

a lesbian novel of piracy and romance

The Queen's Gift

Lara Zielinsky

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by Lara Zielinsky

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Chapter 1

Mary had an enormous headache and Nelson was not helping, bringing her yet another troubled observation of their young prisoner.

"Just provide whatever she needs, Mr. Nelson," she finally snapped, squeezing the bridge of her nose to ward off the dizzying ache. "And prepare a bath in my cabin with a tall flagon of Jamaican," she added, thinking the heat and alcohol would soothe even better than the powders right now.

At her elbow, her first mate Charles Kotay leaned over. Even his whisper rattled her fragile head. "Headache?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes. No, of course not. I rub my nose because I'm bored. Annoyed, she did not respond.

Nelson prodded her again. "Anything, captain?"

"Within reason, Mr. Nelson," she snapped, rounding on him. "Don't give her a weapon."

"Of course, ma'am," he acquiesced, backing away slowly.

"Just get it done. I don't want any more complaints tonight."

Nelson nodded and hurried away. She watched him until he had disappeared down the gangway, waving two seamen to follow him. Gaze unfocused, Mary began dreaming of the steaming bath to come.

"Are you certain you should coddle the girl?" Kotay asked in the lengthening quiet, interrupting the sound of the waves lapping at the ship's sides as the Rouge Rogue cut a southeastward course.

She sighed. "A little honey might neutralize the vinegar," she considered about the adversarial girl below.

"Maybe," he conceded.

Mary decided she had given Nelson enough time to prepare her bath and the rum. "Have a quiet watch," she wished Kotay.

Anne leaned against the side, molding her back to the curve of the basin, sinking down and closing her eyes as she inhaled the steamy air. Days of grime and muscle aches from the constant tension melted away in the water's scalding, soothing heat.

She had been positively dumbfounded watching the short, pudgy man directing two sailors bringing in and filling the large wooden bathing tub.

He had already brought the ink well, quill and parchment she had requested, hoping to write notes she could pass off the ship at the next port to alert her father to her predicament. The man, who identified himself as Nelson, had also brought a tray of crusty dry bread, even drier meat, and a fired and painted clay jug with a heavy pewter flagon.

Pouring a measure of the liquid from the jug, Anne tested the taste, finding a remarkably smooth and buttery rum. The liquor encouraged her to relax and she contemplated the steaming water.

She had been reluctant to be undressed should anyone come through the door, leaving her naked and defenseless. Another shot of the rum, and she had plucked up her courage for a quick cleansing.

Now the hot water cradled her body and she went slowly limp as a rag doll. Her eyes closed of their own volition and exhaustion stole into her muscles and her brain. For the first time in days her guard went down, and she slept.

Two things occurred to Captain Mary Flint as she entered her cabin. Nelson had indeed carried out her orders with his usual efficiency as she spied the tub, and the tray of food resting on the low table beside it.

And the girl had availed herself of both.

Mary had forgotten that morning's order to move the recalcitrant girl to the captain's cabin so that Mary could lay down the law and stop the girl's high-handed attitude with a few well-worded threats.

However, due to consulting with Kotay on several course changes to avoid some of the nearby British-held islands, she had not made it down here for that talk.

Her anger at the situation, and the choice words demanding the girl recall her place as a prisoner, died on Mary's tongue as she strode forward.

The water was clear and still, revealing in its depths the entirety of the young womanly form, water beading on her alabaster skin.

Voluptuous breasts half-floated, round and perfect. The steam still rising from the surface had curled tendrils of the fine blonde hair around the sleeping face, flushed just enough to suggest to Mary's suddenly dry mouth and diverted mind a maiden's blush.

The blue eyes which normally flashed icy challenge at Mary were closed. Long golden lashes caressed the high smooth cheekbones.

Mary saw in Anne at that moment, not the spoiled high-born haughty and argumentative girl. Instead she found her eyes trailing over the blossomed figure of a young woman. A woman who knew nothing of the more dangerous and deceitful ways of the world. Mary's heart swelled with an urge to protect.

A lovely unspoiled woman, Mary added silently. Dazedly she reached out and crouched, feeling the moist soft hair against Anne's cheek curl around her fingertips.

At the light contact, Anne's eyes fluttered open, pupils wide, eyes the color of the Caribbean lifted to search Mary's face.

Mary's smile came unbidden, soft and slow. Only the sound of her blood pulsing in her ears filled the silence.

Anne's eyes gradually widened. Mary moved her hand reluctantly away from the skin soft as gossamer, and stood, taking a step back.

Their gazes held until Anne accepted the towel Mary passed from the table.

Looking down as she stood and covering herself, Anne asked, "What are you doing here?" She made a tired gesture of her hand over her face.

Following a head to toe survey of the body now hidden from her beneath the towel, Mary chuckled softly. "Finding an unexpected guest in my bath."

Anne's gaze snapped up and filled with wariness, which Mary now recognized as different from the anger or challenge much more common in their previous encounters. The young woman's pupils – Mary could no longer think of Anne as a girl – went very small, making her eyes appear larger, more waif-like, more innocent, and scared. "Your bath?" A nervous muscle ticked in Anne's cheeks, while her cheeks brightened again with color. Mary noted the twitch of the long throat as Anne admirably swallowed for courage. "I... I thought –"

Knowing now how much her smiles discomfited Anne, Mary smiled again. The long elegant throat convulsed once again, as Mary spoke lightly. "Contrary to popular pirate practice I enjoy a hot steaming bath."

Mary stuck out her hand and automatically Anne took it, using the aid to step from the huge basin as she tried to clutch the towel to her breasts and remain covered. Anne did not speak again, not trusting her voice, until she had created some distance between herself and the disturbing presence of the pirate captain. Towel to her ample front she unwittingly gave the other woman a tantalizing view of her backside.

Turning around after pulling on her shift, she only saw the captain's averted gaze, fisted hands and reddened face. The strong fingers flexed but the fist reclosed. Certain the captain was preparing finally, to engage in a more typical angry tirade, Anne swallowed, and apologized again, to hopefully avert the scene she felt coming like a gale-force storm. "I am sorry. Should I fetch another for you?"

Whirlpools of warring gray and blue lifted to meet Anne's earnest gaze. "No," came curt and sharp. Anne quivered at every brisk rap of boots against the floor boards as the pirate captain turned abruptly and strode from the room.

Her heart pounded erratically in the silence which followed the heavy thud of the door closing in its frame.

Despite the easy words earlier, Anne sank with certainty and despair to the settee, staring out at the porthole to the swirling waters. The captain would return, with a lash -- the same lash used to flay the English ship captain three days before before tossing his bloody and torn body overboard to the sharks.

Chapter 2

Mary rubbed her hand over her eyes trying to wipe away the images indelibly branded into her mind. Her mouth was arid as the deserts. Moist lips speaking in her memory beckoned and she wondered against her better judgment how sweet must they taste?

Squeezing her eyes shut, she tried to remind herself of the situation. *She's only a child...*

Mary was easily twice the girl's age, mayhap more. They hadn't established that actually. However, porcelain curves touched by water droplets, kisses on the skin which sparkled in the sunlight through the porthole rose to Mary's mind's eye once again.

Oh dear sweet Mother of God, that's no child.

Halfway up the gangway to the top deck, desperate for fresh air to clear her senses, Mary realized her appearance would invite Kotay's questions. After all she had clearly left him with the stated goal of retiring for the night. Caught between the reluctance to face Kotay's questions, or the stomach-in-her-throat sensations of returning to her cabin, Mary was caught in her quandary by Nelson.

The little man, cabin steward to her, and something of a bewhiskered grandfather figure to her crew, looked down from the opening above. "Captain?" His expression was clearly startled. "Something wrong with your bath?"

Mary licked her lips, wetting them to speak, and carefully shook her head. "Clearly piping hot, Mr. Nelson," she praised.

"Too hot?" he asked. "And the dish I left for you?"

Dish. Oh God. Mary could not stop the image from forming in her mind of feasting on her cabin's guest. She dropped her face to hide her heating cheeks from giving away her thoughts. "I haven't yet had a taste," she said truthfully.

"Nothing t' be done up top," he assured her. "Mr. Kotay has the winds well in hand." He lowered himself down the gangway and smiled upon her, now at eye level. "Go on. I'll keep t' others from your door."

So shooed from her own duties with Nelson's gamin smile, Mary had no choice but to back up, and return to her cabin. Reaching for the heavy handle, she prayed.

Please God, if you value my sanity, have her dressed when I enter.

Despite the delay of inner debate and conversation with her boatswain, Mary entered her cabin once again to find the young blonde only partially dressed. A wrinkled shift, one thin strip of fabric falling off a shoulder against a surprisingly muscular arm, and riding up on a long shapely thigh as she bent her head to examine something about the dress in her hands. The fabric barely hid the voluptuous figure. Mary groaned, aware of the outline of a stiffening nipple as the girl turned.

Mary's throat went dry again. To combat the gathering quivering sensation in her loins, she growled and quickly solved the girl's dilemma about clothes. *Find the most shapeless garments you can,* Mary, she prodded herself to a heavy leather chest padlocked and girded with iron. Snatching open the top, she fished, and found, men's breeches and a sea-blue tunic with laces to close the front. She growled, "Here. Put these on."

Anne jerked around, startled by the command. Quick reflexes snatched the clothing out of the air. She looked at the items in bewilderment.

"Your things are filthy," the captain snapped. "Wear those until Nelson cleans the other."

Anne noted the stiff body, the closed fists, of the pirate woman. The whip attached to the belt enclosing shapely hips however,

reminded Anne of the English captain's beating death and she answered the whip of command in the voice. Her voice shook. "Yes, ma'am."

The captain's eyes narrowed in deepening anger and Anne's heart pushed into her throat. "Don't cower. I have neither flogged nor beaten you."

"Will you not?" Anne's gaze drifted again to the whip and the hand fisting around its draped loops.

The pirate woman looked down, her expression surprised. The hand opened and came away from the whip. "I have never harmed a woman." Anne found the woman's eyes, swirls of turbulently emotional blue-gray. "It was not among my plans to have you here."

Anne ventured, "Will you release me then?"

"I cannot. Your presence affords our cause an opportunity we have not possessed before."

"I am only an unattached woman."

"You are worth a ransom to your father perhaps."

"I am worth nothing," Anne said abruptly, aware suddenly that she did not want to go back to her father. She had looked forward to the Queen's court, a different life than the simply country gentry life. Excitement.

"Every woman is worth something," Mary smirked. "I myself have the price of twenty thousand crowns on my head." Anne balked as the smaller woman with the powerful aura of command stepped forward, by sheer force of will causing Anne to sit on the settee looking up at her.

"What is your family name?" the captain demanded. "And you can be home among your kin before the week is out."

"I could do other things for you," Anne replied, though she had to drop her gaze to keep her voice from shaking. That took her gaze over the pirate woman's attire, along the laces holding the white blouse closed against the tanned skin of her throat and upper chest. Further her gaze took in the worn leather vest secured with the wide black belt to the woman's tiny waist. On that belt lay the whip... She swallowed.

She found herself aware of her choices, to go back to family or weather an uncertain future in the company of an outlaw.

"What say you?" the pirate woman demanded and the voice was smooth, perhaps it was a wine Anne thought later, that drugged her senses.

She looked up, watching the captain's chest expand just before their gazes met again. As though another person spoke, Anne heard herself reply, "I would like to be useful."

Chapter 3

Thank God, Anne looked away after her offer. Despite vast control from a lifetime of hiding her emotions in battle, and from enemies of every persuasion, Mary found that her jaw dropped at the girl's plainspoken request.

But she could form no ascerbic reply. "Why?"

Anne looked up again and shook her head. "My father sent me from our home. After this," she looked down and gestured at the room, taking in the whole. "No one will have me."

There was a distinct air of dismissal, a judgment on Mary that Anne's life was now linked with hers and the Rogue crew, and that Anne considered that a dismal prospect. She grew angry. "What is this? You tell me you wish to be useful and in the next breath, speak ill of me and my crew."

Startled by Mary's outburst, Anne backed up on the settee, and planted her palms against the cushion. The clear indication of possible flight moved Mary forward to intercept her. Anne's widened eyes held escalating fright. "I... I didn't mean that, ah, as... oh, it sounded." The girl's long throat convulsed as she swallowed.

Mary put her first on her hips then and demanded, "Explain yourself."

Looking at her hands, which she twisted now nervously in her lap, Anne's eyes flitted over the paisley pattern of the cushion as she clearly searched for the proper words.

The silence stretched nearly to the end of Mary's ability to endure it before Anne began uncomfortably.

"If I have a price," Anne said. "It is my... that I am... untouched," she finished quietly. "By now, I... Everyone must know that I did not reach England, and that I... my ship was taken by y... a pirate."

Anne winced as perhaps she considered that still did not sound as if Anne recanted her opinion of Mary and the Rogue's crew.

Their gazes met as Mary let her anger flicker darkly in her eyes. Would the girl continue? Her tongue seemed to frequently run ahead of her brain, constantly endangering her very precarious position.

"I mean... I.. would know the difference. I... However they, ah, they would not. I..." Anne inhaled then exhaled revealing what Mary suspected was the real source behind the "useful" comment which had begun this conversation. "I," Anne said, "could not be married, would have.. .no place... anymore."

The girl's hesitant admission made Mary think Anne was uncertain she had a place even prior to her kidnapping. Mary also wondered exactly how high up in society was Anne's family that they considered her virginity their property. It made the captain loathe to treat her similarly. She kept her voice low and stern as she reminded the girl of the topic at hand. "You requested to be useful." Eyes narrow she held Anne's gaze as the girl looked back up to her. Though it was difficult to remain unmoved, as the girl's bewilderment was hard to ignore. "What would you do aboard this ship?" Mary demanded.

"I can cook."

"And poison us all to facilitate your escape? Hardly." Mary shook her head. With a casual, but obvious display of power, Mary lifted her boot to the edge of the settee, watching Anne consider the black leather surface and swallow. "Try again."

"I... can clean."

"You would sully yourself with back breaking work? Unlikely. More likely you would jump overboard to escape at the first opportunity and I would be forced to fish you from the ocean, or else risk that it be rumored Bloody Mary spared a life." Mary shook her head again. "I cannot spare the guard to watch you."

"I won't just sit here all day," Anne challenged, looking around dejectedly.

In here? Mary blinked. She could lock the heavy door, and usually did. No one would have to be set to watch the girl. "Do you know anything of being a cabin boy?"

Anne's frown told Mary the position was unfamiliar.

"You would keep this cabin tidy, clear away food, drink, garbage. Clean the furnishings, my clothing," she ticked off the chores.

"I would be... your ... body servant," Anne clarified.

While the word 'body' made Mary think of other things, she gave the girl, who now seemed to have shed the helpless look that had left Mary unable to remain angry, other information. "In time you might earn more freedom, to carry my course changes to the wheelman or first mate, to fetch my meals."

Anne wondered, "Who, ah, who did... does these things for you now?"

Mary laughed. "Don't worry. I have no favorite who would claw out your eyes for usurping his place." Mary laughed at Anne's expression of shock. "And your dear virginity will be safe in my cabin."

Anne blushed.

Then, and several more times in the days to come, Mary would regret those final words as she straightened, and strode out of the cabin, fighting down the flutters in her stomach.

