

Pirate Heiress

A Pirates & Petticoats Novel

by Chloe Flowers

To Tess, Cole and Cade. I love you.

“This storyline itself was well thought out and engaging. I have read a fair few "pirate romances," and I have to say that *Pirate Heiress* is up there with the best. FANTASTIC READ!!” - M.Y.NetGalley and Amazon Reviewer

“*Pirate Heiress* is populated with memorable characters and sure to please readers who enjoy historical romance spiced with swashbuckling adventure.” - CV NetGalley Reviewer

“Brilliantly funny and full of action this book is very entertaining. The characters are interesting and likable, even the bad guy, and the storyline is exciting. I couldn't put this down and I couldn't stop laughing.” -M.L NetGalley Reviewer

A note on Anne Bonny:

There are many stories about Anne Bonny, one of most notorious female pirate in history. There is no solid documentation of her entire life, in fact, there are large gaps as well as a debate on when she actually died. Some say she was smuggled out of prison, some say her father's bribes freed her.

Some say she married and moved to Charles Town (today's Charleston, South Carolina) and lived under the name Burleigh and had several more children.

Some say that Mary Read faked death in prison and escaped, hidden under a shroud, and she and Anne eventually moved to New Orleans and lived out the rest of their days together.

No one seems to know the entire story of Anne Bonny.

Perhaps it's best that way.

This book is a work of fiction.

Names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people, (living or dead) events or places is entirely coincidental.

CHAPTER ONE

The first letter from Anne Bonny to her father William Cormac:

3 March, 1718

Dear Father,

I bid you farewell. I know you disapprove of my choice for a husband. True, he is but a simple sailor. However, I refuse to marry any of those milksops or fortune hunters who continue to darken our door. I love James Bonny and he has sworn his life to me. I ask nothing more from you than your prayers for my health and well-being.

*Your daughter,
Anne*

July 1811

Harbour Town, South Carolina

What the hell.

Conal stared at the still water. His sister was about to marry his best friend this evening, so he could deal with a cold bath. He'd dragged the copper tub from the pantry closet and poured in several buckets of tepid water, and located a piece of lye soap, so at least now the bath would be worth the effort.

The galley stove had been allowed to wane to the lowest of coals, and he, Conal O'Brien, the captain of this fine vessel, had neither the time nor inclination (or rather patience) to heat water.

Better to just duck the head down and get it over with. Like pulling out a

tooth or a wood splinter, cold water plunges were best done quickly.

As he expected, the water was brisk, the soap elusive, the suds painful to his eyes, and the whole notion of soaking in a cold tub remained annoying, to say the least. Yet as always, a stubborn tendency to fight being bested by anything including cold water, won out. He had to hold his breath longer than he'd have liked, but there were areas that needed extra attention, thanks to Gampo and his damned crew of pirates.

It really wasn't entirely the attack by Gampo that had spurred the extra scrubbing, although his coat had been torn and his breeches stained with grime from helping a mate adjust a long gun. Rather, it was the thought of his mother's look of disappointment that made it necessary to repair his appearance before attending his sister's wedding. Although they weren't here, his parents would expect him to see his sister married properly while representing the O'Brien family in a respectable manner.

He scrubbed a little harder.

If not for the thick cloud of fog obscuring everything beyond a couple hundred paces, he wouldn't have had to drop the *Seeker's* anchor so far from the Harbourtown docks. Rowing a canoe back and forth from the pier back to his ship in order bathe and change was vexing. Brendan's ship, the *Reward* was docked at the pier, providing his cousin a more convenient access to the town's offerings. In fact, Brendan was probably already polished and back at the tavern and looking like the handsome devil he was, boots gleaming and collar starched.

He'd be damned if his cousin would find fault in his mien this day. Brendan always seemed to find a loose chain in Conal's armor where appearances were concerned.

But not today.

He'd taken extra time on his beard. Propped against the chair, his polished boots reflected the low glow of the lantern swinging overhead in time with the active motion of the water slapping the hull.

