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J.K-GRAS

Pirate Souls

First and Second Voyages

JKG
Ecriture

*For you,
On that beach,
One day maybe...*



first voyage

The Anarkhia

Chapter 1

The abduction

I am frightened. I am cold and I am in pain.

I am not a seasoned rider. It is a very great effort for me to stay in the saddle for long stretches of time. My leg muscles are beginning to ache.

We have been riding through the thick South Carolina forest for several hours. When the leader decides that we shall stop near a stream, terror replaces my anxiety. Shivers run down my spine. My feet and hands sting as if needles were being driven into them. One of the men pulls me roughly off my horse and throws me against a tree trunk.

“Don’t move!” he orders.

He might be talking to a dog.

For a while, nobody takes any interest in me. The leader of the group is much too engaged in making an inventory of his bounty. His henchmen busy themselves with the makeshift campfire and the animals.

I could escape. I even contemplate it. But I do not make a move. Where could I go?

The New World is vast even when you have a map and a good guide. But here and on my own, there is no way I can survive. If I am not killed by a wild animal before I starve to death or die of cold, the savages will deal with me.

I am being stupid. I know what will happen to me if I stay with these murderers. Perhaps it would be better to die a slow death than suffer the fate that these brutes have in store for me? And even if they intend to rape me, it will not prevent them from killing me.

I have always liked to think of myself as a young woman with more courage than others, but at present, faced with death, I can but bide my time.

Gradually, my enemies settle down where they can to doze. At last I am able to study my captors. Eight men. The stench of their bodies is so foul that I can smell them moving before I see them.

Nine horses. From this I deduce that my abduction was planned.

I know their leader. I have already met him.

It was three weeks ago, in the port of Charleston, in British territory.

After a journey which had lasted for more than a month and which had taken me from Brest to Louisbourg, I had just spent a further two weeks on choppy seas aboard a vessel whose destination the Southern Province. Its cargo was mainly composed of rams and ewe. I was so relieved to be on dry land that I must have been radiating joy like a ray of sunshine. He hailed me.

“What a pretty shipment! Never before has the Septon delivered such a beauty.”

I would not normally have deigned to answer him. Nobles do not address commoners. Or, as Mother liked to say, doves do not speak the language of toads. I do not know what prompted me to dally with him. Perhaps it was the euphoria of having finally reached my destination, and having my feet on dry land. Or the frank gaze which showed his self-assurance and natural authority.

“I agree,” I answered in perfect English. “Our ewes are ravishing.”

The wink I gave him surprised him and we both laughed. Although his apparel attested to the fact that he was poor, his posture gave him a stately demeanour. His cocked hat was threadbare in places. I remember thinking that he would be charming if he would only take a brush to his hair and have a good bath. With his back against a barrel, he eyed me covetously. I moved away to admire the port of Charleston and the hustle and bustle of the sailors on the docks, mindful all the while that his eyes were fixed on me.

“Do you need a guide to take you into town?” he asked.

I turned around. I had to half-close my eyes to survey him. His silhouette was etched on the horizon in the light of the rising sun.

“I believe I can find my own way, thank you.”

“I was not suggesting that I would be your guide.”

His Irish accent rang prettily in my ears. I smiled.

“Have you nothing better to do, my good Sir, than to inconvenience young ladies as they alight from their ships?”

“Nothing more exciting, as it happens.”

His casual air was both pleasant and entertaining.

“Florence!” called my cousin Claire. “Please come and pay your respects to the captain. We are leaving. Mister McPherson awaits us!”

I returned to the deck of the Septon to bid Monsieur Delastérie farewell. I thought I would never see the stranger again. How wrong I was.

Morning is breaking. The men have hardly slept at all. But at least they have not drunk or sullied my body. Not yet. According to my meagre sense of direction, I sense that we are once more on the road to the South. We are leaving Charleston and the home of my husband-to-be near the Santee River further and further behind us. I think that if we continue on in this direction we shall reach the coast.

