

A Willing Lad By Xanthe

Chapter One

1662

The sun was high in the sky, glittering on the waves like diamonds cut from a Spaniard's purse and scattered on the surf. There was a gentle breeze, and the ocean was blue and calm beneath the hot Caribbean sun.

Luke Jenkins walked around the deck of the *Christabel*, feeling her easy roll and sway beneath his boots. He knew every creak and groan this old girl made, and instinctively understood her every list and turn. Luke was proud to be her captain. She was a hard mistress, the *Christabel*, but if he saw her right, she'd do the same for him. Today, she was happy, her sails unfurled and running smooth in the light wind.

Luke was a man in his prime. He'd just passed his thirty-second birthday, his pale Welsh skin was burnished gold by the sun, and his thick dark hair hung in oil-slicked curls around his neck. He wore a pair of tight black britches, knee-high black boots, a white loose shirt, and a scarlet waistcoat. His right ear bore one thick gold ring, and a cutlass was slung through his black leather belt.

His men were scuttling around, busy at their duty, as he expected. He ran a tight ship, but fair. If his men worked hard and were loyal, they were richly rewarded with the spoils pillaged from successful raids on Spanish galleons. If they were lazy or dishonest, they could expect to feel the weight of his whip on their backs. If they double-crossed him, he'd send them down the gangplank at the point of his cutlass without a second thought.

A sudden shout went up from little Nicky Kneebone, on watch in the crow's nest. Luke looked up to see him pointing at something in the water, starboard side. Frowning, Luke made his way to the prow. He wasn't expecting to encounter anything out here. He was deliberately staying away from the usual shipping lanes, laying low following their successful raid on the *Santa Ana* the week before. A fine galleon, the *Santa Ana*, with good pickings – and Luke had made sure she was picked clean. He'd left her captain tied up and fuming in his cabin while he ransacked her, stealing all her treasure. His men had drunk rum enough to drown in for days after.

"What is it?" Luke demanded, pushing through the little throng of rogues, runaways, and reprobates he was proud to call his crew. They were pointing at a white speck in the sea, which was drifting closer, and closer...

"It's a man!" Nicky cried. "Moving too! Still alive!"

"Not possible," Luke said flatly. They were hundreds of miles from land and any other ships. The stranger in the water was an impossibility. Yet, as they drew near, the man seemed to wave at them. He was wearing a white shirt that billowed out around him like a cloud as his arms moved feebly in the air.

"Reel him in," Luke said grimly. What manner of witchcraft was this? A man couldn't survive for long in the open water – he'd drown, burn up, or be devoured by sharks. This man shouldn't be alive.

One of his bosuns, Jake, who could swim like a fish, dived into the water with a rope tied around his waist, knotted to form a lasso. He threw it around the man and shouted back at the ship to pull him in.

"Why are we bothering with him, captain?" demanded Marc, his quartermaster. "He'll be dead for sure when we bring him in. We'll just have to throw him back again."

"Did you have someplace better to be?" Luke grinned. "He might have coin in his pockets, or gold in his teeth. If he's alive, and of good birth, he might reward us – or at the very least we can ransom him back to his family. It's worth taking a look at him."

Marc gave a grudging grunt of agreement, and together they watched as the man in the water was reeled in and hauled up the side of the Christabel.

Their catch landed with a thump on the deck. He lay there, on his front, stretched out in the sun, and the crew gathered around to see what new treasure the sea had gifted them. The sodden man wasn't moving, but the wind gently ruffled his shirt and hair, lifting them, making him seem alive. Nobody spoke. Jake climbed back onboard and scrambled over to stare at the man like the rest of them.

"He must be dead." Marc scowled. "Tis not possible to survive in the sea for long. And where did he come from? There be no ships nearby."

Luke thought he was probably right, but he pressed the tip of his boot to the man's body to be sure. The man's hand moved, surprising Luke's men who all took a hasty step back. Was he a ghost? A merman? A witch? Luke stepped forward, his heartbeat quickening. He took firm hold of the stranger's shoulder, flipping him onto his back. This knocked some air into his lungs for he barked out a cough, brought up a mouthful of sea water, then lay back weakly and opened his eyes. Luke's crew gasped again, and so did Luke... but for a different reason.

