

Cynthia Zeuli

WEST INDIES

The Legend of La Tormenta



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By

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BOUND BY BLOOD

SUCCULENT CRIMSON

Dedication

For the Crew of the Blackheart

The Legend of La Tormenta

Introduction

When the little girl first heard the story, she was skeptical. After all, so many bits of it rang as questionable, or unbelievable, or contradictory of the history lessons she had been taught. Still, she accepted that the tale had been presented to her as a legend. It didn't matter how much of it was strictly true. A legend had its roots in history, perhaps, but it was a history painted with a glossy brush. It was history made to shine with the embrace of not only the natural and normal, but with those parts of life's mysteries which could not be construed strictly as fact.

Once a time has passed and an adventure has ended, all that truly remains of it is our memory. If we choose to color that memory gold instead of grey, does that make it a lie? Does it make it lose its value? Or does it increase in strength, given life by those who breathe beauty and desire into its ghostly folds?

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She wanted to believe it, so she did, accepting the good, the evil, the beauty and the terror of the tale. In the end, the truth of it would be revealed, or so she hoped, by her heart. After all, that is where legends live—in the heart. There tales are polished by our affections and given weight by our love of them. We make them true, no matter how fanciful they seem.

That, she decided, as she picked up her pen many years later to commit the tale to writing, was what really mattered. She wondered if her own memory of the story, and the ones who had told it to her, would paint it in even deeper hues as at last it took solid form upon a sheet of parchment. In a way, she hoped it would. She wanted to leave her own mark on events in which she had no place, but had ultimately formed her into the woman she had become. The tale had been a gift to her, and now she would, in turn, present it to all the world.

And with a few drops of ink spattered upon the page like blood, so began the revelation of the Legend of Tessie La Tormenta – Pirate Queen, Scourge of the Caribbean and Terror of the Seven Seas, written here. Make of it what you will, and perhaps it will haunt your own memory like a half-remembered lullaby, until you wonder whether you might have actually been there, yourself, sailing with the crew of the *Pilfering Pussycat*. After all, who is to say you were not?

Chapter One

Thunder crashed, lightning lit up the sky, and Nate Black pulled his musty gray coat tightly around his ample frame as he followed the captain towards the Lusty Mermaid Inn. The torrential rain slammed down, soaking them to the bone. A lone, flickering lantern hung over the tavern door, spitting and hissing with near futility beside the cracked wooden sign depicting a well-endowed siren of the sea lifting a tankard.

As far as Nate was concerned, the last place Captain Santiago ought to be tonight was a pub, particularly this one. Still, Nate was the quartermaster, second in command, and considered the captain a friend besides, so he was bound to follow. In his opinion, they ought to get back to the ship, and fast. Get out of Port Royal, off of Jamaica. The large British naval fortress that dominated the town gave him the willies, clear down to his boots.

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“Dangerous business, bein’ here, Cap’n,” he said, shaking his head.

“I need a drink,” Captain Santiago growled.

“There’s rum on board the *Pilfering Pussycat*.”

“Aye, but not nearly enough.”

The captain reached for the door of the tavern, but Nate stepped in front and blocked the path. He had to make one last attempt before they embarked on this foolhardy venture. In frustration he raked a hand through his thick thatch of well-silvered brown hair and stroked his clean-shaven round chin.

“Captain,” he said, enunciating the word clearly for once, “You an’ me is clearly less than respectable folk. This port ain’t friendly to our sort, not any more, what with the new governor and all. We’re taking a risk being here, maybe even risking the whole crew havin’ our ship out there in the harbor so close to shore. Might I mention seein’ yer face on a wanted poster? As well as me own!”

“Terrible likenesses. And in any event, I am well aware that Port Royal is not friendly to pirates.”

“Shhh! That ain’t a word to be flingin’ about.”

“Feeling cowardly this evening, Nate?”

“Yer cruel. Ain’t usually so cruel.”

“There was a hanging today,” the captain said in a low, dangerous voice.

Nate shivered. “Pirate?”

“Aye.”

“That only makes our bein’ here all the worse.”

“I suppose.”

Nate’s big hand clutched into a fist. “Listen, Cap’n, ye ain’t usually so close-mouthed. You an’ me, we’re friends. I’ve stuck with you through many a storm, as well’s ye know...but

we won't be friends much longer unless ye confess."

"Craig's dead."

With the captain's words, thunder crashed once more, so Nate was not all together certain he had heard correctly. He stuck his pinky finger in his ear, twisted it lightly back and forth, wiped off the yellow residue on his sleeve, then stared at Santiago to confirm.

"Craig's dead?"

"Yes."

"Which Craig?"

"How many Craigs do you know?" snarled the captain.