He leaned forward and felt for the linen cloth draped over the foot end of the tub. After wiping his face, he braced his hands on the rim and pushed himself to his feet.

When he raised his head, his nose nearly clipped the barrel of a pistol. A faint acrid smell of gun powder assailed his nostrils.

Focused on the cold, grey metal, he was careful to avoid any sudden movement as he reversed back into the water. He raised his gaze. Holding the weapon was a brigand wearing a wide-brimmed hat pulled low. Beneath the hat, a brightly colored scarf covered his hair. Behind the gun bearer stood a second figure, armed as well.

"You have my attention," Conal said evenly. Naked and unarmed, what

choice was there other than negotiation? Not that he expected to talk his way out of this situation.

He was much better at negotiating with his fists.

The one holding the pistol stood between him and the lantern, but from what he could ascertain, the intruder was tall but slight in build. The only thing preventing Conal from lunging for both bastards were their weapons.

The closer man must have been thinking along a similar line of thought, because his pistol shook slightly. "This ship has been taken," he said. "If you value your life and the lives of the crew that remain, you will yield."

Crew that remain?

Conal's stomach twisted. How had he missed the sound of battle aboard? Granted, all but the watch and a handful of men still making repairs had been allowed to go ashore to attend the wedding celebration, but he should have heard a warning shout or a pistol shot even down here in the galley. How many of his men had lost their lives? He ground his teeth, a silent vow of vengeance burning his throat.

"Do you yield?" The intruder tightened his hold on the pistol.

Conal cursed under his breath. "I yield. What are your demands?" He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. The voice sounded too...soft. A woman, perhaps?



Stevie swallowed and gripped the pistol handle more firmly. Her arm was beginning to tire from holding it for so long, but she didn't dare lower it. The mountain of a man in the tub looked as if he could crush her head like a grape with one hand, and her young cousin's with the other. More often than not, she could look an average man straight in the eye. However, with this one, she doubted her head would reach his nose.

Stevie and her family had spied on the *Seeker* for a couple of hours.

"Look," Uncle Bernard had finally pointed. "Most of the crew is heading to shore. There's only a small watch left behind." He rubbed his chin and peered through the thick fog in the direction of the sun, which was up there somewhere in the late afternoon sky. "This fog bank will provide perfect cover. Let's go. The quicker we get this ship to that devil-pirate Gampo, the quicker he'll return the children to us."

The memory of the pirate's men ripping her little brother and sister out of her arms and taking them into the belly of the *Dragon* had her checking the priming of her pistol.

Thankfully, she hadn't needed to use it. The remaining crew of the *Seeker* had gathered around an upturned crate and played cards, enabling Stevie and the rest of the family to surround them.

The men had surrendered with barely a word.
It had been a foolhardy plan.
Ridiculous.
Dangerous.
Crazy.
And absolutely imperative they succeed.

The man in the tub cocked his brows, still awaiting her answer, then his eyes narrowed before sliding down to her soft doeskin boots and back up again. She should have stayed more in the shadows; she might have appeared a bit more intimidating that way.

“Stevie,” her young cousin whispered from behind her, bringing her attention back in line. What was the question? Oh, yes. Demands.

“Relinquish your freedom and possessions,” she said, barely able to keep the tremor from her voice. Her gaze paused at the gold ring on the man’s finger. If they were going to become pirates, she might as well start acting like one. She took a deep breath and drew her shoulders back a little.

“Beginning with your ring,” she said, holding out her hand. The man’s jaw clenched and the knuckles gripping the tub’s edge whitened. What thoughts were flying around in his head? He was contemplating his chances of overpowering her and taking her pistol; she could see that in the way his gaze shifted back and forth between her and Remi. If he had a weapon, and if it had been a one-on-one situation instead of one against two (with guns), he likely wouldn’t have paused to contemplate it this long. He would have defended himself by attacking them. And he’d have won. Even now, she sensed he was still calculating his odds.

