'd been able to conceive with her husband. Having a child would have made her loneliness more bearable.

"I'm sorry, damn it." He took a draw of the tea. "I haven't been in polite society in years. I'm not fit company for a lady like you."

“You haven’t thrown me over your shoulder and carried me away to ravish me yet,” she joked, hoping her attempt at merriment would lighten their conversation.

Instead, his gaze darkened as it roamed slowly over her body. She became aware of how few layers of fabric separated her from him. Two to be precise. He was frighteningly handsome and looking at her in the way a man looks at a woman when he wants to take her to bed. Lizzie felt a rush of warmth pooling between her thighs.

“Not yet,” he said with a raised brow.

Her nipples hardened instantly. Her feelings for him, despite the intervening years, had never altered. She’d never been angry with him for leaving her, only terribly sad. After time had gone by, she’d recognized the struggle he must have faced, trying to make his own mark on the world, not wanting to hurt her. Now she saw before her not the feared pirate he had become but the charming man she had known. She longed to comfort him, take him in her arms. She physically ached with how much she’d missed him. As she’d promised, she’d never forgotten. She’d loved her husband, but she had not forgotten Edmond Grey.

Best to skirt such tempting topics, she decided. She should be worrying more about how to best help his wounded brother and less about how to land in the pirate’s bed. “How can I help you, Edmond? My father won’t be home for a fortnight at least. I fear it’s too long for Thomas to wait.”

“What of you, Lizzie? If I recall correctly, you were ever at your father’s elbow, the son he never had. Hell, I never met a woman as well read as you, and that was back then. I imagine you’ve read dozens more books by now.”

“Perhaps hundreds,” she confirmed sheepishly. It was rare, she knew, for a woman to be treated to the education her father had given her. She could only hope she’d proven worthy.

“Can you tend to him?” He crossed the distance between them. “*Would* you tend to him?”

His question took her aback. She pressed a hand to her heart. "Heavens, I am not a physician, Edmond. Can you not find someone else?"

"It's far too dangerous. There is a price of one thousand pounds on my head. Dead or alive and preferably dead. While I could pay a considerable amount to any doctor, it would be far more worth his while to shoot me and be done with."

She gasped. The sum was an outright fortune. Why, the very governor of New York only earned a wage of twelve hundred pounds per annum. "I had not realized."

"We were on our way to Maine to careen the ship. We were close to Philadelphia when the frigate attacked us and I had heard your father had come to the Colonies some time ago. I knew he was my last resort. But now you are."

Lizzie shook her head. "Edmond, I have never performed surgery. If the musket ball is yet in his skull, I cannot help him."

"It was a grazing blow, but infection set in."

"Infection." It was tantamount to a death sentence ordinarily, let alone on a ship with no surgeon floating at sea.

"Lizzie, I need your help." He took her hands in his, a gesture that both moved and surprised her coming from a man who appeared so outwardly hardened by the life he'd chosen.

Helping a pirate was treason, whether or not he was the lost love of her youth. She could not make the decision frivolously and needed to know more of the situation.

"I dreaded moving him should it worsen his condition." His fingers tightened over hers. "Would you have me beg?"

"I find it difficult to imagine the great Captain Grey begging for anything," she said softly, still hesitant to acquiesce.

"For my brother's life, I would do anything."

"I know not what to say."

"Say yes," he urged, his eyes fierce and unrelenting.

She could not look away or deny him. "I will help you."

"Thank you." He released her hands and cupped her face. And then he utterly shocked her by taking her mouth in a deep, voracious kiss. His lips slanted over hers, warm and firm. As abruptly as the kiss began, it ended. "Thank you, Lizzie."

Trying to stifle the longing he'd set off within her, she forced her mind to the matter of his brother. "Where is your brother now?"

"On the *Freedom*. It was too risky to leave it in port given our notoriety. I ordered the crew back out to sea with plans to return for me at dawn." He raised a brow. "I thought I may have the devil of a time convincing your father to sail aboard a pirate ship with me."

"You want me to sail with you?" She had foolishly assumed Edmond would bring his brother to her.

"It's necessary, I'm afraid. I can't move Thomas without doing him further harm or without making my presence here known. You'll sail with us to Maine and I'll return you on our trip south."

She was to sail on a pirate ship. Lizzie had never gone on a voyage other than her journey from England to Philadelphia. She knew nothing of what to expect. The prospect seemed dangerous and foolhardy for a gentlewoman accustomed to a life of ease and elegance at her father's comfortable house. But it also seemed incredibly exciting. She had to admit too she would not be averse to being in Edmond's presence for a few months. He was a magnificent man, strong, handsome, commanding, imposing in his wildness and daring.

"I should prepare for the journey, it seems." Aside from medical supplies, she would need to pack some dresses, perhaps a book. "Would you like to rest? Dawn is many hours away."

He sighed, the fight seemingly drained from him. "I'd appreciate a warm bed."

"I'll have Judith get you settled then. Meantime, I'll make certain I have everything I need."

* * * * *

He hadn't meant to kiss her. In the quiet of the chamber he'd been escorted to, Edmond looked out the window into the black night. Only the sound of rain pounding the slate roof could be heard. It had been a long time since he'd enjoyed the privacy of a real home. He'd sailed the world, only touching land when he needed to hide, sell his spoils, or restore his supplies. In the process, he'd made a number of friends in the Colonies, and more than a few enemies who couldn't be bought.

Edmond slammed his fist into the casement, berating himself for what he'd done. She was not his, he had to remind his baser self. He had no right to want her. He had no right to be in her home with an ache in his breeches. Damn his blood, he shouldn't have touched her. He'd had his share of women and none had ever compared. He'd never forgotten Lizzie Crawley. Of course, he supposed he shouldn't think of her as the innocent girl he'd abandoned any longer. What had the servant called her?

Mrs. Winstead.

His Lizzie had become another man's wife. Edmond had no justification for experiencing the acute stab of jealousy aching in his gut right now, but he felt it just the same. He'd given her freedom, left her to make her own happiness as he'd tried to forge his. But piracy hadn't made him happy, only wealthy. And it had proven a fickle mistress, ready to take away as swiftly as she gave.

If Thomas died, he'd never forgive himself. Although he'd long ago cast the die for a life of sin, he'd been praying ever since catching sight of Thomas bleeding on the deck. Fortunately word traveled well amongst the settlers and he'd known for some time that Dr. Crawley had come to Philadelphia. It had been a desperate last chance.

When he'd decided to seek out Lizzie's father, he hadn't thought to find her there. He had expected she still lived in London. Instead, his intrepid girl had followed her father to the new world. Perhaps she wasn't so different from him, he thought wryly. Perhaps she too had been struck by the hunger for travel and adventure.

It wouldn't do to linger on thoughts of her. She was not his, never had been. He'd given up any claim on her the day he'd told her goodbye. Damn it, the urge to run was strong. Edmond wished like hell Lizzie's father had not gone to Boston. She was the last woman in the world in whose company he could be trusted. He wanted her with a ferocity that was painfully obvious.

What a true bastard he was, he thought grimly. His brother was near death and here he stood, thinking with his cock. Disgusted, he shucked off his shirt and began pacing the room, willing his thoughts to more important matters. He could not afford to put either Lizzie or Thomas in jeopardy with his actions. And though he knew it well, he still wanted her more than he'd ever wanted any other woman, damn it all to hell.

Lizzie hesitated outside the closed chamber door. She told herself she was being a good hostess, making certain Edmond had been well taken care of by Judith. She'd told Judith and Jeremiah that a family member had taken ill and she was needed, that she had to travel and would return soon. To her father, she confided the truth in a letter she sealed and placed in his office. She had also gathered the medical instruments and tinctures she'd need to attend Thomas, along with a few serviceable mantuas and petticoats. It was time for sleep, but she didn't think she could.

Before she lost her courage, she knocked on his door. "Edmond? It's Lizzie."

It was unspeakably familiar of her to be calling him by his first name and knocking on his chamber door. She should be embarrassed, but she couldn't summon a speck of shame.

"Enter."

She opened the door and paused at the threshold. He was naked from the waist up, perfectly delineated in the candlelight. His chest was broad and defined, dusted with dark hair that trailed down over his muscled stomach and disappeared below his breeches. His hat was gone, revealing a head of dark hair held in a queue at his nape. Strong thighs were evident beneath the tight breeches, along with the tempting outline

of his cock. Her mouth went dry and she forced her gaze to roam back up to the safety of his face.

"I merely wondered if you require anything else before I retire," she managed in the same polite tone she used to inquire after elderly neighbors. In this instance, she did not feel polite at all. She felt rather reckless.

"Come inside and close the door," he ordered in such a commanding voice she obeyed.

Unnerved by his state of undress and his request both, she lingered at the door. "Do you find the chamber to your liking?"

"Of course." He took a step in her direction.

"Is there something you require?" she asked again, trying not to allow her eyes to settle on his full mouth as if she wanted another kiss. *Hopeless*. She could not help but look and admire.

"There is indeed, Lizzie." In another bare-footed step, he was close enough to touch. He slid an arm around her waist and pulled her into him. His cock was hard against her belly. "You."

A delicious feeling swept through her, centering between her legs. She wanted him very much indeed. Even so, she could not capitulate so easily. Her pride would not allow it. She had lived a circumspect life as a widow, yet merely being in Edmond's presence melted her resistance. She supposed her feelings for him had never faded.

"I'm not a prize ship to be conquered." She felt obliged to remind him.

A slow smile curved his lips. "You're far too beautiful to be a ship, Lizzie."

"Thank you, I think." She was breathless, anticipating his next move in their sensual chess game.

"Ah, Lizzie, I'm afraid my intentions aren't honorable." With his free hand, he drew apart her wrapper. "I can see your nipples through your night shift and if you don't

leave in the next minute, I'm going to strip you naked and suck them until you're wild for me."

His words sent a pang straight to her core. "I'm not sure that's wise." Even if it was what she wanted more than anything else. The thought alone of his beautiful mouth on her breasts was enough to make her wet.

"It's been so damn long since I felt a woman's caring touch. I'm a selfish bastard to want more." He cupped her breasts, rubbing his thumbs over her taut nipples. "You may tell me to go to the devil, Lizzie. You're far too good for the likes of me."

She sensed his loneliness and all the worry and pain he'd been carrying with him since his brother had been wounded. Lizzie had heard dozens of bloody tales of his exploits. She'd prayed for his safety. Now he stood before her, a man in need. She couldn't shake the feeling that in giving herself to him she would also be helping him to find some solace, even if only for one night.

"I believe I'm the one who should decide who I keep company with, Edmond." She shrugged out of her wrapper, letting it fall to the floor in a whisper of sound. "Do you want me?"

"Hell yes," he growled. "Feel what you're doing to me." He took her right hand in his, guiding her palm to where his cock strained against his breeches.

Tantalized, she caressed the rigid length. "Then you should take me."