"There's Crab-arse Craig from Trinidad, and Smelly Craig, that fellow what used to sail with the crew of the *Bellerophon*," said Nate, counting them off on his fingers. He could think of a few more but it was clear that the captain was losing patience with the recitation.

"Think I care about that sorry lot? It was our Craig. *My* Craig. The governor had him hanged."

"The governor!" Hearing the news was like a punch to the gut. *No, not Craig.*

Captain Santiago nodded slightly. "But I know who was really behind it."

"You don't think it were—"

"I don't think. I know."

Nate shook his head and swore softly. "By the powers."

"Now, get out of my way and let me into that pub. Come with me if you like. I intend to drink until I hit the floor, and if the devil takes me, so be it."

"More like to be the navy takin' ye than the devil, Cap'n," Nate protested, but he stepped aside and they entered the tavern.

The air inside the hall was hazy with the thick smoke of

cigars and pipes, and a brawl was already in progress. So much for the great clean-up of Port Royal and this tavern, Nate thought. Perhaps they would be safe enough here after all, and surely they would leave after a couple of hours. Until then, he would watch out for the both of them. The captain strode boldly through the middle of it, not flinching in the least. Not a flying fist touched Santiago. Nate sidled up to the bar and demanded a bottle, as he knew he would be expected to procure one. He watched the captain evict the patrons of a rear table with the silvered flash of a knife and take it over. He shivered. He did not want to be on Santiago's bad side tonight. Not ever, really, but especially not tonight.

"Governor's men about, mate," the burly barkeeper muttered as Nate shoved a worn gold coin at him. He wore a dirty rag tied across his forehead and a sweat-stained shirt of indiscernible color. Picking up the coin, he examined it, nodded in satisfaction, and tucked it into his apron. He met Nate's eye. "Commander Vyce patrols these parts. So's you know."

Nate felt like rats were gnawing at the inside of his belly. "Vyce?" he asked casually, playing innocent though he knew the man better than he would care to admit.

"Aye, Alexander Vyce, governor's right hand man. Don't care much for pirates."

"What makes you think I'm a pirate?" Nate said, giving him a steely look.

"You an' yer friend ain't from around here, are you?"

"Not when we can avoid it."

The barkeep nodded. "Ought to avoid it is all's I'm saying."

"Why are you warning me?" Nate asked. The barkeep set two pewter mugs down on the bar next to the bottle.

"You paid well enough. Sides, I know who ye are. I've

seen the posters. Ye hear about the hanging today? Ye hear who it was?"

Nate nodded, took the bottle, and slunk off to the back table. The conversation had left a foul taste in his mouth that only rum might dispel. He set the bottle down with the two tankards, noting that they were of questionable cleanliness, but then again, everything in the tavern was of questionable cleanliness, and Nate wasn't so very concerned with the subject himself. Captain Santiago took the bottle and drank straight out of it. The captain's hat fell to the floor, releasing a long spill of glossy dark hair. Nate bent automatically to pick it up, setting it on the table beside their elbows.

"Tessa," he began, taking a deep breath, but she cut him off.

"Don't call me that. Not here. Not tonight," she said, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand.

"Aye, Cap'n. As ye like."

No matter how often he looked upon her, Nate couldn't get over his attraction to her, attraction that would never come to fruition. He'd known her nearly ten years and was almost like a father to her, he supposed, despite the fact that he wasn't nearly old enough to be. Tessa Santiago, captain of the *Pilfering Pussycat*. She had eyes darker than the storm raging outside of the tavern, a mouth obscenely lush and red, and far too much cleavage to pass for a man, except in the dankest of taverns on the nastiest of nights when she wore the heavy green coat that was the only souvenir she had saved from the man who had taught her to be a pirate.

Well. Almost the only souvenir. He thought of the map, then banished the thought. Lot of good it did them, having a map that couldn't be deciphered.

Nate fidgeted with his empty cup, and the captain tilted

the bottle to pour a stream of the sweet, aromatic liquid into it. Nate inhaled deeply and licked his lips, then watched Tessa put the bottle to her own. He lifted his mug and sipped, letting the rum warm his insides. It was like a sigh of relief, but he dared not imbibe too deeply, not if Vyce might be about. One of them would have to be thinking clearly, and unfortunately, he was that one. He wanted to speak to her, wanted to tell her how sorry he was, wanted to tell her he knew what she was feeling even if maybe he didn't, but he knew she didn't want to hear those things.

"I saw him fall, Nate. I couldn't save him," the captain said after what seemed an interminable amount of time. The bottle of rum was half empty. "I can still hear the sound of his neck breaking. It echoes inside my head. I should have gone forward, should have tried to stop it, but I was too late."

"And well you didn't! You'd have been up there beside him," Nate exclaimed, his eyes going round. "Why didn't you tell me that was where you was going today? I'd have come with you. Maybe we could have saved him."

