

Til death do us part

A cannonball landed inches from my feet, but the fuse must have been bad as it blew through without exploding. I stared at the hole even as the cries of the pirates filled my ears. Swords and pistols drawn, the crew rushed around me toward the men spilling over the side of the boat. A cargo ship, the *Mariette* had not one cannon on board. Seemed stupid in pirate-filled waters. Even a non-sailor like me had wondered why my husband had not outfitted it with such. Blood started to flow over the deck towards me as the ship listed. I could smell its coppery tang. One body floated lifeless in the water, turning it red, and ominous fins slowly gathered in the distance. Then everything went black.

Someone was trying to throw an old sail over me when I woke, head pounding. The attack on the *Mariette* came flooding back and I screamed, knowing where I had to be. The face staring down at me looked to be little more than that of a kid. The lowliest of Jack Lott's crew didn't think of gagging me or binding my hands. A bellow came as the door flew open.

“We don't take prisoners, damn it! How many times have I said it?”

“Captain Lott,” the boy stammered.

Then the captain got a look at me.

“I don't blame you, Johnny boy. Two hundred sovereigns from my share in the crew's take for the woman. Buy you lots more than one woman in Tortuga. You will not be a lad anymore, I will take you to my favorite woman. No one hasn't had a good time

when they're with Maggie." Long dark hair and deep set brown eyes. Thin nose and full mouth, the corner of which twitched when I was trying to keep from smiling. Oh, and such an enchanting smile. I had been told often enough how beautiful I was. I knew what the value was for. They were stuck with me, but I was no burden.

The boy beamed as Jack Lott hauled me to my feet. Before I knew what was happening, my dress was ripped from me and thrown overboard. A ship full of pirates leered as if I was the last woman on earth as I was pushed past in a ripped shift barely covering anything. All were armed to the teeth and covered in blood, blood of the men who had worked for my husband.

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He called it courting, though I was forced to be the whore of the man robbing my husband. That I had slept with a pirate caused me no great duress. After all, for years, I had slept with François and he was little more than a stranger even if we shared the same name. He might as well have thought me the cleaning lady for all the affection he had showed.

I sat up in bed and appraised the man, the pirate. Looking over at a sleeping form not my husband's was a little odd. This pirate was the opposite of everything my life had stood for, a dark, large man lacking any refinement or attractive qualities to even the smallest degree. So this was Captain Jack Lott, the man François was always complaining about stealing his wares and keeping me from having all the things the wives of the men he did business with flaunted.

Many might have envied my place. My former life, that is, not waking in a bed with a pirate. François Le Vasseur was a middle class merchant who gave me decent

clothes and a nice house, even if the luxuries others in the same trade had were missing. A life that lacked for nothing...well, nothing except affection and freedom. I could not leave the house without François's permission, not even to go to the market. The servants would stop me if I tried. Then my mother had gotten sick and begged me to come and tend to her as if we were living in Paris instead of St. Christopher. Somehow, her words rang in his ears the way mine never did, and he let me go. Let me go only to be set upon by pirates and the cargo he worried so much about laid out on the deck to be split among the crew.

I will never admit I was greedy, just envious of women whose husbands should not have been able to best my own. They were in the same business. They were not robbed as soon as their backs were turned. At least that was what I had been told. It was not cloth that lay there as I had always heard the ranting about being stolen. It was gold, Spanish gold. Enough to have bought all of St. Christopher. François had never even given me a wedding ring the day he promised to take care of me till death do us part. François only talked of perhaps one ship a year taken out of five or six. If they all carried the same, where did all that gold go? It surely was not into my household. He was gone a lot, on business, he always said. Now I have to wonder where he really was, who he was with. There was enough there to buy himself many mistresses. Was that why I was not allowed out; he was out with them all the time and someone might let me in on his secret? Did she get all the gold I would have given anything to possess not so long ago? Sad though it may sound, possess as some sort of proof that my husband had actually married me for more than my father's land in St. Christopher.

I wonder if all the ships that he owns are named after his mistresses. There is not a *Delphine* out there. He had told me it would be bad luck. Now they think I am dead or as good as dead and my children will get some new mother, and my husband will take a new mistress or three.

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Jack woke and found me sitting naked as a jay barely covered with a filthy sheet. Like I had any choice. There were only two things he had any experience with; one was fighting and the other, well, a woman of polite society does not speak those words aloud. He grinned as if he thought I was there to entice him. It didn't take one of the prostitutes he was used to dealing with to know how he had gotten that impression. I made noises François never got out of me. Something else it seems he had denied me in six years of marriage.

He smiled at me with disgusting teeth showing. "Care for breakfast, love? I will make you scream some more once I have had some provisions for the long haul."

Damn the man. How could he forget he had me trapped on board surrounded by fifty men who would slit my throat if I said no. He didn't have to hold the knife to my throat himself. I knew I would die if I made one wrong move or, worse yet, be left to the crew to have their fun with first. There was no way I could stay. Even Jack's smile made my skin crawl but now that I was away, I didn't think I could go back either.