She eased a step back, careful to keep her pistol well within a lethal range. “Please don’t try it,” she said. “I’d prefer to save my shot.” She was far from her cozy little room off the kitchens of her brother’s gaming house. Uncle Bernard had given her a brief lesson on managing a pistol, but it still terrified her to hold it.

His eyes widened and his brows raised in surprise. She’d been right in her assumptions, then. She usually was. Her intuition annoyed her brothers no small amount, and they always avoided her when they wished their thoughts to remain...theirs. Only one of them could hide from her, but he was a gambler and so it was expected, otherwise he wouldn’t be a very good gambler, would he?

The man twisted the ring from his finger and tossed it to her. She caught it and placed it on the only finger it would fit—her thumb.

Keeping her focus on their hostage, she moved behind him to the stack of clothes on the galley table and removed the dagger and pistol next to them.

She'd keep a close watch on him; he looked like the type of man who'd rather fight against the odds than give himself over. They needed to get him up on deck with the rest of her family before she fainted from the trauma of this whole episode.

"Get dressed," she said, with as much authority as she could muster.

He slowly stood again with the oily movement of a cat as he reached for a linen rag. Stevie felt her eyes widen. She was wrong. Very wrong. The top of her head would barely reach his chin, let alone his nose. Wide, thick shoulders rippled as he moved, and took up most of the space in the galley. A long scar trailed across his ribcage. A fighting man. A very strong, very muscular, very handsome, very *naked*, fighting man.

She should shut her eyes, avert her gaze, something...but that would be foolish right now. She'd never seen a naked man as perfectly proportioned as this one. To be honest, she'd only seen one other naked man (other than her terribly immodest brothers while growing up). Her cousin, Remi's mortified expression from the doorway prompted her to roll her eyes and give him a pointed look he interpreted perfectly. She'd changed his diapers when she was eight. Besides, she was no dainty maiden.

She'd lost her virginity after falling foolishly in love with a gambler who'd promised her a life of love and luxury. The next day, after losing everything he had as well as several hundred dollars in credits to the house, he disappeared and never returned.

He'd crushed her heart. Ruined it. Ruined her.

Worse were the looks of pity from her brothers and male cousins. Especially her brother Tristan, who'd tried to warn her, but she'd defended the snake, and refused to listen. It was a painful lesson to learn. Men would tell a woman anything to sway her attentions to the bedroom, even profess their love and ask for her hand in marriage and persuade her to give him the most precious gift she had.

Their captive turned toward her and reached for his clothes. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth and she could barely swallow. He had a chiseled chest with a faint layer of fine, light brown hair that darkened to a burnished auburn as it trailed past his navel to his...his...

Oh, my.

"Satisfied, little rabbit?" he asked. A cocky brow quirked up.

So he'd already guessed she was a woman in men's clothing. She assumed he was talking about her perusal, which she wasn't about to address. No need to give him a burst of confidence right now. Besides, her mouth was still dry. Instead, she licked her lips then asked a question. "Little rabbit?" She looked nothing at all like a rabbit. Her ears, along with her hair, were covered.

"You look as if you're ready to jump out of your skin. Perhaps you're afraid of

me?" He leaned toward her.

Yes.

"No." She barely managed a response. Her attempt at laughter was pathetic at best.

"Well...*little rabbit*," his voice was lower than a growl, "you should be."

Her heart jerked in a panicked beat and she stepped back.

He dressed. A pair of shiny cordovan boots stood next to the tub, and he pulled them on while he muttering obscenities about someone named Brendan. That task complete, he stood up straight, crossed his thick arms over his very impressive chest and glowered at her. His eyes were a grey-green with a golden band around the pupil, reminding her of a tiger she'd once seen in a traveling show. She wanted to swallow, but was paralyzed. Was this how a deer felt just before it became a tiger's dinner?