The man lying like a stranded fish on the Christabel's deck had the face of an angel. He appeared to be barely more than a lad, perhaps only twenty. His skin was as pale as porcelain, his hair dark and wavy, slicked back from his face in wet curls, and his lips were so fine they could have been chiselled from marble. Then there were his eyes... Luke could barely pull his gaze away from those eyes, for they were as blue as the ocean and almost as beautiful. Maybe it was a trick of the sun, but they seemed to glow with an inner light, gleaming like moonlight on the surf. A man could drown in such eyes. The lad's face was so comely that for a moment Luke wondered if he was indeed an angel, delivered up by the sea for some divine purpose. He dismissed that thought as superstitious folly, more worthy of his men than himself.

The lad was wearing only rough woollen britches and a white shirt – his feet were bare, and he wore no gold rings or other signs of wealth. A black leather bag was wrapped around his body, tied so tightly that it must surely be important. Marc wrenched the bag off the boy eagerly and turned it upside down. Luke wasn't sure what his men was expecting – maybe a great tumbling of gold coins – but if so, they were disappointed. All that fell onto the deck were several little wooden jars with tightly screwed-on lids. Marc picked one up and opened it, holding it away from his body for fear of catching some ill humour. Inside, was a foul-smelling unguent. Marc threw it away in disgust. None of the other jars held anything more promising – all smelled of herbs, some sweet, some sour, but none held gold. It was a huge disappointment. Luke gathered up the jars and threw them back into the leather bag, then turned his attention to the stranger.

He was still lying there, breathing hard, taking great, gasping gulps of air, like a newborn. Luke leaned over him curiously. The lad turned his head to look straight at Luke, then raised a wavering hand to touch his face... and Luke felt a shock run through his veins like the kiss of lightning in a storm.

"Thank you," the lad whispered... and then he passed out.

"His clothes are plain, and he wears no gold. He's clearly no use for ransom. I say we throw him back into the brine," One-eyed Jim said.

"How d'you think I'd find enough men to crew this ship if I threw away every passing chance of labour?" Luke growled. "He can stay here and work his passage, if he survives the night."

"Where shall we put him, captain?" Jake asked.

"I'll take him to my cabin. I need a new cabin boy." Luke grinned at his men. They all knew he had an eye for a pretty lad, and he'd been short of a cabin boy since young Jamie Bellwether had jumped ship a few weeks back to serve liquor at *The Spaniard's Beard* in Port Royal – and all because the innkeeper's daughter had made his cock so stiff he couldn't bear to be apart from her.

Luke bent over, gathered the lad up in his arms, and lifted him in the air. The boy was no light weight, but Luke was a tall, strong man, his muscles made firm by hard work. He carried the lad across the deck and down the wooden steps, worn smooth by constant use, then along the walkway to his cabin. He kicked open the door, crossed the room, and placed his salvaged treasure on the bed. Then he threw a blanket over him and wrapped him up tight to warm him.

The lad opened his eyes and whispered something.

"You're safe here and will warm up soon enough," Luke said, pouring a tot of rum into a glass. He held it to the lad's lips and watched him sip it down. Colour slowly started to return to his cheeks, and he lay back on the bed, smiling weakly. "Here." Luke crossed the room to his table and brought back a chunk of cheese and some hard tack. "Eat," he ordered. It stirred some sleeping dragon in his belly that the lad obeyed him immediately, without a word. When he was done, the boy glanced around the room.

"Looking for this?" Luke held up the black leather bag. "I'll keep it safe for now." The contents of the bag might look worthless to him, but they might not be worthless to the young man. "Now rest; I'll be back later," Luke said.

He ran a rough hand through the lad's wet hair, smiling down on him. It was impossible not to be charmed by such a beautiful face. Maybe the boy was a witch sent to ensnare Luke, like the sirens of old. Luke knew no woman could make him lose his mind and steer him adrift, but a lad like this...? The beautiful creature Luke had plucked from the sea gave a faint smile, then, once again, obeyed him. He closed his eyes and sank back on the bed, fast asleep.

Luke left the cabin, closing the door softly so as not to wake the lad. He shook his head at himself, tiptoeing around his own ship – many a pirate captain would have taken what they wanted from such a beautiful jewel, then and there, no matter if the lad was half-dead and regardless of his wishes. Luke was not such a man.

