

New York Times Bestselling Author

*Kat
Martin*



*Night
Secrets*

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Chapter 1

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March 1803

Night was always the worst. Brandy stared out through the wavy glass panes that distorted the darkness, saw only her weary reflection, and wondered how much longer she could stand it.

As far back as she could remember, every day of her nineteen years, Brianne Winters had worked from the first gray hint of dawn till blackness curtained the mullioned windows of the White Horse Tavern.

"Brandy, girl, you had better stop daydreamin' and get back to work. Your papa will be back any minute and there's customers with empty tankards out there." Her best friend, Florence Moody, a slender, dark-haired woman six years older than Brandy, stood at the kitchen door, her thin face nearly obscured by steam. They had worked together so long, Flo seemed more a mother or an older sister than merely a friend.

Brandy smiled. "Sorry. I didn't mean to be gone so long. Old Salty Johnson is back in port. He was telling me about his trip down from Halifax. I guess they ran into some weather and one of the masts went down. Nearly sank the blasted ship."

Flo wiped her hands on the apron tied over her skirt. "Old Salty always could tell a tale. Don't worry yourself about it. We just now started getting busy. The Fairwind's dropped anchor and the crew has begun driftin' in. They'll be a handful tonight, seein' as they been at sea for nigh on two months."

Brandy groaned as she walked out of the kitchen and into the smoky, dimly lit taproom. "I swear Dalton's crew is the worst of the lot. I don't look forward to their arrival." The tavern was nearly a hundred years old, with heavy oak beams and flagstone floors. Pewter sconces lined the walls, casting shadowy candlelight against the smoke-darkened wood. Though her father loved the old place, Brandy hated it. It was dingy, she thought, smelled of stale beer, and the walls were cold and dank.

"They're a rowdy lot," Flo said, "and no mistake. We'll be sportin' bruises from our backsides to our knees come mornin'."

"Not me. I'm sick unto death of these damnable sailors and their pinching and pawing ways. The first man who lays a hand on me will be feeling the weight of a tankard against the side of his bead."

Flo just laughed. "Your papa won't much like that. Bad for business. He likes you to keep the sailors happy."

But Brandy didn't really care what her father liked. He certainly didn't care what she liked or wanted. All he cared about was his wretched tavern and making more money.

"I'm Big Jake Winters," he would say, "owner of the White Horse, finest tavern on the Charleston quay." He was always so proud of the place, a legacy he was building for his son. Only Big Jake never had a son.

In truth, his wife had died giving him his one and only heir, a petite daughter, with Ellen Winters's same red-gold hair. Nothing at all like the big strapping boy Jake had so desperately wanted. A second wife had birthed another girl, smaller even than Brandy, and so frail she hadn't lasted through the first Charleston cold. Frances Winters died of the yellow fever when Brandy was ten years old, and Big Jake finally resigned himself to what he saw as God's will.

The bitter fact was he would never have a son. A daughter would have to suffice, but Jake's resentment of the fact hovered like a huge, dark cloud over Brandy's head every minute of every day.

"You went to market this morning, didn't you?" she asked Flo. In a simple brown skirt that showed a bit too much ankle, a lace-up stomacher, and a scoop-necked white peasant blouse that exposed the tops of her breasts—the attire of the White Horse serving maids—Brandy leaned over a scarred wooden table to mop up a spilled tankard of ale, her single long braid sliding over one shoulder.

"Matter of fact, I just got back," Flo said. "We ran short of eggs. Picked some up along with some side pork for your papa's breakfast."

"So what interesting tidbits of gossip did you hear?"

"Bless me—I nearly forgot. I did hear a bit of news you'll want to hear."

"Good news, I hope. I could stand a little of that for a change."

Flo moved behind the wide plank bar to tighten the loose bung on a cask that had started dripping brandy. "Word is Seahawk's comin' in. Should be docking anytime now. Cap Ogden down to the lighthouse spotted her off the point, sailin' in toward the harbor."

Brandy's heart began thudding uncomfortably. Seahawk. Surely not. But her pulse inched up several notches just the same. "I thought Captain Delaine was headed back to England. I didn't expect we'd be seeing him again for at least a couple more months."

Flo shrugged her shoulders. She was a slender woman with broad hips and a wide, welcoming smile. "Wouldn't know about that. Cap sounded pretty sure, though. He don't make many mistakes."

Brandy's hand shook faintly. "No ... no he doesn't make many mistakes." Absently, she walked away, her mind on the big, full-rigged ship Seahawk and its handsome owner, Captain Marcus Delaine. Or more accurately, Captain Delaine, Lord Hawksmoor, his newly inherited title as much a surprise to him as it was to everyone

else.

