

Prologue

Jamaica

October, 1720

The *William* slid through the sea, guided by pirates still rum drunk, the sun hard on their eyes, the shoreline a distant, green outline of trees and mountains. After the morning's rain, the day had turned as fine as any Anne could remember. A wind blew strong from the east, filling the sails and leaving a frothy wake that encouraged pelicans to dive into the sea. She stood balanced at the aft rail absently watching the birds and looking back over the water. Only when she noticed shadows lengthening on deck, did she think to rest easy, for they were now leagues away from the cave where she had hidden the small chest with its treasure.

"The deed's done," Mary murmured quietly, coming to stand beside her. "No sense in tryin' to reclaim the past."

"Aye. The deed's done. And Jack'll be fierce angry when he discovers the coin and jewels missing."

"But that's not what troubles you, is it?"

Anne shook her head and cried quietly, "It's all wrong, Mary! God knows that we are in danger. What can Jack be thinking?"

"Cap'n 'll come round," Mary tried reassuring her. "We just need to leave these waters. A few days more 'e's said. No sense running into the last o' the hurricanes."

"There's more," Anne added, her voice lowered, "after yesterday's fight, I think we should remain dressed as men for the time. Keep to the pants, shirt, and jacket. Best not to remind anyone of our sex."

On the day before Anne and Jack had argued, their swords ringing amidst the cheers of the men.

Looking full into Mary's eyes, she asked softly, "Should I have fought Jack true?"

"Best the Cap'n? Would ye be ready to take control of the ship and crew? Anne, 'tis a hard

pass we've come to. Maybe 'tis time for me to find the inn I've wanted."

Anne nodded and covered Mary's hand with her own. "Perhaps you are right. Perhaps 'tis time to leave this ship. Find a piece of land. For the children we carry."

By late day they had rounded the western end of the island and dropped anchor. Bloody Bay they called this bit of water off the coastline of Jamaica. Here the whalers took shelter and carved their great catch, rendering the fat. With sails stowed and evening soon to come, the men began to think to the fiddle and the rum in the hold. On shore were turtle fisherman, and the crew cried for them to come aboard and share in the rum punch and make merry. Even before the sun started to set, they were done, passed out on deck and below, a few drunken voices rising from the hold.

Anne stood at the watch absently wrapping her hair in a scarf, the sky gold and the red sun quickly descending. A deep breath, and she took in the full measure of the beauty before her, all the while wondering how she would persuade Jack to leave the island. Suddenly, Mary was beside her, a strong hand grasping hard at her elbow. "Anne," she murmured, "on the horizon..."

Anne raised a hand to her eyes to shield the glare. Dark sails rode on the red sea, leaning with the wind.

"The glass," she urged Mary quickly and with some desperation, "give it to me."

Lifting the spyglass to the horizon, the better to be sure, and knowing what she saw, the world fell away beneath her feet.

"A sloop! A sail hidden in the sun. On the king's errand as sure as I draw breath! Get Jack up here! Christ, they make straight for us!"

From below Jack heard their shouts and climbed to the wooden planking, ambling unsteadily across the deck, while Fetherston, his mate, followed in his wake, wavering and just as off course.

"Ah," Jack mumbled, squinting into the fading light. "Mr. Fetherston, my glass."

He lifted lazy eyes to the west, peered, and slurred, "Why, you may be right, Anne. I believe 'tis the gov'nor's ship." He straightened his hat more comfortably upon his head, the long red plume dancing. "Hoist the black flag and show 'em our colors."

"Jack Rackham!" Anne screamed. "'Tis no game! The brig has us if we don't weigh anchor and put on cloth!"

Reeling back and forth on his toes, Jack threw back his head and laughed, for he had looked around the deck at men dead to the world from their drink, considered those out cold below, and knew there was no going anywhere.

Furious, throwing Jack murderous looks as he lifted a bottle and brought it to his lips, Anne primed her pistols and turned to Mary.

"What say ye?" she asked, her eyes wide with uncertainty.

"There's only one thing that can be done," Mary answered taking up a cutlass. "We'll do what we can to protect the other."

With grim determination, pistols and cutlass at the ready, Mary pushed and kicked the drunkards where they lay on deck, shouting that they up and make ready.

"You worthless sons of whores!" she screamed when she could get no response. "Do ye want t' die?"