His crew were uneasy when he returned to the deck.

"Where did he come from, captain?" Nicky Kneebone asked. He was just a wee lad, barely ten years old, but still older than Luke had been when he'd first run away to sea. "There are no ships close by, and we're nowhere near land."

"Maybe some other ship's captain, less smitten by that pretty face, made him walk the plank – and that's how he came to be floating in the water," One-eyed Jim muttered dourly. "In which case, I say we throw him back in!"

Luke's cutlass was in his hand and thrust up against Jim's throat within seconds. "He's under my protection. Anyone who touches him will answer to me. I'll find out what he's doing out here, and why, don't you worry."

Jim gave a grunt of acceptance, but his eye glinted angrily all the same. Luke was always on the watch for signs of dissent on his ship – pirates were notoriously ill-disciplined and

prone to disloyalty. Luke, having served many years with the Royal Navy, had managed to lick some shape into his men, but Jim was always one to watch.

Night had fallen by the time Luke returned to his cabin. He was as mystified by how the lad came to be in the sea as anyone else, but he wanted the boy well-rested when he questioned him. He'd see through any lies, he was sure of that. The lad would answer him true, or Luke would take his cat o' nine tails and beat the truth from him.

The boy was lying on the bed when Luke entered, but he sat up immediately. His hair was stiff with salt, hanging in tousled waves around his face, but his beautiful blue eyes were bright and clear. At some point during the afternoon he must have risen from the bed, for his damp clothes were drying over the back of a nearby chair, and the blanket was tucked tightly around his naked form.

Luke set his lantern down on the shelf beside the bed. Without speaking, he gave the lad a plate of dried meat and hardtack, and watched as he wolfed it down greedily. When he was done, Luke poured some ale into a tankard and handed that to him, too.

"I'm the captain of this ship," he said, when the boy was done with his meal. "My name is Luke Jenkins, but you will call me captain, or sir."

The lad cleared his throat. "Thank you, captain," he said softly. "I am in your debt." He had a deep, soft voice that sounded stronger and older than it had any right to be. "My name is Sebastian," he added. "Sebastian Smith." He gave a crooked smile as he said his full name, and Luke wondered if the second part was a lie. The first, though, rang out as clear and true as a bell. *Sebastian*. The name called to Luke, liling, beckoning, and singing, as if it knew him down to the core of his soul. He felt an odd sense of yearning gnaw at his insides.

Luke took a moment to collect himself, then sat down on the bed beside the lad. He gave Sebastian a sharp look.

"Sebastian. Hmm. How old are you, boy?" he demanded.

"Two and twenty, sir," Sebastian replied. That was older than Luke had thought, old enough to be called a man, not a boy, but Luke decided the ten years' seniority he had on Sebastian gave him the right to call him 'boy' all the same.

"Well, Sebastian, as I saved your life, it belongs to me now," Luke said. Many men would have railed at hearing such a thing, but Sebastian merely looked intrigued. "First, though, you'll tell me what manner of prize you are – are you flotsam, Sebastian, or are you jetsam?"

It made a difference. Luke was well-versed in the laws of salvage – if a ship went down and her cargo floated to the surface it was flotsam. But if the cargo was thrown overboard for some reason... that was jetsam, and a different thing entirely. Was this boy an innocent who'd survived a shipwreck, or had he been cast into the water by another ship's captain for good reason?

"How did you survive the sea?" Luke demanded. "Your skin isn't burned, so you can't have been in the water for long. What ship were you on, and why did you leave her?"

Sebastian's face was even more beautiful bathed in the light from the lantern. He looked like some burnished Greek god, his cheekbones sharp, and his eyes glowing brightly.

"I was on a ship to England – the *Marie-Louise*," he explained, in that sweet, strong voice. "We were thrown off course by a storm a few nights ago. The ship went down, and all hands with her. I was lucky – I was trapped beneath a piece of her hull, with enough air to breathe and a flask of ale at my belt. That piece of hull eventually broke up in the water, leaving me at the mercy of the sea. I had all but lost hope when you found me."

It was possible. Not likely, but possible. Yet, Luke did not believe it to be true.

"Would you be lying to me, Sebastian?" he asked, in a dangerous tone. He drew his cutlass and pressed the tip of it lightly against Sebastian's throat. It would be a shame to cut into this beautiful, pale skin, but he would if he had to.