"There was no way we could have saved him, and you know I don't say that lightly." She sighed and put her hat back on. Nate was glad. All of her long shiny black hair attracted too much attention. "Perhaps if we'd arrived yesterday."

She looked down at the table and Nate knew she was doing her damndest to hide what she felt. He wondered if she would cry in private back in her cabin on the ship. He had never seen her cry, no matter what she'd had to face and there had been no small amount of hardship in her life. She'd lost her family, her home, friends, shipmates—now Craig.

"How did they take him?"

"I don't know," she sighed. She didn't look at Nate. "I

don't need to know. It doesn't matter. Knowing how they took him won't bring him back."

"You think it were the commander."

"I'm certain of it."

"Barkeep says he's around."

"Good. I hope we run into him. I'll slit him open from stem to stern," Tessa growled.

"Foul's the man who could do such a thing."

"There are those who would not agree with you. After all, Craig was a pirate." A hint of ironic bitterness resonated in her tone.

"One of the best."

"In that you are right, my friend." Tessa frowned. "Nate, this bottle is empty."

"So it is. It must be time for us to go."

"It is time for you to go. Go to the bar, and fetch me a second bottle. And a third, while you're at it."

"You won't be able to walk."

"So you carry me. It won't be the first time. I'll pretend not to notice when you grope my arse."

"I'd not do such a thing," Nate said, grinning.

"Would you not?"

"Nay, Cap'n. I've far too much respect for ye."

"Pity. Tonight's the night I might let you."

"You would?" Nate perked up.

"Did you know Craig was my husband?"

Nate's jaw dropped. She grinned and reached across the table, closing his mouth for him with a finger. "Yer what, Cap'n?"

"I'll take that as a no."

"When did that happen?"

"Two, three years ago? I don't recall," Tessa said. "The

blessed event occurred one drunken night in a tavern in some rancid little port or other. Someone put a pistol to Craig's head, if I recall. Never did have a honeymoon. And of course, I haven't seen him in six months, until... until today."

Her voice cracked. She tilted the bottle to her mouth again, but it was still empty. Her pretty face twisting into a snarl, Captain Santiago hurled the bottle against the wall where it shattered. Almost no one took notice of this.

"Captain, yer creatin' a ruckus."

"Get me another bottle, Nate. Now!"

"Do ye intend to drink until ye give up yer ha'penny, then?"

"I'll make myself sick if I want to. Rum, Nate!"

There was no use arguing with her. Nate got up and paid for two more bottles. This time the barkeep did not attempt to give him anymore sage advice, and for that he was glad. He wished some of the crew had come ashore. He could use help getting her out of here. What would they do if Alexander Vyce decided to raid this place? Maybe the captain had a death wish tonight, but Nate did not.

"What will it take to get you to drink these on the ship?" Nate demanded, setting them down in front of her. She ignored him, pounced on one of the fresh bottles and took a long pull. Tessa swayed slightly in her seat. She had swallowed a lot of rum, even for her.

"Too late. I've already started drinking it here."

"Tessa, please, just let's go."

"I've warned you; don't call me that tonight, Nate!"

Nate sighed. "Captain Santiago, we really ought to get back to the *Pussycat*."

Before Tessa could argue with him any further, the door to the tavern banged open, though this still failed to attract

the attention of many of the noisy patrons. It did, however, manage to swivel the head of the drunken pirate. She turned to stare, her expression blank, her normally tanned skin growing pale.

“Craig,” she whispered.

Nate squinted at the door, his blood like a frozen river in his veins. A tall, imposing figure stood in the doorway. Lightning flashed and Nate had to rub his eyes. For a split second, he, too, thought it was the pirate standing there. He heard the thud of Tessa’s head hitting the table as she passed out. The thunder rolled and crashed, barely audible over the tavern noise.

Commander Alexander Vyce of the British Royal Navy stood in the doorway of the Lusty Mermaid. The uniformed officer scoured the room with eyes sharp as broken glass. Those eyes lit on Nate and he smiled coldly. His gaze flicked over to Tessa’s still form. Nate looked around urgently, but there was no back door, no way out, no way to get Tessa out of here. He did the only thing he could. He stood up and stepped in front of the table. Vyce strode through the room as fearlessly as Tessa had earlier, but the room fell silent in his wake. Others looked towards the door, but the commander had not arrived alone. A platoon of his men now blocked the exit.

“Well, well,” said Vyce, towering over Nate. “If it isn’t ‘Nasty’ Nate Black and Tessie Santiago, known as La Tormenta, captain of the *Pilfering Pussycat*, who calls herself the scourge of the Spanish Main.”