I try to recall the map in the cabin of Captain Diziers-Guyon¹ and the names of the port towns scattered over the paper. I only remember the largest ones: Savannah, Fort Saint George, and Saint Augustine.

I find this reassuring. They will not sell me to the savages who live inland. I do not usually heed rumours. But now, all the stories told by the travellers aboard *Le Dauphin*² take on a new meaning. Indians who scalp their

¹ The actual captain of the ship *Le Dauphin* in 1750.

² *Le Dauphin* is a ship that really existed. In 1750, it sailed from Brest to the New World, with on board Monsieur de Chabert to whom the

victims before killing them or who torture white people by pulling out their nails. And I imagine that my long russet-coloured hair would have a certain value for the savages.

From time to time, I have moments of enlightenment. I have been kidnapped so that they can demand a ransom. The man I am marrying is immensely wealthy. His fortune, acquired through the management of farming land for the production of sugar, is one of the most sizeable in the British territories of the New World. My cousin also assures me that he has a number of slaves.

I had met the Scotsman two weeks earlier. We had been introduced by my Jacobite cousin Claire McDougall. It was in the Starling Inn in Charleston where we had stayed for a few days following our arrival in the New World. He was not as ugly as I had imagined but he was older. I was nevertheless moved by the politeness and thoughtfulness he showed me. In no way did he give me cause to think that I would become a thing for him to possess. But he had paid generously to have me.

Much to my mother's displeasure, Mister Conor McPherson is not a nobleman. Our marriage was to confirm that I was the dregs of

king had entrusted the mission of carrying out geometrical and astronomical operations.

the Acres family, and it had been necessary to find me a spouse who would accept my situation. Despite my Puritan education, I had succumbed to carnal pleasure. Scandal might have been avoided if my lover had not taught me the art of libertine love and engrossed me to boot. I had sullied my reputation in France and exile was the only possible solution to avoid the shame that my behaviour would bring to my name.

We women have to learn that fortune is a serious affair. My family's fortune was an insurance against celibacy in this society where the only alternative to marriage is to enter a convent.

A trip half-way across the world to marry a rich sugar producer is not the worst thing that can befall a young girl of 18 years of age. My tutor was wont to repeat that I had not been born at the right time. I used to love it when he said that I was modern and wild and ahead of my time. I believed him when he whispered to me that I was destined for a different future. I was delighted when he schooled me in life outside the walls of the Château de l'Aigle, our family seat. I was accomplished when he made love to me.

“Hold on to your reins”, a man said suddenly.

Lord, what am I supposed to do in such a situation? I feel weak. I may falter at any moment. I have felt the need

to pass water for several hours, but do not dare ask to stop for fear of awakening a virile reaction in my captors.

Towards midday, their leader gives me a hunk of bread. We look at each other, but this time his hard, calculating expression is neither amusing nor teasing. It is deathly cold. Then we set off again.

Their rare discussions inform me that the leader's name is Steven. The youngest is Nick, and the sturdiest of them is nicknamed Cook. The one they call John frightens me. I notice him leering at me and I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end whenever our horses come near each other.

I am ashamed to admit it, but I choose to urinate in my stockings. The inconvenience this causes me is not at first a problem. I vaguely hope that the stench of my legs will send these men running if they try to beset me. I feel stupid and I am drenched.

Never before have I been so terrified.

Chapter 2

The brothel

It is only early in the evening that the sound of cobblestones beneath my horse's hooves draws me from a malicious slumber. We have arrived in an average sized village. There are still a few people strolling through the narrow streets. A soldier dressed in a red tunic emerges from a barracks. He comes towards our group.

A ray of hope lights up my eyes.

“Not a word, or I shall slit your throat,” Steven whispers in my ear.