"So what's your name? Anyone out there who would care to pay good money for your ransom?" He pulled away the sheet that covered me. "Not that I'm in a mind to give you back anytime soon."

"Delphine le Vasseur."

I saw his eyebrow rise faintly. “It seems your husband has paid more than his fair share giving you up. What would you think you would be worth should I send him your price, so he knows I appreciated the gift? Each thigh is surely worth five hundred francs and such breasts as I have ever seen, I would gladly pay a thousand francs apiece for those in my bed. Do you think he would appreciate my throwing in an extra five hundred just for that noise you made last night? It does a man’s heart good to know he can make a woman do that.”

The porthole was open and I tried to breathe in the salt-filled air to keep myself from gagging.

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It was close to a week before I was allowed to leave the captain’s cabin with nothing more than my torn shift to wear. The weather was calm and the smell of cooking filled the air, unfortunately hiding all freshness the sea breeze could bring to my nose. The cook still used the provisions the *Mariette* had laid in for my journey home, and now used for abominations in the cooking arts. I had to hold my nose and close my eyes to get it down.

“We reach Tortuga in a few days, just keep your pants on until then. Do you want to be marooned if you are lucky or shot for stealing booty?” I heard one of the men ask.

“Why can she not put some damned clothes on then?” They were hidden from view so I would imagine they didn’t know I was there. Then again, pirates probably would say anything in front of anyone.

I fled back to the cabin and didn’t come out again. I decided not to roam outside anymore. I had to lay plans to escape when we hit Tortuga. St. Christopher had enough

sailors stop in port; I knew what that night would be like. There would be confusion enough in which to escape.

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Tortuga is a dunghill. Already in its short history French, Spanish, and English colonists have run it. Since 1633, some thirty years so far, privateers and pirates have used it as a base. Every so often the Spanish or the French attack and for a time it is peaceful, but the pirates always seem to come back. The only things well organized are the fortifications and the pirates using them. It didn't help that the French governor in 1650 imported several hundred prostitutes--the impetus to our heading there now since there was gold to spend on them.

It was the dead of night and silent when I slipped on a set of Jack's clothes. A long black coat over loose linen shirt, black britches, high black boots that covered my knees. I did look the part of a pirate even if my skin crawled, literally this time from all the vermin that lived in the man's clothing. It always surprised me he left the gun in the cabin with me. I slipped it in the waistband along with a knife I had hidden during dinner. I guess when I didn't fight that first night, he figured me for a docile he didn't have to worry about.

Slowly in the dark, the docile crawled through the hatch to find a crescent strip of white beach backed by sea grapes, but not too far off were boulders littering the coast. I could smell the tobacco of the men left aboard to guard the rest of the treasure. They expected no trouble and congregated at the bow of the ship sharing a bottle I had set out just after the ship had cleared. I just walked off the ship even if I was crouched down to

do it. When my foot hit the sand so soft beneath me that I sank into it deeply, I ran. I listened to their voices fade, knowing they never even notice I was no longer there.

Palm trees surrounded by blue plumbago, pink and white oleander, purple and red bougainvillea, Easter lilies, yellow, peach, red, pink, and white hibiscus, and cedar trees all perfumed the air as I ran to where; frankly I didn't know. It was only a quarter moon and I had never been to Tortuga; few proper women had. When I fell, tripping over a root, I just lay there for a moment. Breathing heavily, I almost missed the sound of voices in the distance. Hoping any sound I made might be thought an animal, I followed them. Heading away from the ship was all I cared about.

Dunghill was incorrect, Tortuga was worse. Jack Lott's ship wasn't the only ship in port and people swarmed about me like ants all drawn by an invisible pull toward rum. Mud sucked at the oversized borrowed boots as I tried to keep my head down. Too many, it felt like, were giving me odd looks. There were few enough women; I was not fooling anyone with the clothes I wore, but at least it was not the torn shift. It was odd to see the trappings of the life I had only a few weeks ago. Men in gold lace and long wigs seemed so out of place here. I went into the first place that looked respectable. I never felt so embarrassed in my life as when I stood there dressed in men's clothes asking for a room. "And a bath just as hot as you can make it." I had to wash the feel of him off me, not to mention the stench of the ship.

"It is rather late for that, do you not think?" the innkeeper protested.

"I can pay well for it." There were only a few in the dining room as the innkeeper left to get things ready. I could not look them in the eyes. They had to know what I had done to keep from getting my throat cut. The memory of that pirate's hands made my

skin crawl. If it had just been that once, I don't think I would have regretted it much, but he was a bastard and kept rubbing that scream in. Even if it was to save my life, I felt dirty. I had committed adultery. I opened my hand slowly and stared dazed at my palm. In it lay a gold ring I had taken from the treasure that sat in the cabin, the ring François had denied me. How could I go back? Even if I wanted to, François would assume what had happened. I would be the marked woman even if he had slept with dozens of other women.

Suddenly a man's face was mere inches from mine. He was a large portly fellow with heavy jowls half hidden under his enormous wig that stood some five inches high and fell to near his waist. His pale green outfit was covered in silver embroidery and silver lace making him outshine the candles. It didn't, however, do anything to hide his bulk or improve his looks. I could smell his stale breath spiked with alcohol and felt like gagging. Then he lowered his eyes and gazed down my shirtfront before raising them once again with a grin.