"For what purpose, sir?" Sebastian asked softly. He seemed unafraid of the cutlass, barely giving it a glance. "You have seen I have no gold, no coin. I'm not a wealthy man – I was travelling to England to start work with my uncle. He has no sons of his own, so I'm to take over his business one day. My uncle isn't rich, either – he sent me just enough to pay for my passage."

Again, it sounded plausible, but was the explanation offered up too glibly? Luke was not about to throw a man overboard on such thin evidence of deception, though. He removed the tip of his cutlass from Sebastian's throat.

"I do not believe you," he said bluntly. "But every man should be allowed his secrets. I do not believe, either, that you pose any danger to this ship, or those who sail in her. So, my pretty piece of flotsam, here are my terms: I'll give you safe passage to Port Royal, if that's what you want."

"It is, sir," Sebastian said eagerly.

"Very well, though I should warn you we'll be at sea for many months yet, as I have no plans to return to Port Royal anytime soon. Now, there are no free berths of my ship – you'll work your passage if you are to stay onboard."

"I'm happy to work, sir. In fact, I insist upon it," Sebastian said eagerly.

"Well then, I'll give you a choice." Luke stood up and thrust his cutlass back into his belt. "You can work with my men around the ship – there are always plenty of tasks to be done. You'll sleep below deck with them, and share their food and ale."

"Of course, sir. I've worked on a ship before. I know the tasks," Sebastian said eagerly.

"I said you had a choice." Luke held up his hand. "You may, if you prefer, work as my cabin boy – keep my boots polished, my room tidy, and run errands for me. You'll bring me my food from the galley, and see to it there's always rum by my bed."

"You do not have a cabin boy already, sir?" Sebastian asked.

"I did," Luke sighed. "He left to be with some girl in Port Royal. I told him she'd run him a merry dance, but he wouldn't listen." Sebastian smiled, and it was such a warm, sweet sight that Luke's heart skipped a beat. "So, Sebastian – what's it to be? Cabin boy or deckhand?" Luke asked, his breath catching slightly in his throat, for he knew which he'd prefer.

Sebastian didn't give it any consideration at all. "It would be a great honour to be allowed to serve you as your cabin boy, sir," he said, shooting Luke a shy smile.

Luke rocked back on his heels, grinning broadly. "Be warned – I like my cabin tidy, and my boy to hand whenever I call."

"I can do that, sir," Sebastian said eagerly.

"Well and good then." Luke poured himself a glass of rum and downed it in one gulp. "Now, if you so wish, you may also keep my bed warm," he added, drawing the back of his hand over his mouth to wipe away the rum.

Sebastian's eyes opened wide in surprise, flickering in golden hues from the lantern light. Luke grinned and ran a gentle finger over Sebastian's fine lips.

"You're a handsome lad, as you well know. If you're willing, you may sleep in my bed, beside me. But understand me clear – if that's your choice, I'll strip you bare and make fine sport with you. If you've lain with a man before, you'll find it nothing like being with me." Luke spoke with some pride. He leaned forward and whispered directly into Sebastian's ear. "I'll ravish you long and hard – you can expect no mercy," he said. Sebastian made a soft sound in the back of his throat, and his Adam's apple jerked wildly.

Luke drew back, smiling sharply. "But I have one rule – I will never take an unwilling lad to my bed. You can be my cabin boy without sharing my bed, and you'll suffer no ill

treatment from me if that's your choice. So, what's it to be? Do you want to warm my bed, Sebastian? Are you a willing lad?"

Sebastian was very still. Luke could see a little vein fluttering in his temple. He looked at Luke with big eyes. Finally, he spoke.

"With a man such as you..." he said softly, his eyes flickering over Luke's face and down his firmly muscled chest to his taut, slim waist. "Why would any lad not be willing?"

Luke stared at him for a beat, and then he let out a loud guffaw. He threw back his head and laughed, long and loud. Sebastian sat there, grinning, then he joined in, laughing too. It was a light, easy sound, and it made Luke's heart sing with joy. They stopped laughing at the exact same time, and stared at each other. Sebastian's gaze was fixed first on Luke's eyes, then on his lips.

"So," Sebastian said, his mouth quirking teasingly at the corners, "This merciless ravishment you promised – when does it start?"