I swallow the bile that is burning my gullet. No, I am not brave enough to cry out for help. Mute, submissive and feverish. I loathe myself for being so docile. I hate my mother for not having taught me to fight and defend

myself. My reaction is the fruit of my education. Had the principle of blind obedience to the male sex not been imposed on me throughout my childhood?

The soldier does not even turn his head in my direction and continues on his way.

Is it really so easy to abduct young ladies in this New World? Can these people not see that my dress is too finely worked to be worn by a commoner? Admittedly, my hair is in disarray, my face and hands are soiled and I smell of fear and piss.

I am astonished. I had always believed my noble extraction to be displayed on my features. How naïve I have been! Truth be told but when a black sheep is surrounded by white sheep, it nonetheless remains a sheep. This is the only comparison that springs to mind. I am a sheep, and all that I can do is move forward with the flock.

I dismount when Steven orders me to. I feel dizzy and clasp my horse's neck. My moment of weakness has not escaped the eagle eye of the gang leader.

He takes me by the arm and we enter a dark inn whilst the other men lead the animals to the neighbouring stables. There are men drinking and a few wenches wander from table to table, filling tankards of beer. When one of the

girls uncovers her breasts to entertain a dishevelled soldier, I realize that they are prostitutes.

My heart starts beating wildly. I have to concentrate to prevent myself from fainting. I hear Steven negotiating a room for the night with the inn-keeper. The only thought that calms me is when I imagine that one day Mother might learn that my infamy had led me to such a place. I cannot help but smile.

My captor pulls me along by the wrist. Their discussion is over. I shall soon know my fate. I climb the stairs behind him to the second and last floor of the ill-famed establishment. He opens a door into a large bedroom.

“Go in,” he orders harshly.

I obey him and hate myself for doing so.

“A girl will bring you your meal later,” he adds stiffly. “Don’t create a stir. Understand?”

I do not know where I find the courage. I refrain from answering and simply address him my darkest glare. The same glare I used to reserve for my cousin Benoît, who is more pompous than a conceited king. How easy life was before America!

To my astonishment, Steven bursts out laughing.

“Bloody hell! You rich girls!”

And with that, he slams the door in my face. I hear a key turning in the lock. The little common sense left me prevents me from making sure that I am really locked in.

The room is quite spacious and does not smell foul. In any event, it smells less than I do. I make a quick survey of the room: a bed, a table, a chair and a chamber pot. The room looks onto the stables.

If I can climb over the window sill, I can hold on to the roof and from there jump a few metres. If my luck holds, my fall will be halted by the pile of fodder.

It is an opportunity I must not miss, but I hesitate. The noise of the intoxicated men downstairs gets the better of me. Once outside, all I have to do is ask the first person I see for help. I shall promise them a superb reward. Those murderers will be arrested and the gibbet will put an end to their shabby lives.

I have made my decision. I am going to make my move.

“I did not think that you could be so dim-witted,” thunders a deep voice behind me.

Steven is standing in the doorway.

“Where exactly do you think you will be able to go with a broken leg?” he mocks as he throws a bag on the bed.

I have had as much as I can take. I am overtaken by weariness.

“I am more agile than I look,” I answer disdainfully.

Assuredly I must resemble Mother in this posture. No matter. There are times when one must know how to take what good there is to be found in loathsome beings.

“Why am I here?”

“You need sleep,” he mutters and gestures towards the bed with his chin.

“I did not think that you were so dim-witted that you could not grasp the meaning of my question,” I dare to answer as I take a step forward.

A flash of rage crosses his face. Childishly, I had wanted to test the limits of the only figure of authority who has accompanied me since yesterday. I regret my temerity. He comes towards me. When he raises his hand to strike me, I close my eyes. The violence of his gesture terrifies me to such a point that it is as if my entrails were burning inside my body.

He does not hit me. It is even worse.

He puts his calloused fingers around my neck and pushes me up against the wooden wall of the inn.

“You are here because I have decided thus,” he grunts, anchoring his eyes in mine.