I pulled out the pistol I had stolen from Jack Lott. "The dogs will be eating your liver for dinner if you lay one finger on me." As if to add menace to the threat, the dogs outside started barking loudly at another's approach. He looked at me warily and backed away slowly.

My father was a merchant who did a lot of business with England. I could speak the language well enough. "They will find you here," a voice said quietly behind me.

"I have no clue what you are talking about," I said, trying to sound confident.

“I saw them when they came into town. Captain Lott is crowing about the woman he has in his cabin. My ship is preparing to sail with the tide in an hour. I would suggest you come aboard if you truly wish to leave them behind.”

“Where are you bound for?”

“Boston, with a cargo of rum.”

“If you take me there, I will take your offer.” I still could not turn to look at him.

“Very well,” he murmured after a moment. “Percy, forget the bath. I talked her into letting you have your sleep,” he called to the back.

“Thanks to you, Quinn!”

“I will have the bath drawn for you aboard ship to clean him away.”

My eyes closed. “Why are you doing this?” I whispered.

“It was common knowledge, here anyway, that the *Mariette* was going to be attacked. I know of your husband. You were supposed to have been killed, not captured, and surely not escape. Jack Lott isn’t known for taking prisoners even when they are beautiful women.” His hand fell on my shoulder. “We best get you out of here before anyone sees you.” He led me out into the dark, me stumbling all the way. I could not open my eyes at the thought François wanted me dead. The tears would start falling if I did. Till death do us part indeed.

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The water was close to boiling, but I still didn’t seem to notice as I sat on another creaking boat. I just had them keep pouring the kettles in the half barrel. Nothing larger could be offered. Men all of them, but while they looked, not one made a move toward me and the pistol I kept close. I scrubbed and scrubbed, but as the water cooled, it could

not keep the tears from falling down my face. The cool night air disturbed the warmth of the room and I knew someone was there even before I lifted my red eyes to the door. It was the first time I really looked at the man who had taken me from the inn. Somehow, I had the feeling deep inside my gut that I had been delivered from one pirate to another. He was far better looking, a tall muscular man and more refined, but there was a hardness to his eyes not of a regular sea captain. He had long dark hair, but it was dark hair that curled naturally as he wore no wig to cover it. He had a strong angular face but he wore no face powder. Unshaven, his dark skin was proof that he worked on the ships and not in some governor's palace.

“Is it your turn now I am clean of him?” I asked as he watched me sitting there naked in the barrel.

He smiled faintly. “I can see his reasons for breaking with tradition and not killing you.” There was something in his grin that made me want to smile through the tears even if it was only the tiniest of changes in my countenance. “Quinn MacDermott and I am captain of the Revenge. In another place, in other clothes, I am a Captain of the Royal Navy and my orders are to rid these waters of Jack Lott and others like him.”

My smile fell from my face. Pirate hunters had to be hard men too. “And what do you want of me?”

“To make sure you get away.”

Frankly, it was a dilemma I had not thought of until then. I had taken some pieces of eight to pay for a berth away from Tortuga, but after that, there was nothing. I said more to convince myself than him. “I will not go back to my husband.”

Quinn poured two glasses of wine and handed me one. “After finding out he wanted you dead, I would think not. Your parents, perhaps?”

“My father is dead, my mother sick. This passage was to take me to nurse her. She is possibly dead herself. She is not the problem, though. François’s family is her neighbor. I am sure word has been sent saying he is a widower by now, perhaps even a new engagement. It will reach there before me. If I go to her now, how long will I live once they let him know his wife still lives?”

“Did you not even love him a little?”

I looked at him, surprised that a pirate hunter would ask such a question. I slid back into the barrel as much as I could to garner the last bit of warmth it had to give. “I was sold for my dowry and a piece of land on St. Christopher. François used it to set up his business there. For six years I thought he was importing cloth.”

“Pirates do not usually attack ships bearing cloth.”

“You hunt pirates. Where would a good French merchant get a hold full of Spanish gold? Is that why you took such an interest when you realized who walked in on your supper?”

I saw his back straighten and knew I was right before he ever spoke a word. “François le Vasseur never drew a sword in his life that I have proof of, but if it was your dowry that started his enterprise, he used it to build a fleet of ships. We have no proof but it’s trying to be kept secret that your husband is behind all of the trouble in these waters.”

My head fell onto my knees. “Turn around,” I finally snapped. He was a true gentleman. His head never wavered until I told him he could turn back around as I climbed out. “Take me to St. Christopher.”

He must have expected it. There was no movement that conveyed surprise. His answer was far too prepared. “If Mousier Le Vasseur is found dead, I will arrest you for his murder. I cannot play a part in it.”

“He has my children. He might have all but imprisoned me, but he dotes on them. Leaving them with a pirate is another thing altogether.”

I saw the spark in his eyes, but he still shot me down. “It would be kidnapping.”

Aghhhh! “He is a pirate. You said so yourself.”

“I have no proof of that. Only what I have heard.”