Nate clenched his hands into fists. He was surprised that Vyce knew their names—even their nicknames. Nate lifted his chin, his jowls wobbling as he set his jaw and sneered. “Yer in a fine mood for someone who had his twin brother

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hanged today.”

Commander Vyce threw his head back and laughed.

Chapter Two

Tessa dreamed.

Madrid. Her sixteenth birthday, ten years ago. Her father had a wonderful new surprise. Colonel Diego Santiago had been gifted by the king with a tiny island in the Caribbean. It was perilously close to the British settlement on Jamaica, but her father did not fear the British nor the other dangers in the strange new land to which he was taking his wife and two daughters, along with a brigade of Spanish soldiers and servants who would colonize the small spit of land with them.

Tessa and her sister Louisa had watched for months as the ships were built, the supplies purchased, the arrangements made. Their mother prayed and cried. How were they to live so far from friends, family, from Spain? Sometimes Louisa cried with her mother, but Tessa only felt excited. She could see no future for herself as a nobleman's wife. In the Caribbean

she would have the chance to find something new. She didn't know what, but that almost didn't matter.

Slaves were purchased for the journey. Most were black, some were Spanish peasants thrown into the pauper's prison in Madrid, but one was white. Her father thought it amusing to purchase an Englishman. He was a pirate, they said, lucky to have escaped death due to a drunken judge who sentenced him instead to a lifetime of slavery. The pirate was twenty-three, interminably old to Tessa's mind. His hair was long and black, streaked with hints of auburn, as if he had caught rays of sunlight in it. He was not very tall, was scrawny, underfed, had a beaten look about him, but his dark brown eyes had a sparkle, a look of determination in them. He smiled at Tessa boldly and she saw the flash of a gold tooth. She simply shook her head in feigned disgust. Secretly, she was fascinated.

"He will try to escape at the first chance he gets," Tessa predicted to her father.

Colonel Santiago laughed and tousled her hair. "Then his life will be short. He is said to be a good sailor. What better protection on the high seas than a pirate?"

Diego made a deal with Craig. If he served the Santiago family faithfully for five years, he would have his freedom. His name would be cleared. He would be a free man. Craig agreed to this, but Tessa didn't believe him. She watched him, secretly dubbing herself the guardian of her father's property. Sometimes he watched her watching him, always seeming amused, but mostly he ignored her.

On board the galleon, Craig was transformed. No more a humble slave, but master of the ocean. He was given the run of the ship, as there was nowhere for him to escape, and Diego was counting on his skills to aid the crew. Filled out, cleaned up, his cuts and bruises healed, the long, dark hair tied back,

Tessa grudgingly admitted to herself that she found Craig attractive. He was charming, witty. He told her long stories of his adventures that she didn't believe a word of. Had he really been a pirate, or was he simply a master of the tall tale? She wondered.

She fancied sometimes that she fell in love with him on the night of the storm. They were close to Jamaica by then, but still far enough away to be without sight of land. All day the sailors had looked concerned, commenting often on the smell of the wind and the color of the sky. Only Craig had not seemed to be worried, so Tessa had not worried either. When the wind began to pick up and the galleon began to roll and pitch like a toy in a tub, a wild energy had filled her. She had looked at Craig and known that it possessed him as well.

They would have been lost in the tempest without him. The crew scrambled about the ship as the black squall hit. Every man on board was needed to keep them from going down, from sinking into the interminable roiling waters, including her father. The captain and the first mate couldn't handle the ship, but Craig could. He took the wheel, laughing in the face of the rain and the wind and the darkness. He held her steady, shouted orders that the men obeyed from fear for their own lives.

Tessa was meant to be below decks, praying and crying with her mother and sister. She crept above, knowing full well it was too dangerous to be there. She clung to the deck, fought her way to the wheel. She slipped and fell in the water, soaked to the bone, but there was no fear in the storm for her. She shared Craig's ebullience. He saw her there, but instead of telling her to go below, he flashed her that golden grin.

From that night on, he'd called her Tessie La Tormenta, "The Storm."

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The time aboard the galleon seemed like a dream, and Tessa felt more sorrow for the end of the voyage than relief when they reached the Caribbean. She knew she would miss being aboard the ship, though she would be glad to be away from the stench of the bilge and the teeming rats. She had never seen anything the color of the Caribbean waters. The magnificent mix of turquoise and azure and lime waves left her breathless. The warm temperatures that made her mother and sister grow faint only roused her blood. Yes, this held more promise of freedom than did Madrid, but not nearly as much as the ship seemed to offer.

The house was built and waiting for them when they arrived at Isla Allegra, Island of Happiness, so christened by her father, who wished fervently for happiness for his family, and peace, and prosperity. The grounds and farm needed tending, and the slaves were set to work on the land, Craig included. Tessa watched him change once again. He did as he was told, but he became sullen, his eyes wandering to the sea. She hung around him, watched him whenever she could, but he rarely spoke to her.