Recalling his lean, dark, slightly arrogant profile, she thought that it probably shouldn't have been. He had always had a presence about him. His aristocratic blood was apparent in every gesture, every self-assured movement. He was born to command and it showed in every line of his darkly attractive face, from the high-carved cheekbones to the firm set of his well-formed lips.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, with narrow hips and not an ounce of spare flesh over his bones. He was solid and sinewy, his hair coal-black and slightly curly, always a little too long, feathering over the collar of his perfectly tailored navy blue coat. Marcus Delaine was a man among men. His crew knew it and so did Brandy Winters.

Which was why, for as long as she could remember, she had been a little in love with him.

"Better get movin', girl." Flo nudged her toward the bar. "Big Jake's comin' down the stairs."

Brandy sighed and nodded, pasted on a smile, and set to work. The afternoon slid past and evening crept in. The taproom had begun to fill up, mostly with Fairwind sailors. Smoke hung in patches above the wide plank bar, burning her lungs with the harsh smell of tobacco. Raucous laughter drifted into the heavy, age-darkened rafters.

The hours moved sluggishly past, a blur of bawdy jokes and fending off the sailors' roaming hands. God, she hated this place. If the Lord would grant her a single wish, it would be escape from the mindless drudgery and endless hours of boredom at the White Horse Tavern.

Someday, she thought wistfully. Someday, I'll find a way to leave.

The evening wore on. She waited on a table of British seamen and found herself enthralled by a story told by a sailor named Boggs. He'd been forced into service by an English press gang when he was just a boy. Oddly, over the years, the boy had become a man who loved the sea and its many adventures. Brandy listened with a sharp pang of envy, wishing as she had a hundred times that she had been born a lad who could run away to sea and seek a life of adventure, instead of being shackled like a prisoner to a dreary future in the White Horse Tavern.

The hour grew late. It was nearly midnight when Cole Proctor, first mate aboard the Fairwind, shoved through the swinging doors with some of his men and walked into the taproom. Brandy had been up since dawn. Her feet hurt, her eyes burned, and a dull ache stabbed into her lower back. Now, big, burly, loudmouthed Cole Proctor was here. Brandy wondered if the night could possibly get any worse.

Hoping he would take a seat on Flo's side of the taproom, she

slipped silently into the kitchen and peered through a crack in the door.

"What the devil do you think you're doin'?" Big Jake strolled up, his bushy salt and pepper brows drawn together in a scowl. "We've help enough in the kitchen. Get back out there where yer needed. There's customers a-waitin'. Get yerself back to work, or I'll be takin' a switch to yer fanny."

She started to argue, to ask him to let her stay hidden for a minute or two so she might avoid Cole Proctor and his too-friendly hands, but she knew it would do her no good. Big Jake was a strict disciplinarian and to him the customer always came first. His daughter was only a woman. A little mauling never hurt her and it was good for business. At times Brandy wondered just how far her father would go to ensure the success of the White Horse Tavern.

"Get along with ye, now." He gripped her arm so tight she winced, and dragged her back toward the door.

"I'm going, Papa." Unconsciously rubbing the red spot on her arm, she walked back into the room, heading straight for the table in the corner Cole Proctor had chosen, a place he had purposely selected on her side of the taproom.

"Good evening, Mr. Proctor." She forced herself to smile, being careful to stand just out of his reach. "What'll it be for you and your men tonight?"

"Well, now, look what we have here, mates." His eyes raked downward from the top of her head to the soles of her sturdy brown shoes. They lingered for a moment on her ankles, then crept upward to settle on her breasts. "What ya say, mates? Ain't she the prettiest bit of baggage this side of the Atlantic?"

She colored a little and her chin went up. Compliments from women-hungry sailors were hardly new, but Proctor's were always slightly crude. And none of them looked at her with the same naked lust the big first mate always did.

"I asked what it was you would like to have."

He laughed, long and lewdly. "Did you hear that, lads? The lady wants to know what it is that we'd like to have." A meaty hand snaked out and grabbed her wrist. She tried to pull away, but he was more than twice her size and his hold was unbreakable. With little effort, he dragged her down on his lap and wrapped a beefy arm around her waist.

"What we'd like, my little dove, is a big piece of you."

"Let me go—I have work to do." Brandy started to struggle but he merely laughed in that vulgar way of his. Clamping both her wrists together in one of his big hands, he settled her more squarely on his knees.

"No, sir, I can't think of a thing that would please me more than spreading those pretty white thighs of yours and burying my big,

hard—"

"That's enough, Proctor." Brandy's eyes slashed upward to the tall dark figure with the deep, forbidding voice. "Let the girl go."