"Ahoy, the ship," a voice carried over the water. "Who is your captain?"

"That would be me," Jack shouted in return. "John Rackham of Cuba!"

"I am Captain Jonathan Barnett on the king's mission. I've a warrant for your arrest, Captain Rackham. Surrender peaceably and I will give you quarter."

"The fool gives his own name!" Mary cried, moving away, trying again to roust the crew. "Curse all the bloody rum in this world! Surely t'was made to make men stupid!"

"They have us if we do not fight!" Anne shouted close to Jack's face so that her meaning might penetrate his stupor. "I will not go back to prison, Jack! I swore long ago that I would

rather die!"

The sloop of Captain Barnett was almost upon them and only then did Jack's vision clear. With a rude awakening, he realized he stood with drawn sword in one hand and bottle in the other.

"For the love of God," he murmured, "what am I about?"

Tossing the bottle overboard, he rushed to the swivel gun that stood on deck, for there was no time for maneuvering the ship, no time to consider a broadside or rouse the men. Indeed, they were out of time. A roar, and the small cannon he aimed fired, the shot falling short of the on-coming sloop. Those below who could still move, heard the hostilities, and several staggered up top to see what the noise was about.

Barnett was prepared, and without warning, let off a round from his ship's starboard cannon that took part of the rigging of the *William*, yardarm and halyards crashing to the deck, sending the men who had just come up hastening back to safety below.

"On deck!" Anne screamed, rushing to the hold to look down, pistol cocked and ready to fire if they did not obey. "Come back and fight, ye contemptible cowards! Come up and fight like the men ye think yourselves to be! For God's sake, think to your lives!"

"It's no use, Anne!" Jack called to her. "Grappling hooks are at the ready and they'll soon board. We haven't a chance. Not with this lot. I must ask for quarter!"

"You can ask all you want," Anne returned fiercely, reloading from the shot she had fired at the retreating men, "but I'll not be surrenderin'!"

"Nor I!" cried Mary, for both women thought to the children they carried and refused to give birth in a prison.

At that moment the ships touched and the jolt of the meeting was hard, black smoke obscuring sight, debris from the downed rigging still floating through air. Anne whirled on Jack from where they crouched behind the wheel, the better to avoid the musket balls raining down on deck.

"If you give in, you'll only live a few days more," she pleaded. "Blackbeard knew the truth of it. When his end came he chose death on deck to hangin'! Fight, I say! Fight, damn you!"

Jack grabbed her arm and shook her, none too gently, the better to make his point.

"Listen, lass, the Royal Navy hung his head in the ship's riggin'. I'll not have that happen to you. If I surrender at least we have a trial and who knows what might happen."

More sorrowful now than angry, she turned from him, for Barnett's men had come over the side and must be met. Reaching for the pistols in her belt, she aimed and pulled, firing directly into the charge, then drew the sword at her side. Raising it, she stepped forward to meet the first of the attackers, a burly man, and from the determination of his approach, one who thought to make quick work of the fight. With startling clarity she made vague note of the man's ruddy face and clenched teeth. The blow he lay upon her was dealt with a heavy arm, the shudder of impact ringing through her bones and the blade turned too close to her neck. Without thinking, she pivoted and brought her own sword up and across his chest, screaming as she made contact, hacking a long, deep cut that caused the man to howl in pain and stumble among the downed rigging, his fingers red and gripping his wound.

Before she could gather breath, another sword forced her back, the man young, wiry, stabbing in furious, angry retaliation, swinging down to split her skull. Her legs buckled even as she lifted her sword hand, so sudden and fast she had no time to think or see, only enough sense to keep the blade at arm's length and use one of Jack's tricks. Moving with the blow, she unbalanced her attacker, a twist away from the strength of his body, a dagger from her boot, and the sailor would forever carry a scar across his cheek, his blood spraying hot on her knife hand, its pungency mixing with the odor of cannon smoke and burning canvas and the acrid scent of her own sweat and fear. For a terrible moment her stomach heaved from the confusion of shouts

and uncertainty and the possibility of death for herself and the child.

Turning quickly, she found she stood before a half dozen more attackers...and faltered...for dear God, the cause was hopeless, no help from her crewmates, and she could not win. Digging deep for courage, she swung in desperation, sword in one hand, dagger in the other, moving toward where Mary slashed, the two fighting for their lives and the lives of the crew. As she moved, her eyes searched for the place where Jack might be.