Slowly lust for the sea began to ebb, and Tessa found that she loved the island. She loved the hot climate, the morning breezes, the exotic plants and fruits. Her mother and sister wilted in the heat, but Tessa thrived in it. As in all things, her father indulged her, glad to see her blossom like a tropical flower that had been only a green stalk until now. The proprieties she had known in Madrid were lifted here, at least in her heart. Her mother tried to enforce them, but her father turned a blind eye to her rampant fiery ways. She felt wild. She felt free. For her Isla Allegra was freedom. For Craig it was the opposite. It killed her to watch him become an empty shell while she exploded into bloom.

“Let him go,” she begged her father.

“This one needs to learn to fulfill his obligations, to keep his word. Five years is not so long, Tessa.”

Tessa’s seventeenth birthday came on another hot afternoon. Craig was working in the north field. He took off his shirt, and she watched sweat pouring down over his bronzed skin. She had taken to sneaking food to him, and occasionally books, or rum, or her father’s fine rolled cigars. At first she had been surprised to learn that Craig could read, as none of the other slaves did. This only served to remind her that she knew little about him, or where he had come from, with the exception of the stories he had told her of his dubious piratical escapades. She had hoped the books would distract him when he couldn’t sleep late at night. She saw him from her window sometimes, wandering the island in the shadows of the bright, star-filled nights. Today she brought lemonade.

“Like the rum better,” he said, grinning at her.

“Why don’t you run?” she blurted out.

“Gave my word. ‘Sides, your father gave me an offer I can’t refuse. True freedom. Have me name cleared.”

“If the wait doesn’t kill you.”

“Why do you care?” he sounded amused.

She kissed him, because words were not good enough to explain. He kissed her back. Told her that tasting her was more dangerous than running. Kissed her again. She wanted to give him a reason to go on living. She wanted to be that reason. Heat spiraled between them. The rasp of stubble against her tender skin made her ache. His tongue stroked and soothed hers. The world seemed to stop, and her heartbeat resonated in her flesh like a foreign drum.

She gave herself to the handsome pirate willingly. She didn’t expect to love him so much, but she was young and

didn't know any other way to feel, didn't know how to tell the urges of the body and the soul apart. The feelings she had developed onboard the ship emerged once more and grew into something else, something foreign and wonderful. And now, close to waking, knowing it was all a dream, so many years and many lovers later, she felt certain that she would never love anyone else.

The press of the warm body against her felt familiar. Her head was heavy and throbbing. Hangover, she thought. All that damned rum. Devil's tool. Better be some nearby when she could get her eyes open to look for it. Was she back on the ship? She certainly felt like it. Had Nate carried her home? Tessa couldn't remember a thing. She wanted to open her eyes, but they protested.

Sleep, her mind whispered. *Don't think. Don't remember.*

Don't remember what?

Hands on her body. Fingers playing intimately over her curves. Cupping her breasts. Teasing her nipples—a thumb dragged with torturous slowness over each peak, followed by a soft, wet tongue. She shivered. It almost made up for the hangover. The trail of the tongue down her body, delving into her navel, dipping into the most private recesses. Tessa flung her leg out, granting deeper access. The small shocks of pleasure rippling through her body forced her eyes open.

She could not focus, not yet. The ceiling above her swam in and out. The chandelier above the bed swayed slightly, its crystals clinking musically together. There was no chandelier in the captain's cabin aboard the *Pilfering Pussycat*. Where was she? Who was tasting her? Her lips parted, she gasped for breath, looked downwards.

He lifted his dark head and smiled at her.

“Craig,” she whispered.

“I’ve come back to you, Tessie,” he said. He slid up her body, twined his arms around her. She felt the hardness of his sex pressing against her thigh.

“My head hurts,” she mumbled.

Her vision began to clear. She stared at the chandelier, the decorative ceiling. She ran her hand over the blue velvet coverlet. It was embroidered in gold, fancier than anything the two of them had ever possessed. The bed was enormous, rife with feather pillows. Heavy mahogany furniture cluttered the room. An armoire, a desk covered with papers. The door to the armoire was open. Inside, Tessie saw the unmistakable blue jacket of a navy officer. Pants thrown over a chair. Boots on the floor beside the bed.

“I’ve got to tell you something, love,” Craig said.

Tessie stared at him as she remembered. Craig was dead. She’d watched him hang, for Heaven’s sake! She’d seen his body taken away for the gibbets. It had been no trick, no illusion, he was unmistakably dead. So how could he be here making love to her? She didn’t like the only conclusion she could arrive at, not at all.

