

## CHAPTER ONE

*East of the Strait of Gibraltar*  
*April 1767*

A WAVE SWELLED and broke over his head, and for a moment Captain James Warre couldn't breathe. His fingers dug into the wet wood beneath him, but there was nothing to grasp. The churning water choked him, nudged him, smothered him.

With a massive effort he shifted to his side, then let his head fall in a fit of coughing. The seawater left his mouth brackish and dry. Closing his eyes, he let himself slip away.

*"Lavender's blue, dilly dilly, lavender's green."  
Nap time, young Master Warre, and I'll hear no more  
of your sorry excuses.*

Nap time. The sun shone warm on his back as he pitched and bobbed with the chop.

Then suddenly, a shadow.

There was a bump, a scrape. Wood met wood, jarring him. His eyes flew open as he braced for a cannon's roar. Fluttered closed again when it didn't come.

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A female voice drifted to his ears. "...alive, do you think?"

The soft, lilting sound wrapped around him like a melody.

*Bump, bump, bump.*

"...bloody well dead, or close enough." A male voice now.

*Bump, bump, scrape.*

"...haul him up?" Female again.

*Bump, bump*— He opened his eyes and stared straight at the wet hull of a ship. Another wave engulfed him and left him gasping, straining to see the deck in a moment of clarity. He hadn't the strength. His gaze swept the ragged length of the raft keeping him afloat—no, not raft. Broken decking. A memory threatened to pull him under, but he fought for lucidity and kept his gaze moving, turning, sweeping upward. She was a brig.

"...any manner of disease. We cannot afford the risk." Through a haze he recognized the words as English. But then a string of shouted words, this time unintelligible—but not unrecognizable.

English and Moorish together, on a Mediterranean brig.

Renegades. They would not look kindly on the captain of a British ship of the line.

The muffled snap of cloth in the breeze kept him fighting to see the stern. If he could just see her colors... The curving hull blocked his view of all but a bright red corner wafting in the wind.

He fixed his eye on that corner, waiting, clawing against an invisible undertow.

*Nap time, young Master Warre—*

No! He had to see that flag.

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A wave broke over him. His mouth filled with seawater and he gagged, choking and sputtering again as he re-fixed his gaze. Finally, a gust whipped the greater part of the flag into view.

A slender, yellow arm stretched out against the red background, its fist curled around a black cutlass.

*Bloody living hell.*

He didn't need to see the rest of the flag to know that shapely arm was attached to a woman's shoulder and breast. He let his head drop against the wet wood.

*"Lavender's blue, dilly dilly..."*

*Bump, bump, bump.*

The next wave swept him from consciousness.

## CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS A pathetic sight—every bit as pathetic as the day they'd fished Mr. Bogles out of the harbor at Malta, but Mr. Bogles was a cat. A man offered none of the same benefits, yet presented dozens of dangerous possibilities. Captain Katherine Kinloch forced herself away from the railing.

"He could have any manner of disease," she said flatly. "We cannot afford the risk."

"Aye, Captain." Her Algerian boatswain headed toward the fore, shouting a reprimand to three deckhands gawking over the side. Even bathed in the Mediterranean sunshine, she shivered.

*Lower the net!* The order strained on her tongue, but she clenched her teeth and lifted her spyglass toward the strait. Nobody aboard would have survived if she'd let herself succumb to emotion each time the winds blew contrary.

"Terrible way to die," her first mate commented, looking down at the water from where he lounged

against the railing. His tone delivered reproof the way syrup carried a tincture.

“Every way to die is terrible, William.” The words were cold. Awful. She felt a little sick. “I doubt we could do anything but make his last moments an agony by dragging him up.”

“Suppose he’s perfectly healthy? Just dying of thirst?”

“Suppose he carries the plague?” she snapped. One deck below her feet, Anne was happily teaching Mr. Bogles to string beads. Some dangers to Anne were unavoidable, but this one wasn’t.

A tremble made the horizon dance in her field of view, and she steadied her grip. As soon as they passed through the strait, she would be in unfamiliar waters, sailing with a skeleton crew toward a homeland she hadn’t seen in over ten years. Doubts about that decision already kept her pacing the decks during others’ midnight watches—this was no time for more potential folly. Damn Cousin Holliswell and his greed, and double-bloody-damn Nicholas Warre for helping him. But then, Warre men could be counted on to be merciless.

An inky length of her hair flew over the spyglass, and she snatched it away. “For all we know,” she added, “he is a Tunisian corsair.”