Chapter 4

As her heart slowed its rapid hammering against her ribs, Anne gradually released her tight grip on the settee. From the instant the pirate captain had laughed – what a startling and sweet husky sound! – to the volatile, nearly explosive emotions transforming gray eyes to a deep sea blue, rough as the Atlantic in a northeastern gale, Anne was certain she was going to meet her doom for her bold speaking.

Bargaining her chores! How had she managed the gall? What in the name of the Holy Mother did she know about being a personal servant?

Closing her eyes to calm herself and think rationally, Anne envisioned her mother's maid Deluth, who had only recently begun helping Anne with her dressing for the various cotillions and county socials.

The captain had not mentioned dressing her as one of Anne's chores, but rather cleaning the clothes and the cabin.

The clothes tossed at her beckoned her gaze and she dressed, using a leather thong to tie and hold up the breeches which were long enough for her legs, but too wide at the waist. Anne looked around again, rising and making an inquisitive circuit around the crowded space. It seemed cluttered, but orderly. There were knick knacks -- a gilded clock was strapped with iron bar to the desktop. A filigreed iron lamp set in a base attached by clips and screws.

In the middle of the desk lay a heavy tome, vellum pages bound in leather. As it lay open to a page, Anne noted a handsome script, careful lettering in the margins, and a what seemed numerical coding atop each facing page.

"...made for the Sound today. Half a day ahead of the queen's hunting dogs. Nelson brought word from the crow's nest that we should make harbor in Nantucket Cove with the next tide. Tis been

too long since my men and I set boots to land. Nantucket is at least secluded. What with the black eye we delivered a sennight ago, I know none of us relish publicity."

The ship's log, Anne realized. She retreated from before it, as though the pages themselves contained the blood of those killed by the Rogue captain and her crew. To refer to it so casually as "a black eye", what manner of person could think that way about the taking of life?

Had Anne been right to choose to stay? Now she thought on it, she could have weathered the comments behind their hands, or the looks of pity for her predicament.

However she had not really thought at all once she had met gray eyes. Her stomach felt as though the ship had been tossed by rough swells. Just the memory of watching the captain toss her head and laugh made Anne clutch her stomach and pause against the nearest wall. *Such a strange sensation*, she thought uneasily.

For all the angry tones and the whip, pistol and cutlass on her belt and generally harsh demeanor, Captain Flint had surprised Anne with a blast of unexpected femininity. The woman, Anne noted, had ruddy skin darkened by the sun and dappled with freckles. Her hair, at first thought to be a simple brown, was actually bursting with golds and reds, beautifully aflame when the sunlight through the porthole struck her as she had put her booted foot up on the settee to stand over Anne.

She began to wonder what had led Captain Flint into the life of an outlaw on the seas. *Surely she had been like Anne once? A girl with a father, mother, mayhap even siblings?*

Anne swallowed. Flint was volatile. There would be no way to ask her questions and receive an answer. Agreeing to remain in this cabin, serving the woman's whims, Anne feared may prove her ordeal had finally, irrevocably compromised her sanity.

With no instructions but sure to her bones that Flint would return shortly and expect Anne to have begun her tasks, Anne set out to figure out what to do first.

The captain's desk held the long abandoned mug and plate. The barrel of water was cold and dirty. The linen Anne had used to dry herself and her dirty clothing lay in a heap next to the settee.

Suddenly recalling their first conversation about the bath, Anne decided that would be where she would start. Perhaps she could restart the relationship on the proper footing, and clear away the evidence of her mistakes to provide the captain with another tub of clean, hot water and a meal.

She moved the dish, mug and tray to the top of a small bookcase next to the door. For her clothes and the linen towel, Anne was at a loss until she spied a burlap sack atop a chest.

However the sack was already in use. Anne nearly gagged on her own bile as she found a blood-spattered pair of breeches and a white cotton blouse covered in thick blood stains.

More doubts about her choices assailed her, and the need to clean out her mouth sent her for the door.

However she fell backward as the portal opened inward. She landed on her hands and rear with a startled cry. Looking up she found Captain Flint staring down at her, fisted hands on hips. Quickly, Anne said, "I was about to seek someone to show me where I might find more hot water." She held up her hands with the blood stained clothes.

Captain Flint stepped further inside, eyes penetrating. The gesture of a hand finally dragged Anne's attention away from the captivating gaze. "Mr. Nelson will brief you on your duties."

Anne winced as Flint left her on the floor facing Nelson as yet again the pirate slammed shut the door in the wake of her departure.

Nelson reached out his hand. Anne could only stare at it dumbly for a moment before she gathered her faculties enough to realize that he meant to assist her in rising. "Thank you," she said as he took her hand.

"You were saying you wanted to wash the captain's clothes?"

Anne nodded. "The bath water is not cold and dirty. I... would like to rectify my mistake of using it earlier as well," she admitted.

"Nah, ye be all aright. A body much prefers to be clean."

"I'm sure the captain would have preferred her own bath."

"I'll have men down to replace the water straight away," he said as if she had not spoken. "You'll need a washboard and a smaller basin to do the clothes." He clucked, looking toward the empty tray. "And I'll bring a new meal."

He turned back, looking her over critically then. Anne fidgeted under his lengthy regard. "I... She gave me these," she clarified when he seemed to focus on the clothing she wore.

"Fit y' right well they does," he remarked. "Now don' y' worry none. We'll take care of the captain."

Anne was left discomfited once again by a broad toothy smile he flashed her just looking back at her briefly before leaving through the doorway, the tray in his hands.

Sitting down, clutching her stomach which still shook from her encounter with the captain, Anne waited to see what would happen next.

Chapter 5

This time Mary had no qualm about charging onto Rogue's top deck. *Let Nelson deal with the girl, damn it!* She had a ship to run.

"Captain?" Kotay looked over from his position at the wheel as she strode across the deck.

"I will relieve you," she said.

"I thought you were to retire?"

"I am no longer tired," she snapped.

Kotay's dark eyes surveyed her. "All right," he said finally. "I guess I could use a bite. I'll relieve you at midnight."

"Fine." Four hours, she thought, taking the massive wheel in hand. That should exhaust me plenty.

At least she hoped so. She could not imagine laying awake in her bed with the girl so near. Under the influence of blind exhaustion she might just be able to ignore the desire to watch that shapely form in repose. The vision of Anne sprawled backward on the cabin floor, breasts heaving and long legs splayed, tortured Mary's mind.

Arms and shoulders aching, Mary sternly held both the ship and her body in check, surprised to find it so hard to cling to a pledge only minutes old.

Further, despite the fact that she frequently took what she wanted without a second thought, Mary continued to contemplate second, even third, thoughts about consequences and repercussions.

The forlorn expression on the girl's face, as Anne explained her reasons for choosing to stay continued to bother Mary. Damn. She slapped the wheel. She wished she knew the girl's family name, to know if the indifference and neglect Mary suspected were fact or a fiction, designed by the girl to play for Mary's sympathies.

She had shown too much of her true nature to the girl, Mary thought. Wits about her, Anne had seized the knowledge to prey upon it.

That must be it, Mary realized. Since her capture, Anne had been a surprisingly savvy user of her charms. She had convinced Nelson to leave her unshackled, and attempted twice to brain two of Mary's crewmembers who had brought her a meal.

Nelson had been thoroughly bamboozled, arguing for the girl's remaining virtually a 'guest', even though Mary ordered Anne's confinement. He had then turned around and simply told Mary to "talk to the girl. She'll listen to you."

Talk? All that had gotten Mary was a roommate. *Damn, Nelson was tied around the girl's slender fingers!* Mary blanched. Nelson was down there again with the girl now. What would Anne convince him of next?

"Captain?"

"Mr. Nelson." Don't let him see your question, she told herself. "What can I do for you?"

"Perhaps I could do something for you?" he asked, gesturing to the wheel. "I've seen to matters below."

"I'm fine. Thank you."

"But the food and water will be cold."

Mary looked over at him, frowning. Food could not be wasted, and the water... their fresh water supply was limited. "Give them to Kotay. He's below."

"The girl hoped to make amends, Captain." His expression was bland but Mary felt as though he were the hangman, with hooded gaze while simultaneously positioning a noose.

"What does she do now?" Mary did not bother to elaborate.

"I have given her a washboard. She works on your clothing."

"She'll probably try to strike me with the board," Mary muttered but she relinquished the wheel to her boatswain.

Nelson chose wisely to ignore the captain's remark, instead beginning to whistle and look out ahead to the sea, as Mary once again returned below deck.

Captain Mary Flint approached her cabin door in the manner of a condemned prisoner, head down, reluctant steps. Briefly she pressed her ear to the wood, listening carefully before pushing inward slowly. She did not want to send the young woman sprawling again.

As Nelson had reported, Mary found Anne standing over a small basin in the far corner, her back to Mary though the captain could see she had the sleeves of her top rolled up. The girl's forearms were slender muscle, and wet from the wash water. Her thick golden hair had been tied into a pony's tail which lay long against the midline of her back, holding the fabric such that the movement of Anne's arms and shoulders revealed refined and smooth muscles as she scrubbed a garment against the washboard surface. Mary could hear the grating sound which had no doubt masked the sounds of her own entrance to the cabin.

So far the girl had not turned around. Mary tore her gaze from the other woman's back, slender waist and rounded hips to examine the rest of the room. Apparently Anne had spent some time cleaning the rest of the cabin. Strewn clothing was gone. The empty mug and plate had been replaced by new food and drink. Steam hovered over the large bathing basin.

Mary's mouth salivated and her stomach rumbled, reminding her sternly that she had missed her evening meal. Did she dare take the food and the bath while Anne remained in the room?

Another glance at the steam hanging thick over the washing basin and another to see Anne's back remained turned as she conducted her chore, decided Mary. She bent quickly and unlaced her boots.

As she sat on a bench next to the tub, Mary removed the boots. the heels made a light sound as they bumped against the deck. Abruptly Mary's gaze darted to Anne. The young woman remained oblivious and caught up in her task.

Standing, Mary unbuckled her sword belt, setting aside the gun, whip and sword on the desk surface. Removing her breeches, she set them and the stockings on the bench beside her.

Across the room, Anne's hands stopped their motion as the young woman gazed at the captain's reflection in the porthole glass visible because of the darkness which had descended outside.

Chapter 6

Anne felt as though hot liquid trickled down her spine. Awareness that the captain was behind her caused her to clutch hard at the clothing in her hands and still the motion in the basin. Lifting her head, compelled to study the other woman, she caught movement in the porthole glass.

The motion was not outside the ship, she realized shedding a surprising fear that had swelled up in her chest, but inside the cabin. The moonless night outside coupled with the lamp light inside had made the thick glass reflective.

She had an unobstructed view of the bathing basin Nelson had several crew members empty and refill. Captain Flint was presently sitting on the short bench beside the steaming water.

It had to be a trick of the steam, Anne decided. The pirate captain's appearance struck her abruptly as tiny and soft as slender fingers rolled black stockings from flawless legs which glowed ethereally white in the glass image. The stockings joined the breeches laying on the bench.

Anne swallowed down quivers in her stomach as the other woman curled a now bare leg into her lap. Anne was struck by the tiny foot the captain now nimbly massaged, aware only vaguely that she had started to move her own hands in rhythm, sloshing the clothing through the water. A low groan drifted as light as the steamy haze to Anne's ears.

Where was the battle-hardened warrior, the merciless creature who had slashed her English captain's throat? Conflicted emotions nearly choked Anne as the captain, apparently satisfied with her brief massage, glanced up.

Luminous blue eyes touched her, holding her in place as palpably as any caress. She did not dare draw breath until the other woman looked away. *Had the captain seen me staring?*

The fear of her perusal being discovered however could not stop Anne's gaze following the captain's fingers over clasps, neatly parting the thick leather vest. The white shirt beneath was stained gray and pale red in places, Lacing across a slender throat came undone in nimble fingers.

Anne licked her dry lips as the top was lifted off, briefly obscuring Flint's face, and revealing a taut stomach and the undersides of small breasts. Quickly averting her eyes, Anne's hands splashed noisily in the water.

"Surely the stains are gone by now."

Jerking around at the captain's voice, husky and dark, Anne's hands caught the edge of the basin, sending it and its water-logged contents crashing to the floor.

Bending quickly to grab futilely at the mess, Anne only heard the slosh as Flint moved from the bench to the bath. The startled sigh from the captain made Anne dare to look up.

A nude shoulder and arm lay along the top edge as loose hair catching the light of a nearby candle cascaded over it in curling reds. The bath's steam, probably what had caused the captain's vocal appreciation formed a halo around the relaxed angular face.

Anne dared to continue her appraisal because of the other woman's closed eyes. Lifting the clothes basin back to the table top, she stood. The action changed much more than her angle of view, it changed her perspective too.

There was nothing menacing in the lolling figure. Dark lashes were closed over sharply defined cheeks. Flint's other arm floated beneath the surface of the water, resting across a barely visible stomach. Water beaded on the shoulder, drawing Anne's gaze to the scar lancing through the muscled right shoulders and down into the top of the woman's left breast. *Surely such a wound had left lasting damage*, Anne thought. *Was the right weaker than the left?*

Anne's gaze returned again to the slack featured face. *Was Flint asleep? What were her dreams like?* Her gaze trailed down to the tendons visible in the smooth throat.

"So, the wash is done?"

Mouth dry again, Anne could only shake her head.

Obviously expecting a verbal answer, Flint opened her eyes, rising somewhat in the bath. Their contact drowned Anne in languid pools of blue. "Questions require answer." Mary's voice was cool, in direct contrast to the heat suffusing Anne's body.

She struggled to comply. "I... the wash. Is not done." She covered her face, bringing a measure of calm to her racing heart, and breaking the spell of Flint's eyes. "I... There was a mishap."

"I heard," came the dry wind-blown reply.

Anne could not decide if the note she detected was anger or humor.

"Fetch the soap."

Blinking in confusion, Anne questioned, "Soap?"

"The bar you used for the clothes. Bring it here."

"But that's not for your skin!"

"But 'tis for clothes which lay against the skin? Fetch the soap, girl."

Now Anne could define the anger. Quickly she found the soap which had fallen to the floor. Arm fully extended so that she need not get too close, she passed it to the captain.

A warm, wet palm closed around her hand as the transfer was made. Anne released the soap abruptly and the resulting squeeze sent the soap squirting into the air. Both women watched as it arced and then landed in the water with a plop-splash.

Flint fished for it, her body moving fluidly in the water. Anne watched her begin to apply the rough, sour-smelling lye against the supple skin. *She deserves better.*

Lye alone was drying and harsh, as she knew from laundering. At home though, her mother had added cream skimmed from the butter churn, and the boiled, crushed petals of lilac flowers to the family's bathing soaps. As her gaze followed the bar over the scarred skin, she blurted, "I could make better soap for you."

The soap bar and hands stilled. A lowered gaze, hiding any expression from Anne, turned to her. There came a lengthy silence in which Anne almost recanted. Abruptly however, Flint replied, "You may request what supplies you require from Nelson."

Exhaling, Anne nodded quick assent. "Yes, captain."

"Now, if you will pass me that towel?" Mary's gaze dropped to meet hers looking up.