Luke moved forward, lightning fast, took Sebastian's face between his hands, and kissed him hard on the lips.

That electric jolt he'd felt back on the deck when Sebastian had touched his face was as nothing compared to how he felt when he first claimed Sebastian's mouth. It was like being sucked into a whirlpool. All breath left his lungs, every hair on his body stood upright, and shivers ran up and down his spine. He tingled, from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet.

"Dear God... what manner of witchcraft is this?" he murmured, when he finally found the strength to draw away.

Sebastian stared back at him, looking just as startled. "I don't know... I've never felt... I mean, I've kissed many men," Sebastian said, and even though he'd just met the lad, Luke felt a knot of jealousy deep in his belly. "But I've never had a kiss that felt like that."

Luke leaned forward, tentatively. "Let's try again," he whispered, wrapping his hands in the lad's hair and drawing him close. This time when he kissed him, he saw lights exploding, popping behind his eyelids like shooting stars fizzing across the sky. It was beautiful, exciting, arousing... and his cock stirred hungrily.

Sebastian was still wrapped in his blanket. Luke ripped it away, wanting to see his new boy properly. He took the lantern and raised it high, trailing it down the length of Sebastian's body. Sebastian arched his back, displaying himself like a cat on heat; it was a joy to see how willing he was.

Luke devoured the sight of him – the long, slender limbs, dappled in golden shadows; the smooth chest, almost hairless; and the soft pink temptation of the boy's tender nipples. Luke's gaze followed the dark line of hair that led to Sebastian's beautiful, perfect cock – pale skin stretched over hard flesh, not modest in size, and both elegant and smooth, curving upwards from its nest of dark curls. His balls hung full and round beneath, like firm plums, ready to be plucked.

Luke licked his lips, drunk on the sight of so much beauty. "On your front," he ordered, the words coming out in a low, guttural growl.

Sebastian turned over, and Luke feasted on the new sight that lay before him. Sebastian's bottom was as round and pale as a full moon hanging low in the sky. It was as perfect an arse as Luke had ever seen. His cock rose hard in his britches, longing to be inside this beautiful boy, riding him like the Christabel rode the surf on a windy day. Yet some instinct told him to take his time. Surely a meal as exquisite as this should be eaten slowly, and savoured, not devoured all at once, in a hurry?

He trailed his fingers down Sebastian's back, lingering on the soft hollow above his bottom, then moved his palms to gently cup those two, perfect globes of flesh. This was an altar he could worship at forever. He sat astride Sebastian's legs, lowered his head, and pulled

open his buttocks. The salty, musky smell of Sebastian overwhelmed him, exciting him, as he dipped his head and licked inside that dark, private place. Sebastian let out a startled moan and wriggled in surprise, so Luke quietened him with a little slap. That made Sebastian squeal, and his pale arse cheek flush a deep, rosy pink. Luke loved the way that looked, the mark of his hand imprinted on this boy's flesh. He took big handfuls of those soft, juicy arse cheeks, pulled them apart, and dipped his head again. This time, Sebastian gave a sigh of pure pleasure and relaxed into the bed. Luke licked deep inside the boy, as if learning him by taste. Sebastian needed no coaxing as some boys did – he opened up, allowing Luke in deeper still, moaning in delight with every thrust of Luke's tongue.

Finally, Luke drew back. "Turn over," he ordered. It pleased him that Sebastian did as he was told, immediately. Luke leaned over him and kissed him again, savouring the warm, delicious taste of his mouth, so different from the other place he'd been exploring.

Sebastian sighed and pressed his body up against him. "Please, fuck me," he whispered, when Luke finally stopped plundering his mouth. It was such a beautiful invitation... normally, Luke would have done as requested, without hesitation, but some instinct stopped him.

"I will decide when you get fucked," he replied, sternly.

Sebastian's eyes glowed in the lantern light. "Yes, sir. Of course. It's your decision," he said obediently. Luke grinned in delight, feeling a sense of great power course through his veins. "May I beg some favours, captain?" the lad asked. "May I see you bare, too? And may I touch your skin?"

Luke considered these to be reasonable requests. He straddled Sebastian, and slowly removed his cutlass from his belt and threw it onto the chair beside the bed. Then he unbuttoned his shirt and threw that the same way. Sebastian reached up and gently brushed his fingers over Luke's taut, hard stomach.