He smiled at her, and there was no flash of gold. The teeth were all even, all white. His hair was drawn back into a tail. It was black, but the auburn highlights were barely visible. He was pale, as if he spent too much time indoors. He was slightly more rugged, more muscular than she remembered him. He was not Craig.

“Alexander!” she hissed.

“Tessie, listen to me.”

She punched him in the nose. There was a sickening crunch as she mashed it in, and blood poured down from it, splashing all over her naked breasts. Pushing away from him, Tessie flung herself out of the bed, falling onto the floor with

a thump that was certain to bruise her posterior. Desperately she looked around for her clothing—and a weapon.

“You bastard!” she cried. “Do you plan to have me hanged after you rape me?”

He was gasping in pain, lips and chin scarlet with blood. “It’s not what you think. You have to listen to me!”

“You killed the only man I ever loved,” Tessie growled. She found her pants, got into them as quickly as she could, pulled her shirt over her head, ignoring the pounding throb of her hangover and the fact that she was staining it with his blood. “You had your own brother hanged, Commander Vyce.”

“Don’t remind me,” he sighed.

She let out a screech and flew at him again. He caught her by the wrists, flipped her onto her back on the bed, and flung his leg over her, effectively pinning her down. She struggled beneath him, aiming for his most tender and very much exposed parts, but he was taller and stronger than her. She had no chance of physically overpowering him without a weapon. Belatedly she spotted his sword leaning against the wall. She should have grabbed that instead of concerning herself with dressing.

“Kill me if you like. I don’t care. I have nothing to live for with him gone,” she spat at him.

He arched an eyebrow, but grinned as well, as if this pleased him. “Not even the fabled treasure of La Boca Roja?”

Tessa blinked. “How do you know about that? Did Craig tell you?”

“In a way.”

“Did you torture it out of him?”

“No!”

“Ah, it is just a legend anyway,” Tessie said. “A fable.”

“You have the map to this fable.”

Tessie’s heart hammered against her throat. She was certain that only two living people knew about the map besides herself: Craig and Nate. No, make that one. Craig was dead. She didn’t answer. Both men had sworn to take the secret to their graves. She had never known Craig to go back on his word, ever.

“Where’s Nate?”

“Safe.”

“Safe, as in the jail, to be hanged at your convenience?”

“Safe, as in back on board the *Pilfering Pussycat*. I let him go last night.”

“Why?” she demanded suspiciously.

“Didn’t need him. It’s you I need.” He looked at her with what she imagined was meant to be tenderness, but it was hard to tell with his nose swollen and his face crusting over with blood. She shoved at him again.

“And what exactly do you need me for?”

“I love you, Tessie.”

“Have you gone daft? You don’t even know me, except in the few encounters where you have tried to shoot me, arrest me, and sink my ship.”

“Tessie, I’m not Alex. I’m Craig.”

“Don’t do this,” she said, choking back a sob. “Don’t torture me. I’d rather you just hurry up and kill me.”

“I can’t explain it either,” he said. “One minute I was on the gallows sayin’ me prayers, and the next I’m Alex. On the plus side, I haven’t lost my good looks. On the minus, I haven’t the foggiest of how to impersonate a commander of the royal navy and soon they’re going to suspect something’s gone awry in the hanging of the notorious pirate Craig Vyce.”

“I don’t believe you.”

He smiled wryly. "Only you, Nasty Nate, and I know about that map. I also know that you haven't been able to break the code it's written in."

"I'm closer," Tessa said defensively.

"Sure. Listen, I found someone who can read that code. I was looking for you to tell you this when Alex took me, took my crew, and had us all strung up. Only it seems to have gone astray for him, 'cause I'm still here, just wearing his husk."

"Your whole crew? Jemmie, and Big Sal, and One-eye?"

"They went yesterday. Alexander made me watch," Craig said in a soft, raw voice. "I told him I'd come back to haunt him and I did a more thorough job than I meant to."

"So is Alex dead, then?"

"I guess. Scabrous dog got what he deserves. I wasn't ready to quit living yet."

Tessie stared at him, wanting so badly to believe he was telling the truth. He did sound like her Craig, but it was all so unreal. She had seen a great many odd things in her life, especially since she had joined the sweet trade, but this capped them all. She had no choice but to cooperate with him, however. If he was Commander Alexander Vyce, then he held her life in his hands.

"I need to get back to my ship," she said. "Will you come?"

"Do you need to ask? I've no desire to stay 'round here acting like me ponce of a brother and givin' orders for my friends to be hanged."

"Good. Great. Get dressed." Tessie pushed at him, and he slowly let her go.

"You do believe me, don't you love?"

She looked into his eyes. They were Craig's eyes, at least in shape and color and intensity of expression. She swore she

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could see Craig's soul in them. Was she just fooling herself because she wanted so badly for him to still be alive? Before she could reply, a knock came at the door.