Anne realized only then that she had dropped to her knees at the basin's side in a bid to convey the earnestness of her offer. She had clasped the side of the tub, the water splashing her fingers as the captain moved abruptly toward her.

Backing up in alarm, Anne stumbled as though she were a filly on ungainly newborn legs. There was a louder splash as suddenly an iron-firm grip seized her wrist.

Gasping for breath, suspended above the floor, and heart hammering, Anne gazed up, transfixed by water sluicing off what seemed an endless expanse of skin and feminine curves.

Anne had to wince when she reached Flint's face. Counter to the soft curves, the planes and angles were suffused with deep color, eyes narrowed in livid anger. She wrested her hand free, falling and catching herself against the floor. Dropping her face filled with anxiety and shame, Anne ran for the corner, ignoring the subtle noises behind her that signaled the captain's exit from the bathing tub.

Footsteps moving aside rather than toward her drew Anne around where she perched on the corner settee. Captain Flint had drawn on a knee-length oversize shirt, hiding cream-colored skin from view.

Without a word to Anne, the captain readied for sleep, sitting on the edge of a high mattress. She lifted a thickly bristled brush to her hair, stroking through it in long, slow motions.

"You will sleep?" Anne asked. She was unsure if she was more frightened of the prospect of Flint watching her, or having to lay awake nights watching Flint.

Again the haunting blue seized her in their grip, as though a gentle, but insistent hand cupped her chin. "You should sleep," came the stern husky order before the captain herself broke the connection, turning her back again and sliding beneath covers.

Exhaustion from the constantly changing barrage of emotions made it only a matter of curling into the cushioned curves of the settee for Anne to comply.

Chapter 7

Mary lay on her back, looking through the shadows and glow cast by the lantern toward the settee where the girl Anne had retreated in fear and loathing after Mary's imprudent actions. She battled with herself, and finally sat up, stretching out her hands against the mattress, alarmed at how they still tingled from when she had caught Anne's wrist mid-fall.

She offers me better soap? Mary had been bowled over by the sudden, unexpectedly overwhelming desire to let the girl take care of her. That had made her angry at herself. She was not permitted such indulgences while she still had a mission to accomplish.

However, as she moved silently to the desk, adjusting the lantern to see her food and the ship's logbook which still required the day's entry, Mary could not help looking at the curled up figure and wishing things were different.

For a moment she had allowed a connection. The girl had smiled when granted permission to make the soap and Mary found that smile affected her deeply. When she had requested a towel to break the silence as the girl stared at her, Anne had been so startled that she had stumbled backward.

Mary's whip-fast reflexes had her up on her feet in the tub, snatching Anne's flailing arm in an iron grip, preventing the tall blonde's crash to the deck. It had taken some effort to remain on her feet and Mary had grimaced with the effort.

Anne had then fled her in fear.

Not even a thank you. Mary's mood soured and she had turned her back on Anne, dried and dressed quickly so she would not have to witness Anne's cowering, so incongruous with her normally regal bearing.

From her perspective, Mary thought, I'm just a pirate. Mary hadn't taken on this life to be feared but to restore rights to those who lived in fear. Her problem was that along with the Crown's official representatives, men with whom she had a genuine conflict, she had occasionally caused harm to others.

She didn't like it and the price on her head from the Crown had sent bounty hunters after her from time to time, but she was close to achieving her goals, recompensing the families of those from whom the Crown had stolen.

Whatever the "queen's gift" she had heard bandied about in that tavern as being aboard the English ship, Mary now suspected the bauble lay at the bottom of the Atlantic. Other than the captain, a skeleton crew, and the girl the English ship's hold had only wares bound for non-Crown merchants, according to the papers Nelson had shown Mary.

She had cost her own people thousands of pounds in sales of goods by sinking that ship. "Damn!" She stared solemnly at the log book before looking up to find the goose-feather quill and inkwell. Her gaze drifted to Anne. The girl had curled into what looked to be an uncomfortable ball on the settee. Mary suspected that she was cold there by the outer hull of the ship. She quickly tallied the monetary losses she now owed to her own in the logbook page's top corner. Then she recorded the ship's last heading and position, reported by the sextant to Nelson as he had taken over from her.

The tray of food caught her nose's attention then as the smells of salt pork and mulled blackberry wine drifted to her. At her stomach's insistence Mary paused, got up and fetched the tray. At the turn to return, she again looked down at Anne's sleeping figure. The blonde's hair pooled around her face against the cushion. Her hands were fisted against her chest, her knees pulled up to her stomach.

Debating while she ate, Mary finally could only see her way to do one thing, making the girl warm for the night. Exhaling, Mary desired to somehow repair the fright she had obviously caused. She

found a blanket from the drawers underneath her own bed, and returned to drape it over her cabin mate.

The blanket was old and many threads were pulled out, creating holes in several spots. With care that the holes did not catch on any part of the girl's clothing and awaken her, Mary settled its length over Anne. The younger woman's shivering gradually stopped.

Mary pulled back slowly to arm's length and knelt by the furniture. Ensnared by the vision peacefully sleeping before her, she unconsciously rested her hand near Anne's on the settee cushion. The stillness of the room filtered out even the splash of the waves against the outside of the ship as she listened to the slow, even breathing of her young companion and she became aware of the warmth of the curled up body just a hand's length away.

Yet it might as well be the whole Atlantic Ocean. Could she ever hope to make Anne understand?

Someday, she thought sadly, finally rising to return to her own bed. *Maybe...*

Chapter 8

Anne awakened with a start not sure what had disturbed her sleep. She almost jumped again as something slid against her legs when she realized a blanket covered her body. Sitting up cautiously she cast a look to the captain's bed to find she was alone. The captain must already be topside.

The captain. Anne again examined the blanket, noticing the many places where the weave had pulled apart. The wool threads however seemed originally to have been of good quality. Even now the nap was smooth. Where it had pulled apart, she noticed some of the threads were cut. Perhaps she could sew in patches from something else to repair it.

She looked over at the few articles of clothing she had finished washing the previous day. She had been unable to completely clean some stains from the captain's shirt. Perhaps Captain Flint would allow Anne to cut it up for rags and patches.

Anne's heartbeat tripped over itself. It always came back to the leader of this vessel, she thought. Every move she made would be questioned and directed by Captain Mary Flint.

Not use to being handled so constantly, Anne bristled. However, Mary Flint apparently had a negotiable side. She had accepted Anne's offer to make soap. Also at some point during the night she had laid the blanket over Anne.

She watched me sleep, Anne thought. Her heart stuttered on another beat.

What did she think? Am I a nuisance?

Flint had become so quicky angry, Anne did not know what to think and it constantly preyed on her nerves.

Why didn't Flint just slit her throat and be done with her?

"I've never hurt a woman," Flint had said.

If I do not get my nervousness under control, she just might start with me.

A knock at the door startled Anne. Who would knock? She was the prisoner here. "Come in," she called.

Mr. Nelson appeared around the edge of the door. "So yer awake I see. Sleep well?"

Anne almost laughed. The funny little man smiled and sounded as though Anne were a guest and he was a footman.

"I slept fine," she said, quickly covering her amusement and affecting a dry tone. "I... The captain requested I make new soap for her. And," she paused, holding up the blanket. "I'd like to find a way to repair this blanket."

"Tell me what ye need, and I'll fetch it down."

She told him of the ingredients for the soap.

He scratched thoughtfully at his beard. "We keep cheese in the hold. But cream... there's none aboard I know. And ye need lilac, ye say?"

"Sweet herbs would do."

"Like t'cook with?"

She nodded. "If that's what you have." She put her hands on her hips, looking around critically. "I also need a way to cook it all. Do you think the captain will permit me in the galley?"

"Have you not asked her?"

"She was gone when I awoke."

Nelson nodded, apparently considering something. "Well, let's get you something t'eat and I'll take ye topside after."

Topside? To see the captain? Anne's heartbeat sped up double as she meekly followed Nelson from the cabin.

As she followed Nelson, Anne found herself looking around at her surroundings. She had been so nervous yesterday when Nelson had transferred her to the captain's cabin, she had been too distracted to see anything.

Avidly she studied the beams which made up the walls and ceiling and pondered what lay behind each door that they passed. She was led down a set of ladder-like steps and could hear a few gruff voices as she and Nelson approached an opening in the wall that did not have a door.

The galley teemed with activity. Seemingly a dozen men were crammed into a space barely larger than the initial cabin where Anne had been held. All eyes turned to her as motion stopped and her arrival was noted. Instinctively Anne took a short step behind Nelson's shorter frame.

Her escort had turned away from the men at the tables. Anne followed his gaze to a man of giant proportions tied tightly in a white apron with perpetually red cheeks.

Noticing that his eyes were hazy, Anne wondered idly if he was drunk or if the kitchen was indeed that hot. Behind him, suggesting the latter, steam billowed from several pots on a stove top.

"Justice," Nelson said. "Miss Anne needs breakfast."

Anne winced as Justice gave her a definitely sour scowl, turned around, reached for something and then slapped it down on the counter next to him.

"We's got bread an' cheese," he wheezed, sounding like a fog horn with a clogged pipe.

Nodding to Justice, Nelson collected the tray which contained a large roll of crusty bread and a block of cheese. He slipped his own knife out of his belt and motioned Anne toward the tables.

Following behind, Anne only noticed that several men picked up their bowls and plates and moved to other table, leaving an entire table clear for the two of them to sit.

Nelson put the food on the tabletop and stepped back, motioning for her to sit. Thankful she wore breeches instead of petticoats, Anne easily navigated the bench and sat down.

"Now eat. When yer done we'll go see the captain."

Anne picked up the crusty bread and wondered how slowly she could eat, to delay meeting the captain. The bread was warm and the cheese smell awakened her stomach. She could only take the knife and cut quickly through both bread and cheese and stuff them in her watering mouth.

Chapter 9

"Sanchez, can you repair it?" Mary cut through the ship smith's examination demanding an answer.

The dusky-skinned male sat cross-legged on the port deck studying the gaping hole in the starboard side of one of the shoremen's dingies. Normally the small canoe-like boats were towed behind the main ship, used during landings to ferry the crew ashore when the ship could not anchor close due to dangerous shallows.

Sometime during the night waves had tossed the small boat crashing into the Rogue's side. They had other boats, but strategically Mary preferred to have enough to carry her men in a single trip to or from shore. That left no crewmembers behind.

As fiercely loyal as her men were to her, Mary repaid that loyalty with the solemn vow to never leave a single man behind, and so she never had.

She did not plan to start now. "Well, Sanchez?" she demanded.

"We have the tar and the nails. And the saws," he added, black eyes rising up to meet her gaze. "But we have not the wood."

"None?" she questioned in sharp disbelief.

"I sent Montenegro down to the hold to search."

"I will find a way to let you make the repairs," she promised. "For now secure it."

"Aye, captain." Sanchez stood quickly and began directing a group of nearby men to lash the small craft to the port railing.

Mary strode away to the aft section and pulled herself up to the wheel deck while deep in thought.

"Is it salvageable?"

She looked up at Kotay, Rogue's first mate, who had taken off his shirt to enjoy the full effect of sun and sea breeze. He stood strong as an oak, breeches snug on his hips and thighs, bulging muscled arms straining as his massive hands gripped the spoked wheel.

He smiled as he noticed her appraisal. Mary shook her head. After four years traveling together, Kotay had yet to give up that she would someday fall in love with him. She was sure even a brief bout of lust would satisfy him.

However it would never satisfy her. While she did care for him, as she did all her crew, Mary had given her heart but once, only to lose the person who held it to the Crown's greed.

She turned to the matter of the damaged boat. "Sanchez needs wood," she informed him. "He thinks it is repairable."

"We were going to turn south of Caribe Island," Kotay said. "Do you wish to drop anchor for a few days instead?"

Mary considered what she knew of Caribe. English-held, the settlers however had taken only the west side of the island rather than the heavily forested eastern half. There would be natives to contend with, but so many of her crew were mixed descendants of them and other islands, she might get by with a curious scout simply saying hello.

She nodded then, secure in her decision. "Make the necessary corrections. Stay out of range of their west side fortifications and make for the eastern headlands."

Putting her hands on her hips and turning to look out to the sea ahead, Mary caught movement behind her.

A blonde head appeared just over the top of the ladder.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Mary started for the girl climbing onto her wheeldeck without a second thought.

Anne's eyes darted up as Mary's hand closed around her wrist at the top of the right side ladder beam. The whites of her eyes displayed Anne's alarm.

"How did you get out here?" Mary demanded.

"I brought her to see you, Captain."

Feeling Anne's pulse jumping frankly under her fingers, Mary looked past the girl and down the ladder to Nelson.

She dragged Anne onto the wheeldeck and stepped back, leaving the young woman hunched on the deck rubbing her wrist. Greeting Nelson who pulled himself up quickly, Mary fisted her hands on her hips. "What is this about?"

Nelson stood and straightened his clothing, seemingly unconcerned by Mary's rising rage. Perhaps, she thought, I should remind him. She felt conflicted though with the girl so close at hand. Anne's continued crouch against the deck demanded addressing. "On your feet!" she ordered.

Immediately Mary wished to rescind the order. When Anne had complied and stood tall before her, Mary had to lift her gaze to meet the blonde's. The soft expressive blue eyes were trampling over a command resolve that had reduced taller, bigger men into puddles of backboneless mud.

She avoided the quiver in her stomach for the moment, turning on Nelson. "One of you better explain now."

Nelson nodded.

Anne spoke. Mary felt the quiver drop her stomach to her knees as the quiet, simple statement crashed through her like a tidal wave. "I have a request."

Mary hoped no one saw her need to swallow. "Which is?"

"To make the soap," Anne began.

"I told you to get whatever you needed."

"We do not have this item in the hold," Nelson interjected. Mary glared at him.

Anne cleared her throat. "Mr. Nelson is correct. To make the soap I will need milk cream."

"For soap?"

Anne swallowed but did not retreat. Mary appreciated the improvement in the young woman's approach to her. "It is one of the ingredients."

Mary nodded. "I see. How much do you need?"

"It depends on the amount of soap you wish me to make."

Anne's eyes met Mary's again, and the captain found herself nodding. "I will see that you get your cream." Anne nodded. "Was there anything else?"

"I... There were... I noticed holes in the blanket," Anne said quickly. "I can repair them," she added quickly. "However, I need scrap cloth."

"Then find some."

"There was a shirt with stains I could not remove. I thought perhaps it would do."

Mary nodded. "That sounds fine."

Anne dropped her gaze. "Yes, captain."

"Something else?" Anne looked around and the blonde brows drew closer together in confusion. "What is it?"

"Where is Mr. Nelson?"

Mary turned around and found that the girl spoke the truth. While she and Anne had been speaking, Nelson had gone to the main deck. She searched among the men and finally spotted the boatswain instructing a crewman in the knots for the sail ropes. She started to open her mouth and yell for the bastard to get his ass back up here.

Anne's voice however froze her in place. "May I stay up here?"

"Why?" Mary demanded suspiciously.

"I have never seen the ocean like this," Anne said, looking out at the waves around them.

A wistfulness in the young woman's profile called to Mary. "All right," she said before she could think better of it. "You may stay."

After all, in the middle of the Caribbean Sea, where could the girl go?