He'd already determined she was female. Now, he was studying her, calculating the odds on a successful confrontation. If he charged her right now, she'd probably squeal and tumble into a terrified heap on the floor, but he needed to believe she'd shoot him. She pulled back the hammer of her pistol until it clicked to help him with his decision-making process, and hopefully to fortify hers. Still, her heart pulsed and throbbed in uneven beats. Until a short time ago, she ran the kitchens in her family's boarding house and gaming house. Pirating was not on her short list of talents. In fact, she was pleased she'd pulled back the hammer without accidentally discharging the gun.

She called to her cousin over her shoulder, inwardly cursing at the way her voice trembled. "Remi, if he makes a move toward either of us, shoot him." His hammer clicked behind her.

Good.

Pointing toward the door with the pistol, she gestured for her prisoner to go topside.

Almost soundlessly, he moved in long, sinuous strides through the passageway and up the ladder. He smelled of soap, new leather boots, and a musky scent she knew was all him. The vision of that tiger from long ago crept into her thoughts again as she eyed his movements.

Her thoughts jumped to her family up on the main deck. They'd sent her to the galley to see what kind of stores the ship held. No one expected she'd find anyone down here, which was a stupid assumption, apparently.

Quite honestly, it was a miracle they'd successfully taken the brigantine.

And this was supposed to be the easy part.

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Of all the damned, rotten luck.

Conal heaved himself up the last two steps and perused the deck. His skeleton crew were all tied to the mizzen mast in the center of the animal pen amidst a couple of pigs, two goats and the cow. The first mate was busy cursing at the goat currently munching on his hat.

So much for rallying a rebellion anytime soon.

To resist now would be foolish. Best to wait for a more opportune moment, after they had time to evaluate their captors' strengths and weaknesses. He glanced at the woman called "Stevie."

She was taller than most women. Her long, slender limbs moved fluidly, like a dancer he'd encountered once when he was in Arabia. It was hard to draw his gaze from her face. Dark, exotic lashes framed the grey eyes beneath delicately arched brows, and her curves were in all the right places. Even the long vest she wore couldn't hide her form. His guess was that she had a French heritage. Her English was flawless, probably American.

Women weren't usually wanted, needed or appreciated aboard a ship. There were always exceptions, like his sister, but in general, having a woman aboard brought bad luck. Chances were that she was important to at least one other person in their group, or else she wouldn't be here at all. Taking her hostage would be his first move when the time was right.

Surrounding the pen was a group of well-armed men. From what Conal could discern based their mannerisms and stance, they were landlubbers. A couple of men with greenish tints to their faces hugged the rail on the larboard side. Only old two salts stood with their legs braced in a confident manner. Those two were definitely seamen.

Without waiting for a pistol to poke him in the back, he strolled over to the pen. Stevie followed, keeping a wary distance.

"Is your watch unharmed, Remus?" he asked his first mate.

Remus looked up and his cheeks reddened. "Yes, sir. Sorry, Captain." He added in a chagrined tone, "We just didn't expect..."

The man didn't need to finish the sentence, really. Even Conal wouldn't have expected anyone to do something this audacious so close to Harbour Town in the late afternoon, fog or no fog.

Conal scanned their captors. He'd earlier assumed they were pirates, but that seemed incorrect now. There were four other full-grown men, two of which were obviously brothers, and all most certainly had to be related in some way. Along with light eyes and hair the color of black coffee, there were similarities in build and stature, as well as in certain facial features. The only exception was one of the grizzled sailors, a short, wiry, stubble-faced man who looked to be about sixty.

In the light of day, it was more obvious the one called Remi was still a boy, maybe thirteen or fourteen. He was an idiot for allowing those two to take him

without a fight. Pistols notwithstanding.

One of the old salts strode forward, a scowl on his face. "What's this?"

"Remi and I found him in the galley," Stevie said.

"Hiding?"

"Bathing."

The man's eyes widened and he spun to face the two.

"Why didn't you call for help?"

Stevie just shrugged. "Quite honestly, Uncle Bernard, there wasn't time," she said. "We found him in a vulnerable situation and easily handled it on our own."

Bernard rubbed his forehead before brushing a salt and pepper curl from his grey eyes. He spoke to one of his men. "Adrian, toss him over with the rest."