"You are a handsome man, captain," he whispered, his desire glowing in his eyes.

Luke grinned down on him, pleased that the boy wanted him as much as he wanted the boy. He unbuckled his belt, never taking his eyes off Sebastian. He noticed how Sebastian's eyes followed his every move, how they flashed as he slowly drew the belt away from his britches, and how the lad's gaze followed the belt as Luke threw that, too, onto the chair beside the bed. He wondered what fascination the belt held for the boy, but that thought soon passed out of his head as Sebastian reached up and slowly unbuttoned his britches. Luke allowed him the pleasure of the task – for pleasure it seemed to Sebastian. His tongue darted out and wetted his lips as he worked the buttons loose, and his mouth gleamed wetly in the flickering light.

Luke knew then what he wanted to do – what he had to do, immediately, before anything else. He knocked Sebastian's hands aside and finished the work, releasing his stiff cock. Luke had seen plenty of other men's cocks and believed his own to be large and powerful by comparison – Sebastian certainly seemed to think so, because he smiled up at him. Luke wasted no time – he took hold of Sebastian's face and pushed his cock towards his lips. Sebastian needed no urging – he spread his perfect, wet lips to take Luke's cock, sliding them down over it, taking Luke right up to the root. Luke let out a shout of amazed pleasure – most boys did little more than suck the tip, but Sebastian enthusiastically took it whole. The warm pressure of his mouth as it slid over Luke's cock was intoxicating. Luke began to thrust into him, each thrust hitting the back of Sebastian's throat – so deep, so warm, and so pleasurable... so much so that Luke soon spilled out. Sebastian didn't draw back or spit – he held on tight to Luke's hips and swallowed every last drop, as if it was nectar. Luke stroked Sebastian's hair gently, breathing heavily. He was cross with himself for spilling so soon, but he could not have resisted the pleasure Sebastian's mouth offered.

He smiled down on the boy, to show him he'd done well. Sebastian smiled back up at him, tugging on his hips to bring him down onto the bed beside him. Luke rested there happily, taking Sebastian in his arms and kissing him again. He had not yet touched the boy's hard, yearning cock, but Sebastian seemed not to mind, and surrendered his mouth to Luke's plundering kisses. Luke was surprised to find his own cock hard again within minutes – he'd never been stiff again so soon, but then he'd never had a boy as bold and beautiful as this in his bed before. He drew back, tossed Sebastian expertly onto his front, and reached for the oil he used to slick his hair. He oiled his fingers, and then leaned down and spoke into Sebastian's ear.

"I'll ride you like a fine stallion, until your flanks heave and you scream for mercy. If you have no stomach for such a ride, say so now, for I'll not be able to stop once I'm inside you."

Sebastian made another of those beautiful sounds in the back of his throat. "Ride me," he urged. "Ride me hard! Please."

Luke was delighted. He loved to take a boy forcefully, but often had to go slow and tender, as they could not take the full power of his passion. Sebastian seemed to have no such qualms.

Luke spread the boy's delicious soft arse cheeks and slicked oil into the dark hole within. Sebastian moaned and opened his legs wider. His hole was soon ready, and Luke wasted no time in plunging in, with one hard thrust of his hips. Sebastian cried out and gripped the bed sheets. Luke leaned forward and covered the lad's hands with his own, imprisoning his body beneath him, then began to ride him as hard and fast as he'd promised. Every delicious thrust went deep into Sebastian's warm, oiled hole. Luke's earlier spilling meant he was sated and could ride Sebastian for a long time. At first, he held back, as was his custom, for he'd never yet tumbled with a boy who could take his full force. Sebastian was not such a boy. He glanced over his shoulder, his eyes glazed.

"Harder, sir!" he begged. "Please... harder... faster..."

This was music to Luke's ears. He thrust into the boy at full force, glorying in the furious rhythm of their joining. For a long while he was lost in the sensations, riding the surf of his desire to the very limit. It was a place he'd never been before, and he threw back his head and screamed with joy as he pounded into the boy with all his strength. He felt powerful, invincible, like a god... dear sweet lord, he'd never before had a boy who made him feel this way.