Her cheeks were flaming. She felt embarrassed and humiliated, yet she had never been so relieved as she was to see Marcus Delaine.

"The girl asked me a question. I was only just giving her an answer. I'd advise you, Captain, to trim your own sails and stay the devil out of this."

Brandy squirmed but she couldn't break free. The captain watched her struggle and the hand at his side balled into a fist.

"I told you to let her go. I won't say it again."

Brandy bit her lip. Her father would be furious if she were the cause of a fight in the tavern. She forced her eyes to the captain's face, hoping she looked more composed than she felt. "It's all right, Captain Delaine. Mr. Proctor was only teasing. Weren't you ... Cole?" She said with what she hoped was a soft, cajoling voice that disguised the anger bubbling up inside her.

The big first mate cracked a lustful smile. "That's right, Captain. We was just bein' friendly-like. Nothin' for you to get all worked up about."

Eyes an intense midnight blue so dark they looked black speared into her. "Is that right, Miss Winters? Mr. Proctor is just being friendly?"

She nearly choked on the word. "Yes." The thought of Marcus Delaine believing she actually enjoyed the pawing attentions of a man like Cole Proctor made her stomach turn in disgust. But fear of her father's wrath was far worse.

He straightened, drawing himself up to his full, imposing height. "Then I shall have to beg your pardon." He made a slight bow, but his smile was hard-edged and cold. He started to turn away and she might have survived the moment with only a bit of humiliation. She might have been able to discreetly extricate herself from Cole's octopus-tentacled embrace if the beefy sailor hadn't chosen that moment to crudely pinch her bottom.

Fury swept her like a gale-force wind and all her good intentions flew right out the window. With a shriek, Brandy leaped to her feet, moving so swiftly the first mate lost his hold. She slapped him hard across the face.

"You are the most despicable, foulest creature I have every had the misfortune to meet. If you ever touch me that way again I swear I'll find a pistol and shoot you!"

She whirled away from him and smack into Marcus Delaine's broad chest. A corner of his mouth quirked upward in the barest hint of a smile. "I thought he was just being friendly."

Brandy flushed and backed a step away. "Cole Proctor wouldn't

know the first thing about being friendly. I just didn't want to cause any trouble."

"The fault was hardly yours."

"True, but that's the way my father would see it." She started to say something else, to thank him for his effort to intervene, when she heard Cole Proctor's chair scraping backward and turned to see him coming to his feet.

His thick fingers rubbed a reddened cheek. "You little hellcat, you hit me. I'll teach you what happens when you raise a hand against Cole Proctor." He reached for her but the captain pulled her out of harm's way and stepped between them.

"You had that slap coming, Proctor, and you know it. You want to teach someone a lesson, why don't you start with me?"

Big teeth flashed in a feral grin. "Now, there's a good idea. I'll take care of you, then haul the girl out back and deal with her."

"Her father might have something to say about that."

Proctor scoffed. "Big Jake don't give a damn about her. Odds are, if he thought she'd bring a high enough price, he'd sell her off for the night to the highest bidder."

Brandy's face went pale, and a muscle tightened in the captain's lean cheek. "Why don't we go outside?" he said softly. "Perhaps we can discuss the subject more fully."

But the beefy first mate had no intention of leaving the safety of his men. Instead he swung a roundhouse punch that Marcus Delaine neatly sidestepped, then a second powerful blow that would have sent a strong man to his knees. The captain dodged them both, avoided the chair the first mate tossed at his head, stepped in, and landed a crushing blow to Proctor's stomach that doubled him over.

A second hard punch, neatly delivered to the side of Proctor's jaw, sent him sprawling into a corner, his head thudding loudly against the wall. With a grunt of pain his eyes rolled back and the fight was over.

Unfortunately, by now every Fairwind crewman in the tavern was on his feet and itching to take up the gauntlet against the men in the crew of the Seahawk who had come in behind their captain. Someone swore, another curse followed, and the tavern erupted in chaos. Chairs flew through the air. Tankards of ale crashed against men's skulls. Brandy dodged an upended table and squeaked out a warning to Flo, who ducked a flying pewter mug and crawled to safety behind the bar.

By the time Big Jake Winters had the fighting under control, the inside of the tavern looked as if it had been through a hurricane. Though his men were only partly to blame, Captain Delaine offered to pay for the damage. Brandy's father eyed the small leather purse the captain set on the bar.