Adrian strode toward him and Conal swallowed. He was normally the tallest in the room, but this one had him by almost a half a head.

Stevie touched her uncle's arm. "Wait, we might need him. He's their captain."

A quick flicker of relief crossed Bernard's stern features before he turned his attention back to the large man. "Never mind. Make a sweep of the lower decks instead."

An angry shout came from the water below on the port side of the *Seeker*.

"At least toss over the oars, you sons of bitches!"

Conal started to walk toward the voice, but at Stevie's raised pistol he stopped. "What have you done with the rest of my men?"

Bernard answered. "We sent them off in longboats." He grabbed two oars, walked to the starboard side of the ship and heaved them overboard.

"You half-masted, verminous dawcock!" came the reply from the water below.

At least the men had oars available to row them to shore, although there was no guessing how long it would take to get to them. Conal doubted there were any swimmers among the crew on the longboat. It would take some time to paddle with their hands to where the oars floated on the opposite side of the ship.

Meanwhile, Bernard moved Conal near the mizzen close to the other men then bound his hands and hobbled his legs in irons, effectively depleting his mobility.

The pirates gathered together and the two old seamen began assigning tasks, and it wasn't long before they were in an argument.

"The anchor has to be brought up before ye can do that, ye dim-witted dog."

"I know that! But we need feet on the yards and arms on the sheets if we're going to get underway, you vermin-ridden old goat."

Not only did their captors walk the deck like lubbers, they didn't even look

like pirates. There were no missing appendages except for two fingers gone on the oldest sailor's left hand. There were no visible scars, and for the most part, none of the younger men showed the effects of sun-darkened skin or scurvy.

Curious indeed.

CHAPTER TWO

2 April 1718

Dear Father,

John Bonny and I have purchased a schooner and will soon embark on a journey north to Boston with a hold full of tobacco and other naval stores. I am happy and my hope is that you are happy for me. We shall bring back some maple syrup for you on our return trip. Be well, Father.

*Your daughter,
Anne*

Stevie Sauvage was now a pirate and a thief. As such, she expected to feel more dangerous and brave.

She didn't.

Fear still had her hands trembling. What if they couldn't complete their task? Would Gampo really carry through with his threat to kill the twins? How would she ever be able to live with the consequences?

Her uncle stood with Harvey, Gampo's second, who'd been assigned to accompany her family on their mission. He eyed Stevie as he argued with Uncle Bernard about who was in charge. Finally, Harvey pointed to the ring on her thumb. "Ye didna have that gold on yer hand before. Where'd you get it?"

She fingered the signet ring and lifted her chin. She'd not let the caustic old salt intimidate her. "I took it from the captain. It's our nature as pirates, is it not? Plunder?"

Uncle Bernard stopped arguing with Harvey and lowered his brows. "It

certainly is not *your* nature. Give it back."

She pulled the ring from her thumb, but Harvey snatched it from her hand and shoved it on his stubby finger. "Everything on this ship belongs to Cap'n Gampo now. I'll take it. Just fer safe keepin'."

No one trusted Harvey. But since he was Gampo's eyes and ears, no one dared challenge him, either.

"We have her captain?" Harvey asked, rubbing his hands together.

Bernard nodded and jerked his chin to the broad-shouldered man standing in braces near the mizzen mast.

"Aye, then." Harvey rocked back on his heels. "Let's weigh anchor."

The captain stood in stony silence as one by one, his crew's hands were bound to the main capstan at the center of the deck, each tied to a different bar. Stevie's brother, Tristan escorted the captain over, and Uncle Bernard scratched his bristly chin, eyeing him up and down.

"My name's Bernard Sauvage, Captain. Best just call me Bernard. If you call out 'Mister Sauvage,' we'll all turn around. "

The captain nodded a stiff greeting. "Captain Conal O'Brien."