I am suffocating. I can smell cheap beer on his breath.

“And if you value your life, you do what I say without uttering a word. Do I make myself clear?”

I cannot nod to show that I agree.

“Yes, it is clear. Mery!”

I blink to show him that I have fully grasped his threat. Tears course down my face. I need air. The room is beginning to sway before me. I feel myself slipping away.

At last he releases me. I fall to my knees.

Air fills my wounded windpipe with a hoarse sound.

“You stink,” he taunts me as I fight to get my breath back. “Now get washed, change your clothes, eat and sleep.”

This time I nod my head up and down, too stunned to answer. A woman appears through the half-open door and leaves a bucket of water and a plate before disappearing down the corridor. I do not dare meet my tormentor’s eyes. I do not want to admit defeat.

The door slams. He turns the key twice in the lock. I manage to stand up by myself. Involuntary tremors travel

through my body. Do I still have the choice of acting in any other manner? Do I have the right to disobey?

No.

I slowly wash. I don men's apparel that is of somewhat doubtful cleanliness. I eat a sort of gruel which almost has me regretting the pea soup with olive oil we were served aboard Le Dauphin. I lay down on the bed.

And I drop off to sleep.

It was foreseeable. My abduction plays again and again in my troubled mind. The shock of the scene is etched on my retina. I can see my cousin's henchman, Éric Dubois, before me. The knife blade of the one called John glinted before it cut. Eric's throat opened up so quickly that I could not comprehend what was happening. His blood spurted from him as if the torrent had only been waiting for this opportunity to leave its bed. He dropped dead at my feet. Spasms jerked his body. My cousin Claire was being restrained by two men to my right whilst her husband was molested. I heard the sound of his nose breaking when Steven kneed him. I cried out. Or was it Claire? Or was it that the screams were only in my head?

The renegades rifled through our baggage in our makeshift camp. All our belongings had been turned upside down. Héléne, my lady-

in-waiting, was crying, curled tightly under a blanket. Steven kicked her out from under it. I felt pain for her.

I do not even know if I defended myself when he grasped my arm. I do not recall mounting the horse. I do not remember either if I looked back. I do not know if they are still alive.

I do not know if I shall ever be able to laugh again.

A ray of sunlight shines through the window and lights up my face. I have felt it burning my eyes behind their closed lids for several minutes. My blue eyes have never taken kindly to morning light. I do not dare move; there is an unusual sound behind me.

A snore.

I am not alone in the bed.

A mental exploration of my bodily sensations confirms that I have not suffered physical abuse during the night. My right hip is immensely painful because it has been still for too long.

I cannot bear it any longer and I decide to get up. I slowly throw back the cover and put my feet on the floor. I freeze. The sounds of breathing have ceased. The man on my left is awake. He does not move.

Once again with exaggerated quietness, I move away from the bed before turning around. Steven is staring at me with the sleepy eyes of a small boy. Who could believe that his man is actually a brute and a murderer?

“I hope you will be using the chamber pot this time!” he sneers, putting his hands behind his neck and stretching. “I am not going to buy you any more clothes.”

I do not answer, but I continue to stare at him.

“I got a good price for your dress last night,” he says to himself.

His Irish brogue is so thick that I cannot grasp all the words he uses.

My English is in point of fact more than perfect, Mother made sure of that. She maintained that a dowry was not enough. It was also necessary to acquire an understanding of the world to be able to excel in high society. Thus my costly education would find a use in the New World, if I could not dazzle aristocrats with my poetry.

Mister McPherson, whom I was to wed, made great efforts to speak slower so that we could understand each other. He was from the Scottish Highlands and spoke of his deep-seated attachment to his country and his desire to return there one day. He only stayed with me for one evening. He had been summoned to his plantation for

urgent affairs. My health did not permit me to continue the journey when we landed. My cousin Claire, her husband and his benchman stayed with Helen and myself. They kindly offered to escort us to what was to be my future residence as soon as I should feel better.