I felt like crying again. Men were such idiots. “Would a hold full of gold be proof enough? I know where Lott’s ship is hiding in the shallows. There are only two guards and they are half drunk.” Now the wheels in his head were turning. It was not the question I was expecting, though, after seeing that look.

“How would that prove it was your husband who was in charge of the ship that was attacked? I understand your dilemma, but I have jurisdiction only on pirates. We can go and take Lott’s ship while it is lying at anchor. Your word and the hold of gold are proof enough of his actions and would have been for the *Mariette*. Your husband, though, would only have to claim his captain turned from his service after he last left his sight.”

“Get Lott’s ship and then take me to St. Christopher. Sunday week, they will all be at church. You want proof. I can get you proof.”

“Now you wish me to condone robbery?” I could have screamed then and there. The man I thought so hard was balking over a little robbery.

“It is my money that built that house. In fact, he keeps his lock box in my room. If it is true, his records will be in there. Is it robbery if it is in my room?”

Proof, it seemed, spoke volumes. “Then let’s go.”

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He made up his impression to me when I had to stay below when Lott’s ship was taken. He truly was a hard man. Several of Lott’s crew had returned, but all were in a similar state, in their cups. Captain MacDermott didn’t have any qualms about slitting the throat of the first man who stood up to him. It was not much of a fight. It was close to dawn and they had been swigging rum since four the afternoon before. I hardly even heard the sound of cutlasses clashing, they were so drunk. Most were taken without a fight. With the gold in hand and a witness to bear against them, the crew sailed back to the main port to arrest Jack Lott and his crew.

I had been told to stay on the ship, but I could not do it. I expected I would want to throw Lott a kiss goodbye to let him know I had not just lain there out of the kindness of my heart, that I was not the wanton hussy he must have thought I was. I slipped in the door of the tavern where women lay about naked, as I had been kept not so long ago. I caught sight of the cabin boy who had brought me on board passed out with his head between the very large breasts of a redhead. He was guarded even if he could not move if they ordered him to.

Having him glare at me with those dark murderous eyes of his, I knew Lott didn't have to guess who had turned on him. "Bitch," he snarled, straining against the men who held him tight.

"And here I thought you had grown fond of me, or is it that you grew fond of fucking the wife of your partner behind his back? Took extra pleasure in the task after you found out who I was, did you not?" I taunted.

In his rage, he broke free and came for me. No one expected it and they just stood there for a moment as he charged. I raised the pistol and fired when he was only feet away. I watched those dark eyes fade as the bullet to his head took its revenge for me. A bullet from his own gun.

"I told you to stay on board," MacDermott roared as the smoke still hung in the air.

"I was not going to leave it up to the likes of a bunch of ragged sailors to mess up. You are not the only one who wanted the bastard." I had to endure the captain's murderous glare. I took it head on and he finally roared to the men to take Lott's crewmen away.

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Hands held me down, the stench of foul breath filled my nose, but the part of the dream that had brought me bolt upright drenched in sweat was the feel of that bastard. I was not sure which one. As I sat there, the man in my dreams had changed from Lott to François time and again until they had merged into one.

The door burst open. “Delphine, are you all right?” Quinn asked, out of breath. I take it I screamed as I woke even though I could not remember doing so. Another man was the last thing I felt like staring at right then.

I flung myself back down, face to the wall. “Go, please.” I know I said he was hard, did I mention stubborn? His weight on the small bed made me roll toward him. A gentle hand pushed the curly black hair from my face.

“Killing the man isn’t what you thought it would be like, is it?”

“I would kill the bastard again,” I hissed, unable to keep the anger in check with the visions of my dreams yet to vanish with the light of day.

“Then what haunts your dreams?”

My eyes closed again, I could not look him in the face. “Are you as hard as I think you are that you believe all women whores?”

“I saw you scrub yourself raw. I know how you survived. This is the first time you’ve dreamed of it, though.”

Dreams, it seemed so long ago since I had them. Most of them had died the first months of marriage when I was all but forbidden from leaving the house. The children were my only reason to live even before I was taken captive. “Six years I was married to François and I dream of him as much as I do Lott. What does that make me? I could have walked out of that room any moment.”

“It makes you a survivor. I interrogated those serving on Lott’s ship. You would not have died prettily if you had denied him anything.”

I rolled over facing the wall once more. “I might as well get the dreams out of the way. No decent man will have me now. Marriage to another as bad as François if I can

find even that.” The weight from the bed lifted and I heard the door open. He didn’t leave, though; a moment later, the weight was back on the bed.

“Sit up and drink,” he ordered, not sounding particularly pleasant.

“Why?”

“Please.” That was a request and I rolled over.

“Why?”

His jaw was set as if waiting for the axe to fall. “I don’t exactly think you want to possibly carry his child.”

Oh, God. I had spent close to two weeks on that ship and it had never occurred to me that it could happen. All I could think of was escape. That had to be the reason the idea never came to mind.

“Sanders saw a woman with child at the tavern where we found Lott and his men and bought this from the native woman acting midwife to her. He is too scared to come to you with the idea. You did just shoot the pirate in the head. You have a reputation to live up to now.”