At her words, his mouth came down on hers in a ravenous kiss. His lips played over hers, opening her for the warm slide of his tongue against hers. He tasted sweet, like tea. He released her breasts and sank his fingers into her hair, removing the bodkin that has been keeping it in place. Her blonde hair fell in long waves around them. He kissed her with a fever that matched the one burning in her blood.

She was dimly aware of the sound of her night shift being rent by his capable hands. Cool air swept over her nakedness. Hot touches feathered over her breasts, between her thighs. He dipped a finger into her folds, teasing the bud of her sex. She moaned, straining against him, her tongue dueling with his.

He pulled away to drop opened-mouth kisses on her neck, then lower, to her breasts. When he sucked a pebbled nipple into his mouth, she jerked against him. His tongue raked over her nipple, toying with her. Her breasts were incredibly sensitized, making each stroke of his tongue intense. She sank her fingers into his thick hair, mesmerized by the sight of him suckling her. He nipped her lightly with his teeth and she moaned.

Edmond glanced up at her, a wicked expression on his face. He tongued the nipple he'd just been torturing. "Do you like my mouth on you, Lizzie?"

"Oh yes," she whispered.

"Tell me what you want me to do."

She wasn't sure she could give voice to it. No one had ever asked her to speak so plainly before. "Please, Edmond."

He kissed the top of her breast. "You must tell me. I want to hear your lovely voice saying naughty things."

Very well. He was teasing her, working her into a frenzy and then withholding to enhance the pleasure. "I want you to suck my other nipple," she murmured.

"With pleasure." He dipped his head and took the peak of the breast he'd ignored into his mouth. He sucked deeply, raked his teeth over the pink skin. His hands cupped the full undersides of both breasts.

Liquid and warmth pooled between her legs, her flesh swollen and hungry for more. She was almost desperate to have him inside her. She rubbed her naked body against him, telling him without words just what she needed.

He left her breast and dropped another kiss on her mouth. "Get on the edge of the bed."

She crossed the chamber and seated herself on the bed's edge, watching him approach her in his half-nude glory. He looked dissolute, dangerous and thoroughly bad, a pirate come to take her.

“What would you have me do?” she asked, feeling unaccountably shy with his gaze on her.

“Open your legs for me.” He sank to his knees on the floor before her as though he was a courtier paying homage.

She parted her legs, her sex aching now. She had no idea what to expect, but the mystery made the wait all the more pleasurable.

He stared. “You’re so beautiful. I can’t wait to put my cock inside you, Lizzie.”

Edmond lowered his mouth to her, licking the throbbing bud of her sex. He played his tongue over her, sucked her, rubbed his beard over the sensitive flesh until she cried out. She arched into him, wanting more. His tongue sank inside her, in and out, in and out, the same way he would claim her with his cock. She thought she’d die from the pleasure of it.

He dropped a kiss on her mound and looked up at her. “Are you certain this is what you want, Lizzie? I’ve been through hell and back these last few days and it’s made me into a bit of a madman. I don’t want to take more than you’re willing to give.”

“I’m certain,” she told him without a moment of vacillation. He was her Edmond, and she longed for him, to help him forget at least for a little while.

With a groan he stood and removed his breeches. His cock rose proud and thick from between his thighs. She wanted to put her mouth on him as he had done for her, to taste and lick him, make him feel the same passion coursing through her veins. But when she moved to him, he shook his head.

“I want to be inside you.” He slid a long finger into her passage. “You’re so very wet for me.”

“I want you inside me, Edmond.” She arched, moaning when he slid a second finger in her.

He guided her legs so they rested on his chest, one on each of his shoulders. Then he lowered his hands to her waist, pulling her until her bottom was slightly off the

bed's edge. He probed her entrance with the tip of his cock, playing with her, readying her. She jerked, wanting to take more of him inside.

It was maddening. Just when she thought she'd explode with waiting, he plunged inside her. He began a delicious rhythm, quickening his pace. Again and again he sank his cock deep into her, then drew it almost out, then deep once more. She cried out as a spasm overcame her, washing her body in bliss. He continued, increasing his thrusts in speed and strength. He was incredibly deep.

"Do you like it hard, Lizzie?"

"Yes," she cried out, very near to another climax. She'd never experienced such heights of pleasure in her life. She hadn't realized it possible.

In a few more deep strokes, she came again, tightening around his cock, shivering with the intensity of it. He moved her legs and slid from her body. Confused and sated, she waited for him, wondering what he was about. He had yet to reach his own fulfillment.

"I want you another way," he explained, joining her on the bed. "Turn over to your stomach."

Lizzie did as he asked, feeling exposed in a delicious sense. It made her sex ache for more. His hands came around her waist to angle her as he wanted. "Bring your bottom up," he instructed.

She positioned herself into a half crouch, up on her knees. She'd certainly never made love in this way before. It excited her. She was so wet the moisture had begun slipping down her inner thigh. His hands caressed her bottom.

"Are you comfortable, Lizzie?"

"Yes," she managed, almost incapable of speech. She wanted him badly.

In the next breath she got what she wanted. His rigid cock slid back inside her, reaching a depth that made her cry out with the sheer pleasure of it. He pulled out

almost completely, then sank in again, harder and faster until she came with so much force she squeezed his cock from her slippery passage.

“Have I made you come, darling?” His voice was deceptively innocent, with an underlying mischief.

She couldn't spit out a single word this time. She gasped for breath, her body tingling with incredible sensation. He thrust into her once more. His prolonged lovemaking was making her unbelievably responsive to his every touch.

In another series of deep thrusts, he slammed into her, moaning. She came again as he pumped his seed inside her, thrusting and rotating his hips. Liquid warmth shot into her, filling her. His moan mingled with hers. Neither of them moved for a few beats of the heart, savoring the aftermath of their frenzied loving.

Finally, he withdrew from her and fell to the bed at her side, lying on his back. Lizzie collapsed to her belly, sated and, she knew, forever altered. Breathing heavily, she glanced at Edmond's naked body beside hers. She was mesmerized by the deep tan on his upper body, earned no doubt from days spent under a southern sun aboard his ship. Her gaze traveled lower, to where his cock nestled in a dark nest of hair. It was large even though he was spent, the tip glistening with remnants of his seed. Merely looking at him made her want him all over again.

“Incredible,” Edmond said at last. “Lizzie, I thank you for the best moment of my life. I swear to you I've never felt anything like it.”

“Nor have I,” she confessed, reaching out to caress his chest.

Her feelings were too jumbled, too fresh to sort through. All she knew was that she cared deeply for the man before her, always had. They had known one another in their youth in London. He had always been an adventurer, a charmer with something to prove. She had been quiet, bookish, impressed by his wayfaring spirit.

“I needed the kind touch of a woman.”

The euphoria inside her began dying. “Any woman?”

"No, Lizzie. The kind touch of a woman who cares." He ran a finger down her cheek. "Don't think I haven't thought of you often."

She flushed. "Thinking of me is not the same as caring enough to return for me. I waited, you know. Foolish girl that I was, I kept thinking you'd be back."

"I am truly sorry about our past, Lizzie. You're too good for the likes of me. You've always been indescribably lovely. I was a bad seed with something to prove. Look at the path my life has taken. I would've shamed you and I knew it."

She caught his hand and pressed a kiss to the palm. She believed he hadn't meant to hurt her. Time and age had given her wisdom, the luxury of no longer holding a grudge. "I know not why you've chosen piracy, Edmond, but I know you are still noble and good."

"Not noble and never good." He sighed. "But you've made me feel as if I could be, even just for this night."

"You've made me feel like a real woman, even just for this night," she returned, smiling. "I've always cared for you, Edmond. I cannot lie. But neither do I approve of the life you've settled upon."

He laughed. "Nor did I expect you would, my sweet girl. We must all answer for our sins one day, and I have many."

"May I lie with you until the morning?" In truth, she didn't want to return to her empty bed. The night had become something of a dream. She'd shed her mantle of well-behaved widow, passionless woman, and had dared to feel. Tomorrow, however, everything would be different. She would have to focus on his brother, and it would not be prudent to allow herself to feel for Edmond. In the end, he would leave her as abruptly as he had spirited her away.

"You may," he said at length, pulling her to his side and drawing the counterpane up over their bodies. "Sleep well, sweet Lizzie."

Chapter Two

By the time the sun began its morning ascent, Lizzie found herself sailing away from Philadelphia and her quiet life of widowhood. Edmond didn't introduce her to the sun-bronzed men, a hard scrabble, unkempt lot of Frenchmen and Englishmen. Instead he took her directly to the small cabin where his brother lay at the mercy of his wounds.

The lower ship smelled of moisture and brine. It was surprisingly spacious below decks and not so different from the passenger ship she'd sailed upon from England other than its smaller size. Unless she mistook her guess, the ship had once belonged to a very wealthy merchant, until the merchant had the misfortune to run across the Scourge of the Atlantic, of course.

A rather dangerous-looking sailor watched over Thomas. He stood as she and Edmond entered, whipping a cap from his head. Under ordinary circumstances, Lizzie would have easily mistaken him for a criminal. Then again, she supposed pirates were indeed criminals, merely criminals of the seas rather than the road.

Edmond wore a grim expression as he gestured to Lizzie. "Jean, this is Mrs. Winstead. She's kindly agreed to tend to Thomas for us. Mrs. Winstead, this is Jean, my first mate."

"Beg pardon, Captain," Jean began with an obvious French accent, "but a woman?"

She wasn't surprised by his response. Most men were dubious of a learned woman. "I've trained with my father, who is a well-known physician throughout England and the Colonies. I understand your hesitation, but I can promise you I shall do my utmost to care for Thomas."

"Mrs. Winstead is to be treated to a level of respect higher than even myself," Edmond ordered. "Please convey this to the rest of the men."

She fancied it was almost unheard of for a genteel lady to be present on a pirate ship. Perhaps just as unheard of as a woman who would dare to seek an education for herself. Lizzie wanted to make it clear she was no fainting miss. She could hold her ground against this lot of toughened men.

"I'll earn their respect with my actions," she said with a confidence she didn't completely feel. After all, she knew too well no matter how much knowledge one possessed, miracles happened rarely. And her patient was in a bad way.

Her mind turned to the task before her. She crossed the cabin and knelt at Thomas' bedside, heedless of the damage it did to her skirts. It was difficult to perform an examination in such poor lighting. "Edmond, bring the lamp closer, please?"

He did as she asked, joining her wordlessly by Thomas' sickbed. The light revealed what she had feared. Thomas' complexion was pale, his skin damp with sweat. A large, oozing wound marred his right temple. She pressed a hand to his forehead.

"He's with fever. How long has he been this way?" she asked Jean.

"Since *hier soir* he has the sweats, then the shivers."

"Last night," she murmured to herself. "That isn't good. Fevers weaken the body and he needs his strength to recover. I'll need to stave off the fever."

"Will you bleed him?" Edmond knelt at her side, his voice pained.