The truth is that I had feigned my malaise. I wanted to delay the unavoidable and gain a few days in which to savour my celibacy.

Perhaps if we had left with Mister McPherson, none of this would have happened... Could it be that I had created this situation myself?

My eyes are attracted to my captor's belongings that he has thrown on the only table in the room. A pistol has been casually left on his waistcoat and shirt.

“Do you not want to have some fun?” he teases, lifting up the sheet.

He is adopting this vulgar attitude on purpose. He hopes to shock me by exposing his morning erection inside his breeches. He is waiting to see how I would respond.

I could appear outraged, or even disgusted. I decide to be pragmatic.

“I am hungry, Sir. And I would really like to know why I am here.”

Not the reaction he had foreseen. I see that he finds it confusing.

“Don’t worry, you’ll know soon enough!” he rejoins as he leaves the bed. “I have things to do. I shall come and fetch you at midday.”

Without another word, he leaves the room, leaving me on my own. The hours tick slowly past. Another woman brings me water and some fruit before leaving. Around what seems to be one in the afternoon, I am ready. With my outsized clothing pulled in around my waist, I look like one of the seamen who work on *Le Dauphin* or the *Septon*. Only my childlike face and my long blond hair betray my identity. That is, if I still exist in the eyes of the world.

Am I still Florence des Acres? Am I not becoming yet another poor soul lost in this world adrift?

Chapter 3

Perdition

Time passes. Nothing happens. He does not come. Fear is slowly starting to invade my veins. Hunger is twisting my gut and anxiety gnaws at my stomach. I hesitate to call out for someone. The door is locked, I have checked, but the establishment must be occupied by clients. Am I permitted to ask for food?

The darkness of night is falling. I can hear noise on the ground floor. Most likely brothel patrons.

The door to the room is flung open. Steven and Cook are watching me from the dark corridor. I want to tell them I am famished, that their treatment of me is intolerable. The tightness of their shoulders discourages me from giving them a speech on how to care for women.

The Cook hands me a sort of bonnet. His massive, hairy forearm is covered in scars and nauseates me. I understand that I am supposed to put the accessory on my head.

“Hide your hair inside it,” Steven says impatiently. “And pull it down well over your forehead.”

I obey. He then hands me a pint.

“Drink it!”

I do not understand what he wants of me so I wet my lips with the yellowy liquid. Beer mixed with a stronger spirit.

“You don’t get it!” he rants. “Drink it all!”

“The whole tankard?”

“Down to the last drop. And hurry up about it!”

I look at him, dumbfounded, and cast a curious glance at Cook. He is as closed as an oyster.

Steven’s cheeks and forehead are becoming redder and redder. I do what he orders. And I drink.

I know that he wants me to drink quickly, but I have to stop once or twice. An empty stomach and alcohol are not good companions. I am afraid I might bring everything up and draw his anger.

Everything that happens after this is likened to a nightmare in which you know that you are going towards

an atrocious end. I nevertheless continue to advance towards my distressing fate. Steven and Cook have hold of each of my arms. Once in the main room, we head for the door.

“Put your head down!”

The alley is teeming with soldiers in red tunics. I have never been so pleased to see Englishmen in my life. They are looking for me! I am sure of it.

All of a sudden, I feel Steven’s hand grab my neck. He forces me to adopt a staggering gait. We walk a few yards. I have lost all hope of trusting my sense of direction. The alcohol is taking its toll and my head bent forwards towards the ground is making me feel all the... Oh no, I am going to vomit. I know it for certain now.

“Lordy! Is everything all right, sirs?”

This is my chance. I think there is a soldier blocking the way. I want to raise my eyes, but Steven keeps holding my head down.

“Yes, Smith had too much to drink, as is his wont,” Steven answers in a singsong voice.

He is good. He almost gives the impression that he is in a really festive mood.