Sebastian's back was slick with sweat, his body trembling with the force of Luke's immense thrusts, his head slung back and his hair hanging in loose waves around his neck. It was like riding a horse through the waves, feeling the pleasure build and ripple between them. Luke cried out and redoubled his efforts, wondering if it was possible to feel any more ecstasy than this, then realising it was... again and again... until he spilled with a great howl, roaring out his victory until he was hoarse. He collapsed on top of the boy, still lodged deep inside him.

"Are you damaged, boy?" he asked, feeling suddenly anxious as the boy was so quiet. He'd felt nothing but waves of pleasure rolling off Sebastian, but had he been so far gone he'd misread the situation?

"No, sir. I'm just in awe of you," Sebastian whispered. "No man has ever taken me with such forceful passion. It was sublime."

Luke grinned and kissed the lad's neck. He rolled sideways, taking Sebastian with him, keeping his cock buried inside the boy. Then, for the first time, he grasped the lad's cock.

"Did you not spill too?" he asked, finding it rock hard.

"No, sir. You didn't give me permission," Sebastian replied.

Luke felt a wave of some new sensation burn in his belly, exciting him beyond belief. "No boy has ever asked for my permission before," he murmured.

"Then they should!" Sebastian retorted. "You should demand it, sir. A man as magnificent as you, who can ride a boy with such power – it is your right to command their pleasure as you see fit."

"Well then... I'd see you spill and know I brought you to that joyful pass," Luke said, wrapping his hand firmly around Sebastian's cock and milking him with long, fine strokes. Sebastian gasped and hollered, bucking into his hand. Luke bit down gently on his neck.

"Keep still," he ordered. "Take what I give, and be grateful." Sebastian melted back against him immediately, surrendering to his embrace, and did not move again as Luke stroked his cock. The lad panted, moaned, and sighed – but he stayed as still as if Luke had tied him in place.

Luke's cock stirred again, where it was still buried inside the boy. What manner of witchcraft could this be, that he was stiff as a post again so soon? He didn't care. He held Sebastian in place and rocked into him with slow, lazy thrusts, keeping time to the firm, sweeping movements of his hand on the boy's beautiful cock. Sebastian was gasping, crying out, whimpering his pleasure.

"I'll spill again, inside you, and when I'm done you can spill too," Luke murmured in Sebastian's ear. "But not before. Can you hold that long?"

"I must, for you have ordered it so, captain," Sebastian replied.

Luke felt another surge of ecstasy. It was as if Sebastian knew him to his core, and every word he said stoked the fires of Luke's arousal even more. Luke kept the boy on edge, fucking his arse hard while milking his cock expertly at the same time. Sebastian was screaming now, begging for release and yet holding himself teetering on the brink. Luke had never felt such power... it consumed him. He slowed down to keep his own pleasure at bay simply for the joy of prolonging the boy's delicious agony. Sebastian knew it, too, for he begged, and pleaded, and hollered, and then howled... and all the time Luke slowly fucked him and milked him without mercy. He didn't know why the boy kept so strong – he'd imposed no penalty on him for spilling first – and yet he sensed it was a point of pride in the lad, and he would always put his captain's pleasure before his own.

Finally, Luke took pity on him. He sped up, fucking furiously, wondering how the boy's hole could take it, then screamed out his release as he spilled deep into Sebastian.

"You may spill now," he said, and that sense of power exploded within him all over again as Sebastian did, immediately, as if Luke's word had been all he'd been waiting for.

Luke held him firm, as Sebastian spilled out over his hand, gasping and shuddering the whole while. Then the boy gave a long, sated groan and relaxed limply into Luke's arms. Luke kissed his neck repeatedly.

"Dear God, boy – I've never had a partner so willing or so obedient to my will," he whispered.

"And I've never had one so powerful," Sebastian replied weakly.

They fell into a dazed, exhausted sleep. Every time Luke woke, he found his cock stiff again, and he rode Sebastian to completion each time. Sometimes, he let the boy spill, and sometimes he did not, and Sebastian accepted both outcomes the same.

Time passed in a haze. Luke was dimly aware of daylight outside, and at one point Marc knocked loudly on the door to ask if the boy had cut his throat in his sleep. Luke roared at him to leave and threw his boot at the door. Neither he nor Sebastian stopped to eat – they gloried in each other's bodies repeatedly, existing only to fuck, and rest, and fuck again. Luke had no idea how his cock could rise so endlessly to the occasion, or how Sebastian's hole could take the relentless pounding, yet neither of them seemed to know how to stop.