“Or a subject of the king,” William countered conversationally. And then he added, “I don’t recall you having so many qualms when we took Phil and Indy aboard.”

“Of course not. And you know the reason.”

He leaned over the rail and called down to the near lifeless form below. “If you’ve got breasts, old boy, now’s the time to show ’em.”

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“Enough!” She lowered the spyglass. William’s blond beard glinted pure gold in the sun, the exact shade of the hoops gleaming from both ears beneath his scarlet turban. His loose, white tunic fluttered in the breeze above black linen trousers and bare feet. “I should have thrown you over years ago. Your sense of humor leaves much to be desired.”

He raised a brow. “As does yours. It has disappeared entirely, along with your compassion.”

The accusation struck hard. “That is entirely unfair. We know nothing of him,” she said. “Not his nationality, his occupation, his loyalties, his morality—”

“Irrelevant.”

“—nor his history. All of which is relevant with so few of us left on board.” She caught her boatswain’s eye from the lower deck. For God’s sake, she could barely trust her own men. She raised her chin at Rafik and stared him down until he looked away.

Familiar tension coiled in her gut, screaming that there was no room for error. No room for any but the most calculated risk. “I’ll not be made to feel guilty for mitigating danger,” she added. But guilt crept in anyhow, and not only about the unfortunate in the water. This voyage was the biggest risk yet. If it turned out to be a mistake, Anne would be the one to suffer most.

She felt William staring at her. “It’s not too late to turn back,” he said quietly.

“Bite your tongue.”

The sound of angry footsteps on the stairs warned of Millicent, who stepped onto the upper deck with her expression locked in the glower she had adopted the moment they’d sailed for Britain. With her slender

body enshrouded in a shirt and breeches, her hair pulled severely beneath a misshapen hat, and her conventional features, Millicent passed for a young man to those who weren't looking closely. "Philomena is beside herself," she announced, "and India is ready to go over the side. This isn't sitting well with the crew." She awaited Katherine's reply with lips thinned.

"We'll be underway as soon as the tide turns," Katherine told her.

"And leave him to his fate?" Disbelief raised the pitch in Millicent's voice.

"Katherine Kidd," William quipped, pushing away from the railing. "I shall go see what I can do to quell the riot."

Katherine looked over the rail, hoping for confirmation that it was too late and there was nothing they could do. As she watched, a wave rolled over the man below. One of his hands moved, reaching, then stilled. Devil take it, watching him die was intolerable.

She thrust her spyglass toward Millicent. "Come here. Look at him. Is there any sign of disease?"

Millicent, the eldest daughter of a country physician and an excellent surgeon in her own right, pointed the instrument downward. "There are no sores on his face that I can see," she said after a moment, "but it's difficult to tell with several days' growth of whiskers. I don't see any jaundice. I see nothing on his hand except raw skin." After another moment, she returned the spyglass. "Assuming he was clean-shaven before disaster struck, he's been adrift at least three days. It is very unlikely he would have survived this long if he also had a sickness. I can't be sure, of course. Not without examining him. But I believe he's as safe as any to bring aboard."

*Safe* was patently the wrong word. Reason advised that one man could pose little threat, but experience warned otherwise. Katherine stared down at him. A shipwreck survivor? They'd seen no evidence, and the weather had been clear except for some high clouds. A Barbary captive attempting escape? The possibility stirred a sympathetic rage inside her.

"I don't speak lightly, Captain," Millicent added stiffly. "I would never endanger this crew, or Anne."

"I haven't the least suspicion that you would." Another swell covered the motionless form on the raft. On the main deck, so many hands had gathered at the rail it was a wonder the ship did not list to starboard. Young, impulsive India gestured wildly to William. Philomena—never one to turn a blind eye toward any man—looked up at Katherine as though to say, "Well?"

The tension in her gut coiled so tightly she wanted to vomit. The uproar from the main deck buzzed in her ears as precious, lifesaving moments ticked away. Some mistakes should be easy to avoid. If she acquiesced, and he turned out to be the danger she feared...

Yet if she left him to die...

"Very well." The words tumbled out, ejected by the sick pit in her stomach. "Haul him up. If there is any sign of disease, any sign at all—" But Millicent had already spun away, practically flying down the steps to relay the order.

Katherine Kidd, indeed. She inhaled deeply and tried to still her trembling hands. Already her stomach eased, but it shouldn't have. Even if the man was healthy, he could bring trouble.