Bernard gestured to others Conal had already had the misfortune to meet, Adrian and the boy Remi "My sons." Bernard nodded toward Tristan and Stevie. "And my late brother's children. We mean to take this vessel to Jamaica, and it would be much less painful for your men if you assist us in that endeavor."

The captain flicked a dark gaze toward her, then shrugged "I have no helmsman."

"We have full faith in your competence with your charts," Bernard replied. "Harvey and I are familiar with sailing ships and will assist in any way we can."

Harvey sauntered up and unwound a long leather whip. Stevie swallowed. It was a cat-o'-nine tails, the knots on the ends darkened with use and dried blood.

"I brought me own cat," Harvey sneered, "I'd be happy to scratch their backs with her if need be."

The captain's eyes hardened and his gaze swept over the wicked strips of leather, paused on the signet ring on the pirate's finger and then narrowed. The ring was very important to the captain. That was good information to keep in the back of her mind for when she needed it.

She shifted her gaze between him and her family. Would the captain be compliant, or would he fight? Her brother and cousins might be big and strong, and although they brandished them in a dangerous enough fashion, they weren't well-trained in the use of weapons. Thankfully, their hostages weren't privy to that information.

"You can put that cat away, Harvey," Bernard said. "I don't believe Captain O'Brien would jeopardize the health of his crew." His voice dropped to a steely

tone meant only for O'Brien's ears. "We are determined to see our plans through to the end, Captain, with or without your help."

With that last sentence, Stevie stepped forward, pistol ready. After her mother died, Uncle Bernard had rescued them. She would go where Uncle Bernard said to go and follow his instructions as best as she could. She owed him.

"What are your intentions once we make port in Jamaica?" O'Brien asked, turning his back to Harvey and his wicked cat.

Harvey and Bernard exchanged glances. Bernard cleared his throat then shrugged. "We have urgent business with a privateer who's waiting there for us to arrive."

Stevie released a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. For a moment, she feared Uncle Bernard would tell him what they were going to barter. It would have revealed a weakness better left hidden.

"And once your business is complete, what will happen to my ship and crew?" the captain asked.

Uncle Bernard shrugged again. "Once we arrive, we will have no need for either."

Very cleverly worded, Uncle.

O'Brien tilted his head and studied Bernard then Harvey. "I have your word?"

"Of course." Harvey nodded and stuck out his hand. O'Brien warily shook it best he could with bound wrists.

Stevie swallowed and turned away, afraid the guilt in her chest would show on her face.

Her cousins had finished attaching the crew to the capstan, and Harvey shouted, "Heave around, ye maggots!"

The men looked at their captain, but didn't move.

Harvey shook out his cat. "Heave 'round, I say!"

The men remained motionless, eyes on their captain. Conal O'Brien gave Uncle Bernard a long look before he nodded to his men. They heaved against the bars and pushed the capstan around. In an almost musical cadence, it began to clank as the chains moved through the hawse pipes. Once the anchor was up, the men were released and O'Brien gave them orders to prepare to sail.

Stevie sighed. Thank goodness there hadn't been a rebellion from the scant crew. They'd managed to capture the ship through sheer luck and happenstance. Had there indeed been a fight, her small band of 'pirates' would have surely been diminished and probably defeated.



Conal cursed under his breath. He didn't believe Harvey's promise to be done with the *Seeker* once they reached Jamaica any more than Harvey took Conal's word that he and his crew would be compliant.

As it was, just breaking free of the harbor in this fog was going to take a bloody miracle. He'd put out enough sail to move the ship slowly forward, but even at this pace, he'd be hard-pressed to adjust direction if the situation called for it.

He glanced up, barely able to make out the figure he'd sent to the upper topsail yardarm. "Mister Remus! Eyes sharp!"

"Aye, sir!" came the reply from above.

Conal peered into the fog. He blinked. Was that a shadow on the—?

"Ship sighted on the portside! Portside!" came the shout from Remus.

"Hard to larboard!" Conal shouted to Bernard, who turned the wheel furiously. Beyond the bowsprit loomed the aft end of a ship, nearly the same size as the *Seeker*. Men scrambled to adjust the jibs to keep them from ramming into the other ship's hull.