Chapter 10

Granted permission, Anne now sat at the railing in front of the ship's wheel, arms crossed over her upraised knees and chin resting on a forearm. She thought the view spectacular across the deck out to the bow, watching the men climbing the rigging against the backdrop of cloudless sky and pale blue waters.

A speck slowly growing larger off the ship's left side drew her attention. *Land?* She studied the sight and felt a surprising trepidation seize her chest. *Did the captain see it?* Anne turned around to look at Captain Flint.

Legs slightly spread, the woman had her arms crossed over her chest as she looked up into the face of the man holding the wheel. *He was huge*, Anne realized. Bare to the waist, his physical strength was evident and she shied from it, returning her gaze to the captain once more.

How did she command them? she wondered. Next to her crew member, Mary Flint plainly appeared tiny.

Then Anne noticed the whip-like spread of Mary's hands as she talked, and the firm set to her jaw as she stopped talking to hear his reply. It was hypnotic, this give and take by the captain's mannerisms, Anne thought as she was drawn repeatedly to the slender hands carving their point in the air. The husky voice drifted around her like a caressing fog, as the woman's voice reached her on the shifted winds.

"I am not going to risk someone knowing of our cargo," the captain said. "Tack around outside glass range," she ordered.

The big man's shoulders rounded as he conceded, "Aye, captain."

"You're the best navigator we've got, Kotay. The sandbar will be child's play for you." Anne froze as Flint turned from her conversation. Her gaze dropped but not soon enough to not make

the captain fully aware that she had been eavesdropping, however unintentionally. "Something on your mind?" Flint's voice was sharp.

Lifting her head, Anne's heartbeat thundered in her ears when their eyes met. "I will go below," she said solemnly and rose to her feet. "Is there anything I should do ... for you?" she asked, recalling her new position of service.

"I will be supervising landfall," Flint said dismissively.

"I will bring you something to eat here," Anne promised. "A sandwich?"

The captain looked about to protest; her lips even briefly parted before her jaw snapped ferociously shut. "Bring one for Kotay as well," she said abruptly.

Anne nodded. "Yes, captain." She left the top deck quickly then, relieved to be stepping out of range of the unsettling captain's penetrating gaze.

"She must know of the Queen's gift," Kotay remarked when Anne had gone.

Having been watching Anne's progress in leaving, drawn too often for her liking to the way the woman's hips filled out the serviceable breeches, Mary spun on him. "She knows nothing."

"She knows how to quell your temper," he observed.

She turned to follow Anne's departure again, only to realize the girl had not gone below deck, but now stood at the port railing, hands wrapped around the wood beam, staring out at the approaching land. *Was she planning to flee?*

The prospect of the girl trying to leave the Rogue hit Mary with an irrational bout of pain. "I'll take my lunch below," she snapped at Kotay then hurried down to the main deck and strode quickly to the girl's side.

Anne was so engrossed she did not turn at the sound of quickly approaching boots. Mary grabbed hold of her left arm and Anne screamed, fighting the grip. "Stop!" the captain ordered, muscling Anne to the deck surface by forcing the girl's wrist backward, so she lowered to her knees out of reflex to protect the bones from breaking. "I said, 'Stop!'," Mary growled. "You will not leave this ship!"

"I... wasn't..."

Anne's other hand drifted to her bent thigh and Mary followed the helpless gesture down, spying the knife in the girl's belt. She snatched it free, leaving Anne cowering as she studied it. "Where did you get this?"

Massaging her wrist, Anne looked up with trepidation. "It's Mr. Nelson's," she said. "He loaned it to me."

"He loaned it to you?" What in God's name had possessed her boatswain to give the girl a weapon? The captain could have found her throat slit in the middle of the night. "You filched it off him, you mean."

"No, I didn't."

"Come with me," Mary demanded, tucking the knife into her own belt, and reaching to grab Anne's arm again. The girl flinched away from her. "Now!"

Anne did not resist then as Mary grasped her wrist and hauled her to her feet. Roughly she pushed Anne before her, over to the ladder steps which led to the ship's interior. "Down!" Mary ordered, shoving at her shoulder from behind.

Stumbling, Anne caught at the sides of the steps and hurried quickly down. Mary followed; her gaze narrowed, and her eyes darkening dangerously.

"My cabin," she ordered when Anne turned to look at her in question.

Subdued, Anne walked with her head down, leading the way to the captain's cabin. Mary felt her body traitorously respond again to the sway of delicate hips, and the soft-looking hair that fell around Anne's face, as she kept her head down and let Mary open the door before proceeding inside.

She shoved the door closed. Anne stood in the middle of the room when Mary turned to face her. Her hands were clasped together before her passively. Mary's own heart raced far too fast; she knew she was dangerous right now. "I want an explanation," she demanded, tossing the knife carelessly from her and both women watched it imbed in the wall nearly to the hilt.

Anne's bottom lip quivered; Mary saw the sheen gathering in the other woman's eyes. "He gave it to me."

"Why? I specifically told him you were to have no weapons."

"I used it to eat this morning," Anne said earnestly. "He never took it back."

"And if I ask Nelson, this is what he will say?"

"I have never lied to you." Anne's voice stuttered over the words.

"You say you wish to stay and then I find you at the railing contemplating jumping overboard. Your promise to stay was therefore a lie."

"I was not going to jump."

Mary growled and spun away. "Liar."

Anne sat down. "I do not know how to convince you," she murmured.

Spinning back around, Mary charged, towering over Anne, their gazes linked, fire sparking in her belly, and Anne's eyes widening in alarm. She grasped Anne's shoulders, intending to shake her, to wreak some of the same havoc in the girl that the girl caused in her.

Anne gasped; Mary watched the full lips part as if in slow motion. I am surely addled, she thought, as her gaze settled on those lips, only to close as she dipped her head and captured them with her own.

"Convince me," she growled. Her hands pushed down Anne's arms and pinioned the girl by her hands to the chair.

Anne's lips continued to part under her assault, until Mary could only feel and taste the texture of sweet honey within. Her tongue sought more of the sweetness, and plundered Anne's mouth again and again. Anne's hands were now against her chest, surely aware of the pounding heart within Mary's chest, and then suddenly against the skin of Mary's throat, and encircling back behind her neck.

Sweet fire erupted in Mary everywhere Anne touched. She groaned as shivers skittered down her spine from Anne's fingers in the nape of her hair. With a gasp as her groin spasmed, Mary tore herself away.

Anne fell from her hands, back against the chair, color high, breathing hard. Quivering hands lifted shaking fingers to her mouth, as wide eyes searched Mary's face for an explanation.

Damnation!

Oh sweet fire and damnation.

Mary fell to her knees and put her hands on Anne's lap, looking up into the blonde's face. Their hands found one another against Anne's thighs as their gazes joined.

Anne whispered, "What is this?"

The urge to brush her fingers through the loose hair against Anne's cheek rose up in Mary. She did not ignore it, cupping the girl's face with her right hand.

She stood slowly, pleased by Anne's face lifting and keeping their gazes joined. Her own hand slid from Anne's cheek, to the column of her throat, sweet soft skin begging Mary to undertake a more

intimate exploration. "Come with me," she said. Her voice was little more than a husky whisper. Her fingers caught in the laces closing Anne's blouse. She slid away from the skin there, feeling the shiver coursing through Anne's body, and the girl's racing heart.

"Come with me," she said again, bending down and capturing the sweet lips again as she backed up.

Anne followed, rising as Mary stepped backward, their lips never parting. Both women's hands now restlessly plied through the other's hair, holding them breathlessly together. When Anne's lightheadedness led to her gasping for air and breaking the connection, Mary's lips trailed down her chin and throat, and to the softness of her collarbone. Her hands moved to Anne's waist, and she tugged the blue top free of the breeches, her fingers hungry to touch upon the alabaster skin she had seen a day previously.

Mary's hands were soft and hot against Anne's skin. The blonde's head fell forward as her senses became caught in a maelstrom of sensations. Mary's mouth then found Anne's ear.

The husky, expressive voice poured into her soul. "I want you. Trust me."

Anne was soon on her back on the bed, her top tossed aside, Mary's hands were hot on her torso then pulling off her own top and breeches. The flush to the skin invited Anne's touch. When her palms slid over the skin she felt the same heat rising in herself, rising also in her captain.

The world shrank to encompass only blue eyes swirling with dark heat and promises. Anne did not know what made her part her thighs as Mary's palm rested on the top of her knee. She only knew she wanted to understand the cause and at the same time to calm the turmoil that constantly erupted between them.

Mary's touch everywhere, with her lips, with her hands, caused the quivers that were constantly in Anne's stomach around the

powerful captain, to intensify until she arched, almost unable to bear the torture any longer.

She whimpered as a cycle of surges and withdrawls that felt like waves toying with the sands of the beach took over her lower region; Mary's body surged against hers, an alluring contradiction of soft curves and potent, commanding strength. Her body began to throb, feeling like it was condensing to a single point. A bright light beckoned behind her closed eyes. Certain she was about to die, Anne cried out as the incoming rush suddenly reversed like an explosion tearing her apart.

Mary's mouth stole the sound then her voice joined Anne's in another cry as she surged against the generous curves to be overcome with spasms of her own.

Chapter 11

The concentrated warmth of a hand resting on Anne's hip roused the blonde young woman from slumber. Her eyelids fluttered open, gaze instantly falling into the sea of blue of her companion's eyes. An emotion that gave Anne a very warm sense of belonging filed them. Her lips curved slowly into a smile. A little shyly she marveled, "Twas not a dream."

The corners of the captain's eyes crinkled slightly and Anne followed the motion down to see mulberry lips curl at the corners and part slightly. She dampened her lips with her tongue in reaction, remembering the taste and feel of the captain's mouth on her own. The hand on her hip slid to her front, up over a breast. Anne shivered with recalled delight as her nipple hardened, pressing into the roughened palm. The captain's hand continued on, drawing Anne's own from under her cheek. Following a kiss pressed into Anne's palm, the captain's husky voice addressed her. "Was it not?"

"Twas real," Anne insisted. "I am sore betwixt my legs."

"I hurt you?" The blue faded slightly toward gray as the captain's eyes sought her body critically.

"Tis naught but pleasant. As it was when you entered me." Anne cupped the older woman's chin, gently drawing her face back up.

"Truth?"

Anne smiled. Watching her captain's uncertainty made her feel surprisingly confident. "I have never lied to you," she said softly, repeating again her words of earlier. "Captain," she added.

Her hand was grasped and moved from the captain's chin with quick kisses to each knuckle. Shivers chased themselves to her spine and warmly reminded her center of the pleasures recently shared.

"Mary," the captain said. "I would hear my name from your lips."

Complying willingly, Anne echoed, "Mary."

The captain -- Mary, Anne corrected, rearranged herself then, propping her head up on an open palm and searching Anne's face. Anne held her breath as she watched Mary's gaze explore her body further. "Say my name again," Mary asked, eyes returning to Anne's.

"Mary," Anne whispered, wondering why she felt nervous. True, she had never been naked with another person, and what they had shared she felt instinctively had removed the need for such modesties. However, she had a sudden desire to improve her appearance.

Mary's palm sketched over a lower rib then paused over the swell of Anne's breast, thumb and forefinger rolling the nipple between them. Anne gasped and involuntarily arched, offering more of herself for contact. Gazes locked together, Anne gasped as Mary spoke again. "I wish to lay claim to you." Mary's voice rasped her name into her ear, "Anne, tell me I can."

A firmly muscled knee slipped between Anne's thighs rubbing against her center. She felt herself dampen as her body filled with anticipation. "Yes," Anne responded, the single word rushing out on an exhaled breath.

Mary's mouth trailed down her throat. Anne's nipples began to ache for attention. Mary's tongue licked at Anne's collarbone. Anne brought her hands up to cradle Mary's head, a contented sigh releasing from her throat as Mary's warm, soft and wet mouth finally closed over a painfully hard nipple. Her body surged upward to meet Mary's poised above her.

She felt Mary repositioning, nudging her thighs apart with both legs between. Sifting her fingers through Mary's hair, Anne marveled at the fineness of it, the glimpses of fiery reds and rust that sparkled among the browns. She was briefly stymied by a cloth tie, which she loosened. As Mary's hair fell free around her

face, Anne arched and throbbed, and finally succeeded in guiding up the finely featured face until Mary's lips covered her own and she felt the other woman's slender fingers sliding over her hips toward her center to claim her once again.

With maddeningly slow undulations, Mary ground their centers together. The mingling sensations had Anne wildly near the brink.

Wham! The crash of a door against a wall sent Mary charging to her feet. Anne dazedly saw the woman, standing naked, already unsheathing her sword.

Kotay stood in the doorway, his own sword drawn. Anne yanked the blanket to her chest as she took in the burning anger in his eyes.

Undaunted by her own nakedness, Mary remained poised, ready to run someone through. At the moment, Anne thought, that might be the Rogue's second in command. "What is the meaning of this?!" Mary demanded. She dropped the sword's point, but not the sword. "Get out!"

"You are required for landing," he said sharply. His message delivered, his feelings made known in the terse words and the narrowed gaze that took in both women's states of dishabille, Kotay turned on his heel, slamming the door closed behind him as he departed.

The silence was terrifying for Anne. Her heart hammered out of control. Gradually as Mary did not move, Anne's heart beat slowed and she inhaled cautiously.

Mary stood frozen staring at the door.

Chapter 12

How dare he? Mary fumed. It was a good thing he had left, she thought, as she swished the sword in her hands rapidly through the air, giving vent to her sentiments. *Kotay holds no claim to act the jealous lover!*

Amid the rattles and creaks of the ship then, Mary heard the clatter of a chain sliding against wood, and the heavy splash of the anchor hitting the water.

We are making landfall. Kotay's words rushed back at her. The air breezed on her body as she turned around to fetch her garments. Her eyes fell to her bed and she stumbled as her mind was muddled by the fetching sight.

Anne sat in the middle of the tousled sheets, demurely holding a corner to her chest, not nearly enough to obscure the abundance there. A shapely foot and ankle were also partly visible in the tangle of sheets at the other end. The woman's skin was nearly as white as the sheet. Her hair, as golden as a sunrise, cascaded around pink-tinged cheeks, rose red lips, and clear sky blue eyes.

Mary licked her lips, recalling the beauty's taste. Drawn as a moth to flame, she moved to sit on the bed, less than an arm's length away from her desire. Her voice was husky, gentled by the emotions she could not contain. "You will wait here."

Anne nodded. Grasping the sheet, Mary tugged it from the long fingers, revealing the loveliness once more for her eyes. She visually traced the body before her, committing the whole to memory. Full swells of breasts with thick nipples stood rigid in the cool air of the cabin. The woman's narrow waist was taut, her pelvis flaring out to wide hips covered with silk soft flesh. Cornsilk curls hid Anne's sex from view.

Mary's gaze traveled still further, down the evident muscles in Anne's bent legs. Her perusal paused over the dark stains dotting the sheet between them.

Shame filled her. She had promised Anne her maidenhead would remain intact. Conflicting emotions welled up. Had she been gentle enough? *Why did Anne not protest?*

There would be no going backward, Mary knew. 'Twas done.

However, what to do now?