"Contrary to many other physicians, my father does not believe in the efficacy of bleeding a patient. No," she decided, "we will treat the fever differently. I've brought some dried marigold. Jean, if you could boil some water, I'll make a tea for Thomas to drink. I've found it to be very helpful in reducing fever."

"Marigold tea?" Edmond sounded dubious.

She'd suspected he might have difficulty trusting in her. Lizzie placed a hand on his arm. "I study herbs, Edmond. Either you trust me or you do not, but you must decide now. If you question me, it will only hinder my ability to give him proper care."

He raised a brow, his expression turning startled. "Damn feisty woman aren't you?"

"I've had to be," she said simply. "Do you trust me or not, Edmond?"

A half-smile curved his lips. "It would seem I've little choice in the matter."

"I will do my utmost to help him." She felt the need to reassure him. While to others he may have become a toughened pirate capable of anything, he was still Edmond to her. She could sense his vulnerability the way she felt the sea rolling beneath them.

"It's all I ask." He bowed his head.

"First things first. I'll need to organize myself or I won't be much good to anyone." She rose and placed her satchel on a table that had been secured to the floor. She'd brought a selection of her medicinal herbs that were very dear since she'd yet to establish a reliable herb garden in her new home. She'd brought a salve of houseleek leaves to stop bleeding and wormwood conserve for herself in case she suffered from seasickness. Working with her father had taught her she'd need to cleanse the wound and keep it in clean bandages.

She plucked the flask of whiskey she'd packed from her satchel, along with some squares of muslin and the houseleek salve. "The wound has to be cleaned."

He inclined his head, expression severe. "Whatever must be done shall be done."

Lizzie went back to the bed, her mind galloping ahead of her. "How long has he been insensate?"

"Since taking the ball to his temple, I believe."

It was ominous news. Injuries to the head were incredibly perilous. In her experience, it was difficult for anyone to recover from a serious blow. "You must know he may never wake," she warned quietly, hating to have to deliver the sobering news.

Edmond swallowed, keeping his gaze trained on his fallen brother's still form. "I understand."

His distress was plain. She wanted to comfort him or offer encouraging words but yet she would not raise false hopes. Moreover, she could not allow herself to falter or feel. Her every action was now a matter of life and death.

Lizzie carefully tipped the flask over the wound and sent a stream of whiskey upon it. She focused on running the cloth gingerly over the injury. A fresh coating of blood oozed to the surface. She worked until she felt the wound had been thoroughly cleaned. Throughout the process, Thomas remained alarmingly still. She applied some houseleek salve to his wound, then pressed a square of cloth to his head, securing it by winding strips carefully round his forehead. By the time she finished, Jean had returned with a steaming pot of water and a cup.

"Place it on the table if you please." She rose and turned to fix the marigold tea.

Edmond stood as well. "Jean, you'll help Mrs. Winstead until she no longer requires you. Fetch me if I'm needed."

Lizzie was dismayed and troubled by his sudden defection. She looked to him in askance. "Edmond? I thought you would aid me."

"Jean is more than capable," he said dismissively. "I've a ship to captain, Mrs. Winstead."

* * * * *

Edmond stalked the deck of the *Freedom*, cursing himself. He hadn't meant to treat Lizzie with such coldness. But damn it, watching helplessly as his brother slipped closer to death with each breath was more than he could bear. He did have a ship to captain, and above decks he could feel the ocean breeze, watch the rugged beauty of the sea around him. He was at home here. Allowing himself to entertain tenderness toward Lizzie was foolhardy. He could never be happy anywhere but here.

Ollie, his gunner, approached him, wearing a look of concern. "Captain, we're being followed."

Damn. He couldn't afford another battle, not now with Lizzie aboard and Thomas so close to death. "Jesus Christ, just what I need. How far off and can you tell who the devil it is?"

"Looks as if it's English colors, just over there." Ollie gestured to a speck on the horizon that was unmistakably the silhouette of another ship.

His own countrymen wanted him dead. It was a sobering thought. With the price on his head, navigating the waters he'd come to know like the palm of his hand was becoming more treacherous by the day. Every man with a frigate at his disposal was trying to hunt down the *Freedom*. They'd earned their enemies the hard way, taking more ships than Edmond had even bothered to count.

"Another bastard wanting a piece of us, do you think?" He stroked his beard, already strategizing.

"Very likely, Captain." Ollie grinned, showing a row of teeth as brown as the planks beneath his feet. "We'll take them on, no problem. Always do."

They were fighters, the men of the *Freedom*. They'd all seen their fair share of hell. Many of them had been pressed into the navy against their will. Others had been assured pay by unscrupulous merchants who never fulfilled their promises. Still others had joined their ranks from the ships they'd plundered. Together they had become a menace so great that the cry for them to be stopped had been raised as far away as London. The Governor of Virginia wanted Edmond's head on a pike. None of them were yet ready to stop pirating. It was in their blood.

His mind was churning. "How many grenades have we?"

"I had the lads working up more through the night," Ollie replied. "We emptied a few rum bottles to aid in the task. It was a hardship, but we managed."

Edmond laughed. They'd long ago discovered a grand use for the rum bottles they drained. Stuffed with gunpowder and bits of metal, they made grand weapons. "A hardship indeed. If you're ready, we'll bide our time and let them come to us."

Ollie nodded. "Yes sir."

But as the day wore on, the approaching ship slipped from their sight. Perhaps they weren't to be attacked by an enemy ship after all, the men reckoned. Edmond wasn't convinced they'd gotten off so easily. He watched and waited, an uneasy sensation settling in his bones. He had a feeling they hadn't seen the last of the ship on the horizon.

* * * * *

Lizzie endured a long, wearying day of tending to Thomas. As the hours dragged by, she kept expecting Edmond to return and inquire after his brother's welfare, but he disappointed her. Jean was a man of few words but nevertheless proved himself an invaluable help. Together they spooned marigold tea and fresh broth between his lips. She cleansed his wound repeatedly. By nightfall, Thomas' fever appeared to have broken for good. She deemed it a good time to allow herself an hour or two of rest.

Jean guided her to a cabin where, as she discovered the moment the door closed behind Jean, she was about to face yet another battle. Edmond was within, seated, a bottle of rum at his side. He didn't bother to acknowledge her presence but she knew he was as aware of her as she was of him. Before the door even closed at Jean's back, she felt keenly aware of the tension emanating between them.

Edmond took a swig directly from the bottle, staring into the planked floors. "How is he?"

"Thomas is improving." She stayed close to the door, uncertain of his mood. He appeared very raffish at the moment. "He has yet to wake, but his fevers have subsided."

"Will he live?"

"I don't know," she answered honestly.

"You needn't linger at the door as if I'm about to accost you." His voice was grim.

"I don't fear you, Edmond." She took a step closer to prove her point. "To others you may be a pirate, but to me you are merely a man."

"I'm a bastard." He swigged another gulp of rum and settled his dark, glittering stare on her. "You'll need some rest, I expect. I will sleep on the floor if you wish it."

She moved closer again, taking in his appearance, haggard and ashen in his worry. Back in Philadelphia he'd been free for the night to escape from the misery of waiting for his brother to die. Lizzie had no doubt it was what he expected. Thomas was in a bad way, she knew. But she also believed in the efficacy of knowledge, of medicine well researched and practiced. Her father had spent scores of his life perfecting his science. She possessed only a scant handful of his education, but she believed in his methods. She believed saving Thomas' life was possible, especially since the fevers had gone.

"Thomas will have a fighting chance," she promised Edmond, understanding him perhaps better than he understood himself. "You've done your duty in seeing to that."

"How have I done my duty?" He roared the words, stalking across the length of the cabin. "Answer me that, Lizzie. Damn my blood, how have I done my duty when my younger brother lies on his deathbed at this very moment?"

Her heart ached for him. His pain was palpable, obvious. Others would likely find it difficult to believe the feared Scourge of the Atlantic had been brought low before a woman. Had she not known him in their youths, Lizzie would have had the same belief. But she knew him, knew his vulnerability was real and not affected. Thomas meant a great deal to Edmond, and he felt responsible for Thomas' grave condition.

She went to him, almost afraid of the anger emanating from his strong body but knowing she had to attempt to give him solace. She closed the distance between them, placed her hands on his stiff shoulders. "Edmond, you cannot carry on this way. It does no service to either yourself or your brother."

"To hell with your soft woman's words," he scoffed, shrugging from her touch.

She gathered her courage and matched his angry strides even in the constraints of her mantua and petticoats. "To hell with nothing, Edmond Grey. Listen to me. Did you force your brother to join you?"

“Christ, no. He followed me without my knowledge or consent, thinking a pirate’s life a rum adventure. The truth is this life isn’t for anyone who wants to live beyond the next plunder. One mistake and everything we’ve earned, all the prizes and glorious ships we’ve overtaken, each battle we’ve won, is gone. In the end, pirate or no, you’re just a goddamn head on a pike.” His voice broke. “I warned him. I bloody well warned him.”

His back was to her. Without speaking, she followed him. Lizzie hardly knew the man he’d become, but it was plain to see he needed reassurance. Tentatively, she wound her arms around his waist, holding him. The night was silent around them but for the gusting of wind and slosh of waves. The ship pitched but she was fortunate to not yet suffer the ill effects of seasickness. She’d seemed to have found her balance. It hadn’t been that long since she’d made the long passage from England to the Americas.

“Why must you persist in being so damn kind and good?” he demanded, turning in her arms and yanking her against him. His reaction was almost violent in his passion. His eyes glittered like twin pieces of coal. “Why, Lizzie?”

Before she could answer, his mouth was on hers. The kiss was fierce, insistent. It claimed, it took. He slanted his firm lips over hers, his tongue sliding into the wet recesses of her mouth, plundering the same way he would a ship. She opened to him, giving willingly. Her tongue mated with his. Her every sense was on edge, aware of his masculine scent, the way he tasted like spice, his hands caressing her bottom through the layers of her dress. She was instantly wet, throbbing between her legs, hungry for him to claim her again.

She cupped his face, liking the feeling of his rough beard on her fingertips. She wanted him with a ferocity that frightened her. The magnetism between them was powerful yet new to her. While she’d been wed to James for three years, their life together had been complacent, comfortable. He had been content to wade through his books, she to care for their home. Although they’d shared a quiet love, there had been no passion.

Edmond quickly pulled the sash from her mantua and pushed the heavy brocade from her body. The pins holding her stomacher in place tinkled as they hit the floor. He slid his hands from her waist to her breasts, weighing each one in his hand. Her nipples puckered and poked against the thin fabric of her smock.

He broke the kiss, meeting her gaze. "I swore to myself I wouldn't touch you again. Tell me to stop."

"I don't want you to stop," she confessed.

"I have nothing to offer you. I'm a wanted man, Lizzie."

He was a pirate, a man who took risks with his life each day. She was not naïve in giving her body to him. Perhaps it was wrong, but for the first time in her life, she felt needed. It was a rare, extraordinary thing.

"I haven't asked you for anything more than what you're free to give."