"I'll take yer coin for what's been done, but the payment for me

trouble will come from me daughter's hide." Gripping her wrist, he started dragging her toward the stairs. "'Tis past the time she learned the price of her high and mighty ways."

"This wasn't my fault," Brandy argued, setting her heels and pulling against him. "I didn't start this—Cole Proctor did."

"Your daughter is right. She was a victim, not the cause. It would be unjust for you to make her pay for something she had no control over."

Big Jake's jaw firmed up. His grip tightened painfully on her wrist. "She's trouble, just like her mother and every other woman I ever knew. Never should have paid for that fancy tutor. Thinks she's too good for the rest of us just 'cause she's got a little schoolin'."

"That isn't true. I—"

His palm cracked hard across her cheek. "Ye need to learn yer place, girl. I mean to see that ye do."

The captain's dark eyes locked on her face, which stung and had begun to turn red. The only sign of his anger was the muscle that throbbed in his cheek. Very slowly he shoved the pouch of coins on the bar in front of Jake Winters.

"The fault was mine and my crew's. If the girl is made to pay, it won't sit well with the men." He smiled but his lips were tight with warning. "Everyone knows the White Horse is the finest tavern on the quay. It would certainly be a shame if my men no longer felt welcome."

Jake Winters heard the words and the underlying threat that went with them. Marcus Delaine was a wealthy, powerful man. He was an earl and the owner of Hawksmoor Shipping. It wouldn't be simply the crew of the Seahawk Jake would be losing as customers but five other ships' crews as well—and anyone else under the captain's influence.

Her father clamped hard on his temper, but the ruddy color of his skin told Brandy how difficult a task it was. "Perhaps ye be right, Captain. Perhaps I was a bit too hasty." He flashed Brandy a menacing look and shoved her toward the stairs leading up to her room. "You've the captain to thank for sparing ye the beatin' ye deserve. The next time yer uppity ways bring trouble down on yer head, I promise ye won't be so lucky."

Brandy nodded, embarrassment colliding with relief. She gave the captain a grateful, trembling smile, and started up the stairs, her long copper braid bobbing against her back all the way. She wasn't a child anymore but her father treated her as if she were, and Marcus saw her that way as well. Why was it only men like Cole Proctor saw her for the woman she had become?

And how much longer would she put up with her father's tyranny before she decided to do something about it?

Not much longer, Brandy vowed. Not much longer at all.

* * *

Her chance came far sooner than she had imagined. It was fate, she thought, God's answer to one of her thousands of prayers. It happened the following morning as she was walking past an inn called the Pines, just a few doors down from the tavern. She had just stepped into the street when Marcus Delaine appeared through the carved front doors of the inn, striding off toward the spot where the Seahawk was docked.

Brandy watched his tall, leanly muscled frame moving with brusque authority and felt the same thread of warmth she always felt when she saw him. She hurried her steps, catching up to him as he crossed the street and began to walk along the quay.

"Good morning, Captain." She gave him a bright, sunny smile. "I saw you come out of the inn. I wanted to thank you for what you did for me last night in the tavern."

He slowed his long strides so she didn't have to run to keep pace with him. "I assure you, Miss Winters, it was my pleasure. Proctor has had that beating coming for a very long time." He smiled faintly. She noticed a slight bruise darkened the skin over one of his high cheekbones.

"I thought you were off to England. I didn't think to see you back in port for some time."

Black brows drew together above a fine, straight nose. "We had some problems with the rudder on our way back from Virginia. Had to have it replaced before we set sail for home."

He was so tall she had to crane her neck to look up at him. When she did, sunlight glinted on his wavy black hair. Brandy felt the oddest urge to run her fingers through it. "As I recall, you were having trouble with your ship the last time you were in port."

A hint of displeasure roughened his voice. "Bad luck seems to be dogging us lately. I hope that's going to change. In the meantime, we've contracted for a short sail to the Bahamas, a load of flour we took on in Alexandria, some timber, and a few other trade goods. We'll be returning here to pick up a load of cargo before we head back home."

Her pulse kicked up with a sudden thread of interest. "How long will you be gone?"

"If all goes well, less than a month. It isn't far to the islands. We'll off-load and return as quickly as we can."

Her pulse began beating even faster as an idea took root in her head. "You'll be traveling to the Bahamas, then coming straight back here?"

"That's right. We hadn't planned to make the run, but the money is good and with the setbacks we've suffered of late, we can certainly use it."

"When will you be leaving?"

"As soon as the rudder is put right. If all goes well, that should be the day after the morrow."

They had reached the landing where his ship was moored and the captain turned to face her. "Should I not see you again before the Seahawk sets sail, take care of yourself, Miss Winters." He smiled, a flash of white against his sun-darkened skin. "With luck the Fairwind will be leaving Charleston as well."