I took the cup slowly and drank the concoction, trying not to gag as I lay back down.

“Why do you seem to care what happens to me? Do you do this for all your women passengers?”

“You’re the first we’ve ever had around. Having a woman on board is bad luck, so the superstition goes. Shouldn’t be too much of a distraction for the crew now that you have proven you can shoot to kill. Don’t think we’ll befall too much bad luck.”

No straight answer. I knew he meant he needed a witness and I was it.

“Not all men are as bad as those you have had to deal with,” Quinn whispered just before he closed the door.

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The liquid in my glass started to tilt as the ship took a hard turn. The sails snapped as we caught the wind and changed course.

“Can you make out the ship, Ned?” I heard Quinn yelling above.

“It’s the *Sabine*,” came a faint cry.

I ran. Captain MacDermott stared at me as if I was crazy as I stood there half-dressed. Every crew member seemed to be thanking me, though. “François was worried about his ship, the *Sabine*, just before I set sail. It is coming from Maracaibo.”

“Spanish gold,” Quinn muttered.

“Do we attack?” the first mate asked.

“Any passengers aboard, do you know?”

I shook my head quickly. “Passenger berths would cut down on the space he could fill with cargo, he always said.”

That grin worried me. “No, keep it in your sights and we follow it. If we are lucky, we can catch Monsieur Le Vasseur red-handed.”

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The sea was strong enough; salty spray rolled over the edge of the deck and soaked me as I sat at the bow. No one said a word to me. I was Jack Lott’s killer and to a crew of pirate hunters that seemed more fearsome than the pirate himself. I was neither proper lady anymore, nor was I a prostitute. I felt as if I was alone in the world. Sailors didn’t know what I was and somehow I was not so sure I did either.

“What is your husband like?” Quinn asked behind me.

“I thought he was just a man driven to succeed, forsaking all else. I am not sure what he is anymore.” Everything seemed a lie now. François had lied about everything. He was not too busy to spend time with me, he wasn’t too poor to buy even the smallest token to show he cared. He was not even just a middle class businessman who imported cloth. “You want to get information to use against him, don’t you?”

“I’m wondering more how he could ignore a wife such as you in his bed. I think that is his biggest crime; I can’t understand.”

I laughed when I had not felt like it in some time. “You have never been married, with words like those.”

“This life leaves little time for it. How many women would sit around waiting while I have been on the seas for nine years? I’ve been after Lott and François for a long time, four years of that.”

“If a man was there with me as long as he was on land, I could live with him being gone years. Of him never even caring when we stared at each other across the table, that’s worse than him being gone.”

Quinn smiled. “Pity you’re married, then. I wouldn’t mind at all having you waiting for me.”

I turned and stared. “Odd sentiments from the man who wants to see my husband hanged.”

“Sentiments every man on this ship would agree with, even if they had never heard of François le Vasseur. Your husband is blind.”

“Pity Lott was not,” I muttered.

“None of that talk. I refuse to let a woman feel sorry for herself when I’m trying to seduce her.” I raised an eyebrow very high and his smile grew. “The crew seems to abhor the idea of you sitting here sullen and they actually voted on who should come cheer you up. I was informed I was the man and I was to seduce you.”

The sea rolled over the sides again and washed over my feet. “They see that as fitting for a woman who spent two weeks with a pirate. A mother of two and a wife.”

His booming laugh filled the air, his eyes sparkled in the sun that warmed me through. “They are good sailors and soldiers. I never said they were gentlemen.”

Yet a small part of me wanted him to do just that. Odd to hear, I know, but after the last week of dreams since killing Lott, I had wondered if the feel of another man was the only way to rid my mind of it. To give freely what there had been no choice about before, to Lott or François. Trust me, only the fact that the idea made me sick right now stopped me from taking his hand and leading him to his cabin. A month earlier, I would have gladly taken an affair with Captain Quinn MacDermott as an escape from the boredom. Today I was a different woman. Though I had not escaped boredom, I had escaped pirates. Then his voice was right in my ear.

“Delphine, I’m asking for a kiss. The look in your eyes is answer enough. The men will think I never even tried if they don’t see it. If you clearly turn me down, though, the matter will be at an end.”

Why did the thought enter my head François had never kissed me, not in six years of marriage. The peck at the marriage ceremony, and he took me to bed for heirs, but he had never actually kissed me. Pirates do not kiss, either. “François never kissed me.” I had to force out the thought.

“He should be arrested for that alone.” Was I dreaming that those words didn’t sound just like some game he was playing to keep the crew at bay? I had not kissed a man since I was sixteen...just a boy, only a year before I was married. My stomach was just about as nervous had it had been then. He said nothing more, not asking if I would allow it. I only had to turn my head and his mouth was against mine. Fingers clenched in my hair not letting me move away, but only after a gentle hand grazed the sensitive skin on the underside of my breast did my mouth open in surprise and his tongue slipped in. I may never have wanted a man in my bed again right then, but I could have spent the rest of the year like that. Quinn was in no haste to leave me like François and there was nothing to make me feel ashamed like Lott. He pulled away to let me breathe. I seemed to have forgotten that tidbit in the years that had passed.