With a groan, he began working on her petticoat. She helped him off with his shirt. They were suddenly half nude, frantic. Kissing and stripping away one another's garments, they made their way to his narrow bed. They fell upon it naked. Lizzie tore her mouth from his and pushed him to his back. Though he was far stronger than she, he allowed her control over him and the realization aroused her even more. She dropped a series of kisses down his neck, over his muscled chest, moving lower still. His cock was stiff and ready.

She very much wanted to take him in her mouth and give him the same pleasure he'd given her. When her hand wrapped around his thick shaft, he moaned and jerked his hips. An answering blossom of heat unfurled in her. She took the tip in her mouth, running her tongue over his satiny skin in circular whorls. Then she sucked, taking as much of him as she could. Guided by instinct, she mimicked the motions of lovemaking, stroking him with her mouth as she sucked and licked. She could hear his breathing become ragged as he struggled to maintain control.

"Lizzie, sweet Christ. I won't last much longer."

She didn't care. She wanted to bring him to release with her mouth, taste him as he surged inside her. Sucking his cock left her wet and aching between her legs. It was delicious and debauched. She loved the heaviness of him on her tongue, the moans she wrung from him.

"Come here to me," he growled.

Lizzie glanced up the solid length of his body and met his gaze. "Tell me what you want me to do," she whispered, echoing the words he had spoken to her during their last lovemaking session. She found she quite enjoyed hearing naughty words and deeds spoken aloud.

"Come and I'll show you." There was wicked intent in his tone, glimmering in his dark eyes.

She rose to her knees and scooted away from his tempting cock. He gripped her waist with one hand and her thigh with another. "Turn around and sit astride me." He helped her to position herself, arranging her so that she was on her knees, one leg bent on either side of his chest. "Now rise up. I want to taste your lovely cunny again while you suck my cock."

Lizzie did as he instructed. His tongue dipped inside her, making her cry out. She'd never done anything so sinful in her life, but she found she rather enjoyed sin. She lowered her head to take his beautiful cock in her mouth again. His tongue teased the bud of her sex, plumping the aching nub. He sucked it between his teeth. She laved his cock with her tongue, panting, mindless with pleasure. He rubbed his face in her folds, his beard abrading her delicate skin in the most delightful way. His cock was slippery with her saliva, her sex soaked by his ministrations.

Just as she feared she'd explode, he groaned and tore his mouth from her. "Enough. If I don't have you soon, I'll go mad."

Lizzie rose, allowing him to guide her until she faced him. In the low light, she could see the slick sheen of her juices on his sensual lips. He reached between them, probing her entrance with his stiff cock. "Take me inside you."

She ground her hips against his in response. He thrust upward, his cock impaling her in one swift motion. His big hands anchored her waist, helping her to begin a rhythm. She rode his shaft, taking him inside, then rising up so that he almost slipped from her body before pulling him back in once more. His eyes closed, his expression one of utter gratification.

“That’s right, my girl. Ride me as hard as you like. I’m all yours.”

At his words, she began a faster pace, loving the feel of his cock within her, loving the sense of control being the dominant partner gave her. She wanted more, faster. She never wanted to stop. He rocked his hips beneath her, helping to deepen the penetration. His right hand slid from her hip, coming between them to play with her sex. She tightened on him instantly, pleasure shooting through her body.

“Fuck me, sweet Lizzie,” he growled, rocking into her.

With a throaty moan she continued sliding over his cock, each jerk of her hips bringing them both closer to release. He continued toying with her. The wet sounds of their lovemaking filled the chamber. Lizzie reached her pinnacle again, gripping him so tightly with her passage that he came too, pumping his seed inside her. He swiveled his hips, getting as deep as he could, filling her with his semen.

Gasping for breath, her body covered in a sheen of perspiration, she collapsed at his side. She was sure she’d become thoroughly dissolute. Nothing could have prepared her for the pleasure he’d shown her thus far.

“You surprise me with your passion, Lizzie,” he murmured, drawing her to him.

She dropped a palm on his warm, sweaty chest. “I must confess I surprise myself.”

“I cannot give you enough thanks for all you’ve done for Thomas this day.”

Was their lovemaking nothing more than his appreciation for her efforts on his brother’s behalf? Not liking the thought, she drew her head up to gaze at him. He was beautiful in a rakish sense, his hair a wild black tangle around him. His eyes burned into hers.

"I do not require your gratitude," she informed him. "If that is all you feel—"

He pressed a finger to her lips. "Don't say another word or you'll make a fool of us both."

He was right, she knew. Why complicate what they shared? They were two people with an appreciation for one another, two people both a bit lost in their own worlds. Why not seek comfort in each other? Why not taste passion before returning to her life of loneliness?

"Forgive me," she murmured, dropping a kiss on his chest.

He ran his hand over her hair in a comforting caress. "Always, Lizzie. You've been an angel since the day I met you."

"Surely not such an angel or you wouldn't have gone off to sea." She tried to keep the edge from her voice but could not.

"If I had stayed and married you, neither of us would have been happy. Even I knew that much, stupid lad that I was. I have roaming in my soul. I was made to sail these seas until they claim me. It would've been pure selfishness to subject you to my way of life."

"Would you never like to call one place your home?" She knew she shouldn't ask, that it was certainly not her place to pry. But she couldn't resist. Part of her had secretly wondered ever since he'd left.

"The sea is my home and mistress both," he said simply.

She was left with the same dismaying realization that had struck her all those years ago. Although she'd loved him with uncompromising fervor, Edmond Grey was not capable of loving anyone but the sea. Trying to ignore the pang in her heart, she shifted away from him. If she wanted to keep her feelings from being dashed once again, she'd do well to keep her distance.

"I should like to check on Thomas again." She rose and began scooping up her discarded garments. Best to stay the course she knew and stay far from the one she

didn't else she'd be facing the same sad ending she'd experienced ten years before. And she'd be standing alone as she watched Edmond Grey walk out of her life.

Edmond watched her pick up her garments. Her body was truly a thing of beauty. She'd matured and bloomed into the beautiful woman he'd always known she would be. He'd never thought to see her again, and now he'd lain with her twice. He should not have allowed his baser urges to overcome his judgment. She was having difficulty keeping her emotions at bay and he could sense it.

"Lizzie, I've been honest with you."

"Of course you have." There were tears in her voice as she threw on a shift, ending his view of her tempting backside. "You've always been the same Edmond Grey, and I've always been helpless to resist you."

"If I could change what's passed between us, know I would." Christ, he could still smell her on his skin, in his bed. He felt just as helpless as she claimed to be.

"Think nothing of it," she said quietly, pulling on her dress. "I've a patient to attend." With that, she was gone.

He had to go to her. He knew it the moment she left the cabin. Damn it, he was making a mess of things, allowing their intimacy to go so far, allowing her to once again have hopes for a future with him. He couldn't hurt her this second time.

He stood and slapped on a pair of breeches and a shirt, cursing himself for the worst sort of scoundrel. He had no right to bring unhappiness to her. He didn't want to be the cause of the sadness in her pretty eyes. She deserved far better than a worthless bastard like him. Right now, he was damned if he knew how to make peace between them.

She'd nearly made it to Thomas' sick room when a pair of hands clamped on her waist. With a muffled shriek, she spun about, prepared to do battle. She didn't trust the

pirates one bit, despite any threats Edmond may have made to them regarding her safety. Her heart kicked a beat when she realized Edmond had followed her.

He hauled her against his chest. "Why do you run from me, Lizzie?"

It was true. She had been running. Her emotions for him were proving too raw, too real. "I have a patient to care for if you'll recall," she reminded him.

"I'm aware of that." He tipped up her chin. "But Jean is keeping watch over him with orders to fetch us if Thomas' condition changes. You've done what you could. Working yourself to weakness won't help him."

"I can take care of myself," she told him. The need for some distance between them was a strong urge.

"While you're on my ship, I'm responsible for your welfare."

Her patience snapped like a weak thread. "If that's indeed true, you're failing miserably. I'm the most in danger when in your presence."

He released her. "If you don't want to suffer my attentions, you need only say the words."

Her heart ached, mind warring with common sense and confusion and, worst of all, love. "I don't understand you, Edmond."

"Christ, I don't understand myself."

He reached for her hand, but she pulled it from his grasp. "Don't."

"Ah." A pained smile curved his lips. "Have you regained your senses then?"

It hurt her to deny him, truly it did, but her own self-preservation had to win the day. She was not, could never be as world weary as he. "I think it unwise for us to proceed as we've been. I lost my head."

"Well, best you lose yours before I lose mine."

Lizzie lost her temper. "Stop it at once."

He raised a brow, looking startled. "Stop what?"

“Joking about your demise. You think this all a lark. Haven’t you heard about all the pirates who’ve been killed? Bad enough your own brother lies dying. It seems you’re bent on killing yourself as well.” Anger mingled with frustration. She slapped at his coat, wanting to make him see reason. “Bless your poor mother. She must be a saint for all this.”

“My mother is dead,” he bit out. “I don’t think she gives a damn.”

Lizzie had not realized, but the knowledge of his mother’s passing didn’t render her any less frustrated with him. “She may not, but I do care,” she lashed at him. “I care, Edmond. What happened to make you into the man you’ve become? What made you so cold?”

“Seeing hell.” His tone was grim. “Seeing battle. Almost dying. You’ve lived your pretty life without a bit of discomfort or misfortune.”

“How dare you?” Rage coursed through her. “Do you think I was fortunate to nurse my husband through illness? To watch helplessly each day as he faded away? Do you think it was comfortable to be left with nothing, to have to depend upon my father for my bread once more?”

“It is my turn to beg your pardon. Forgive me, Lizzie.” Sincerity laced his voice. “I hadn’t realized.”

“You may be the feared Captain Grey, but you aren’t the only person on this earth who has ever been through difficult times or who has ever known pain and hurt.”

“Lizzie, look at me.” He caught her around the waist when she would have turned away, pulling her to him. His hand was firm on her chin, his brown gaze trapping hers. “I’m an arse.”

Though she hated herself for it, her anger began dissipating. “You needn’t have told me. I already knew.”

He laughed then. “How is it a slip of a woman can bring me so low?”

How she loved his smile. She'd seen it so rarely that when it graced his lips, she felt an answering heat slide through her. He was a beautiful man. "I cannot answer that, Edmond. Only you can."

With a groan, he lowered his mouth to hers for a passionate kiss. It would seem her resolve had been short-lived. But as quickly as the fires of desire ignited, they were doused as the ship gave a great heave beneath them, sending Lizzie to her knees. Edmond caught her up in his arms, holding her against him.

The hollers of men could be heard above them, mingling with the sudden roar of the sea.

"What is happening?" she asked Edmond, fear roiling through her stomach.

"A storm." Edmond's jaw was a tight line, his tone grim.

"So quickly?"

He nodded. "Get into the cabin with Thomas and don't leave unless I come for you."