“Commander Vyce? May I come in?”

Chapter Three

Lieutenant Ethan Harris knocked on the door of Commander Vyce's bedchamber in the officers' quarters. Vyce's room was larger than most, as a reward for his faithful service to the governor. And now, after yesterday's hanging, followed by last night's capture of the captain of the *Pilfering Pussycat*, Ethan thought with a grin, the commander was about to be rewarded even more. How desperately the lieutenant wanted to give Alex the news before anyone else did!

"Commander?" he called again when no reply came from within.

"Aye! Um...just a moment!" came the familiar voice of his superior officer.

Ethan frowned as he heard a significant amount of shuffling and thumping coming from within the room, and he wondered if Alex could possibly have someone else inside with him. Ethan's lower lip quivered and he took a deep breath.

Jealousy would not get him anywhere. No one knew that Ethan had been Alexander Vyce's lover for the past six months. Such practices were frowned upon, especially by the governor, and so they had kept their shared passion a secret. Despite how callous the commander could be at times, Ethan was deeply devoted to him. He often suspected, however, that Alex was not nearly so loyal to him, but he had not dared to question for fear of losing him.

Ethan smoothed a hand over his collar length blond hair and stood as straight as he could as he waited for Alex to open the door. He would not have dared open it himself, even knowing it was unlikely to be locked. His eyes grew round as Alex flung the door open. The commander was only half dressed, wearing his pants more wrinkled than Ethan had ever seen them, and his jacket over a bare chest, though he wore his sword. He wore no shoes, no stockings. His black hair was tied back in the usual queue, but some of it had fallen loose. And his nose, his nose was swollen, his lips and chin bloody.

"What happened to you?" Ethan gasped.

"What? I'm fine, really, mate. My same old self, nothing wrong!"

"Your nose is bleeding."

"My nose? Oh. Oh! Just banged it on me bedpost." He wiped his mouth on his sleeve, taking away most of the blood.

"Should I fetch a medic?"

"No! It ain't broken, just swollen."

"I can come back at a more convenient time if you like, sir," Ethan said slowly.

"What was it that you wanted?"

"You seem rather disheveled, sir." Alex squinted at him.

"Can't a man be disheveled in his own quarters?"

"It's just that you usually aren't."

"I see," Alex said.

Ethan frowned at him.

"What can I help you with?"

Ethan stood staring at him for a moment. He felt as though he were looking at a stranger. It was difficult to fight his suspicions. He tried to peer past Alex into the room. He was several inches taller than the commander, but somehow Vyce managed to block the whole door. "May I come in?"

"This is not a good time."

"Please, Commander Vyce. I have good news for you."

Alex stared back at him for a long time, his eyes moving slowly up and down the length of him. Ethan stood up even straighter. Finally Alex moved aside. His hand went to the hilt of his sword, and he closed the door behind them.

"Well," he said, "What is it?"

"Have I done something to displease you, Alex?" Ethan asked worriedly. He glanced around the room, which looked much the same as always aside from the bed being unmade. The only time Ethan had even seen the bed unmade in Alex's room was when they were in it.

"Of course not," Alex said gruffly. "Nothing is amiss."

Ethan tried to accept this at face value but it was not easy. He took a deep breath. "The governor is going to promote you."

"Promote me?"

"A captaincy, or, well, there's talk of him needing a new rear admiral. But a captaincy for certain!"

"Wonderful, wonderful. Well, thank you for letting me know."

"Commodore Taylor says that the governor is very pleased with you."

"As well he should be, now—"

Ethan was gushing. He knew Alex hated to be interrupted, but he could not help going on. "It was bold what you did, sir, hanging the pirate Craig Vyce like that. Many men would not have been able to turn in their own brother."

"You didn't know my brother," Alex muttered, his eyes darkening.

"You always do the right thing, sir. I've long admired that about you."

"Thanks, chum," Alex sneered.

Ethan frowned. The commander was using an awfully strange vocabulary today. "Chum?"

"Ah, Lieutenant."

"Ethan. Please, call me Ethan when we're alone, like you always do. I don't know what's put you in such a foul mood today, Alex. Have I upset you? I always thought you hated your brother. Tell me you're not angry with me for mentioning that."

"Oh, rest assured, I hated my brother," Alex said. His hand twitched atop his sword. "Now, if you're done delivering the good news, I have some paperwork I need to attend to."

Ethan was afraid he had hurt Alex by mentioning his newly deceased brother, so he tried to steer the conversation towards Alex's other accomplishments. "And the bold capture of La Tormenta, sir. You were so valiant and brave at the Lusty Mermaid last night."

Alex squinted at him. "That's right. You were there."

"Yes. I was there. With you."