If he did, he would spend the voyage in chains.

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Alone on the upper deck, she held the spyglass to her eye and carefully focused it downward. A striking face came into view, close as breath in the lens. Her belly quickened in a sudden, visceral reaction. The man's complexion must have been swarthy before, but now a pallor made him seem ghostly. A strong, perfectly sculpted nose extended from an angular face with sharp cheekbones. Wet, black lashes lay against the hollows beneath his eyes. His jaw hung slack, dusted by a thick stubble of whiskers that nearly hid a dark slant of mustache above firm, lifeless lips. Water plastered his hair to his head in careless black waves streaked with silver.

For a long, hypnotic moment the world contained only him.

And then the ship rolled with a wave, tearing him from her view. She inhaled sharply and lowered the glass. Surely it was too late. His large hands lay motionless against the boards that supported him. She hadn't seen any movement through the glass.

Rafik's staccato shouts barked up from below while the crew threw the nets over the side and clambered down. She held her breath as several crew members tried to lift the man off his raft but only succeeded in nearly capsizing it. They shouted for a boom, and soon the crew on deck fashioned a sling and lowered it down. Within minutes they hauled the man's listless, sodden form into the air.

Quickly she made her way to the quarterdeck and then to the main, just as they brought him aboard. Crew members crowded in around the rescuers. "Give them room!" she ordered, and they backed off instantly. "Is he alive?"

“He was half an hour ago,” India said insolently, brushing past her to help remove the sling. Her blond braid hung like a rope over one shoulder as she deftly undid the hooks. Rafik hacked away the man’s white shirt and tan breeches, while two deckhands doused him with fresh water from the mop buckets. Now the orders came from Millicent, who forced everyone away except those who helped wash him.

“Phil went to find some toweling,” William said, moving in beside Katherine.

After a moment Millicent called over her shoulder. “He lives!”

Katherine exhaled.

The man lay naked and facedown on the deck as they continued to douse him until Millicent was satisfied that no salt remained. Phil returned with two lengths of linen and crouched by his side. His legs were long. Muscular. Katherine slid her gaze past solid buttocks to the broad expanse of his back and shoulders.

“A fine form of a man,” Phil purred, drying him carefully.

India snorted and snatched one of the towels from her hand. “Auntie Phil, he’s in his dotage!”

Phil laughed at her niece. “In your eyes, any man over twenty-five is in his dotage.”

“Exactly so.” Eighteen-year-old India smiled wickedly from beneath her tricorne hat.

Millicent rolled the man over, revealing a sprinkle of dark hair on his chest, a rippled stomach and—

Katherine looked away, straight into William’s laughing eyes. “I’ll wager you side with Phil this time,” he said.

“He will need clothes,” she snapped. “Something of yours will do.”

William leaned in, lowering his voice to a mock-whisper. “Are you sure? Because I rather had the impression you might prefer him without.”

“Devil take you. You’re as bad as Phil.”

“I heard that,” Phil called. “And I resent it deeply.”

But Phil had been right about one thing. The man was definitely not in his dotage. The ordeal may have nearly killed him, but he looked strong, and he was large. Commanding. “I don’t want him in the infirmary,” she told William under her breath. “Too close to the crew. We can clear out André’s cabin and put him there, but in the meantime—” she hesitated “—put him in mine.”

As expected, William’s brow ticked upward.

“One word, and you’ll meet the end of my cutlass,” she bit out, but the threat had no effect on William’s amusement. “As soon as he’s been seen to, everyone will resume their duties or punishment will be meted out.”

“Captain Cat-o’-nine-tails.”

“If behavior warrants.” But they both knew she owned no instruments of torture. It was far more effective to offer good food, high pay and commendations for good behavior. “Fortune has smiled on him today,” she said, a bit too sharply. “We shall see if that changes once he is awake.” She looked once more at the newest person for whom she was responsible. The man was handsome—too handsome, with features that bordered on aristocratic and a stubborn, angular jaw.

“We could use another man on the crew,” Phil pointed out.

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“True enough,” William agreed. “But then, we’ve no idea whether he knows his cock from a bowsprit.”

In that same moment, the man’s eyes fluttered open. He looked up, straight at Katherine, piercing her with depths as green as a backlit Mediterranean wave. Something hot and liquid and unexpected shot through her, and a shiver feathered her spine.

He knew the difference. She’d wager the entire year’s take on it.