"But Edmond—"

"On this I am quite firm, Lizzie. I need to keep both of you safe, and there's no telling what manner of storm this is. We've already taken a battering from the battle and we can hardly afford to withstand much more."

Another wave hit, sending the ship lolling to her side. Lizzie would have fallen if not for Edmond's grip on her. She allowed him to rush her to the relative safety of Thomas' cabin. The belly of the ship groaned and creaked around her, giving voice, it would seem, to the fright coursing through her.

Jean rose from Thomas' side at their entrance. "Captain, the storm, she is an angry one."

"God's blood, you can say that again. I'll need all hands on deck, Jean. Mrs. Winstead will stay with Thomas."

He pulled Lizzie to him and dropped a quick kiss on her mouth. "Promise me you'll stay here."

"I promise."

Edmond nodded, his expression fierce, that of a man going into battle. "I'll come back to you as soon as I can. Jean?"

And then the two men were gone, leaving Lizzie to await her fate as the ship rocked and creaked around her.

* * * * *

Edmond stomped into the storm expecting the worst and finding it. Above deck, the situation was a grave one. Men were scrambling on the deck together, trying to secure the jibs and maintain the proper direction. There was a virulent fury in the storm that shook even a seasoned sailor like Edmond. He'd lived through his share of storms but this one was unholy bad.

He and Jean went into action, taking up the quarterdeck and shouting commands above the din of the roaring sea. The waves were rising and falling twenty feet in height, crashing down on the deck. It was treacherous work to remain standing and not be lost forever to the ocean. The winds had grown with astounding strength, putting the ship's sails in peril.

There was no help for it, Edmond realized. They couldn't fight the storm. All they could do was give in, which meant following the winds. They'd have to give up on Maine and head south, back into the dangerous territory of the Chesapeake. The Governor of Virginia wanted him dead. It would be foolhardy to head there so soon, but they had no other option.

Another wave slapped the *Freedom*, sending a cascade of seawater over her deck. He called out to Jean. Under ordinary conditions, he knew the *Freedom's* hull was leaky, let alone under the pressure of high seas. It wouldn't do to take on too much water.

He called out to Jean, "Man the pumps. We're taking on water, and tell all hands we need them to man the sails. We'll have to go south with the wind or it'll tear our sails to hell."

"South, sir?" Jean looked at him in askance. "Do you think it wise?"

"Wiser than sending us all to the bottom of the ocean," he replied with grim determination. "We'll have to take our chances with the devil we know."

Jean nodded and left the quarterdeck to Edmond, carrying out his orders. It was then, as the winds and waves kicked up a battle to beat the Armada all around him, that he was struck with a crippling comprehension. One thought more than the possibility of drowning, the chance his ship would break apart and sink to a watery perdition, or the thought of losing his friends overboard, struck him. One thought more than any other shook him to his core.

He had to survive this night, if only to save the woman he loved.

Damn my blood, he silently cursed. He'd spent the last ten years scouring the ocean in search of himself, but he'd never been able to escape the one inevitable lure that brought every man to his knees.

A woman.

Chapter Three

Lizzie didn't know how much time passed in the grip of the storm. Thunderous waves sent her reeling to the floor more than once. She tried to keep her mind from the possibility that the ship could sink, taking her down with it, by tending to her patient. She did her utmost to keep Thomas comfortable. The oil in the lamp had burned very low by the time Thomas began stirring.

His eyes opened slowly to reveal the same penetrating dark stare as his older brother's. "What?" he croaked.

Hope blossomed within her. Surely it was a good sign that he'd regained consciousness. Surely the good Lord would not cast them all to the bottom of the ocean after performing a miracle. She pressed a cup of water to his lips and helped him to take a few steadying sips.

"I'm Lizzie, an old friend of your brother's. I believe we met on several occasions."

"I remember. It hasn't been that many years. How the hell did you come to be on this ship?"

She smiled at his bold question. It too was a good sign. His thoughts seemed sharp. "You were injured in battle. Your ship's surgeon was killed, so your brother sought out my father to assist you. But my father was away, and I'm afraid you got me instead."

"My head feels like it's been stuck on a goddamn pike."

"Indeed." She offered him some more water. "I assure you it hasn't."

"I suppose I owe you thanks?"

"You owe your brother thanks," she refuted. "He put his life at risk to save yours."

He closed his eyes, clearly drained from his illness. "Thank you just the same."

The ship listed again, this time with less force. She hoped the winds and waves above had calmed. Her stomach was churning quite violently with the upheaval the storm had produced.

"You're welcome, Thomas."

He remained quiet for a few moments. Just when she thought he'd fallen back asleep, he shocked her with a troubling question. "Are you still in love with my brother?"

Her gaze shot to his but his eyes were yet closed. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're speaking of."

His eyes opened again. "Let's be honest, shall we, Lizzie? Unless I miss my guess, there's a storm brewing above deck that's about to pitch us to the bottom of the sea. No room for falsehoods here."

"You're certainly garrulous for a man newly rescued from death." She didn't mean to sound so contrary, but she couldn't help it.

"You're the one who performed the rescuing," he pointed out in a good-natured tone that belied the fatigue he was obviously fighting.

The ship gave another violent pitch. The hull groaned as Lizzie was sent sprawling. She righted herself, effectively sobered. "Very well. It does seem we're in dire straits."

"You saved me so I can become fish food." He gave her a halfhearted grin. "Kind of you."

"I hope not." Fear welled up within her, as powerful as the waves that could be heard crashing on the decks above. "Thomas?"

"Yes, Lizzie?"

"I have two confessions to make. The first is that I'm terribly frightened just now." She paused, weighing the wisdom of her next words. "And the second is that I never stopped loving your brother."

"I thought as much."

A niggling worry asserted itself. "Thomas, has he anyone who loves him? A wife or a mistress somewhere?"

"Edmond has no one waiting for his return."

Relief slid through her. She had initially assumed he was unattached, but she wanted to be certain. Never would she want to pine after a man who already belonged to another woman. It would be even more foolhardy than pining after a pirate captain already was. Yes, she had to admit to herself she was the worst sort of fool. Perhaps in the light of day, with her life in a much more tenable position, she would regain her sanity.

Another wave assailed them, tearing a gasp from her throat. Her demise was a very real possibility, and the thought was most sobering.

"Take my hand," Thomas said quietly, reaching toward her. "I haven't prayed in a long time, but I think we should now."

She linked her fingers with his and bowed her head, adding a silent prayer of her own for the captain roaming the decks of their besieged ship.

* * * * *

A long gap of time stretched between the last vestiges of the storm and the moment Edmond stalked back through the door. Lizzie jumped up at his entrance. He was soaked through, his shirt torn open, blood streaming from a cut on his shoulder. He looked weary and battered.

"Edmond." She went to him, rushing into his arms. She didn't care if he smelled of the sea or if he dampened her own dress. Nothing mattered but that he was here with her. He'd survived. They'd all survived. It was the second miracle of the evening. His arms tightened around her and he buried his face in her hair.

"You're safe," she whispered, scarcely believing their good fortune.

"My God, Lizzie, I thought I'd never see you again." He pulled away and dropped a quick, hard kiss on her mouth. "I swear to Christ that storm came directly from the devil himself."

"Hullo to you too, brother." Thomas' wry drawl interrupted their impromptu reunion.

Flushing, Lizzie stepped out of Edmond's embrace. Goodness, her emotions had overcome her. She'd already forgotten Thomas' presence when just minutes before, she'd been redressing his wound.

"Thomas, damn you, you're awake." A grin replaced the somber downward tilt of Edmond's lips. He crossed the room and delivered a sound clap to his brother's shoulder that left Thomas grimacing. "I thought you were going to die, you bastard."

"Easy on the brotherly concern, Eddie. I've still got the devil of a headache."

"I'm of half a mind to give you another headache," Edmond muttered. "If you ever take a musket ball for me again, I'll bloody well kill you."

Understanding dawned on Lizzie. That certainly explained Edmond's despair and anger with himself. Thomas had obviously been protecting his older brother when he'd suffered the wound. She pressed her hand over her heart, touched by watching the two men interact. Little wonder Edmond had been so devastated.

Thomas gave a halfhearted laugh. "It's my duty to look after my brother. You sure as hell don't look after yourself."

"That's my business, puppy." Edmond's tone was affectionate. It was clear the two brothers loved and respected one another very much.

"It seems thanks are in order for bringing an angel to rescue me." Thomas looked to Lizzie. "She performed a miracle on this old body of mine."

"Not so old yet." Edmond turned, his gaze on hers sending an answering flood of warmth through her body. "With any luck, thanks to Mrs. Winstead, you'll be blessed

enough to live to be a real old man." He looked back to his brother. "You just have to quit pirating."

"Go to hell," Thomas scoffed. "I'll quit when I see fit."

"Watch yourself, brother. You'll quit if I throw you off my ship," Edmond warned.

"You don't scare me, Eddie. This is our ship. The other men would have to vote in favor of leaving me and I don't think they would."

"You're right, damn your blood."

Thomas just grinned. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm in the mood for a nap and you stink like a moldy barrel of salt cod."

Lizzie couldn't help but laugh, which earned her a glare from Edmond. "'Twas your brother who said it, not I," she defended.

She was feeling suddenly dizzy with relief and fatigue both. She hadn't slept all night and it was likely soon morning. The stress of caring for Thomas and fearing that any second they'd be cast to the bottom of the sea had drained the fight from her. She was incredibly grateful for the second chance she'd been given, but all she wanted now was a warm bed and a few hours of precious slumber. The only hitch in her plan was having to share a bed with Edmond, who, moldy barrel of salt cod odor notwithstanding, was as dangerously compelling to her as ever.

"We'll leave the devil to his rest, then," Edmond murmured, his stare deepening to obsidian.

"I'll check on you in the morning," she promised Thomas. "Call for me if you should need me before then."

"Many thanks to you, Lizzie." Thomas' eyes had already closed.

She left the room with Edmond's hand possessive and firm on her waist. The hull was wet, she noticed, sea foam sprayed here and there. She raised her skirts to prevent them from being dirtied.

"How bad was the storm damage?" she asked, concern returning to her now the shock of survival had fled her.

"Several men went overboard." His jaw tightened. "We took a beating. We'll have to stop in daylight as soon as we can to repair her."

"I'm sorry." She reached for his hand, giving his fingers a reassuring squeeze. She couldn't imagine how awful it must have been to watch his comrades being swept to sea, no way to save them.

"It could have been far worse," he said. "I've known entire ships to go down in storms like the one that just pummeled us. It's one of the hazards of the sea."

"Just the same, I'm sure it's never easy, losing men."

"Nothing worthwhile is ever easy." He gave her a sad smile.

"Isn't it? I'm not so sure." She thought of their brief time together. Giving herself to Edmond was easy and extremely worthwhile.

"Indeed." He escorted her to the privacy of his cabin. "Thomas is calling you Lizzie now, is he? You're certainly familiar with him."