At last she spied him, and with no small amount of shock, watched as he hesitated in his struggle, looked toward her, then lay down his weapon, immediately surrounded. So devastated was she at the sight, that she slackened her grip on the sword in hand and had it struck from her, the weapon flying away. Arms empty except for the dagger, she held it before her, turning left and right, desperately trapped. Blades to her body, she could do nothing but stand, while Mary soon met the same fate, completely surrounded and facing sure death if she did not surrender.

Voice shaking with emotion, a last swift glance at Anne, and Mary cried, "'Tis not for me that I give up my cutlass!"

Captain Barnett came aboard and observed the crew of the *William* slowly brought up on deck, some still so drunk they were just realizing what had happened, the turtle fishermen mixed with the lot, then regarded the two men who had fought when all was lost.

"Take them," he told his lieutenant. "That one. With the knife. See to it."

"Put it down, mate, or you'll not live to see the next hour. That's it..." the words were spoken calmly, the seaman moving stealthily, hoping the man would lower his weapon before more harm was done.

In the next instant, three marines were upon Anne, brutally wrenching the knife from her fingers, and in the scuffle and scrapping, Anne's shirt was so pulled from her shoulder, that a white breast showed.

"How now?" gasped one of the sailors, stepping back, gaping in amazement.

"They're no men that ye look upon," Jack called to him. "Those hellcats are women, to be sure. And I'll be havin' you treat them with respect."

"Aye," Anne told him, covering herself, and standing shoulder to shoulder with Mary, removed her scarf to let down her hair, running a hand through it. "'Tis women we are."

"And if ye've a mind t' mess with us, I'll have your gizzard," Mary spat, voice trembling in fear and fury.

"I daresay," Barnett said to no one in particular, his eyes filled with interest, "this bit of news will go down well in the governor's mansion. Your names?"

"Anne Bonny...and this is Mary Read. We've a mind to know your intentions."

"Why, Mistress Bonny and Mistress Read, I have in mind to invite you aboard my ship...as prisoners. As for Captain Rackham, put him in irons."

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," the mate answered, "but the women...I worry they will start up trouble. Fought like demons, they did. While the men hid below, they met us hand to hand."

"I'm afraid you are right, Mr. Andrews," he agreed with no small amount of disdain. "Put them in irons as well. But separate them from the men."

A single heartbeat passed, and Anne crumbled quickly into the sickness of complete despair, a nightmare finally fulfilled—her escape from the drawing rooms of Charles Town, estrangement from her father, the alleyways and taverns and work on ship, the men she had known in New Providence, those hung and gone, the prison she had once been forced to endure, the death of loved ones—all the trials of her short existence, all leading to this one feared moment. An hour ago she'd had all the freedom of the seas, could make any choice, move with abandon and decide her own fate. Now, everything in her existence would depend on the whim of her captors. If only she could go back, even one hour. If only she had known. But...she had known. Why else hide

the treasure? Why fight with Jack to sail north?

Jack. With devastating finality she knew she could no longer take him in her arms. As they brought her to the railing, she cast one last look in his direction and saw that he watched her, knew they might never see each other again. Their eyes locked and Anne shivered. In the depths of his gaze was the love and light that had pierced her soul from their first moment of meeting. She smiled to tell him she understood, memorized his face.

In the passing at the ship's rail, she whispered to the mate, Fetherston, "Tell Jack the treasure is gone. I took it this morning while you were..." and felt herself rudely pushed toward a small cabin on the sloop, the room where shackles awaited.

The cabin was small, dark, and tight. Night had fully descended and only a whisper of light pierced the door seams from the lanterns on deck. She and Mary clung to each other knowing they were doomed, their emotions floating about them as easily as seaweed on the surface of the sea, tangible, washing against them in a high swell, themselves helpless in the grip of a power over which they had no control.

"How has it come to this?" Mary whispered, her lips pressed against Anne's neck, her breath warm, her eyes dry, too sorrowful to cry. "What shall we do?"

Anne closed her eyes and with emotions she rarely permitted, sank into the mist of remembrance. She was all of twenty years old, a woman grown, but she yearned for her mother.

"Oh, my dear," she murmured, taking Mary's hands in her own. "I have come to this place because once, my own beginnings were born of defiance."