“Slapping me would probably work best,” he whispered.

The tears started falling down my cheeks and I backed away from him, running back to my berth. How could I slap him? He showed more affection in a sham than I had been given in years.

The knock on the cabin door was soft before it opened. “If I had known it would make you cry, I never would have done it. The rest of the crew would have started trying, though.”

Men can be so dense sometimes. “That is just it. You do not even care for me and you showed more affection than my own husband has given me. Every damn man on this ship would show me more than François did. He didn’t marry Delphine Chevignard, he married a plantation in St. Christopher and the money to build pirate

ships. Does it make me even worse that if not for Lott, I would gladly let you seduce me just to feel something?”

He opened his mouth to answer but the first mate called, “Land, St. Christopher,” and the *Sabine* was busy setting anchor in the shallows. It was time to get my husband.

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I stared through the glass for minutes, carefully studying the faces of the men as the ship’s hold was unloaded. We were not in Basseterre, the main port, which was telling enough. A group of men had been offloaded further down the coast to work their way around. When I finally shook my head that François was nowhere to be seen, a signal was given. First, the cannons opened fire until the *Sabine* took a ball below the water line. Quickly it settled in the shallows. When the cannons stopped, the men came out of the trees to keep the *Sabine*’s crew from fleeing. As I came ashore on sand stained with blood, Quinn looked worried. Chest after chest was filled with cloth, five at least. Then, finally, a cry went up as gold was found. Three chests full, in fact. I just stared in one at the huge cross, rosary beads, candlesticks. My husband had financed the attack on a ship filled with priests. Tears fell down my face. He had wanted me dead, but to know he had killed so many others was the last thing I could take. Lott had left no survivors from the *Mariette*. If all of the crews he worked with did the same, he had the blood of hundreds on his hands. One gold ring still had the finger attached. I vomited.

* * * *

A neoclassical house of white covered in bougainvillea, my favorite flower, with black shutters that opened at the bottom to withstand the winds that plagued the island. Out back was the cistern that caught the rainwater that collected on the roof. There was

no sign of anyone in sight. The house was filled with the finest furniture available from every country of Europe, with a dark stained open beam ceiling to frame it all. The furniture was without a doubt expensive and tasteful, but it lacked the ostentatious flair of London and even the Governor's palace. It was more like a grand country home, old and comfortable. None of it had been in the house when I had left it a few weeks earlier. All of its goods I would have loved to spend the time picking out.

There was one flighty buxom maid left at the house who entered while I looked at all the changes that had happened so quickly. She fainted dead away, thinking I was a ghost. Not unthinkable, since I wore the same dress of dark burgundy brocade highlighted with Venetian lace, my hair arranged to highlight large ruby earrings. I wore the clothing in the painting that hung on the wall. All had been found in the hold of the ship.

I carried out the strongbox and Quinn shot open the lock. There for all to see were the records of the pirate escapades of Jack Lott mentioned by name, half a dozen other pirate captains as well, every man in his employment, every ship ever taken, every piece of cargo. It seemed the one ship a year François had ranted about so much was the payment for the rest of the year. He had literally turned piracy into a business. The ships' cargoes were brought intact to him and sorted. Two shares were formed, one for Lott and one for François. After a year, a ship was loaded with the pirate's share in gold or money made from the selling of the other cargo and attacked like so many others. I was just to be thrown in to the bargain. Lott never even knew whose wife I was. Not until I told him.

“Now, shall we go take my husband’s treasure back to him? I should like to be there for that.” MacDermott looked up at my words. He was worried after my actions at the tavern. I could see it even before he spoke.

“He needs to be taken for trial. Catching pirates is one thing, catching the man who was financing them from the shadows to keep his name clear is another. He has to be made an example of to the others who might be doing the same thing. Do I have to search you for a pistol or can you do this on your honor?”

“What honor? It was taken from me,” I hissed. I might have been part of some bucolic painting as I sat there on a rock outside in full dress, if not for the topic of conversation. The men around looked away when he picked up my chin, forcing me to look at him. I suppose they thought he would kiss me again. Obviously, none could hear him or see the look in his eyes. Kissing me was the last thing on his mind.

“I will put you in chains until this is over if you cannot understand your revenge has to come second. I need your husband alive to stand trial. Now what is your answer?”

“You have my word I will do nothing to harm him physically. I might yell.”

“Expected.” He was very quiet for a moment. “What are you going to do after this? These records show this house was actually built with the proceeds from the first ship they attacked, not from your dowry. It will most likely be confiscated.” That I was not expecting and it hit me like a bullet to the heart.

“When my husband is hanged, I will worry about it.”

* * * *

I stood in the dining room where I knew they would be coming after they returned from church. François looked to be having a feast by the dishes that lay on the table.

The occasion for such delicacies ran through my head. Was he marrying already? Quinn and half dozen men stood in the window wells. They were not hiding, but they kept the room surrounded and were unobtrusive enough that he would come fully into the room. François entered, dressed in bright pastel blue clothes edged in gold lace, his face powdered, his wig heavy, and patches on his face. Indeed, there was a woman at his side.