The bowsprit swept across the last six feet of the other vessel's poop deck with no damage other than snapping off the ensign staff, plunging the flag into the water. The larboard side of the ship flew past them; Conal caught sight of the shocked face of a crewman through one of the open gun ports. The distance between the two vessels was barely an arm's length at most.

Thankfully, the rest of the way to the open sea went without incident. Like a breaking wave, an almost audible sigh of relief rolled across the deck when they finally cleared the harbor. Conal maintained the current course and crawled toward the open sea hoping the fog gripped the coastline and thinned farther east.

Once they finally moved out of the thick fog bank, men of the *Seeker* moved sullenly about, unfurling sails and hoisting them while the young woman looked on, pistol ready but wavering.

Ah. She looked frightened. Nervous. Perhaps she'd never sailed before and was afraid of the sea. She glanced at him, and he caught her gaze and held it, testing her. The small muscles in her jaw moved as she clenched her teeth before she stepped behind one of her brothers, out of sight.

Run little rabbit, run and find your hole, crawl inside and hide, but know that even then, I will find you.

Once Conal had her, Bernard Sauvage would have to negotiate better terms with him, which meant they would not be sailing to Jamaica, at least not without the other two ships in his fleet.

The Sauvages had decided to release him from the irons, but kept his wrists bound behind his back. He stood with his feet braced wide, issuing terse commands to his men.

The *Seeker* began to pick up speed as the wind caught the square main sails. The upper sheets were still furled and lashed. The boy, Remi seemed the most curious, and observed the sailors closely. He enthusiastically offered a hand

when he could; otherwise he stood as he did now, near the stern, watching one of the men climb the rigging to secure a jib. Stevie sauntered over to him, and soon the two had their heads close together, deep in discussion.

“Prepare to jibe,” Conal shouted. “Release the spanker.” The boom began to swing toward the midline of the ship. Stevie and the boy, apparently understanding neither the commands nor the resulting actions, continued to talk, backs facing the boom swinging their way.

“Jibe ho!” Conal shouted. His men were all up in the yards, their captors either guarding with pistols or doing other minor tasks. Even if they weren’t occupied, it was blatantly obvious Stevie’s family of pirates had no experience working a ship of this size (if they had any experience at all). They’d done nothing but get in the way since they set sail. If he had to guess, he’d say they’d never even *been* at sea.

Even worse, those who knew what ‘jibe ho’ meant weren’t close enough to relay his warning or help.

Considering the circumstances, it did occur to him that if he let the events unfold without interference, the pirate band would be quickly reduced by two. The young boy was close in age to Brendan’s younger brother, and as tempting as it was, Conal couldn’t stand idly by and watch the lad get swept overboard. The impact of the boom alone could crack his skull open. Seeing no other alternative, he ran toward the two. If the boom hit them, they would be badly hurt, or possibly knocked into the sea.

“Hit the deck! Hit the deck!” he shouted.

Stevie’s eyes widened when she turned and saw Conal charging toward her. To his horror, she drew the pistol from her belt. Didn’t she see the danger she and the boy were in? Remus yelled and waved his arms from the yards, trying to draw their attention to the swinging sail, now gaining speed. There was no time to explain the why or what of the situation.

Conal grazed the boy with his hip just enough to cause him to fall backward before he lunged, lowering his shoulder to catch Stevie in the chest. Both went flying to the deck. Just as they hit, there was a loud *crack*. The sail continued to swing over the deck before it was secured by one of the men.



Stevie squirmed to get free from under Conal O’Brien’s large, muscular body and struggled to take a breath. Remi rolled and rose to his knees, his face pale. One of O’Brien’s men and Remi’s brother Adrian rushed to aid the two, but the sailor was stopped short by Adrian’s pistol.

“Put that gun away and help!” Stevie shouted. Adrian shoved his weapon in his waistband and reached for her, pulling her to her feet. She shoved his hands

away. Couldn't he see the captain was hurt?