Brandy grinned, seeing in her mind's eye the captain's fist connecting with the first mate's jaw. "With luck."

He reached out and touched her cheek, ran his hand lightly over her hair. "How long have we known each other, Miss Winters?"

"The better part of ten years, I would say." She remembered the exact moment she had first seen him, a handsome young lieutenant in a British Navy uniform walking through the tavern's front doors. She was little more than a child back then, but still, he had intrigued her.

"You're growing up, lass. You'll be needing a husband soon, wanting a home and family of your own."

Brandy shook her head. "I don't want a husband—at least not yet. I want to see things, go places. I want a chance to live my own life before I settle down."

The captain looked at her with what might have been a trace of pity. He had heard her say those words at least a dozen times. "Independence is not an easy thing for a woman."

"I'll make it happen. You'll see."

He glanced toward the harbor, to the tall ship rocking gently, its huge spruce masts swaying in the wind. A seagull screeched high above his head. "You're a good girl, Brandy. You deserve to find whatever it is you want."

In that moment, Brandy knew exactly what it was that she wanted. She wanted to sail the seas with Marcus Delaine. She wanted the chance for adventure. And for the first time in her life, she was going to get what she wanted.

Brandy smiled. "Have a good trip, Captain."

He merely nodded and waved, his thoughts already drifting toward the tall ship and his men. Brandy watched his broad-shouldered frame disappear in that direction, then turned and raced back toward the tavern. Two days was all she had. Two days. It was scarcely enough time to make plans for a journey that could change the course of her life. It was a thrill just to think of it.

Brandy grinned and stepped up her pace.

* * *

"Well, Cap'n, what ye think?"

It was late in the afternoon. Standing on the dock next to the ship, Marcus studied the broken rudder that had been removed from the Seahawk and replaced.

"I don't know. If you look at the crack in the wood, the line seems a little too clean. There's a chance it could have been sawed, but there's no way to tell for sure. And these dents ... as if it might have been struck by a sledge. It's possible someone wanted the rudder to split. By weakening the wood, they could have helped it along."

Hamish Bass, first mate aboard Seahawk and Marcus's longtime friend, surveyed the huge piece of wood, cracked clear through, broken and totally useless. "Aye, that could be, Cap'n." He scratched his craggy gray beard. "In truth, with all that water passin' over it, workin' against the edges, it's hard to say. Could be it just looks that way."

Marcus raked a hand through his hair. "You're probably right. But this makes the third problem we've had in the past two months and I don't like it. I suppose I'm groping for anything that might pose an answer."

"Ain't many who'd have reason to do such a thing."

"No. A disgruntled crewman, perhaps. Someone with a grudge."

"You've a loyal crew, Cap'n. They know you're a fair man, and far more lenient than most. They're lucky to have a berth aboard Seahawk and most of 'em are more than grateful for it."

He nodded, pleased at the words. "It's cost us a little time, but with the extra load we'll be carrying to the Bahamas, we'll actually come out ahead."

Hamish grinned crookedly. "See? Things is lookin' up already."

Marcus smiled. "Perhaps you're right. I presume we'll be ready to sail with the tide."

"Aye, Cap'n. She'll be shipshape by then."

Marcus nodded once more and they turned and walked back to the gangway leading up onto the deck. Seahawk was a triple-masted, full-rigged ship, her hull sleek and fast, the flagship of the Hawksmoor Shipping fleet and the best vessel Marcus had ever sailed. He had owned her for the past two years. He was proud to own her, proud of the success he had achieved that allowed him to purchase such a beautiful ship.

When they reached the quarterdeck, he clapped the older man on the shoulder. "You had better get some rest, Hamish. You've the watch tonight, and tomorrow will be here before you know it."

The older man nodded and waved as he sauntered away. Leaning against the rail, Marcus smiled at his slightly bowlegged, rolling seaman's gait. Perhaps Hamish was right and their bad luck was behind them. Marcus hoped so. He'd turned thirty last month. For the past six years, since he'd been shot in the shoulder in a battle against the French and finally left the Navy, he had worked with single-minded purpose to build Hawksmoor Shipping into the successful enterprise it was.

A year ago, his older brother Geoffrey had drowned when a

bridge collapsed and his carriage went into the river. Marcus inherited the family title and a good deal of money, but it hadn't been that way in the beginning. He had built Hawksmoor Shipping from a shoestring inheritance he had received from his maternal grandmother. He had worked sixteen-hour days to make the company a success and he meant to keep it that way.