I truly did look closely to see why I was neglected for another. Not that I wanted to be married to the man knowing all I did, but six years of my life and for what? She was actually rather plain, though it was hard to tell through the dress and powder. Was she rich then? Did she let him do things to her I never would dream of?

“Mama!” my children cried upon seeing me. They ran and clutched my legs. At least someone had missed me. The woman turned the most awful shade of green. I wondered if her name was Mariette or was it Sabine?

Then he caught sight of me. “You are supposed to be dead,” François hissed.

“Yes, well, they were pirates. Did you expect them to keep a deal? Bad enough Lott took me to his bed until I could escape, but then after bed with you, I could endure anything. The worst thing, I think, was that a damned pirate made me scream as he did. Made me wonder all this time how little regard you had for your wife if you didn’t even care to take so little effort to keep me happy.” There was a sniff from the corner where François’s new whore was cowering, but its meaning was clear. I was not the only one left lacking when it came to my husband. The woman was just attracted to the jewels he had wooed her with. “The British Navy has the gold, François. Lott’s dead, crew’s dead, your ship is confiscated, and they have your records you kept in my room as a precaution.”

He pulled the sword from his belt. Quinn's sword stopped it from piercing my chest just in time.

“Gggrrrrrr!” François yelled in frustration as he turned on him like a madman. It was rather funny to watch, really. Captain MacDermott looked far more pirate than François did. Now I only had to wonder if Quinn was as schooled in the art as my husband. He had taken years of lessons before our marriage. Anger made the attack worse as he thrust and slashed his way across, driving Quinn back. He had yet to look around and see he was surrounded. The Captain only had to say the word and they would have surrounded François, but he never acted as if he was not in control. Steel clashed in the air as he always caught François' blade, never failing to anticipate the next move. As they danced about, I suddenly realized Quinn didn't want to kill the bastard.

The men with him tried to grab me, but I was across the room before they realized I was moving. The pistol at the base of François's neck stopped the dance.

“Delphine, you promised you would not kill him like you did Lott.” Quinn growled, hardly out of breath.

François's eyes went wide when he heard the man's words. A pirate hunter didn't seem to worry him but a wronged wife did, even worse, a wronged wife who had already killed. Quinn was reaching for the gun when I yanked François down to mouth level. No one but the three of us heard my whisper.

“You are a pirate, husband, even if you never sailed with them. You will hang as one. Do not worry. I will be there by your side when they let you fall. Till death us do part.”

* * * * *

I sold the land for as much as I could. There was no house and very little in income to build one. It was my only asset. I stood there and watched the hangman's gallows in London as they were prepared to stretch the neck of my husband. My children were safe, but Captain MacDermott had been right, everything gained from the attacks was confiscated. I was left with only the land my father had given me as a dowry. They would return or repay what they could to those it was stolen from, but me, they could not return what had been taken from me. I had no house, no money. I only had what I did through Quinn's words that I had helped bring Lott and his men to justice. He tried to fight for more, but the judges were more interested in making an example of François than Quinn had been. My clothes and furniture were all I had and even those were only what I had before the wedding. I had my children, but six years of my life were gone. I could never get them back. I was a twenty-six year-old widow to a pirate who most didn't believe I could ever have known about. They didn't seem to realize just how little they share with us women. Before that fateful day I set foot on the *Mariette*, my only activity was meeting with a very small group of women that François allowed. It was my only contact really and I always pried as much information as I could out of them in my given time. They never knew much of what their husbands did, how much they made, as long as it was enough for them to spend it on what they wanted. We were all clueless, and now they were persecuting me for it.

"Whore." The words made me spin to find myself face to face with a woman finely dressed. I didn't know her, but I had seen her sitting in the courtroom as my husband was tried, listening as I described how I had survived his attempt to have me killed. I had expected it from his family, those on St. Christopher perhaps, but this was

just some random English woman with a rather odd fetish for seeing pirates hanged.

Captain MacDermott stepped in front of me, blocking our view of each other. He was not looking at me, though. He leaned over and muttered something in the woman's ear.

When he turned back to take my arm once more, the woman was gone.

We had walked a ways before he looked down at me smiling faintly. "Sometimes one has to be reminded of who they sleep with."

"What?"

"She's had lovers for years, almost as long as she's been married."

I had to bite my cheek to keep from laughing. "Why do I think I can guess what you said? He who casts the first stone, perhaps. I thought you hard once; now you are quoting from the Bible."

"I didn't have to quote the Bible. I know her husband well and he doesn't know of her activities."

"You keep her secret the way it was kept from me for all those years."

He leaned his head near mine. "Are you saying that if you should marry again, the man would be bound to you alone? You will surely find it hard to catch a man with that requirement."

I felt like laughing, but I just could not do it. Walking down the street it felt so much like we were flirting youths without a care in the world. Only this time the youths were walking from the hanging of a pirate--the father of my children. It seemed like it was all over so long ago. The day I pulled the gun on him, it had ended for me. For the trial and hanging I was there because it was required of me. "Shooting a man, I think, limits it far more."