She was wondering if he'd caught that. Lizzie suppressed a smile of her own. "You needn't fear I've developed tender affections for your brother, Edmond. I'm yours."

The words escaped her before she could think better of them or call them back. He stiffened, looking down at her with a questioning gaze. "Are you mine, sweet Lizzie?"

"In this moment," she replied with honesty.

"And what of the next moment?" He ran a finger down her cheek.

Lizzie pressed a kiss to the pad of his finger, heart full of longing. "The choice is yours, I suppose."

He drew her to him for a kiss. She ran her palms up his chest between them, not minding if he smelled of the sea. She wanted to be as close to him as possible. She wanted him inside her. To her, he had become as necessary as air. Her hand landed in the unmistakable stickiness of drying blood. His wound. She'd completely forgotten.

"Your wound," she cried, pulling away from his embrace. "I must tend to it at once. What happened?"

"Splintering wood." He shrugged. "I'll live."

"Let me have a look, if you please." She was already slipping the tattered remnants of his shirt down over his shoulder.

A menacing red gash stretched across his chest, still oozing blood. "This needs cleaning Edmond, else I'll be nursing you as well."

Her father had taught her that wounds were always to be kept clean. Many physicians suggested strong emotion led to fevers, but her father and some of his colleagues believed otherwise.

Edmond flashed her a wicked grin. "I'm not concerned for my welfare, Lizzie darling, but you may continue removing my garments if you'd like."

"Naughty man." Trying to keep her mind on practical matters, she pushed him onto the bed. "What am I to do with you?"

His grin deepened. "Get naked with me."

She tsked. "Where do you keep your rum?"

"Brilliant idea. It's in the cabinet just over there."

Lizzie fetched the half-empty bottle and tore a strip from her petticoat. It wasn't as clean as she would have preferred, but it would have to do. She splashed some rum onto the muslin. "I'm afraid my idea isn't quite the same as yours."

"Why the bloody hell are you pouring my rum on a scrap of petticoat?" He sounded outraged.

She wasn't concerned. She dabbed at his wound, cleaning it as best she could despite the hiss of breath he expelled at her touch.

"That bloody well stings, woman."

"Good." She sent him a saucy look "That means it's doing its proper job."

"Damn you, give me that bottle." He plucked the rum from her grasp before she could stop him.

"You're a most vexing patient, Captain Grey."

He hooked his free arm around her waist, drawing her into his lap. "You can call me the Scourge of the Atlantic, my love."

She laughed at his rakish charm. "You're incorrigible," she complained without a bit of heat.

"Absolutely," he agreed before sealing their mouths in a hungry kiss.

Lizzie kissed him back with all the pent-up emotion of the past few hours. She wanted to hold him against her, to become one with him. She wanted his naked skin pressed to hers, his hard cock deep inside her. She wanted his tongue tangling with hers, his seed pumping into her. He'd made her into an insatiable wanton. For the first time in her life, she felt alive. It was disconcerting and heady at the same time.

He tore his lips from hers. "I want you, Lizzie. Hell, I want you like I've never wanted another woman in my life."

"I want you too," she confessed. She wanted him so much it scared her, for the potential for ruin was as great as that of the storm they'd survived. More than anything, she wanted to believe there was hope for them, that he wouldn't again abandon her in favor of his mistress, the sea.

He smiled, framing her face with his hands. "You are so lovely. There's nothing I'd like better than taking you right here on this bed."

"Then perhaps you should," she suggested, shameless and loving it.

"Ah, you tempt me." Edmond pressed his forehead to hers. "But I have it on good authority that I stink, and I should hate to sully you."

"You don't truly smell. Your brother was having you on."

"Mayhap, but I'd like to clean up a bit all the same."

The urge to tend to him rose within her. She wanted to take care of him, make him feel loved. Beneath his thick pirate skin she sensed there waited a man who wanted to know tenderness in his life once more. "Let me bathe you."

"You seek to spoil me," he said, but there was satisfaction rife in his voice.

"It would seem you need spoiling," she pointed out. "Who's been looking after you all these years?"

She couldn't help but think of him as a dory floating in the middle of the ocean, all alone, no shores in sight. Surely he longed for a home, a woman who loved him. She hadn't realized just how lonely she'd been until Edmond had reappeared in her life, reawakening her to passion and possibilities.

"I've been looking after myself."

"Little wonder you're in the straits you're in." She tsked. "Pirate trying to outlast the dangers of the sea. Surely all this grows old for you?"

He raised a brow. "You dare to henpeck me, my dear?"

"Perhaps you thought you'd whisked away a different physician's daughter?" she countered, unperturbed. "I'm certain you've known my temperament for a decade at least."

He did know her temperament all too well. Edmond grinned, feeling the weight settled upon his shoulders by Thomas' wounding and the storm lift merely by being in her presence. She was a saucy wench, fiery in her determination, strong enough to love without being loved in return. He'd treated her poorly and he wanted her to know, but the words escaped him.

Instead of telling her what he ought, he tilted up her chin. "If henpecked I must be, then I choose you to do the henpecking every time, my dear. I submit to your ministrations. I fetched some water earlier, just over there."

An answering smile curved her lips. "I'm relieved to hear it, Edmond." She rose and crossed the cabin, heading to the small crock of water he'd brought from the galley.

He watched the sway of her hips, thought about how sweet and hot she felt around his cock, and was instantly hard. Christ, he hoped the water was cold or he'd ravish her before she even managed to wipe the sea stench from his body. She turned back to him, cloth and crock in hand, catching the direction of his heated stare.

"How have you come to be so bloody beautiful?" he asked, content to watch her, to savor her presence.

Her eyes glinted. "How have you come to be so handsome?"

"Handsome?" He rubbed his hand over his beard. "I'm a timeworn sailor, not the sort of man you deserve."

"I'll decide that," she said simply, seating herself at his side. "You've always been my fate, Edmond Grey. You were just too stubborn to see it."

He felt her words like a knife. "I was acting in your best interest. Good Lord, Lizzie, would you have wanted to be the wife of the most wanted criminal in the realm? Do you realize the import of what I've become? You're as lost to me now as you were these last ten years."

"I don't believe that." Lizzie dipped the cloth into the water and slid it over his wounded shoulder first.

He ignored the slight burn, trapped in the torment of his conscience and his wants. He wanted Lizzie more than he wanted life. But how could he foist himself upon her when he would likely be dead before summer? He liked to think he was invincible, but the truth was that he'd lost too many brethren to mistake the reality of his profession.

She caressed a wet path over his chest and torso, then dipped the cloth back into the crock. He was straining against his breeches. All it took was the slightest touch and he had no defenses against her.

"Why don't you believe that?" he asked, his voice thick. He was mesmerized.

She met his gaze, hers sultry and heavy lidded. "Because I'm here with you. I'm yours, Edmond. I always have been. A woman's heart never lies."

He shouldn't press her further, he knew, but he couldn't resist. "And what does your heart say?"

Her nimble fingers went to his breeches and he almost lost his ability to think. "That I love you," she murmured.

Perhaps he was completely mad, he reasoned, because her declaration aroused him even more. "Lizzie, sweet." He should tell her how he felt, he knew, but he was frozen with the shock of her words. Though he'd braved death on many occasions, he was still terrified of the love he carried for her.

But Lizzie was hell-bent on torturing him. She opened the placket of his breeches, then came upon the bed to straddle him. His member sprang free, large and proud. She cast a wanton look his way before running her moist cloth over his rigid cock. He groaned and thrust his hips. He very much wanted her berry-red mouth to replace the cloth.

As if hearing his silent plea, she closed her lips over his tip, sucking. It was all he could do to refrain from exploding in her mouth at the contact. There was something so tantalizing, so innocent and yet depraved about watching this good woman, still clothed in her sensible mantua, taking him into her mouth.

She sucked, her tongue flicking over him, and took his cock deep into her throat. He moaned, sinking his fingers into her soft golden curls. He wanted very much to be inside her tight, pink pussy. Lizzie sucked again, head moving up and down as she drew him into her throat, then out, then into the moist heat again. Within moments he was brought to shuddering release. Edmond watched as he pumped his seed into her open mouth. She met his gaze as she swallowed, then licked a teasing path across his cock.

The breath heaved from his lungs as he collapsed against the bed, spent and sated. Lizzie curled against him, rubbing his chest in soothing circles. He had never felt so

loved. He wanted to return her generous words but somehow could not. In the end, he fell asleep with Lizzie's soft and reassuring form at his side.

* * * * *

The next morning was bright and sunny, the fright of the night's storm a thing of the past. Lizzie found Edmond on the quarterdeck, the wind ruffling his black hair. How she loved him, she thought, reveling in the sensation. It felt good to be free with him, to touch and kiss him as she wished.

"Good morning," she greeted, pressing a kiss to his bearded cheek. His scent washed over her, a captivating blend of spice and sea air.

"Good morning, sweet Lizzie." He grinned, flashing a row of even teeth that were starkly white against his bronzed skin.

He was incredibly handsome, utterly captivating. Her heart swelled. Best to turn her mind to safer matters, she cautioned herself. She'd only make a cake of herself swooning all over him before his men.

She cast an admiring glance over the ocean surrounding them. "Why are we traveling so slowly?"

"We're limping," Edmond explained. "The storm forced us to turn south. We need to anchor and make some repairs."

"South?" She was startled by the revelation. "I thought we were headed north and I'd be returned to Philadelphia on your way back."

"Are you so eager to be rid of me, my dear?"

"No," she answered truthfully, "but neither can I stay on a pirate's ship forever."

"Other women have before you," he responded in a thoughtful tone. "It's not unheard of."

Was he being serious? Her heart leapt, ridiculous though his suggestion was. "Edmond, please don't speak of such things unless you are very confident in what you say."

He reached for her hand, tangling his fingers with hers. "You know the more time I spend in your company, the more I want our idyll together never to end. But neither would I put you in danger. This is a hard life, Lizzie."

The familiar sadness crept through her again. She managed a smile, squeezing his hand. "We needn't make such decisions now. Where are we?"

"Just off Virginia," he responded, taking her cue and venturing once more into safer conversational waters. "We are well known here, which is both good and bad. The officials want us captured but the people have always been true to us. I'm hoping to go ashore for a few days, give Thomas the opportunity to regain his strength. We can't afford another storm or battle in the shape we're in."

"Very well. Can I be of service in any way?" Lizzie doubted he'd allow her to perform labor of any sort, but she was feeling the need to be useful. "Being coddled is really quite boring, you know."

Edmond grinned. "You may watch us."

She sighed. "Am I never to have any adventure?" She had to admit she'd been secretly longing for excitement.

"I'm afraid not, my dear."

But just as he spoke the words, a cry sounded through the men. There was a ship approaching them, large and ominous on the horizon. Lizzie glanced back to Edmond, not missing the way he'd stiffened or the grim cast to his features.

"Other pirates?" she guessed.

"It's doubtful." He took her arm and began hauling her away from the sudden flurry of activity on the deck. "Whoever it may be, you'll have to go back down to the hold. It could be dangerous."