She returned her gaze to Anne's face. The blonde looked at Mary's body with open curiosity. It touched Mary's pride to know she was a fit woman, her body shaped by years of sea living which was far from easy living. "When we have set up on shore, I will return for you," she said when Anne's gaze lifted once again to her own.

"I understand." The young woman's voice wrapped itself around Mary's chest and squeezed it gently.

Visions of making this woman cry out her pleasure on a bed of moss, under the protection of the island palms, to join the music of the Myna birds and the parrots inundated Mary's senses. She could suddenly smell their fluids mingling, feel the softness of the moss under their bodies, and hear the crickets as dusk would blanket them. Only by shaking herself could she recall her responsibilities and pull on her garments.

At last she sheathed her sword and stood, striding for the door.

"Captain?"

Grasping the heavy latch in her hands, Mary turned back. "Yes?" The woman sat still nude and uncovered. "You should attire yourself before you grow too chilled," she advised.

"Yes, captain."

A moment passed as their gazes locked. Mary dipped her chin and took her leave.

She flew up the steps to see all the men making preparations for their landing. Sails had been pulled in and were being rapidly rolled and tied to the masts, men, like locusts, crawling over all the rigging to get the work done. On this, the leeward side of the island, there were no lookout posts to avoid, but still they sailed in with the caution born of long years fighting battles. What men were not atop the masts were readying the landing boats, and she spotted Sanchez directing the lowering of the damaged boat to the water's surface. It would be dragged behind and once on shore, the supplies assembled, it mounted on braces up off the sands, and the repairs made.

Sanchez waved upon spotting her moving toward the steerage deck. She gave him only a brisk nod in return. Her men were efficient. She led them, but they knew their tasks, and their place.

Except apparently for Kotay, she thought angered again by the liberty he had presumed to storm into her cabin.

She hauled herself to the raised deck, and looked from Nelson, to Kotay, and then flicked her gaze back to Nelson and gestured with her head that he was to leave. Now.

Nelson accepted her wishes in silence and dropped down the ladder to the main deck, supervising the landing boat deployment.

"We are ready to make landfall with the crew." Kotay reported their status, not looking at her directly, but rather standing fixed at the wheel, staring directly out at the point of land ahead of the ship. However he was not steering. He was simply avoiding her. The Rogue's anchor had already been dropped. They were safely within the natural harbor, invisible to ships which might pass outside, and there was no civilization on the land where they would send the small boats.

"I accept your report," she said coolly. "I do not accept your method of reporting it."

He turned his head sharply toward her, his eyes clearly looking through her rather than at her. "I attended to business," he said concisely. "Your business."

She rested her hand on the hilt of her sword. "Do you wish to challenge my command?"

His face was a mask of disdain. His jaw set in granite. He shook his head.

"Then do not ever presume to tell me what is and what is not my business," she said coolly. "Anne..."

"She must be a spy of the Queen!" he hissed. "She has completely taken you in!"

"She has not!"

"You bedded her. You don't think that is being taken in?"

"That's right. I bedded her. She is... was," Mary corrected herself, "an innocent. I'll deal with the consequences, but they are nothing to do with the Queen." She exhaled. "And they are nothing to do with you, Kotay."

"You are my captain."

"That is all it will ever be," she said, not unkindly as he fumed and his face grew reddened. "I have never led you on about that."

"But..."

"Never," she said firmly. "Do not speak of it again."

Kotay exhaled, released the wheel and set its guide rope in place. "Yes, captain." He looked at his discarded shirt laying over a nearby railing and pulled it on, lacing the ties. "Will you let me at least escort you ashore?"

"I think perhaps we should remain at a distance during this landing," she advised.

Again he nodded. "Yes, Captain."

"Kotay," she asked sincerely. "You must agree to this."

"Why?"

"There can be no questioning the leadership on this vessel, among this crew. You have to trust me, that I do know what I'm doing." She shook her head. "If you can't..."

"She will betray you," he said. "Such women have done so since the beginning of time."

Mary shook her head. "You have concocted that reasoning out of your jealousy. Such pettiness does not become the man whom I have called my right hand since our first battle together in Tortugas."

"When you ask her about The Queen's Gift," he asked. "What is her reaction?"

"I have never asked her. She knows nothing."

"What is her family name? Why have you not considered ransom?"

"I do not know." Mary shook her head. "It matters not. She wishes to stay."

"That must be clue enough to you about her duplicity. What prisoner would wish to stay aboard the ship which kidnapped her?" He demanded to understand, "And why would you give up probably rich coffers to feed our cause for a woman?"

"I have given up nothing of our cause." Mary sighed. "We will discuss this no further. Adjust to the situation, Kotay, or I will see you leave our cause."

She turned on her heel. "Do you return to her?" he demanded.

"Yes," she said simply, not turning around as she reached and held onto the railing. "I will be escorting her to the encampment."

She did not need to see his face to know she had dealt him a devastating blow. With a heavy heart, that he might not see his way clear to remain in her service, Mary removed herself from the

steerage deck and strode back to the cabin below where Anne waited.

Chapter 13

Drawn toward Mary's parting look, Anne had risen quickly from the bed and eagerly dressed in the loaned tunic and breeches. As palpable as any of her earlier caresses, Mary's gaze had accompanied a promise to return. I must be ready, she thought.

She turned her attention to the bedding. The sight of its rumpled sheets heated her blood with memory. As she went to rearrange and smooth the linens over the mattress, tiny dark spots on the pristine white caught her attention. The stains of blood, her maiden blood, was a stark reminder of what she had allowed.

Waves of shame buffeted her and she caressed her cheek with the linen, a manner of mourning. Her virginity, the commodity of a young lady of her station, was gone. There would be no dowry to her parents, the price paid by a bridegroom chosen for her. Anne was not stupid. Once she had arrived in England, the Queen would have done the same, choosing from among courtiers to cement a political alliance or treatise.

No tears fell from her eyes however. On the fibers she caught a subtle scent, another inhale and she identified Mary's essence, mingled with her own. She gripped the evidence of her own choice, suddenly seeing it for exactly that, a statement of her first steps toward choosing her own destiny, her own future. Removing the sheet from the bed, she balled it in her hands.

What sorrow could I have?she thought, recalling their coupling with wonder and pleasure, accompanied by the soft openness filling Mary Flint's face, giving Anne the sensation of glimpsing the other woman's soul. There was the moment she felt nearest to death, only to feel Mary's sure hands caressing and holding her, keeping her secure. She heard again Mary's open cries mingling with her own. She recalled the moment her own eyes flew open, gasping from the sensations coursing through her body to see Paradise reflected in Mary's eyes which had become the color of

the wide ocean she had been entranced by on the Rogue's deck earlier that day.

The two women were elementally bonded now, Anne felt. She had chosen to lay with Mary. There had been no coercion. The pirate captain was not whom her father would have chosen for her, but Anne, recalling the husky voiced, "May I?" from Mary's lips, would never choose anyone else.

Holding the power on this ship, and over Anne's life, Mary had never needed to pose the question. The right was hers by possession. Anne recalled that moment when the question was laid to her. That Mary would ask... She had recognized it as a gift, like the fetched quail laid before a beloved master by the hunting dogs.

Standing, she reverently folded the sheet and set it beneath her bed, the lounge against the wall. "You have claimed me, Captain Mary Flint," she murmured, looking out the porthole at a landing boat rowing for shore. "I am yours."

There was the sound of the door opening behind her, and Anne turned with a smile to see Mary stepping around the edge, looking back over her shoulder at something or someone in the corridor. Unobserved, Anne took the simple pleasure of trailing her gaze over the other woman's figure. Mary's hair, pulled into a nape pony tail, revealed the soft skin of the woman's neck. Anne's fingers tingled with the desire to caress there. Her imagination moved to cupping Mary's cheeks and kiss the lips now turning into view. As their eyes met, the knowledge that she wished to touch Mary as Mary had touched her made Anne's thoughts bold. And you are mine.

"You are ready?" Mary asked.

"At your service," Anne said, a wealth of meaning in her strong tone and in the dip of her head as she stepped away from the porthole and met Mary halfway in the middle of the cabin.

Mary lifted her hand toward Anne's arm. Intercepting its path to her shoulder, Anne instead grasped the fine boned fingers with her

own, aware of the softness of the pads as they slid over her palm and then wrist, even as she closed her own fingers around the back of tendons and muscles that bespoke a strength which captivated her. There was puzzlement now in the eyes lifting to her. A moment of silence passed and then Mary simply let her hand back fall to her side, Anne's carefully ensconced within it. There was a slight tug, and Anne stepped forward keeping their gazes twined. Her heart pounded in her chest as the gray-blue swirls assessed her. She gave vent to the happiness in her being with a slow, widening smile.

Mary's own lips turned upward, taking the spare features and filling them out with a glow Anne could only believe was happiness as well.

There was another light squeeze to her fingers and Mary led the two of them from the cabin.

Out on deck, Mary led Anne to the starboard side of the ship. Releasing Anne's hand with great reluctance, she bent to check the knots securing the rope ladder to the railing. Finding the hold satisfactory, she turned to offer Anne a hand to begin her descent. The younger woman was bent over the railing, her hands white-knuckled in their grip. Her gaze fixated on the small boat far below and fear clearly widened the pale blue eyes. "I will help you," she promised gently.

"What if I should fall?"

"I will not let that happen," she vowed seriously. Anne looked at Mary. The tension in her shoulders released; her grip loosened on the railing. Mary took her right hand from the railing. "I will go first and guide you down."

Anne nodded. Mary maneuvered out over the railing and gripped the rope sides carefully. She pressed her left boot to the middle of the third rope rung and her right boot lower, to the middle of the

fifth. Gripping the right side securely, she reached up with her left. "Come here," she coaxed.

Watching carefully, Mary monitor Anne's movements over the top railing. When the girl turned her back to the ocean and cast about with her foot for the rungs below, Mary grasped the woman's bare ankle and placed the slender foot on a rung.

"Keep coming," she encouraged. She sensed Anne's balance shifting. The rope ladder responded to it as well, swinging slightly to the left away from the side of the ship. The only thing to do was to step herself up, cupping her body around Anne's back, both her hands on either side of the young woman's head. The slender body shivered in fright against her own for a moment, then calmed. The motion of the ladder stopped gradually. "You'll be all right," she whispered. Her calves were to the outside of Anne's legs. Their difference in height suddenly realistically making Mary's plan to guide Anne down a little harder.

However she realized an opportunity to give Anne her own confidence in the endeavor. "Move your foot to the next rung down," Mary encouraged. As Anne pulled back to look down at her feet, Mary's arms flexed and she echoed the muscle moves, however only securing herself to the right side of the rope ladder. Anne completed the step to find herself side by side with Mary, both their hands side by side. Mary covered the tensed fingers with her own and gave a squeeze of confidence. "Good job."

They made their way, in this same fashion, down the rest of the 40 feet to the ocean surface. The water splashing Anne's ankles from the kicked up waves as the boat held its position against the side of the ship startled the blonde again however. Mary wrapped her left arm around Anne's back and squeezed more firmly. "The gunwale is directly below you. Step down and let go."

Anne took a moment to assess her position. The boat shifted below them, dancing on the waves. Mary was startled as Anne's hand suddenly covered hers on the next rope rung down, where Mary had put her hand to maintain her position as the rope ladder would

inevitably swing as Anne released it. She felt the body next to her stretch downward, heard the gentle exhalation of relief as Anne's foot made contact with the gunwale, and then the ocean breeze was cool on her body as Anne dropped into the boat.

She watched Anne stumble and wondered why none of her men steadied her. She waited until Anne seated herself in a clear space in the bottom curve of the boat, and then stepped onto it herself. Seating herself in the bow, she ordered the boat to the shore.

Her men rowed steadily, easily accepting Nelson's directions to change course port or starboard to move through the waves without dashing themselves against the promontory rocks. Once they reached the shallows, all the men leaped from the boat, grasping at the side and thrusting it onto the sandy shore.

With the boat steadied by their hands, Mary stood, and stepped out herself. Reaching back, she grasped Anne's hand and guided the young woman out onto the sand. Walking Anne up the beach to the dunes and the grasses behind which she knew her men had established their campfires and shelter, Mary listened to Nelson directing the men to pull the boat fully on shore. Then that sound drifted away, replaced with the noises ahead of the crew chopping wood. Cresting the dune, she surveyed the orderly chaos of setting up the tents. The dark sail canvas was perfectly suited to their needs, pulled taut and tied over supple wood frames, harvested from the forest which filled the land to the west of their landing site.

Grasping Anne's hand as she saw the young woman dusting her other hand through her hair to pull it from her face, Mary led the way past the camp, to the woods beyond. A hill rose through this forest and she intended to sit at its crest and watch the sunset with Anne ensconced in her arms.

Chapter 14

Anne looked back over her shoulder at the busy camp area growing more distant with each step she took with Mary.

"The men will not follow us."

Glancing to her right, Anne found Mary offering an assuring smile. The fingers wrapped around hers were moving in intoxicating patterns. However, Anne made an observation, "They were preparing a meal."

"Are you hungry then, my Anne?" Mary's hand stroked up her arm. Tingles spread in her chest and Anne blushed. Mary leaned in and brushed her lips against Anne's ear, whispering, "I know I am."

Anne swallowed down the lump in her throat and put her hand over her stomach in an effort to quell the tremors Mary's voice elicited. "Where are we going?" She finally managed, though it was only a whisper.

"To the top of the world," Mary answered.

The captain led the way through the trees and bushes, finally locating a less dense path to guide Anne up the rising slope. The flowers and leaves were vibrantly colored. Anne noted every color of the rainbow, and a few more beautiful besides, amid the lush green leaves. As the dirt moved under her feet, Mary's grip remained sure.

At last the trees ended and the pair stepped out onto the open crest of a hill. Above the blue sky was dotted with wispy clouds, as though someone had pulled apart raw cotton across the expanse. Birds swept by on spread wings, catching the air currents as Anne turned her face into the same breeze. The touch of the sun and breeze made her feel just as open as the space, and she smiled, closing her eyes.

Beside her, Mary waited, watching the young woman revel in the spacious and varied beauty. She watched as Anne opened her eyes, and looked down the hillside to the handful of farmsteads in the middle of cultivated fields. The way Anne had looked, staring out over the bow of her ship, Mary sensed there was not a lot of adventure in her young lover's past, but a dreamer's heart within her chest. She hoped to feed that, to keep Anne at her side with the promises of the life she could give her.

Opening her eyes, Anne looked around at the rest of the scenery. There were farms far below them, and fields of crops. Nevertheless, despite the evidence, Anne felt as if she and Mary Flint were the only two beings alive. She felt humbled, awed, hungry to explore and yet safe and content. She moved her hand in Mary's grip, and turned to face the older woman.

"Tis the most beautiful thing I have ever seen."

Mary lifted her hand to Anne's cheek. "There is nothing more beautiful than you," she said. "But I had hoped this would be your reaction."

"You have seen so many things," Anne said. "I can't possibly compare."

"I have seen a lot, tis true. But it would be the dangerous side of life, the Devil's hand that I have seen too often." Mary led Anne over to a tree where she pulled out her sword and cut down a pair of fist-sized reddish fruits. She handed one to Anne. "A sweet gift." Anne studied the fruit curiously. The flesh reminded her of plums back home, yet they were so much larger.