"Yes. Well, it's not terribly valiant or difficult to arrest someone who's well into her cups."

"Alex," Ethan said, still trying to make sense of the commander's odd behavior, "I'm not on duty until midnight."

"Do you intend to stay here talking to me for that long?"

Alex sounded exasperated.

“Not talking,” Ethan whispered. He slipped his arms around Alex’s waist and kissed him full on the mouth, pulling their bodies tightly together, never minding the traces of blood on his lips.

Alex let out a yelp and pushed him away.

“I’m sorry!” Ethan cried. “Is it your nose? Did I hurt you?”

Alex stared at him for a long moment, then finally he nodded. “Yes. That’s it. My nose. Just bumped it is all.”

“I’ll be more careful,” Ethan promised softly, moving forward to take Alex in his arms again. The commander stepped backward. Ethan frowned, feeling his heart miss a beat. “Are you certain I’ve done nothing to displease you?”

“No, no, it’s fine, really,” Alex insisted. “I just need to be alone for a bit.”

Ethan nodded slowly. He felt his lip tremble again, felt his careful posture crumble, his shoulders slump.

Alex sighed. “Come here, it’s not like that, mate. Ye just don’t understand.”

“Why are you talking like that, sir?” Ethan whispered.

“Call me Alex,” said the commander, grinning at him.

Ethan heard a muffled sound coming from the direction of the armoire. He turned his head and just had time to see that it was open a crack before Alex stepped nimbly in front of it. A thrill of alarm went through him.

“What—” he began, but a rock came crashing through the window. “Get down, Commander!”

Ethan grabbed Alex and pushed him down onto the floor, determined to protect his superior officer—and his lover. He ran to the window and looked down from the second story of the barracks to see three men scaling the side of the building.

Their wild eyes and fearsome expressions enveloped Ethan in a cold wave. Another man stood on the ground below, shouting instructions.

“Get the captain, boys! Bring ‘er back!”

“Pirates!” Ethan gasped. “Commander, summon the men!”

He whirled back around to see that Alex had regained his feet and drawn his sword. The armoire burst open and the female pirate captain sprang forth. Ethan’s jaw dropped. She wasn’t armed, but her fists were clenched as if she meant to pummel someone. No, not just someone. Him!

Ethan ducked her blow and she screeched at him like a banshee. What the hell was she doing hidden inside of Alex’s armoire? She must have escaped the prison somehow, and come here to seek revenge on him in the name of those who had been hanged this week.

Before he could speak, the remains of the window were smashed and the three pirates climbed through. One was a skinny red-haired man, one a squat Spaniard, and the third an enormous black man. They all looked mean, dangerous and slightly ragged. Ethan drew his own sword, ready to join Alex in fighting off the ruffians, but he found the point of the commander’s blade at his throat.

“Drop it, mate.”

Ethan let go of his sword, not comprehending. The female pirate punched him in the gut, dropping him to his knees. He lost all of his breath, but she wasn’t through with him. Her fist connected with his jaw and threw his head back to smash against the armoire, leaving him dazed.

“Captain! Yer alive!” the red-haired pirate shouted.

“Course I am, you bilge rat! What do you think you’re doing here?” La Tormenta said.

“Rescuing you, what do you think?”

“I don’t need rescuing!”

“Nasty Nate says ye do!”

“And what’s that if it ain’t Commander Alexander Vyce and one of his men?” said the black man.

“Let’s gullet them,” the Spaniard hissed.

“No!” La Tormenta cried. She stepped in front of Alex. “Don’t touch him.”

Ethan heard the pounding of footsteps in the hall outside the room and realized gratefully that some of the other men were coming to their aid. He was too dizzy to wonder why the pirate wench was protecting Alex. He stayed sprawled on the floor and tried to decide if they’d kill him faster if he reached for his sword.

“Someone’s coming,” Alex said. “Out of here, all of you, now.”

“Ain’t ye going to fight?” said Red incredulously.

“Not if I can help it. There’s too many of them.”

“Them?” the Spaniard said suspiciously.

“Let’s go!” La Tormenta cried, pushing at them. The pirates began climbing back out the window, Alex following after them.

“Ain’t ye going to kill Vyce, Captain? He hung Craig! And Jemmie, and Big Sal, and One-eye!”

“No one’ll be killing him! I’ll explain later. Now, just go!” She grabbed Alex’s arm. “Come on!”

“Commander!” Ethan gasped.

“Got to do what the lady says, mate,” Alex said, winking at him. He followed La Tormenta out through the window and disappeared into the night. The door burst open and the room was flooded with a flash of red and white as heavily armed men stormed in.

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“Lieutenant Harris!” someone shouted.

“Stop them,” Ethan groaned. “Commander Vyce has been taken by pirates!”

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