“You might have a point there. Although an enemy of Lott’s or François’s might find you quite the catch. You never know what offers you might get.”

I laughed down the street, but I knew it was nothing more than a dream.

* * * *

When you have nothing, you return to your parents. Quinn took the children and me to Dover for the trip to France. It pained me to have to return as destitute as I was. My father had decided on François and now I had to inform my mother how much their choice had ruined me. I stared at the quiet waters of the Channel hoping it held for the crossing. I could not stand to sink after all I had been through.

“Would you think me terribly forward if I asked to call on you?” Quinn said quietly as he stood beside me. I held my two children’s hands, having a time keeping them still.

“I think I would be very disappointed if you didn’t. I would like to hear how things go with you.” He reached over, took the hand of Sophie, and placed something in my free hand. I opened the cloth slowly while Captain MacDermott stood there just as calm as could be. Before me lay part of the gold that had once lain on the deck of Lott’s ship. It was a gold bodice ornament shaped like a bow and covered with rubies and rose cut diamonds with a large ruby drop and earrings to match. So that is what a quail’s egg looked like.

“Because of you, St. Christopher and the surrounding waters are far safer. I received a promotion and you are left without a franc to your name. That does not sound very fair to me.”

“It is a pretty gift, but it will not go with what I shall have to wear now that I have nothing left. You should take it back to its owner before I think you have gone pirate, too.”

“Has it been so long since anyone has shown interest?” My mouth opened slightly at what he said. It had never occurred to me. “Not many can show such strength when they are shown adversity, nor in court admit how they kept themselves alive until they could escape pirates. I thought its price would build a fine house and you would not have to live on your parents’ charity.”

“Why would you do such a thing? You could get thrown in jail for this.”

He smiled at my innocence. “I have been finding the owners of the goods. There are a few we can find no trace of. One will perhaps help to make up for your trouble. More than that and I would probably get caught. When these memories have dimmed and a suitable time has passed that tongues will not wag, I would like to be allowed to try my hand at convincing a rare soul to marry me, to give her children a father. Once she’s over this thinking I would only take her to give her something to feel and realizes I am serious.”

Oh God. I bit my lip; it was all I could do to keep from gaping. In all the time I had known Quinn, he had never made any mention that such words might come from his mouth. He must be a rare man that he had no concern over a woman who spent two weeks at the hands of a pirate and could still speak of marriage. Staring at his hard green eyes, I remembered the words he whispered before he left me one night, and the word flirting took on a completely new meaning. Maybe it should not have been so unexpected. “That kiss, did the men really draw lots?”

“Do you think I would lie about something as idiotic as that? If I want to kiss a woman, I can find a far better way to get her in my arms than that.”

My grin grew with each word out of his mouth. The wheels started turning in my head, a decision obviously made without even having to think about it. “The French have islands in the Indian Ocean. I should have no worry of this story reaching there and they raise similar crops. I would have more experience there than in the Americas or remaining in France where the gossip will surely kill me. Perhaps in the spring when the weather is favorable, you might come see me and we will see how I have recovered. I will need a ship to help me reach there and I could use some help obtaining passage. Perhaps you could give me the name of a reliable ship’s captain.”

“I will be there.” It was all he said before he took us to the ship to make the crossing.

* * * * *

Springtime in Paris. The grass was green, the trees in bloom, the stench of pirates that still seemed to always linger in my nose was washed away with the latest rain. My mother had died only weeks after I arrived. I was there for her at the end, at least. Every day I walked out having to stare at François's parents' house. Every time they caught sight of me, I heard the curses. ‘Whore’ seemed to be the favorite.

“Well, I would say you have not changed your mind about leaving, at any rate.”

Quinn’s voice was soft in my ear as I packed. The house was sold, the things I didn’t want were already gone. I would have sworn it was a dream, the words he had spoken at the docks, but then I felt his hand gently tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “I

found you a first rate captain, good sound ship, two berths, one for you and one for the children.”

“It is not Villanche, is it? He has the worst reputation.”

Quinn turned me around so I actually looked at him. “No; new man to the route. Though you might have heard of him as well. Captain Quinn MacDermott, he just retired from the Navy; a pirate hunter, so you should be good and safe from attack on the way out.”

“You retired because of what I said?”

“I retired because it took me four years to catch Lott. I could not see myself taking on another pirate and hunting him for years. Now, using my bounty to buy a ship to sail to the Indian Ocean, well, it was a damn good excuse to be close to you for months to come.”

* * * *

Several days later, children in hand, Quinn took us to the docks. I could only stare at the ship as the children rushed ahead. It was named the *Delphine*.

“I thought it was bad luck...”

“To name a boat after the woman who killed Jack Lott? Might be bad luck not to name it after you.” He pointed to the ship’s head and it looked suspiciously like me, curly long black hair flying, dressed in a tight torn shift, arm raised, bearing a pistol. “I had no part in it being made, but just could not turn down the gift when it was there before me. Best looking ship's head I have ever seen. I like the model even better still.” Quinn’s grin stopped anything else from coming to mind.

I have a good feeling about the voyage already.