"Must I?" The thought of miserably awaiting her fate as she'd done during the storm was most unappealing to her.

"Most certainly. You must stay safe at all costs, Lizzie." He paused, naked emotion in his eyes. "I can't lose you."

It was the closest he'd come to an admission of tender feelings. Granted, there was a potential peril looming in the distance, but she took comfort in his confession nonetheless.

The ship was coming in at a good clip, spurred on by the wind and a number of men plying the oars. More cries rose from the pirates.

"I'll see myself below," she suggested. "Your men need you."

He nodded, his mind clearly wandering to the danger of the situation at hand. "Wait for me below. I'll come to you."

Lizzie pretended to go below deck once more, but instead of following through with Edmond's dictates, she hid among some wine barrels that had been lashed together to survive the storm's angry waves. She took in the bustle of the pirates scurrying to their positions. Edmond ordered them to take up their muskets, and in the next few minutes, the details of the ship approaching them were delineated in the afternoon sunshine.

Dear God, the Royal Navy was upon them. Guns lined the ship that approached, its colors high, its menace sending ice into her soul. There was no way the pirates would be able to successfully defend themselves.

The fury of the evening's storm had taken its toll on the *Freedom*. Her mast had been severely damaged. Lizzie had seen the water she'd taken on in the hold as well. Now they were in no position to outmaneuver a frigate that appeared to outgun and outman them three to one.

Edmond gave the command to sail in an attempt at escape. But before they could make it far, the opposing ship unleashed the guns upon them. The jib halyard became the *Freedom's* first casualty, sending the foresails crashing down. They instantly slowed, allowing their opponent the chance to draw nearer.

“Let them taste our musket fire,” Edmond commanded over the confusion. “Send them to hell where they belong.”

From her now tenuous perch, she watched as Edmond gestured for his gunner to send a barrage of grapeshot toward the enemy. As the smoke cleared, the enemy ship was almost close enough to make out the features of its men. Edmond’s pirates were faintly visible as they lit fuses in rum bottles and tossed them into the other ship. Explosions rocked the deck. The rum bottles, she realized, had been loaded with gunpowder and musket balls, turning them into deadly weapons.

Her heart raced a mad pace as the opposing ship responded with another hail of gunfire. The sound of the battle was deafening, loud pops and cries mingling with the moans of wounded men. Even as the warfare unfolded, the *Freedom* was being guided to the shore. It appeared as if Edmond was attempting to run her aground to give his men a better chance. But suddenly, the enemy ship swung against the *Freedom*, the hulls of the two ships slamming together.

Edmond’s men scurried aboard the other ship, swords drawn, facing off against the attacking ship’s survivors. The clang of metal replaced the sound of gunfire. Lizzie was transfixed, frozen, horrified, unable to look away from the carnage. Good heavens, this was not the sort of adventure she’d had in mind. She frantically scanned the teeming throng of men in search of Edmond’s beloved form. She found him facing off against the ship’s captain, who had jumped aboard the *Freedom* in the melee.

Edmond thrust forward, engaging the other captain in a lightning-quick challenge of blades. As the two men fought, they moved slowly across the deck until they were almost upon her hiding spot.

“I’d allow you to surrender,” snarled the captain of the enemy ship, “but I’ll enjoy killing you far more.” He landed a glancing blow on Edmond’s shoulder.

Lizzie held her breath. If she timed it properly, she believed she’d be capable of tripping Edmond’s opponent. Their steps moved closer, as did the metallic clash of swords. Edmond’s back was to her, his strong body tense as he fought for his life. His

assailant was abreast of her in the next moment, completely unaware of her presence. She gauged her timing perfectly. Just as the captain took his next step, Lizzie slid her foot across his path.

He fell like a downed tree.

What the devil? Edmond stared in shock at his opponent. He'd been about to deliver a death blow and now he lay at his feet. Then he saw the innocent face of the woman he loved, who was not awaiting him in the hold as he'd requested. *Damn her.* Pride in her bravery warred with anger for her carelessness. He didn't have time to deal with her recalcitrance but she'd get a tongue-lashing from him the instant this bloody battle came to an end.

He cuffed the captain on the back of the head with the butt of his gun. If the way the man's head thumped to the deck was any indication, he was unconscious. There was no help for it. He had to aid his men, which meant enlisting Lizzie, damn it all. He gave her his musket.

"Do you know how to shoot?" he shouted over clanging of cutlasses and the cries of the men.

"Yes, of course." She scrambled to hold the musket in its proper position. She looked awkward, but capable.

"Good. If he moves, kill him." He unsheathed his own cutlass. "By God, woman, don't leave this spot until I return."

Without waiting for her response, he rushed back into the skirmish. It was imperative they win this fight. As Edmond boarded the naval ship, he recognized the grisly carnage. Their gunner had done his work well. Men lay bloodied and battered across the deck. The *Freedom*, it seemed, would claim yet another ship.

Jean was in a heated session of swordplay, and Edmond rushed to his aid, cutting down the officer he fought from behind. Jean wiped blood from a cut on his cheek, grinning. "Thank you, Captain. These English puppies, they don't play fair."

"I'm an English puppy, if you'll recall."

"You're like me," Jean offered. "You have no country, Captain."

It was true. After all these years at sea, he truly felt he belonged nowhere and to no one. Edmond scanned the ship, sensing their enemies were ready to raise the white flag. "Drop your weapons to the deck! We'll be commanding this ship from now on, and if you value your life, surrender at once."

Arms clattered to the deck. The bloodied survivors of the battle were eager to save their own hides. Edmond appointed Jean in command of the naval ship, and put ten of his men in charge of guarding prisoners before heading back to the *Freedom* and Lizzie.

For a change, she had listened to him. She was precisely where he'd left her, presiding over the downed captain like an avenging pirate angel. A hot stab of lust went directly to his groin. Sweet Christ, he wanted her. He loved her. He never wanted to be without her. It was madness of the first order, but he didn't give a bloody damn. She was his. After all these years, they had found one another again and he would make it right between them.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, taking the musket from her. She appeared shaken by her first exposure to combat.

She shook her head. "I am well. Are you unhurt, Edmond?"

"Always." He grinned with the triumph of the fight. "A little crew of navy puppies is no match for me."

Lizzie smiled halfheartedly, still clearly overwhelmed. "What shall we do with him?" She gestured to the captain.

"Fetch me some rope from over there," he told her. "We'll tie him up and make him sing."

If there was one thing he'd learned in his time on the sea, it was that with the proper incentive, naval officers liked to tell everything they knew. With the right amount of intimidation, he hoped the captain would reveal everything he knew about

the state of things in the Chesapeake. He was beginning to feel like the fox in the hunt. He'd never been chased with as much determination as he had in these last few weeks. It was a grim sign that it may well be time to forgo pirating for good.

When Lizzie returned with the rope as he'd asked, he lashed together the captain's hands and feet. It was time to uncover the truth and make a plan for the future, whatever it may bring.

* * * * *

Lizzie was tired. It was all she could do to remain upright in her saddle. She felt as if she'd been riding forever. After burning the naval ship and sending it to the deep, they'd gone ashore. Edmond had learned through the captured captain that there were several ships and spies scouring the region in search of him. Governor Spotswood wanted his head more now than ever before. The news frightened Lizzie. She didn't much like the idea of being in close proximity to anyone who wanted to do Edmond harm.

She had reservations about throwing themselves upon the mercy of the people, but it would seem they had no other choice. Gunfire and the storm had rendered the *Freedom* thoroughly compromised. So it was that with the few living prisoners gleaned from their opposing ship, they docked in Virginia and separated. The plan was set for all men to return within a week's time. Edmond had shared that he expected a week's time would provide enough opportunity to repair the ship and allow Thomas to recover properly.

Lizzie, Thomas and Edmond were on their way to a plantation owned by one of Edmond's friends. Because they only could obtain two horses, Edmond walked between Thomas and Lizzie. Fortunately, Thomas was able to sit a horse, but beyond that feat, he had little strength. He was still recuperating, after all.

"Are you very sure this is wise?" she asked Edmond as they clopped through the dense forest.

"We have no choice, and the thinner we spread ourselves, the better," Edmond answered. "I've done this hundreds of times before. Have faith in me."

She did have faith in him, but she still harbored a niggling feeling in her stomach.

"I understand, Edmond, but I wish there was a better way." She nodded her roan along. He ever wanted to stop for a snack. Indeed, over the course of their hour's jaunt, he'd wanted to stop and relieve himself or eat at least half a dozen times.

"This is our only way, my love."

His love. It was not the time to press confessions from him, but she didn't frankly have a care. She wanted an admission from him, perhaps more than he could give. She wanted an assurance, some sort of hope they would be safe. She was quite terrified they would come across someone who wanted them dead.

Suddenly, a disturbance rose in the undergrowth surrounding them. Lizzie saw the unmistakable blur of a man running, and in the next instant, shots were fired. She ducked low across the saddle as a musket ball sliced the air above her so close she could hear it. Dear God, for the second time in less than twenty-four hours, they were under attack.

"Lizzie," Edmond called, jumping up on the saddle behind Thomas, "ride east as hard as you can. Keep your head down."

Terror clamped onto her heart like a fist. "What is happening?"

"Ride, Lizzie! We haven't much time."

Half a dozen men had emerged from the scrub, all brandishing muskets, all determined to capture or kill, whichever came first. Keeping her head down as Edmond had instructed, she kicked her roan into a gallop. The tepid creature was spooked by the gunfire and instantly tried to buck her. Lizzie held on, urging the horse to go faster. Suddenly her mount bucked again. She lost her tenuous grip on the reins and tried but failed to retrieve them. The roan reared up and the next thing she knew, Lizzie was hurtling through the air.

Chapter Four

Lizzie woke to the throbbing of her head and utter confusion. *What in heaven's name?* Slowly, she took in her surroundings. She was in a small, sparsely decorated chamber, sunlight streaming in through a cracked window pane. Her hands were tied behind her back, her body thoroughly sore. She was seated in an unforgiving wooden chair.

Where was she? What had happened? Dozens of questions sifted through her mind.

The door to the chamber creaked open, revealing a man in officer's dress. She recognized him. Impossibly, he was the captain who had attacked Edmond's ship. Bertrand. He'd been left under Jean's guard, which meant that something was very much amiss.

It was then that comprehension hit her. She'd been captured. Fragments of her dash through the forest returned to her. She'd been pushing her roan, trying to escape, when the horse had bucked her.

Dear God. Where was Edmond? What had happened to Jean?

"Ah, madam, I see you've decided to join us," the officer said with a sardonic air. "I trust you're comfortable?"

He was enjoying his power over her. She tipped up her chin, determined not to allow him to intimidate her. "Forgive me if I find your hospitality sadly lacking."

"Such fire." He crossed the room, his booted footsteps heavy, ominous. "It's little wonder he wanted you for himself."