"You said you were hungry," Mary encouraged.

Biting into the fruit, Anne experienced an explosion of taste, sweet juices rushed onto her tongue. She felt a bit of it splash her chin. Her teeth brushed against seeds. She pulled back to look at the interior finding a yellowish pulp inside with the seeds. "It is sweet," Anne remarked.

She watched Mary take a bite of her own, and the smile as she chewed briefly. The captain then lifted her chin. Anne saw the sparkle in her eyes, and the juices on her chin, and bent her own head, letting Mary capture her mouth. The kiss was different as they passed the fruit and seeds between their tongues. Dropping her sword belt to the ground, Mary wrapped her arms around Anne's back, drawing the woman down to the soft grass with her.

While their mouths remained joined, Anne felt Mary's left hand cupping behind her head, fingers loose in her hair, and the woman's other hand seemed to follow an ache which began calling for the captain's sure touch. When Mary began to end the kiss, Anne let the half-eaten fruit fall and brought her own hands up to hold Mary's head still close. "Do not stop."

The captain kissed her and then leaned back, resting her right hand just below the curve of Anne's left breast against her ribs. "You have lost your fruit," Mary observed. "I shall fetch you more."

"I need nothing more than I have," Anne replied, rolling to the side. Mary let her initiate the following kiss, and even part the buttons of Mary's vest.

"Yet you are still hungry," Mary quipped with a smile that showed all her teeth.

Anne blushed, dropped her hand from Mary's buttons and dropped her eyes.

"Oh, my sweet Anne," Mary whispered, lifting her chin with a gentle finger. "I want everything about you to feel free. If you want our passion, initiate it. I will never tell you no."

"I do not know what to do to please you," Anne admitted. "Am I not your captive?"

After a pause to order her thoughts, Mary answered sincerely, "What was before, was a mistake. I would change who I am, to be more worthy of you, but I cannot. I cannot undo what has been done."

Anne closed her eyes, taking in the words, and then opened her eyes to memorize the expression suffusing Mary's features, the openness, the wanting, which she had glimpsed in their earlier coupling.

"Do I say too much?" Mary asked.

"No." Anne shook her head. "I do not know what to reply." She met Mary's eyes and brushed the bone in her cheek with her thumb. "You wish to be different. I do not wish that."

Mary lifted her hand to cup around the back of Anne's on her cheek, looking up into sincerity shining in a blue matching the sky above them. "With but this hand I could make you speak any words I want to hear. But I want what is in your heart, Anne."

Anne searched Mary's face, and the earnestness in the woman's gaze made the captain bite her lip to remain still and quiet. Anne dipped her chin then, bringing their mouths into contact. Anne's tongue parted Mary's lips, soothing the bitten one before consuming both in a desperate kiss. Mary groaned as the passion of her young lover was communicated clearly. The younger woman's long fingers smoothed through her hair, caressing as she hoped to be caressed elsewhere soon. To let Anne find her own way to share their pleasure meant that Mary had to give up her lead.

Anne found her way from Mary's mouth to her ear, laving hot breath against the skin. "This is my heart," Anne murmured. In response, Mary groaned her surrender.

"You shall not touch the captain! Stay away!"

Anne's body was jerked away from Mary's. The pirate captain reacted to the threat instinctively, leaping to her feet. Sword already swept up from the ground in the same motion that had her standing, she identified Kotay with his fist wrapped around Anne's upper left arm. The strength of his grip was evident in the pain contorting Anne's features. "Release her!" Mary demanded. "Kotay, have you gone mad?"

"She had you by the throat!"

Mary and Anne both watched the short blade Kotay brought up to rest against the skin of Anne's throat. Anxiously, the blonde pleaded, "Twas a kiss!"

Kotay wrestled Anne around and growled in her face, "A kiss of death! My captain is not turned by the wiles of women like you!"

With Kotay's attention fully on Anne, Mary took the opening, finding it easy to ram the hilt of her sword into the base of his skull, making him black out. His grip slackened on Anne. Mary caught the young woman mid-fall, and pulled her away from the falling body.

Anne shook with fear and buried her head into Mary's shoulder crying. Stroking Anne's hair, Mary soothed her and wondered what the hell to do with the unconscious man.

She had trusted him. Since Anne's arrival, he had grown suspicious and uncontrollable. He had said he would serve her, but this attack could not go unpunished.

The sounds of bodies rushing through the foliage turned Mary from her thoughts. She lifted her sword at the oncoming threat, and pushed Anne behind her back.

Nelson burst into view with two other men in his wake. Jerking backward at the sight of her sword, he fell over an exposed root. From the ground he identified her. "Captain!"

Mary gestured with her sword's tip. "Get him out of here, and put him in irons."

Staring at the unconscious man, Nelson asked, "What did he do, Captain?"

"He threatened Anne," Mary replied. "He'll be lucky if I decide against gutting him." She emphasized her point with another sword swipe in the air. "Now, get him out of my sight!"

While Nelson and the men began to drag him away, Kotay groggily awakened. Pulling himself from their grasp, he threw himself on the ground at Mary's feet.

"Something to say?" she demanded.

Kotay started to his feet only to go ashen at her raising her sword, and returned to his knees. Submissively, he said, "My life is forfeit."

"You can continue no longer in my crew." Without care, Mary opened up the sleeve of his shirt, from wrist to shoulder, scoring the skin of his sword arm -- that which he had pledged to her service six years earlier. A thin line of blood began to drip on the cotton of his tunic.

She did not want to do this. However the laws of the sea and men demanded it. Ignoring Anne's gasp, and the feel of the woman pulling away from her back, Mary lifted her sword out over Kotay's outstretched hand and swung downward, cutting deeply into the wrist. Without a surface to offer resistance, the slice went deep, but did not sever the hand which had moments earlier held Anne's throat.

Kotay's scream rent the stillness which had descended with the rise and fall of her blade. She now fully lowered that blade and turned her back on him. A glance over her shoulder saw Kotay grasping the damaged limb and running from her sight. His frantic motion through the trees startled scores of birds, and she followed the evidence with a hollow feeling growing ever larger in her chest.

When she turned to him, Nelson remained still. He met her gaze with his own shadowing her pain. Mary lashed out, "What say you?" she demanded of her conscience.

He dropped his gaze. "May I clean your sword, Captain?"

Furious, Mary tossed the blade at his feet and pulled Anne away with her down the hillside.

Chapter 15

Anne's heart rushed too quickly; she grew short of breath. Pulling up, she tried to stop running. Her hand slid from Mary's grasp only to have Mary turn and seize her wrist roughly. Pain exploded in the muscles and tendons making Anne cry out.

"What are you doing?" Mary demanded.

"I must needs stop."

"You leave me as well, my Anne?" Mary released Anne's wrist with a hard thrust. "You see what I must be, and it disgusts you that I am a killer."

"You didn't kill him. You could have, I know, but you did not."

Mary's head dropped. "I should have killed him."

"For touching me?" Anne was horrified.

"Everyone will know what he has done. He will never find another captain to serve." Mary covered her face with her hands. Anne felt she was finally pulling herself together.

"I would kill any man who meant to take you from me," Mary vowed. "Kotay was crazed. He sees you as a threat though I know not why." She shook herself and to Anne's surprise reiterated, "I should have killed him or tossed him in shackles. He is branded traitor now," Mary explained. "The first man who sees him will kill him, as I could not."

"The marks? The wound you gave him?" Anne asked.

Mary nodded grimly. "Tis the Brotherhood's mark for a traitor. He lives, and yet, will be left without allies. A man of the sea dies without comrades."

"Then why did you do it?"

"The other men," Mary said. Anne recalled the men who had come with Nelson to the hilltop. "My command cannot stand if they question its totality."

"Why do you live like this?" Anne asked, anguished by the way Mary was torn emotionally by her actions.

"I have sworn to end English dominion over our people. I will not rest until that is done."

Anne winced as Mary's voice had grown vicious. Tentatively she asked, "Why? The English king gave us our lands. His troops protect us."

"Protection?! They kill and rape those who would disagree with the King's laws. As for the land, we are serfs to the English economy!"

"I do not understand."

Mary cupped her chin sadly. "I suppose you do not. I would like to keep you innocent longer, my Anne, but likely your father is a collaborator, and that is how he keeps his lands and his chattel, and his prominence."

"My father wouldn't do something unjust."

Mary's eyes grew sadder. "Many men turn from good to evil when confronted with the death of that which they hold dear."

Inhaling, Anne asked, "I wish to understand your pain. Will you tell me how you came to be?"

Mary's gaze went distant, obviously remembering a painful time. Anne watched her stagger, dash at wet eyes with her hands, and fall to the ground. Rushing up, Anne fell to her knees beside the older woman, and though the smaller woman presented her back, Anne wrapped her arms around the shaking muscles. She was not sure to what she gave solace, only that she felt compelled to do so.

The story began softly, Anne straining to hear the words.

"I was married," Mary said. "My father arranged it. My family held a small farm, but Lionel was a merchant, and he fancied me. I thought him handsome the few times we met. I was given to him on my eighteenth birthday."

"Did he love you?"

"We did love," Mary said. "My family prospered from the alliance. I learned to cipher and kept the household accounts as Lionel went to sea with our goods month after month. He took me with him only rarely."

"Is that when you fell in love with the sea?"

Mary nodded. "I also began to see the money we traded was considerably less than an Englishman. Our goods, they said, were inferior. They stopped us from processing them. The town miller's work fell off, then the scrivener, and the raw flax and cotton were sent to England to be spun and weaved, and sewn. Only the clothes returned to the mercantile to be sold. Then came the taxes. So many taxes.

"All the finished goods we did make were taxed so that they were more expensive than the goods brought from England. Lionel and I continued a good living, but for everyone around us, it became a hardship. Even for my father."

Mary's eyes narrowed. "They challenged the edicts and did not pay the taxes. At first only goods were seized by the king's soldiers. Then rebels set fire to the warehouses of English goods, and the king ordered the land taken from those guilty as compensation.

"Thirteen farms were sold that summer to collaborators to make up the loss to the Crown. My father's was the last. A son-in-law had been caught with a torch."

"What did your parents do?"

"My father tried to stand in their way. The soldiers took his denials as defiance. They humiliated him, took my mother sexually repeatedly, and intended to take two of my youngest siblings, mere

babes. Father protested; one child, sweet Virginia, was killed. Mother wept. They were asked again would they leave the land. Father refused; when the soldiers would have struck down the babe, Barnard, Mother put herself in front of the blade."

Anne was horrified of the images violently playing in her mind. How had she never heard of this family tragedy? Surely something would have traveled to the other farmsteads? "What happened? How could no one else hear of this?"

"My father was taken to England to stand trial. Lionel was at sea. When he returned, I asked him to find Father, to free him somehow. T was all I had left.

"Lionel went. I ne'er saw him nor my father e'er again." Mary wiped her eyes. "I took to the sea to find them myself, and swore that, could I help it, no Englishman would grow wealthy on the back of another New Englander again."

"Oh," Anne gasped.

"When I stumbled upon you, I was pursuing 'The Queen's Gift'. My men had heard tell of a rare gem a collaborator intended to bequeath to the Queen for favor."

"I know of no gem," Anne said. "My father was sending me to the queen's court."

"Your father was sending you to the queen's court?"

"I can sing, and play many instruments. He had written her that I was gifted and hoped the queen would see to my education."

Mary's expression became inscrutable. Anne studied it, trying to discern the feelings the captain was experiencing. She was startled when Mary burst out in indignation, "Gifted? Education?"

"What is wrong?"

"You," Mary burst out. "You are the queen's gift!"

Anne blinked in surprise. "I do not understand."

"Anne, there are many in the colonies who could have aided you in improving your gifts. My brother Michael for one, was a music tutor. However, you were sent to England NOT for your benefit, but rather your father's. You were his gift to the queen, for favor."

"I do not believe you."

"As I said, many men will turn to the devil if the angel's path be blocked. Were his businesses failing?"

"I know not."

Mary inhaled. "I must know your family name, Anne."

"Will you kill me?"

"I must know what I am dealing with."

"And if I do not give it?"

"We could be hunted down in our sleep."

Anne's shoulders slumped. She pulled at the grass surrounding her, breaking off the stalks. She did not want to believe Mary's suspicions, that she had been bartered to earn her father favor. On the heels of that, she thought, would something happen to her family if she never made it to England? "What will happen to my family?"

"One thing at a time. Your name, Anne."

"Tis Coleridge," she finally admitted. "My father is..."

"Brian Standish Coleridge," Mary finished for her, her tone spitting.

Chapter 16

Anne staggered from shock. "You know my father?"

Mary easily heard fright in the young voice. Her answer, she knew – for she intended to give the truth, would not assuage that fear. "We have crossed paths many times." She paced. "He will never believe that I did not seize you a purpose."

She also knew something further, more certainly than she knew her own name. "He will come after you."

"He knows not that you have me." Anne's thoughts were expressed with eagerness. Did Mary dare hope that the young woman's heart was as eager to remain with her?

Shaking off her delusions of love and lust, Mary turned tactically to the matter at hand. She shook her head. Again, the truth. "I hit one of his shipments just before encountering your vessel," she admitted. "I sent a shipment from England to the bottom of Boston Harbor not even a sennight before."

"But how could he know 'twas you?"

Mary would not let the naivete stand. "I always mark my strikes, and leave a man alive to report."

"But why?" Anne was clearly upset. Mary felt for the younger woman, but better she understand now, than later, the details of this life Mary had chosen to live.

"It demoralizes," she explained bluntly. "He finds it harder to hire crews for each successive ship." Anne's expression crumbled to despair. Mary hardened her heart against it. "It is my mission. I do what I must."

Mary realized she had better assure herself and her crew of Coleridge's whereabouts. "Come," she said abruptly, holding out her hand.

"Where?"

"Back to the camp."

Anne did not readily take Mary's outstretched hand, a telling point that she remained confused in her loyalties and gathering fear of the future. Then the young woman's words seemed to tell Mary exactly where her loyalties lay. "When you find my father, or he finds you, will you kill him?"

Again Mary knew her words would not reassure Anne. Yet she had only truth. "That is your father's choice."

When Anne looked up, Mary did offer an understanding of the dilemma her young lover faced. "I do know the pain of kinship, Anne. Tis not the easy road."

At last Anne slid her hand into Mary's. Under a cloud of suffocating silence, the two women made the long trek eastward in the gathering darkness toward the Rogue crew's encampment. With every step, Mary felt the warm hand in hers grow stiff with pain and indecision, and ultimately, she believed, withdrawal.

Mary summoned Nelson to her as soon as she spied the small husky figure talking to the perimeter guard.

Hurrying to her, he asked quickly, "What is it, Captain?"

"You are my second now," she said unnecessarily. They both knew with Kotay's dismissal that Nelson would fill the role. However, the crewmember within earshot would hear and know, and in that way, the proper communication would be passed among the rest of the Rogue crew.

"Aye, captain." He saluted. Another tradition she acknowledged with a dip of her head.

"I have a mission for you," she went on with her real business. He nodded. Keeping Anne at her side, Mary continued to walk to her tent, and explained. "Find two men trusted to keep their heads to join you."

"Where do we go?" he asked.

"Into town. I need ears to tell me of Coleridge's current movements."