He stared out at the quay, feeling the slight chop of waves against the hull, enjoying the salty tang of the air, the smell of damp hemp and tar, the feel of the mist against his skin. He loved everything about his life at sea, the life he had so determinedly forged for himself. He had loved the ocean since he was a boy living in Hawksmoor House, high on the cliffs of Cornwall above the windswept water.

It was a life he would never leave, never give up, not for love nor money, nor even to satisfy his responsibilities as earl. His younger brother could see to that, could provide for the needed Hawksmoor heir as well. Marcus would never marry. There was no woman on earth who could possibly compete with the lure of the mistress he loved above all others.

Marcus thought of the sea as a beautiful woman who had captured his soul entirely, and he smiled.

Chapter 2

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"You're going to what?"

Brandy grinned. "I told you—I'm sailing to the Bahamas. We leave on the morning tide."

Flo sank down on the narrow bed in Brandy's small attic bedchamber above the tavern. "You're insane, if you even think about runnin' away, your father will kill you."

"I'm not running away. I'm going on a trip. I'll be back in less than thirty days. If my father wishes to kill me, he will have to wait until then."

"You're smilin'. I can't believe you think this is funny. What do you think Big Jake is gonna do when he finds out what you've done?"

"Perhaps he'll never find out ... at least not exactly. I'm leaving him a note. I'm telling him I've gone to visit Cousin Myra in Savannah. He'll be furious, of course, but I don't care. By the time I get back, I'll have figured out what I'm going to do with the rest of my life, and it won't be working my fingers to the bone for the next thirty years at the White Horse Tavern. I'm not throwing my life away so my father can squirrel away more money. Sweet God, I swear it is some kind of sickness. He's never satisfied. He never has enough, and I, for one, am through with it."

Brandy walked over to her friend. "The only thing I'm going to miss about this place is you, Flo." She grinned. "Are you sure you don't want to come with me?"

Flo sniffed her disapproval, a single dark brow arching up. "If I have to dress like that, there isn't a snowball's chance in Hades."

Brandy glanced down at the cabin boy's clothes she had finagled from Old Salty Johnson, a pair of course brown breeches and a full-sleeved homespun shirt. "I thought I looked rather dashing."

"Dashin'? You look like a street urchin. If it wasn't for those big cat eyes of yours—"

"I don't care what I look like as long as it gets me aboard that ship." She reached out and caught Flo's hand. "I wish you were coming, but I never really thought you would. I'm just praying I don't get caught while I'm trying to sneak aboard. Or that no one finds me until we're far enough out to sea that the captain can't bring me back."

Flo squeezed her hand. "He'll be furious, you know. Underneath that cool exterior, he's a harder man even than your father. God knows what he might do."

Brandy unconsciously shivered. Marcus Delaine had been kind to her over the years, but there was a ruthless side to his nature she

had glimpsed more than once. He was a man who didn't like to be thwarted. Clearly she would be doing so when she boarded his ship without permission and stowed away below.

She wondered what he would do to her once they were at sea and she made an appearance on deck. It wasn't a moment she looked forward to, yet whatever the consequences she would not be deterred.

"I have to do this, Flo. I've been waiting all my life for a chance like this. I have to find out what it's like in the world outside the White Horse Tavern. I have to discover what I really want to do with my life."

"Why can't you just want a husband and children like every other girl?"

"Why can't you?" Brandy asked.

"You think that isn't what I want?" Flo stood up from the bed. "There's nothin' in this world I want more than a husband and home of my own."

"You never said so—not in all these years. You've never shown an interest in any of the men who come into the tavern. I thought you weren't interested in marriage."

"Oh, I'm interested, all right." Flo glanced away. "Unfortunately, the man I want is already married."

"What?"

"That's right. I'm not proud of it. That's why I never said. But I been in love with William Brewster for years. He's the only man for me even if I can't never have him."

"But surely you could find someone else, someone who—"

"There is no one else. Not for me. Some people love only once. For me there's only Willie. You had best pray to God, you ever do fall in love, it'll be with a man who'll love you back."

Brandy said nothing more, but Marcus Delaine's handsome face rose into her mind. With it came an odd chill of apprehension. The journey ahead would be fraught with peril. Marcus Delaine and the fierce attraction she had always felt for him would surely be among them.

"I have to go." She plucked up the tattered woolen coat lying on the bed and crammed her arms into the sleeves. "I've got to find a way to board the ship without anyone seeing me. The crew will be returning sometime before midnight. I want to be safely hidden away before they get there."

Flo leaned over and hugged her. "Are you sure I can't talk you out of this?"

Brandy smiled. "What do you think?"