Lizzie instinctively knew she could give no quarter to him. She feigned innocence. "Who are you speaking of, Captain Bertrand?"

His eyes narrowed. "Don't play coy with me. I saw you with him aboard his ship with my own eyes. Mrs. Winstead, isn't it?"

"Yes, and of course I was aboard his ship. I was taken prisoner by him and his men." If she could just convince him she had nothing to do with Edmond, perhaps he would let her go.

"I think not." Captain Bertrand leaned down into her face with such proximity she felt the heat of his breath fanning her lips. "I don't believe a word of what you've told me, Mrs. Winstead. In fact, I believe you are that pirate bastard's whore."

"I told you I was an innocent captive."

"You must think me a fool." He dragged his fingers over her cheek and she shrank from the touch. "What were you doing aboard his ship?"

"I was taken from a passenger ship," she repeated, holding her head high. She would not break. She would not allow Captain Bertrand to see her faltering. "I expect the others drowned in the storm."

"Tripe, Mrs. Winstead." He gripped her arms with enough force to bruise. "If you won't tell me the truth, I'll be forced to make you."

Tears of pain stung her eyes but she refused to let them fall. Perhaps she needed to try another tactic. "The only tripe in this room is you, sir. How dare you treat a respectable lady in such a debased fashion? You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Does the governor know the depths to which his hired assassins have sunk? Preying on innocent women?"

He slapped her soundly across the face. "Where is he hiding?"

Shock rendered her numb for a few breaths. She realized he'd split her lip. The taste of blood tainted her tongue. She was afraid if she didn't tell Captain Bertrand something soon, he'd inflict far more pain upon her. He was determined to hunt down Edmond and he didn't have any compunction about abusing her to glean the information he sought.

"Maine," she said truthfully. "He said he was heading for Maine."

Of course, his path had changed dramatically given the storm and the battle. She had a feeling Maine was the very last place he'd turn up at the moment, which was why she mentioned it so readily.

"He's on land now and Maine is out of the question. Surely he has a hideout here that you're aware of, Mrs. Winstead."

"I am not privy to his hideouts, having just been his captive."

"Perhaps this will help you to think more clearly." He grabbed her curls, pulling her hair with a great deal of force.

She feared he'd ripped it from the roots even as she made an effort to remain outwardly stoic. "I cannot tell you what I don't know, Captain Bertrand."

"Damn you," he growled, sending a spray of spittle over her face. "I'll have him at my mercy one way or another. You're only prolonging his inevitable hanging."

Her stomach was heavy as an anchor. "Honestly, sir, I don't have a care for the man. He was my captor, nothing more."

"Liar," he spat. "You were seen embracing him. You've been in his bed and there's no mistaking it."

"I'm a respectable widow," she maintained, hoping he couldn't sense her deception. She'd never been terribly good at prevarication. But if ever there was a need for it, surely it was this. If she remained impervious to the captain's abuses, she could at least give Edmond a fighting chance.

"I can see why he was so smitten with you that my men almost caught him." He released her hair and trailed the back of his hand down her throat. "Mayhap I should treat myself to your loveliness."

Instinct spurred her to action. She had to escape. With great effort to conceal her movement, she began testing her wrists against her bonds. They were loose enough that

with enough wriggling she believed she could free herself. She needed to distract the captain long enough to accomplish the deed.

“Do you have a wife, Captain Bertrand?”

Her question seemed to have the desired effect. He paused, his hand at her throat. “I do indeed, Mrs. Winstead, but I fail to see it’s any business of yours.”

“Imagine, for a moment, that your wife is on a passenger ship that was besieged by pirates. She’s taken aboard the pirate vessel against her will. She’s frightened and horridly mistreated.” Behind her back, she slid her right hand free.

“My wife wouldn’t cast herself into sin by giving herself to a pirate as you’ve done. And if she had, I’d hang her myself.”

It was now or never, she realized, calling upon all the strength in her body. Although disgust rose within her, she knew she had precious few choices. She lifted her legs and kicked against him with all her might. His response was instant. He stumbled back and Lizzie wasted no time in jumping from the chair. Her only option was to try running.

“Then I pity her, Captain Bertrand,” she threw over her shoulder. And then, she threw open the door and ran directly into a man’s solid chest.

Edmond staggered back, surprised by the female who had hurtled through the portal, nearly knocking him over in the process. He held her, anchoring her waist with his hands. “Steady.”

He’d recognize those golden curls anywhere. It was Lizzie. He drew her against him, breathing in her floral scent. Somehow, she always smelled of roses. He’d never forgive himself if something happened to her. She was all he’d been able to think of since they’d been separated.

Thankfully, he had some friends in the area who knew where Bertrand had taken up residence. He’d had a suspicion he would find her here.

"Edmond?" She looked up at him and he noticed a fine trail of blood on her lip. Someone had hurt her. "Why have you come?"

Bloodlust consumed him. He'd come to save her, and he could not leave her mistreatment unanswered. He stalked past her, hell-bent on pummeling the piss out of the bastard. Edmond caught him by his fancy jacket and threw him against the wall.

"You will never lay a hand on her again, Bertrand." His fist made a satisfying connection with the captain's face. "Never."

He swung again, but Bertrand was nimble. He sidestepped him and landed a jarring blow of his own to Edmond's eye. Edmond bloodied his nose. Bertrand pulled out a dagger.

"The governor has said the reward for you will be paid dead or alive," Bertrand taunted.

Edmond pulled a dagger from his boot, ready for hand-to-hand combat. He'd been in more than his fair share of knife fights, and he hadn't lost yet.

He feinted to the right and managed to slash Bertrand's sleeve. "Nothing would make me happier than giving you a scar to remember me by."

Bertrand sliced the top of Edmond's hand. He didn't even feel it, his body too numb. "I'll send you to hell, Grey," Bertrand snarled.

"Not if I send you first." Edmond raked Bertrand's side with his blade, then cut his hand so badly Bertrand dropped his dagger. Edmond kicked it across the floor to Lizzie.

Thank God he'd managed to recruit some of his men for the thorny task of rescuing Lizzie. Bertrand had rallied with his spies and mercenaries after escaping from Jean by clubbing him over the head. It had taken Jean, Ollie and three others to subdue them before Edmond had even reached Lizzie. Now only one man remained. He circled Bertrand, wanting to kill the bastard.

“Edmond, don’t!” It was Lizzie’s voice that he heard above the rage pounding in his head, Lizzie’s voice that made him stop.

He knew if he killed Bertrand, there would be no going back. And the truth of it was he didn’t want to become beyond redemption in Lizzie’s eyes. He didn’t want to be a pirate whose only home was the sea. He wanted a wife, a life, a place where he was loved. He’d always known he couldn’t be a pirate forever, and now there was a siren who called him louder than the ocean. Lizzie. His Lizzie.

He shoved Bertrand against the wall, pressing the tip of his blade into his skin with just enough force to release a bead of blood. “I could kill you right now.” He scored a fine scratch from left to right. “I could cut here, slit your throat.”

“Please,” Bertrand pleaded.

“But I won’t.” He gestured to Lizzie. “She has shown you mercy. Don’t ever forget that.”

Then he allowed his bitter enemy, the man who would have him dead, to walk away. It was, Edmond decided, his final act as a pirate. From this point forward, he was a new man.

* * * * *

A fortnight later Lizzie was back aboard the *Freedom*. There was still a price on Edmond’s head, but nevertheless, the crew had all reconvened unscathed. They had too many associates in the countryside to be found. They’d heard Bertrand had left Virginia to return to England, but it was likely that another vain glory seeker would take his place.

It seemed like her life for the last few weeks had been nothing but a dream. She’d almost come full circle. After spending time with some trusted friends of Edmond’s, the crew was back aboard their intrepid ship, preparing to take sail.

Lizzie stood on the deck, the sun warming her back, content to watch Virginia slip away. She and Edmond had become inseparable. They were lovers and friends, and she

hadn't pushed him for more. But sadness invaded her thoughts from time to time to think he would always belong to the sea, never to her.

"I want to show you something."

Lizzie jumped at the low rumble of Edmond's voice in her ear and spun to face him. "You scoundrel! You gave me quite a fright."

He smiled down at her, insufferably handsome as always. "I hope you'll forgive me when you see this." He extracted a sheet of paper from his coat. "This is for you, darling Lizzie."

Puzzled, she took the paper from him and unfolded it, reading the contents. She nearly swooned from shock. "Edmond, is this real?"

He nodded, his smile turning into a smirk. "I've been granted a pardon by the governor. I'm a free man, no longer hunted, no longer above the law."

Her mind reeled. "How is this possible? He had a price on your head."

"I'm the Scourge of the Atlantic." He winked. "Nothing is impossible for me."

The rascal. Somehow he'd gained his freedom. He'd made it possible for them to have a future together. Dare she hope it meant he wanted her in his life forever? They'd been through so much in the last few days, and it had only served to strengthen their bond. And after their struggles, the pardon was a feat akin to a miracle.

"How did you really do it, Edmond?" Her curiosity wouldn't be deterred.

"Believe it or not, I had some help from Captain Bertrand." Edmond tucked a stray curl behind her ear. "I decided my run was over, and I had something the governor wanted while he had something I wanted. One of the first principles I learned as a pirate was the benefit of bartering."

He amazed her. "What did you barter?"

"A pardon for my assistance in bringing in the pirates who have been attacking the governor's shipping interests in the Chesapeake. Who better to catch a pirate than

another pirate?" He shrugged. "It's simple, and fortunately, with Bertrand backing me, the governor saw the wisdom of my plan."

"That's wonderful." She threw her arms around his neck and dropped a kiss on his mouth. "Isn't it?" Doubts instantly pricked her mind. "Won't you miss the sea?"

He shook his head. "Not if I have you." He brought her hands up to his lips. "It's taken me ten years to find you again, and I'll be damned before I mess it up. I'm sorry I ran from you, Lizzie. I've been to hell and back, and it's taken that for me to realize I'll never find myself without you. When we get to Philadelphia, I hope you will do me the honor of becoming my wife. I love you, Lizzie, more than pirating, more than the sea."

"Oh, Edmond." He became blurry from the tears rushing to her eyes. These were the words she'd longed to hear from him, the words she'd been too fearful to even hope for.

"What's this?" He caught a teardrop with his finger. "I hope I'm not so unsettling a future as all that."

"Of course not, you silly man." A bubble of ecstatic laughter burst inside her. "I've never been this happy in my life. I love you too, Edmond. I loved you when you were a boy, and I love you even more now that I see the man you've become."

"Marry me, my love?"

"Yes," she cried, tugging him to her for a passionate kiss. "A thousand times yes."

About the Author

Scarlett Scott has loved romance novels ever since she was eleven and swiped her older sister's books to read by flashlight in her closet. Her mother caught her, but she remained undeterred. A self-described promiscuous writer, she dabbles in all sorts of genres but loves erotic romance best. She lives with her hero and their adorable but occasionally evil puppy and spends too much time lurking on her blog.

Scarlett welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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