Nelson frowned. "Is it wise to hit him again so soon after the last shipment?"

Letting Anne precede her into the tent, Mary kept herself outside, her fist tightening on the canvas flast as she held it open. "I have reason to believe he may be hunting for us," she explained in a low voice.

Nelson's brow furrowed, and he looked about to once again protest. She cast her eyes at the tent. The inference was enough. Nelson stepped back and offered her another sharp salute before turning to find the men who would accompany him.

Mary lingered, watching him. She noted with approval his choosing of Ekafor and Daniel. Both strongly resembled the natives of these islands. Knowing he would report back anything he found promptly, she turned, ducked her head and entered the tent.

While she and Anne had been enjoying their idyll -- likely their first and last in light of developments, Nelson had obviously been busy. A thick bedroll had been spread on the ground. The small chest of her important papers had been set in a corner. Another chest of her garments, had been set on the ground in the opposite corner. Against it stood her sword, cleansed since her judgement against Kotay.

Next Mary's gaze fell to Anne. Her blonde hair in disarray about her downturned face, the young woman looked about with a lost expression then sat slowly on the large pile of bedding. No doubt

aware of their relations aboard ship, Nelson had only provided the one.

Mary knew she should order another one brought in order not to force her presence on Anne any more closely than absolutely necessary. However, doing so would alert the crew to the changed status of their prisoner, letting them think the blonde no longer under the captain's protection.

Nothing could be further from the truth, and no single action would endanger Anne more. Mary would not do it. She could suffer the scorn she knew would come from Anne -- even if she was silent and pained now, Mary knew the condemnation would come. She would continue protecting the young woman who had come to mean a great deal to her.

Mary sat at the opposite end of the bedding. "I do not blame you for your father's positions. Each person makes his or her own decisions."

Anne's shoulders were hunched. She twisted her fingers in her lap.

Mary gamely offered, "Would you like something to eat?"

Shaking her head without looking up, Anne lay down, curled tightly into herself and answered quietly, "I am not hungry." Her voice was small and lonely.

Mary could not bear it. "Do you despise me?" she asked.

Blue eyes washed crystalline with unshed tears met her gaze. "I am sick of heart," Anne admitted. "I know not what to believe, nor what to feel."

Mary nodded. What Anne said was as honest as she herself had been. In truth, she hoped Nelson found no word of Coleridge in town, and that what she dreaded in her bones would not come to pass. Perhaps, she thought, Anne needed to hear that. "I hope your father is not here," she said quietly.

Rolling over, Anne's expression was one of open surprise. "Why?" she asked cautiously.

Rather than answer, Mary displayed her own fear with her own question. "Whom would you choose, Anne?" She lay down gingerly next to the young woman, yet careful to keep their bodies from contact.

Their gazes locked. Anne's tears told of the struggle within before she spoke, her voice wavering. "I do not know."

Mary watched her once again lower her head to the blankets, eyes averted. Laying back herself, Mary reached out once briefly to stroke the long golden hair.

With an unrestrained cry, Anne turned over, wrapped her arms around Mary's neck and sobbed into Mary's shoulder. Mary gingerly returned the hold, laying awake until the tears subsided, and an exhausted Anne gave in to sleep. The young woman's even, warm breathing against the skin of her throat lured Mary finally to her own troubled slumber.

Chapter 17

Anne came awake with a startled gasp, escaping the horrors and confusion of her dreams. Over and over again she saw herself rushing forward as her father and Mary dueled. Her screams drew attention and one would be distracted and killed by the other. The scene would restart as she cradled the dead, and she would try again to stop the madness. Only this time, the other would fall. Anne knew not whom to mourn or whom to rejoice. She only knew that she must stop it from happening.

Under her ear, Mary's heart beat steady and sure. Anne lifted her head, laid her palm over the warm spot and searched the relaxed face. Her eyes caressed the defined cheekbones and the delicate arch of nose, thinking again of Mary's life. What it must have been before injustice took it all away.

It was against her father though that Mary and her men had set themselves. Was he as Mary said, taking profit off the backs of his own neighbors in complying with the orders of these taxes? Anne understood nothing of business. Mary said she did.

The pain as Mary spoke of the past, was it real? Had she truly lost so much? Father, brother, husband? Certainly any other woman would have broken the bonds of sanity.

Anne had her answer in that thought. What sanity was it for a woman to become the leader of a pirate crew? To keep at it despite the horrors wreaked upon the soul?

Somehow Anne knew she possessed a tether to that soul; Mary had risked her captaincy to love her, even to let her live when she was first found aboard the English vessel. Even in the way Mary spoke to Anne, she had been everything honest about her feelings, and what she felt she must do.

Anne chewed her lip indecisively. But what could she do? A glance down into soft sleeping features decided her. She would not see that face bathed in blood. Her nightmare would not come true.

Rising in silence, Anne gave the close cheek a caress with her lips. She froze at a noise outside the tent. There again; the rustle of leaves drew closer.

Anne held herself at the side of the opening. The flap started up, a head leaned in. She tensed then the moonlight illuminated Nelson peering at her. She rushed forward and cupped her hand over his mouth before he would speak. "She sleeps," Anne whispered.

"I have news she ordered," he whispered back as she removed her hand.

"My father?" Anne asked, still keeping her voice low.

"Aye."

Anne thought no further. "Take me to him. I must stop this."

"But, maid..." He looked past her to Mary. "The captain..."

"Tis naught but the middle of the night. We will be back by dawn. I will not sacrifice her nor my father," Anne said with urgent determination. "I will convince him to go away."

"He will not let you go. You are his daughter."

"I am... no longer a maid," Anne said. "He will... see me as soiled. I am of no use to him now."

"And his love for you? Flesh of his flesh?"

Anne shook her head. She knew naught of her father's true feelings anymore. If they were love at all. Looking to Mary however, she knew what she felt for the pirate captain, and what Mary felt for her, that was love. "Nelson," she said firmly, turning back to face him. "You will take me to my father. Now."

He finally dipped his head and took a step back. "All right y' come with me." He ordered two men to join them with a wave of his

hand. "Take your weapons," he told them, as he added a second knife to his own belt.

Anne protested. "My father will not harm us."

"I will die a fighting man before I return to this camp without ye. Mary will ne'er forgive me."

That he used the captain's given name cowed Anne to silence. In the midst of the triad of men, she walked from the camp.

The moonlight was enough to navigate by, and they continued in silence for several minutes. Nelson led them not up the ridge but around it, keeping them all hidden among the trees. Anne's ears tuned to the sounds of the night as the darkness closed off much of her vision.

Leaves crackled and a branch snapped underfoot. She reached out for Nelson ahead of her.

They were rushed and body slammed into the trees. Grunts and the clang of steel soon filled the air. Anne rushed forward into a clearing. The moonlight showed their attackers and Nelson and the other pirates engaged in battle. She started to scream, sure they were still close enough to rally help from the Rogue's camp.

Her first cry rent the air. All before her froze. A heavy fist slammed into her upper back and Anne fell to her knees in the dirt and leaves.

Voices surrounded her. A boot kicked her ribs. "Tis a woman!" the boot shouted.

"Mayhap we have Bloody Mary herself, eh?"

"Let's take 'em all t' the cap'n and see what he says t' do with 'em." A second kick connected with Anne's head and blackness enveloped her senses.

Chapter 18

Mary awoke slowly, hoping to awaken her blonde bed-mate in a leisurely loving. But with no welcome weight against her, she rolled over to search the tent. Anne was not within.

Through the slight gap between the entry flaps, Mary could see the sun had risen. Knowing her young lover's appreciation for the sky and sea, she imagined Anne had stepped out to relieve herself and now sat on the rise overlooking the beach.

As suitable a place as any to join her with breakfast, Mary thought. Rising quickly, she replaced her tunic with a clean one from the chest, and straightened her breeches and set her feet back in her boots. Brushing her hands through her hair she wished vainly for a mirror. Knowing one would not materialize, she simply finger-combed the shoulder-length locks and fashioned a ponytail with a tied bit of black ribbon.

Securing her weapons to her belt, Mary stepped out into the sunshine and smiled to the men walking past. They returned her pleasure and she began to search the camp for Anne's striking appearance.

When she had no luck, Mary pulled aside the next man to pass. "Have you seen Lady Anne?" she asked.

He nodded quickly. "Mr. Nelson escorted her."

At least she's not alone. Mary applauded her new second's initiative in looking out for her young lover's welfare.

The young sailor had not finished. He turned, not toward the sea, but to the west and pointed. "Was middle of the night when they departed," he said.

"Where did they go?" To this question her crewman could only shrug. "Are you certain twas so long ago?"

"Luta was on guard duty. His shift is one to two bells."

"Where's Luta?" she demanded. He pointed to a cluster of men sitting by a cooking fire. She recognized the African male Luta biting into a biscuit stuffed with mashed berries. Crossing the short distance quickly, she questioned him. "Luta, where did you see Nelson go with the girl?"

His big brown eyes looked up at her. "He did not say, cap'n."

"Did they return during your watch?"

"No, cap'n. I was relieved by Richard." He pointed over his shoulder to another tent.

Mary stalked over, entered and dragged Richard from his bedding with a surprisingly hard pull that moved him several feet. "Did Nelson return during your watch?"

The big lumberjack-build man blinked up at her dazedly, eyes squinting as he tried to focus on her words.

"Nelson and the girl," she reiterated. "Did they return?" After an anxious minute which saw Mary's pulse climb quickly, Richard finally shook his head. "Who held watch after you?" she demanded.

"Martine," he said. "He's still there."

She turned on her heel and left the half-dressed man shaking his head. With quick strides she made a beeline for the guard location. Martine leaned against a tree, looking this way and that with a scanning motion of his eyes. He sprang to attention with his hand on his weapon when he heard her approach.

"Quiet?" she asked.

"Aye, cap'n."

"Has Mr. Nelson returned to camp?" she asked.

"Not while I've been here," he said.

That meant eight hours had passed. Hands on her hips, Mary paced, deciding the next best course of action to take. Have to go after them."You keep look out,"" she told Martine finally. "I'm taking a party to find Nelson and Anne."

"Aye, cap'n."

Mary selected Ekafor and Daniel, who had accompanied Nelson into the town during the night. Additionally she ordered four others to arm themselves and join her.

As the posse set out westward, Mary demanded a report from Ekafor of the situation they had found overnight.

"Coleridge is traveling under an English standard, captain," Ekafor reported. "He is not the captain, but he has paid for the voyage. They say he hunts for something lost to him."

Mary nodded. "Our young captive is his daughter. I knew he would come for her."

"But captain, he has declared a reward of 900 pounds to any man with information. 9,000 pounds to anyone who brings in the perpetrator."

"Is my name attached to it?"

"I saw no name. A poster bears your likeness however."

"He knows my name will strike fear in his would-be hunters." Mary cursed fluidly. How to get close to him? she asked herself. As the march continued through the island forests, Mary fervently prayed Anne and Nelson were on a lark shopping for the soap ingredients the young woman had requested.

When they happened upon a clearing, some 3 miles from the camp, and saw the signs of struggle, Mary knew her hopes were for naught. Resolutely, she drew her sword. "On your guard men, we go to battle."

Chapter 19

The light filtering in from the barred opening high overhead told Anne dawn had long since arrived in the hours they had been trussed up and tossed in here. She had spent some of that time fitfully dozing and trying to ignore the ache throbbing through her skull since being hit. The rest of the time she had sized up their prison. The rough-hewn stone surrounded them on all four sides, even masking a door set in one wall. The whole was probably no more than ten feet on each side and perhaps twice that in the height to the ceiling or roof with its barred hole.

After hours in the small space, with the five men in various positions crowded around her, Anne began to miss the wide open feel of sitting on the Rogue's deck, the sea below and the sky above, an endless vista of possibilities. Here felt literally like a dead end.

Very dead.

Anne shivered and mentally steered away from such negative thoughts. Despite her arms and hands tied behind her, she leaned against the wall and breathed slowly, each breath in pulling with it a vision of happiness.

She could almost imagine Mary magically forming before her, her recall of the older woman terribly vivid. The wide legged stance Mary took standing on the deck of her ship. The way she rolled her hands into fists against her hips, a thumb stroking the hilt of her knife in her belt as she surveyed her crew's activities.

Anne sighed as her vision turned her gaze to her. Mary's eyes crinkled at the corners, a smile that only partly touched her lips lest her men see her softer emotions. However, the light in the deepening blue so possessed Anne, she sighed.

"Lady Anne?"

Shaking the daze, Anne broke free of her reverie and looked to her left where Nelson sat an arm's length away. "Yes?"

"Be ye all right?"

"As well to be expected in this hidey hole," she replied. She looked over at their companions, two others of the Rogue's crew. Sanchez clearly slept, his chin tilted back, head resting against the stone as his arms lay slack against his bent knees. Anne worried about the younger, a black-skinned slave who had been freed he had said, by "La Capitaine" when he was being moved, sold from one plantation in the islands to another. Injured during the initial scuffle with their captors, he now had a large gash on his head. She had yet to see him stir as most of them had to get more comfortable over the hours. His chest however continued to move, a sure sign that he remained alive. "What of you?" she asked Nelson.

The older man sported a bruise over his right eye and a knife wound in his right hand had crusted over. "I am fine," he said, though the shrug was accompanied by a wince.

Since she had dozed, Anne wondered if she had missed anything important. "Do we yet know where we are, why we are held, or who holds us?"

Nelson smiled at her, his unclean teeth showing. "The cap'n would be proud of yer lack of hysterics," he complimented. "I already requested that information when we had a short visit from our guard at dawn."

"Any answers?"

"Where we are is a room formed from the tunnels under the town streets for when they have the gales each season. The walls are six-foot thick stone. The guard gloated in alerting us that no one would hear us yell."

"They mean to torture us then?" Anne shivered then inhaled and nodded tightly. "And the others?"

"We are held as suspected crew of the outlaw Bloody Mary."

"Suspected?"

He smiled. "We never wear outward sign of our allegiance. And our faces and names are unknown except to those we kill. Only her name is recognized."

Anne nodded. Mary had said she gave one man a chance to know who had doomed the ship.

"Who," Nelson went on in a lower voice, "is exactly who we figured. However we have been lucky that Coleridge has not yet come to see his prisoners in person."

"I could talk to him," Anne said. "We must demand to see him."

"Nay. When he sees you, we will all hang as kidnapers, whether we be pirates or not. I'd rather not die so soon."

"Is there any chance?"

"Only if Captain Flint finds us before Coleridge comes to visit," he replied honestly.

Anne swallowed down her doubt and nodded firmly. "Then that is what I shall pray to Providence for."

"Aye, lady."

"Do you not believe in your captain?"

"I believe her capable of taking any man in single combat," he answered. "But this is an unknown place, and we have unknown time that only grows shorter. She is not superhuman to see through thick walls of stone and ferret us out."

"I know," Anne breathed and dropped her head, closing her eyes briefly and devoting her mind to singular prayer. Please God, grant my love swift wings and a falcon's sight, and a measure of my love to give her strength.

Shadows moved across the floor as she opened her eyes, blocking and unblocking the light from above. Nelson had said the room was beneath the street. Could they draw attention somehow?