"I think you're crazy, but I told you that before."

"Wish me luck, Flo. Luck and a grand adventure."

"I wish you Godspeed and a safe journey home."

Brandy hugged her one last time. "Thank you, Flo. I'll see you in thirty days. With luck my father will be so glad to have me back he'll forgo whatever punishment he's come up with by then."

"Fat chance of that." Flo walked her down the back stairs, then stood waving as Brandy tossed her small bundle of clothes, her few days' supply of food and water, over her shoulder and crossed the street, heading off toward the docks.

Brandy turned to see her friend disappear inside the tavern, then continued on her way, her sturdy leather shoes thumping along the wooden dock. Most of the crew would be on shore leave for a couple more hours. She imagined Captain Delaine was already aboard and perhaps Hamish Bass, the first mate.

Her plan was simple. Dressed in her cabin boy's clothes, her hair tucked up under a brown woolen cap, she would simply board the ship in the darkness as if she were one of the more than forty crewmen returning aboard. She would make her way below without being seen and find a safe place to hide.

Standing at the bottom of the gangway, she took a deep breath, pulled the cap down low across her forehead, and started up the wide wooden plank, praying the rapid flutter of her heart wasn't really loud enough to hear. A sailor stood on deck at the opposite rail, but his back was turned in her direction. A pair of men played whist by the light of a lantern. In the distance she could hear a sailor trilling notes on a flute.

Brandy ignored them and kept on walking, heading for the passage that led down to the cargo hold in the center of the ship.

She had been aboard the Seahawk only once, when Hamish Bass had volunteered a tour. She'd been enthralled, of course, and even now she remembered the layout and nearly every passage.

Finding her way was easier than she had expected, and with so few crewmen aboard, no one paid her the least attention. The ladders were steep, the passageways dim. The hold was dank and colder than she remembered, but it was piled high with crates and boxes, kegs and hundreds of sacks of flour, and finding a comfortable hiding place wasn't really all that hard. She made a den for herself behind some wooden crates and lined it with bags of flour to insulate against the chill.

Most of the cargo was well secured, lines and ricking pulled and pounded tight to keep it from shifting. It was lit only by a lamp at each end, providing a meager barrier against the impinging darkness.

Brandy shivered and pulled her tattered coat a little closer around her. A rat skittered along the hull, chattering noisily as it ran. Seconds later, an insect crawled across her hand. Brandy suppressed another shiver.

Nothing worth doing is ever easy, she told herself. She was safely

hidden and ready to begin her great adventure. Still, she hoped she wouldn't have to stay in the hold too terribly long.

* * *

The winds kicked up the first day out of port and the seas turned rough. Marcus stood at the helm, his legs splayed against the roll of the ship, staring off toward the horizon. Flat gray clouds hovered above a white-capped sea. Distant lightning flashed, but the thunder remained elusive, too far away to hear.

"Looks as if she might blow up a bad one," Marcus said to Hamish.

"Aye, Cap'n, that she could."

"Send one of the men down to check the cargo, make sure the lines are secure."

"Aye, that I'll do." Hamish shuffled off in that rolling gait of his, his long gray hair fluttering beneath the bottom of a woolen cap. He disappeared out of sight and Marcus returned his attention to the sea.

Like a beautiful woman, he thought as he had before, untamed, passionate, and willful. Strangely enough the notion brought a different image to mind, a sweetly smiling face and thick red-gold hair, full red lips, and amber eyes, slightly tilted up at the corners.

He scoffed at himself. Not a woman, merely a girl. True, she had the body of a woman, a tiny waist and high round breasts, a trim pair of ankles, and, he imagined, a tight little derriere. But Brianne Winters was young yet, innocent and incredibly naive. He was surprised he had thought of her at all, surprised it was her face he had imagined instead of the dark-haired woman he had slept with when he had arrived in port, a lusty widow who had skillfully satisfied his baser needs.

Perhaps it was Brandy's spirit, for in truth he admired her, found himself smiling at the memory of her clash with the Fairwind's first mate. She was a fiery little thing—not yet a woman, he reminded himself once again.

Still, her image lingered softly in his mind as he stared out over the water.

* * *

The ship rolled sideways, rose on a wave, poised there for an instant, then dropped away. Brandy's stomach dropped with it, turned over, and lurched upward. She barely made it to her knees in time to heave into the bucket she had scavenged when she realized she was going to be sick. That was two days ago—or was it three? It felt more like twenty. She couldn't remember the last time she had eaten, yet she continued to wretch into the bucket as if there were actually still something left in her stomach.