Fear and despair get the better of me. Nausea too. A stream of vomit leaves my stomach.

“What did I tell you? Old Donovan’s wenches know how to get their patrons drunk,” he added with a loud guffaw.

The soldier laughs in turn. I am lost. The men exchange a few words more and then we continue on our way.

My body is pulled in all directions. My only markers are the town’s cobblestones. I can smell sea spray.

“Where are you taking me?” I manage to articulate despite the terror that they inspire in me.

“Shut up!” Cook answers through his teeth.

I am not walking on stones any more but on wood. The docks!

In desperation, I try to get loose from their grip. I have no choice. If I go aboard a launch, I am done for. If they wanted to demand a ransom, it would have been wiser to have stayed on land.

No, I refuse to board any old tub. I struggle. My attitude draws attention. For a brief moment, I think that I may be saved. I exchange a look with a sailor who guesses that I am not what my captors pretend.

After that, everything goes so fast that I do not realise what is happening. I feel it. A cold, hard blow bores into my temple. My blood runs down my face and into my hair. My vision blurs. I want to go on struggling. Cook's hands grip me firmly around the throat. And then, blackness. Nothing.

At least I am no longer in pain. I am no longer afraid.

Jérémiab. I wonder what you are doing. Who you are loving. A man perhaps... You were never choosy when it came to the sex of your partner, were you... Have you forgotten me? Was I just a pawn in your love games? I know well, deep down, that I was never the queen of your chessboard. No matter! I cherish what you have given me. I miss you. More than ever.

So here we are. I want to die. I regret not having escaped in the forest near Charleston when I had the chance. I emerge from sleep and promptly fall back into slumber again. Nausea clouds my mind. The lack of movement submerges me with pain. Every move is torture. I hear water lapping against the hull of the ship.

At last I wake up. My hair is stuck to my forehead and I can smell dried blood. It is difficult to adjust my sight in

the semi-darkness. I can make out barrels and sacks of goods. No doubt about it, I am in the hold of a ship. The damp, the continuous swaying and sea scents are so easy to recognise. And the pestilence of mould too.

I sit up, and I make out a particular detail which causes me to shiver. Bars. I am in a cage. A cage! I do not understand. Hatred of my captors invades me with a violence that I did not realize I was capable of. My soul is torn apart, flooded by this destructive emotion.

There is a bucket of water beside me. I crawl towards the object with difficulty in the hope that it is drinking water. No. Even that is refused me. Despite everything, the sea water refreshes my face. I clean as best I can my bloodied hair and wipe the sweat running down my body. Hunger and thirst imprison my clouded mind in a delirium and fantasy of food. The darkness oppresses me as it deprives me of the slightest mark of time.

“She’s awake!” barks one of the seamen who has just poked his head through the hatch which gives access to steerage.

It is strange, but I feel reassurance at the knowledge that they have not forgotten me in this hole. The hold frightens me. My solitude is terrifying.

The sailor reappears in full this time. He throws me a piece of fabric through the bars of my diabolical prison before leaving again. As my fingers unfold the material, I can feel the seams of a dress. This also provides a form of relief. I am going to recover a modicum of femininity. It is quite ridiculous. This garment should conjure up the danger of being a woman in a shipful of scoundrels. The sensation overwhelms me. Nevertheless, the dress will help to restore my identity. Florence des Acres de l'Aigle, daughter of the second Marquis des Acres, the sweetheart of one of the biggest fortunes of Charleston county, the pirate's whore. I digress.

The plunging neckline makes me feel ill at ease so I put the sailor's shirt that Steven gave me at the inn over it. Another man is coming down the steps. He opens my cage without looking at me. In spite of the darkness, I recognize Cook. I do not know if it was he or his leader who hit me on the head. The only thing I am certain of at this moment is that this man and his acolytes will not hesitate to harm me again if I act in a manner which displeases them. He leaves with a heavy step and goes toward the hatch. I follow him with uncertain steps, holding on to everything I can see near me. Will I at least learn of my fate? Should I

find a way to end this nightmare? If I have the opportunity, would I be capable of slitting my veins with a knife? Or of throwing myself overboard?