She jerked her head up and back, screaming a terrifying howl from her throat. Gasping for air after a minute, she searched the shadow play for some sign of reaction. The shadows on the floor had stopped moving.

They could be heard. Either their jailer did not know, or he had lied to keep them quiet.

She yelled out again. Nelson's bewildered expression met her triumphant one. "People can hear us," she emphasized.

"Let us pray it be the right sort of people," he muttered. Kicking at the feet of the other men, he spoke quickly. "Yell yer damn fool heads off, men!" he encouraged.

The cacophony was akin to a pack of wolves baying at the moon. Anne's voice soared above them all though, high and sweet, filled with hope and borne aloft by love.

Chapter 20

Mary knew the appearance of Rogue crewmembers in town on the streets with their weapons drawn was provocative. It would send word instantly to elements opposed to her. In fact she was counting on it. By now, whoever had Anne, Nelson and the others knew their identities. Mary's only hope of finding them, in an unfamiliar town, with unfamiliar hiding places, was to cause a showdown and have them brought out in the bargaining.

There were more than English soldiers and loyalists like Coleridge here though, she realized. Walking through the town streets, she saw crews of other pirates of her acquaintance. Any one of them also could have Anne, and they would not surrender her in any bargain.

That threw her heart into her throat, thinking of Anne at the mercy of a pirate. Small irony that, she thought, swallowing the mixture of laughter and anguish.

In any case, no one had yet come forward to challenge her posse. They were approaching a street market and Mary was loathe to draw innocents into the fight. She ordered her men to sheath their swords. "But keep your eyes open," she added. "Our comrades and friends are here somewhere and we will find them."

"Aye, cap'n," Ekafor responded on behalf of them all.

Street markets are anything but quiet affairs. Livestock squawked, bleated and mooed while merchants hawked their specialties to passersby. There was a constant undercurrent of haggling, buyers and sellers coming to agreed prices for the goods.

Still Mary heard the slight clank of metal under her boot as the cobblestone surface briefly gave way to a metal grate. She looked down in alarm thinking she had encountered some sort of trap.

"Tis how the keep the rains from flooding the streets," Ekafor explained.

Mary prodded the grate with the toe of her boot and scanning the ground, noticed others like it in the street. "What is below?"

"Stone to guide the water flow out to sea."

She was still marveling when she heard the yelling. It echoed, giving her no sense of its origin but then she realized that only large open spaces could cause such an effect. Like the hold of a ship. Or a cavernous stone room!

"Is there a way down?" she asked Ekafor. All of them had halted at the sound, which continued in bursts. "Can we get beneath the street?"

They were looking around when Mary spotted uniformed men running for a particular building. Their weapons were out, and they seemed particularly intent. She deduced their destination had to have something to do with the screams, and she ordered her men to follow. "This way!"

The melee began above ground. Mary and her men were surprised just inside the doorway by slashing blades. Mary brought her weapon up to deflect one aimed for her head. The clang of metal and the grunts of men pressed in close combat was loud and echoed between all the fighters. It took her several seconds, parrying with more instinct than actual sight, for her eyes to adjust to the dim lighting.

She finally could size up her opponent. He stood taller by another foot and his reach was longer. It took considerable dodging, but finally she rushed inside his reach and drove her blade into his chest, which was only covered in the King's colors. A doorway behind him was revealed as his dead weight sank to the floor, gurgling breath and blood added to the noises of the room.

Mary grabbed for the door, a sliver of light shined along its edge. "Heave to!" she yelled. Her men's attention turned to her. Her voice, feminine in its tone, caused a brief surprise in their enemy.

Cries of "Bloody Mary!" accompanied her and her men as they effected an escape through the doorway. Stairs stretched out below them, going down into darkness. The landing was lit by a wicklow light on the wall. Mary grabbed it. "Bar the door!" she ordered.

Noises of attempts to get through on the other side reached them, but quickly hammering a block of wood with the hilt of his sword, Daniel jammed the hinges. The soldiers on the other side would break through eventually.

Mary however hoped they found another way out of the passages before that happened. "Down!" she ordered, leading the way with the wicklow light in her left fist and sword in her right.

The steps went down a league it seemed, not turning at any point. The walls grew damp. She slipped twice, caught by Ekafor under the arms. She had to put away her sword in order to steady herself against the wall.

No shouts or screams could be heard anymore, and Mary feared that Anne and the others had been silenced. At the bottom of the stairs, a sluiceway opened up. The long open curved floor ran perpendicular to the stairs seeming endless in both directions. Which way?

Studying the dark passages, Mary searched for some sign that would trip an instinct within herself. Anne, where are you? her heart cried out.

A faint light in the passageway to the left appeared. Dear God, could it be? She queried her instinct, and decided that had to be it. Whether they would meet Anne and Nelson effecting an escape, or British soldiers carrying out orders to silence the prisoners, the motion had to mean people. "All right," she said in a hushed whisper. "We're going left. But take it slow. I want none of our people harmed."

The men nodded and stepping down into the sluiceway, they proceeded to step carefully, disturbing the quiet as little as possible. The light grew more obvious. Mary pressed against the wall though the shadows were deep here. She realized the opening was indeed a door. And finally, she heard voices.

"Cease that caterwauling, ye scurvies! Damn ye, shut up!"

There were the sudden sounds of things, bodies likely, being thrown against walls. It had to be hard impact to make sound against the stone. It was the abrupt end of a feminine scream that spurred Mary forward into the breach.

"Damn you, unhand her!" Leading with her sword, Mary burst around the doorway and launched herself at the first red coat she saw. Her men followed suit.

Anne was indeed in the hands of someone at that moment. As Mary's momentum took her opponent down, and her with him, the two women's eyes met across the short distance. Anne struggled against the burly man who had hauled her against his chest, wrapping both arms around her, and clamped his hand over her mouth. The ice blue eyes were frightened, but the struggles continued until she had shaken the man's hand free and bitten the skin inside his thumb.

With a howl that matched time with Mary's punch to the face of the man she had landed atop, Anne's captor threw her aside. The blonde landed against the floor with a thud, but was quickly on her hands and knees. Mary head-butted the man she fought in the face and leapt up once again. She brought her boot to bear on his private parts, doubling him over on pain, and assuring he would remain on the ground for several more seconds.

She rushed toward Anne.

A gunshot cracked the air.

Silence reigned in its aftermath as everyone turned to the sound to investigate its source and its result.

Mary gasped. Ekafor lay face down, atop a British soldier, as blood poured from beneath him onto the stone floor.

Wisps of smoke trailed from the barrel of a pistol, the bearer now leveling it toward her.

Another shot rang out. The man holding the gun on her dropped to his knees with a pained scream as his chest bled red over a dark blue gentleman's overcoat. Mary looked behind her to see which of her men had fired the shot. None had a weapon in their hands. She looked back at the falling man just as Anne screamed behind her, "Father!" as his eyes rolled back in his head and he fell over in the doorway.

Mary looked more closely as Anne rushed past her. Everyone seemed frozen as it was indeed Brian Coleridge whose lifeblood began to stain the mortar and stone on the floor.

"Father!" Anne cradled his head in her lap, his eyes gazing up at her face.

"Shoot her," Coleridge ordered his men. "Shoot the pirate." His gasping breaths broke up the words, but there was no mistaking the command.

One of the British raised his weapon. Two gunshots rang out and the soldier fell with a belly wound. "Where the hell is that coming from?" shouted another soldier looking around. Falling prey to her own wound, as the soldier's bullet had lodged in her side, Mary too knew none of her men had fired. She glanced up. A pistol barrel was just withdrawing from between the grates high above.

Who was their miraculous savior? she thought, as not one of the British soldiers now dared raise a weapon as they all realized the source unseen high above could have any of them in their sights.

"Anne?" she called to the distraught young woman rocking her father's body. Cautiously she moved to Anne's side, a glance now and again up to the grating to see if her intentions would be rewarded with a bullet in the back. Nothing happened. Holding her side, Mary checked on Coleridge. A British soldier who started

forward found a bullet fired into his foot. Hobbling, he froze about five feet from the two women and Anne's father. "Is he dead?"

When Anne did not answer, Mary reached forward with her left hand while stroking Anne's back with her right, and checked Coleridge's throat for a pulse. "Tis weak, but he is alive," she reported the news aloud. "You may take him away," she told the British soldiers, as she eased Coleridge from Anne's grasp, and pulled the young woman back against her.

The soldiers looked cautiously upward. Despite not knowing the identity of her aid above, Mary boasted. "My man will not shoot you if you take Coleridge and leave this island tonight."

Aware here she had the upper hand, Mary assured that she kept it. She had her men confiscate all of the British weapons. Her men hefted Ekafor, and trained the confiscated weapons on the British as well. To one of the soldiers, Mary held her own knife at his back.

There was one small problem when they emerged back into the sluiceway. Her gunman ally, whoever he was, was unable to continue his monitoring. Joined by the reinforcements who had broken through the blocked door back above, the British soldiers quickly turned the tables, now holding Mary and the Rogue crew.

Anne was once again held in British hands. She walked close by her father's unconscious form as the procession returned above ground. When Mary slipped on the steps, and a blow rained down on the auburn head from her captor, Anne stole the knife from the belt of the man at her own side. In her bare feet she found easy purchase on the stone steps and wrestled her way to the doorway into the building. "Release her!" Anne demanded.

"Lady, she killed your father. She must pay the price."

"She did not. The shot came from somewhere else."

"She told us in her own words it was her man. She knows the penalty."

The procession marched relentlessly up the steps. Anne raised the knife ineffectually. Mary, watching, knew it would have done little damage had Anne tried to strike out with it. One of the soldiers stepped forward, backed her into a wall, and wrested the weapon from her hands. The soldier nodded to the ones holding Mary, and she was knocked unconscious just as she noticed a shadow filling the doorway.

The shadow behind Anne opened fire, pistols in each hand firing off rapidly. The soldiers tried to all rush the doorway; Anne was batted aside. She crawled to Mary's side, and cradled the lolling head. She could only watch, sitting among the downed Ekafor, her father, and Mary, as the British soldiers and the Rogue sailors battled around her with knives and swords.

The Rogue contingent finally wrested the upper hand, and dealt the final blows to the British hunting party. Nelson came for her at the battle's close as the British lay dying. "Let us go, my lady."

She lifted Mary's head from her lap. "Why must it be like this, Nelson?" she asked.

"The world is a complicated place," he said, not unkindly. "We fight. Sometimes we win. Sometimes we don't."

"How do we know what we fight for is right?"

He bowed his head sadly at her. "What does your heart tell you?" He looked up as someone approached them from behind Anne.

She looked up, following Nelson's gaze, and found herself staring up into Kotay's face. The huge man wore an implacable expression. She swallowed.

"Does the captain live?" Kotay asked Nelson.

"She does."

"Let us be gone," Kotay ordered.

"What of my father?" Anne asked uncertainly. "He could be returned."

"One of his men remains alive outside," Kotay said. "I can have them escort you back, my lady," he snorted.

Anne was hurt by the clear challenge. Beside her, Mary stirred. Startled by the caress on her hand where it rested on Mary's chest, Anne turned with a gasp.

"Choose," Kotay demanded. "We must leave before other soldiers come looking for their fallen."

Breath rasped across Anne's hand. She looked down to see Mary looking up and speaking softly. "Go where your heart requires."

Mary's whisper decided Anne. "I will return with you to the Rogue," she said.

Epilogue

Mary awakened to the feel of the boat's movement. *How did I get here?* She started upward. Had she been taken by Coleridge's loyalists? Was she headed for a British court to face charges?

Hands slipped over her shoulders, strongly pushing her back in the darkness. The touch was so distinctive; no other had ever been so soft. It brought tears of joy to her eyes. "Anne," she breathed in revelation. Wherever they were, they were together.

"Aye, tis me." A lamp was lit to her right and the women gazed upon one another within its encircling light. The face of her young lover seemed to have aged. A sad wisdom looked out from the blue, turning the ice to the color of a storm-tossed sea. "You are safe."

"We are aboard the *Rogue*?" Mary asked.

"Aye."

"Your father?" Mary asked, afraid the answer would explain Anne's melancholy.

Anne exhaled. Mary feared the worst. *Oh to have to choose*, she lamented. Abruptly Anne answered, "He lives."

"He does?"

"Kotay assured that he and the remaining loyalists were retrieved."

"Kotay?"

"He tipped the balance in the fight, defending you," Anne said. She gestured out of the circle of light. The door opened. Mary turned her head to the light let in from the corridor, and recognized her former second in command standing in the doorway. He did not move.

Mary called him forward, "Come, Kotay." He stepped inside, dipping his head. The scars on his arms were visible, ragged ridges of flesh. Mary swallowed. "You have saved my life," she said. "What say you?"

"My life is yours," he repeated the phrase of a time ago.

"Do you swear loyalty to all that is my cause?" She looked significantly at Anne beside her.

"She has acted with bravery in your cause. In that we are in the same cause, I will ne'er do harm to a compatriot."

Anne blinked. Mary smiled. *Twas the height of praise if a man called you compatriot.* "Anne," she said, pressing her hand lightly over the younger woman's where it lay on her chest. "Do you accept his words?"

The young woman stared at Kotay for several breaths. Dipping her chin, she replied, "I... ah, I accept."

Kotay nodded. Mary dismissed him. "Tell Nelson I will see him in an hour's time."

"Aye, captain."

Mary studied Kotay's back as the man left. "Anne," she said when he was gone, "Will you tell me all?" She held out her arms, inviting Anne to join her on the bed by lifting the sheet. "Even the pain in your heart?"

"Nelson said we fight for what we feel in our hearts is right," Anne said, as she slowly drew herself under the sheet. "The only thing my heart could speak, even as I saw my father bleeding, was your name."

"He is alive. Your choices gave you that."

"Tis certain I am dead to him."

Mary kissed her forehead. "I know." She lifted the quivering chin. "But you will always mean my life to me." She pressed her lips to

Anne's tenderly, sweetly, praying in the days and years ahead to bring every happiness to Anne, who had brought back to Mary the heart she had buried so long ago.

Thank You

I sincerely thank you for joining me on this journey with Mary and Anne and all the pirates of the *Rouge Rogue*. More is coming in their story, so I hope you will join me then.

Authors really only get traction if readers support them, so thank you for supporting me with the purchase of this novella.

If you enjoyed this book, please consider posting a review in your social media and include link to my website: <http://larazbooks.com>

Again, thank you!

About the Author

Lara Zielinsky loves few things more than a day spent writing with a pot of hot tea, or a carafe of iced tea, close at hand. Those few more things include her family and reading books while enjoying the beach or a backyard barbecue in her home state of Florida.

She's been writing stories about women loving women for more than two decades. What started out as writing for fandoms finally gave way to original fiction since 2001. She enjoys connecting with other readers and writers of lesfic and bific on social media. She's not as prolific as she would like, but has always believed in the moral of the story *The Tortoise and the Hare*: slow and steady is best. So she keeps writing until each story, long or short, is complete to her satisfaction.

She holds a bachelor's degree in journalism and is currently working on her masters in professional writing. After working as a teacher, a techie, and a host of other things in a variety of industries, she has finally come back to her first passion.

She's always available to edit for other authors, with 15+ years experience editing for small press publishers and indie LGBTQ and romance authors.

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