Trembling, she lay back on her makeshift pallet, resting her head against the hull. Her cap was long gone, her braid hanging limply

against her shoulder. She was so weak she could barely lift the flagon of water she had brought. She took a few tentative sips, felt the cold water hit her empty stomach, and immediately regretted it.

She groaned as she leaned toward the bucket and forced up another dry heave. In the back of her mind, a slight noise registered, then grew louder, but she was too sick to put the signals together.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" The short man jerked off his cap and scratched his thinning gray-brown hair. "A stowaway. Ain't seen the like in years. What the bloody devil is ye doin' down here?"

Brandy groaned again, this time with disgust at herself for not being more careful. She knew the little man standing over her, recognized his pork-chop side-whiskers and thin, mouse-brown hair. Joshua Dobbs, one of the Seahawk crewmen who came into the tavern.

She turned her head to look up at him. "How many ... how many days have we been at sea?"

The little man sucked in a breath. "Why, I know you! You're Miss Brandy—from down to the White Horse Tavern!"

"How many days, Mr. Dobbs?"

He scratched his head. "Three days, miss."

Brandy groaned. She was sure it had been at least five.

"Cap'n Delaine, he's gonna be real unhappy when he finds out what you gone and done."

Brandy reached out a shaky hand and caught the little man's arm. "You can't tell him, Mr. Dobbs. Please ... you mustn't tell him yet. In two more days we'll be too far out to sea to go back. I want to go with you to the islands. I have to."

Joshua Dobbs just shook his head. "Couldn't do that, miss. Cap'n would be real put out with me, I didn't tell him you was down here."

"Please, Mr. Dobbs, couldn't you just pretend you didn't see me ... just for a couple more days?" She tightened her hold on his arm. "I could pay you. I've saved a little money. I could—"

"It ain't the money, miss. It's just that the cap'n—"

She broke away from him then, leaning over the bucket, retching miserably in front of Joshua Dobbs.

"You don't look so good." He left her a moment and returned with a tin cup of water. He dampened his handkerchief in the cup and handed it to her.

Brandy accepted it gratefully. "Thank you." She washed her face with a trembling hand and lay back in her pallet. "Just one more day, Mr. Dobbs. Please ... just give me one more day." The ship rose on a wave and Brandy's eyes drifted closed. She was so tired ... so unbearably tired.

Joshua Dobbs stood over her. Poor little thing. So small. So pale. He remembered her well. Brandy Winters had served him many a

time at the tavern. She always had a smile for him, always made time to listen to one of his stories. He remembered how her eyes would light up whenever he talked about his adventures, the prettiest light brown, they were, so shiny they almost looked golden.

He'd always felt sorry for her, the way her father treated her, like she was no better than a servant. He'd whipped her, Josh recalled, just for standin' outside too long, listening to one of his tales.

Poor little thing. What would it hurt if he helped her just this once? What would it hurt?

Josh glanced around. No one was near. If he got her a little broth and some crackers she'd feel better. She could face the captain then, and like she said—maybe it would be too late to take her back home. He wondered if she was running away from her father. If she was, Josh didn't blame her. And he decided he would help her as long as he could.

* * *

Brandy mustered a weak smile for the little man who had helped her through another miserable day. The storm had worsened, but thanks to him, she felt a little better. The crackers Josh Dobbs brought had helped to settle her stomach, though she still didn't dare try to eat.

He waved at her as he scurried away, staying only minutes for fear someone would see him. For his sake, she had tried to hold down a bit of broth, but it had come right back up. Surely by tomorrow the storm would abate and she would be able to eat, get back a little of her strength. She propped herself against the hull, huddled beneath the blanket Josh had brought her. She couldn't remember when she had ever been so cold.

Still, the prospect of going on deck, of facing the captain's fury, had begun to hold little more appeal than staying below.

The ship creaked and moaned. It rose on a wave and dropped into a trough, and she heard the unexpected sound of splintering wood. A jolt of alarm slid through her and she braced herself against the hull. The ship leaned sideways, more wood snapped, and alarm swelled into a sharp stab of fear. One of the ropes that held a stack of boxes in place just a few feet away began to groan, and she looked upward, gasping as the heavy boxes shifted, stretching the line so taut it started to quiver.

Sweet God, something was happening to the ship, and whatever it was, it wasn't good. As weak and unsteady as she felt, Brandy drew herself up and peered into the darkness, trying to discover the problem and decide what she should do. Her heart was hammering, pounding out a warning, yet she forced herself to stay calm. She trusted Marcus Delaine to captain the ship and keep them safe. She had nothing to fear, she told herself, yet her pulse beat wildly just