Crossing the ship appears never-ending. The sailors stare me nastily. Some even spit as I go past. I cross steering with its closed portholes and then climb a final ladder and find myself in the open air. The sun is setting behind the horizon. In the light of day, I see that I am wearing my scarlet dress. My hands are dirty, my nails black. My fingers shake.

The ship is ripping through the sea at surprising speed. No land in sight on either side of the ship. The waves appear to smoke before my eyes which are clouded by the tears of desperation.

How can I have slept so long?

I am starved. The sailor takes me to a cabin. The slightly more abundant decoration makes me think that these are the captain's quarters. There are fruit and gruel on a desk. Without thinking, I snatch up an apple. I force myself to chew slowly and savour the sweet juice which runs into my mouth. I see a glass of water that I empty in one gulp. I then devour a piece of dry bread, being careful not to suffocate on it.

“The rich are too used to having everything,” exclaims Steven to my right.

Obsessed by the abundance of food, I had forgotten to check whether the room was occupied. The captain is watching me from a bunk in the corner of the cabin. He smiles at me and there is no animosity in his relaxed expression.

“What do you know of the rich? I imagine that you do not frequent many of them,” I cry defiantly before stuffing as many grapes as my mouth can hold.

I know not where I find the bravery to speak to him thus. I am immensely proud of myself.

“I admit it,” he answers in a way that appears too cautious to be natural.

He makes me think of a chess-player. He is preparing his next strike, and I hope that it will not be to my face.

“I flee the company of petty noblemen when it can be avoided,” he argues, sitting up on his bunk.

“Are you sure that it is not they who flee your presence?” I retort with my mouth full.

I am going too far. I expect a violent reaction from him. Nothing happens. He just observes me silently.

“You’re no more than a spoiled brat,” he rails. “Now, sit down, we must talk.”

I sit astride a rickety chair opposite him. My hunger is satisfied, but I nevertheless continue to pick at the dried pork on the table. I try in vain to keep my face straight so that he cannot guess my turmoil.

“We are going to New Orleans, but we are stopping off at Tortuga to begin with. The journey will last several days. My sailors do not appreciate you being on board. A woman on a ship bodes bad luck. If you value your life, you must be discreet.”

“Why give me such a garish dress if you seek sobriety?” I ask wearily.

“To ward off bad luck. Normally, you should go forth bare-breasted, but our figurehead does this for you. Think yourself lucky that we have this dress. If it were up to me...”

“Why are we going to New Orleans?” I interrupt, pulling the shirt tighter around my hips.

“You are frightened, aren’t you?” He asks me seriously. No, he is not taking a malicious delight in asking me this question. He wants to know the answer.

“Of course.” I whisper with a tremor in my voice.

“If I explain everything, I fear that you will be too afeared to act reasonably.”

“You have either said too much or too little. I must know why I am here and what you intend to do with me.”

“I am a pirate and you are nowt but a contract. You will be well treated if you behave as I want and you show me due respect and also to the members of my crew.”

“Respect?” I choke. “You are pirates, worthless men. Go to hell with your respect! I order you to take me back to Charleston. I am to marry next month. You have no right to destroy all that I am trying to save.”

Once again, his attitude leaves me speechless. He does not show anger. His lips stretch into an enigmatic smile. A tiny dimple appears in his tanned cheek.

“You want to go back to an old man. Seriously?”

I nod.

“I am disappointed. I was told you had the character of an adventurer.”

“Who spoke to you of me? Who gave you this contract? You surely have the wrong girl. I am more than ordinary. If it is for my family fortune³, I regret to say that my

³ The Normandy Acres family had a large estate.