"No, not me, *him*." She pointed to Conal.

Hindered by the ropes binding his hands behind his back, Conal grimaced and finally rolled to his side, revealing Stevie's pistol on the floorboards by his stomach. A thin ribbon of smoke rose from the narrow mouth of the weapon, while a red spot of blood began to grow across Conal's shirt.

Stevie dropped to her knees and ripped the fabric, revealing a large, bloody gash. She pulled the cloth from her head and pressed it over the wound. Dear God, had she killed him? She shifted him to see if the bullet went through.

"It just grazed his side," she said breathlessly. Her gaze caught the green fire of the captain's and she looked away. Uncle Bernard ran up to join them. She tried to explain. "I thought he was going to attack Remi, so I pulled out my pistol. When I realized what was happening, and before I could lower it, he ran into me and it went off." She peeled the scarf back a little to see if the bleeding stopped. "I didn't actually intend to shoot him," she muttered. Surely they would have reacted in a similar manner.

But Conal was scowling at Bernard. "If ye had an ounce of sense in that head of yours, ye wouldn't let her carry a weapon of any sort."

Bernard returned the glare, pulling his own pistol out. "I'll thank you to keep your advice to yourself and remember your place in all this." Still, he nudged Stevie's pistol away from Conal, picked it up and shoved it into his pocket before staring curiously at the captain. "How did you know she was a woman?"

Conal tossed Stevie a lusty leer. "One of her more feminine parts cushioned my head when we hit, although for a moment I wasn't sure if it was a bollock or a breast, it was so small."

How dare he! He'd already known her gender. Stevie narrowed her eyes and opened her mouth to retort.

"Hoy, there!" a cheerful voice cut through the tension. Her older brother, Tristan a bottle in his hand, strolled up to the group. "Look what I found in the captain's cabin—what happened here?" Tristan's voice raised a notch as he took in the blood on both Stevie and Conal's shirts.

"Stevie accidentally shot the captain," Adrian said, taking the bottle from Tristan's hand and raising it to his lips.

She snatched the bottle from Adrian's giant paw. "Go find some clean rags." The last thing they needed was a tipsy lot.

"Is there a ship's surgeon?" Uncle Bernard asked the captain.

O'Brien gave him a sarcastic grunt. "Yes. He's with the helmsman back in the longboat."

Stevie rolled her eyes. Of all the rotten luck. "I'm not a healer. All I know is that whiskey cleans a wound and garlic helps to prevent infection." She held up the bottle. "I have this." She looked at Tristan. "Find some garlic, and the

surgeon's bag." She splashed some whiskey on the captain's wound.

"Mary, Mother of Christ!" Conal roared. He locked eyes with Bernard and glared. "Get her the hell away from me!"

Stevie set her jaw in irritation. "I'm trying to help you. Stop being so uncooperative."

He gave her an incredulous stare. "Stop being so uncooperative? Am I supposed to invite you to tea for taking my ship? You—"

"Watch your mouth," Bernard snarled. He gave O'Brien a swift kick, induced a grunt of pain from the captain.

Whatever he'd been thinking was no way to talk to a woman, even one dressed as a man. He might be big, strong and proud, but right now, she had the upper hand. She tossed another bit of whiskey on the gash, just to remind him, which elicited another roar of displeasure.

"Your wound can't be too dire, given you're capable of a bellow *that* thunderous," she said through her teeth, returning his death glare with one of her own. Whatever he'd been about to call her couldn't have been gracious. No one had ever almost talked to her that way before, although with her brothers and cousins always around, no one had dared.

"You're enjoying this," he ground out.

She gave him her most pious look, then and sloshed another splash of whiskey on the wound.

The muscles in O'Brien's jaw pulsed and he turned his attention back to Bernard, speaking through clenched teeth. "Either you get this sadistic *witch* away from me, or I swear I'll take a flying leap over the rail and end my misery once and for all, and you can sail this damned ship yourselves wherever the hell you desire, *with my compliments.*"