Finally, the following morning, Luke knew they must finish. He was captain of this ship, and had responsibilities.

"You are a siren," he whispered in Sebastian's ear. "You have unmanned me."

"I'd say you're very well manned, sir," Sebastian replied, with a cheeky grin.

Luke laughed and cuffed him around the head. Sebastian giggled in a way that made Luke's heart sigh. He longed to pull him back into his arms, but enough was enough.

"We must live as well as fuck – and I'm hungry!" he proclaimed. "It's time you started your duties as my cabin boy."

"My other duties, you mean." Sebastian winked, sliding out of the bed. "I trust you're satisfied with my performance in your bed?"

"You have quite the naughty mouth, but I know a way to silence it." Luke rolled out of bed and chased him across the room. He pulled the lad into his arms and kissed him soundly. Sebastian nestled into him and kissed him back, just as soundly. Luke drew away with a groan. "No – enough!" He put a finger over Sebastian's lips. "It's time to get to work!"

He dressed, enjoying the way his new cabin boy watched as he pulled on his clothes and arranged them just so. He gifted Sebastian some clothes from his own closet – they were of much the same height, although Sebastian was slighter in build and thinner of leg. Then Luke led Sebastian up onto the deck. A cheer and not a few whistles went up from his men, who were all in no doubt as to why they had not seen their captain of late. Luke let them have their moment, then briskly returned to captain mode and found fault with the rigging and the cleanliness of the deck, on purpose, to chide them back to their tasks.

"What manner of ship is this, sir?" Sebastian asked, glancing at the empty flagpole. "Are you a cargo vessel? If so, what cargo do you carry?"

Marc, who was standing nearby, laughed heartily at that.

Luke grinned. "No cargo, boy. We take from any Spanish galleon that crosses our path."

"You take?" Sebastian turned to him with big eyes.

"Oh yes. The captain has a mortal dislike for Spaniards," Marc murmured.

"With good reason," Luke growled. "Yes, we take, boy," he said, growing impatient with Sebastian's wide-eyed stare. "We plunder, pillage, and steal."

"You mean... you're pirates? This is a pirate ship? And you..." Sebastian rounded on him. "Are a pirate captain?"

Luke shrugged. "What of it?" he demanded, with false bravado. He wondered if Sebastian now regretted giving himself to him so freely. If so, the boy might refuse him another time. Luke would never take an unwilling lad, so he'd be mighty sad about that.

"A pirate..." Sebastian whirled around, gawking at the ship, then back to its captain. Then, much to Luke's surprise, his face creased into a broad, ecstatic smile. "This is new! I've never been on a pirate ship before... or been had by a pirate captain," he added, in a quieter tone, that only Luke could hear. "It's exciting!"

Luke gave a loud guffaw and wrapped an arm around the lad's shoulder. "You're not afraid?" he asked.

"Oh yes," Sebastian replied, grinning happily. "Very afraid. That's part of the thrill! Pirates! You don't fly the Jolly Roger, though?" He glanced at the empty flagpole.

"And let everyone know my business? Of course not," Luke chided.

"And are you good at your trade, my handsome pirate captain?" Sebastian purred, looking as if he'd love to fall to his knees and open Luke's britches, there and then.

"Was I good at what I did to you in my cabin?" Luke demanded.

Sebastian blushed. "Very," he whispered.

"Well, I am just as good a pirate captain," Luke told him proudly. Sebastian laughed, and Luke thought he could never get enough of that sound.

He wondered how Sebastian would fit in with his crew. His cabin boy was a strange creature, with his mix of soft yielding and cheeky teasing, combined with that sense of mystery. Luke anticipated trouble, but Sebastian surprised him by blending in from the start. He cleaned Luke's cabin and was always on hand to do his captain's bidding, but he was also

more than happy to help with everyone else's chores, too. Luke would often find him assisting his men as they worked, mending a rope, or swabbing the decks. He cast as much of a spell over his men as he had over Luke, and before long he was a fully accepted member of the crew.

Life settled into a fine routine. Many pirate captains were lazy, preferring to berth at Port Royal and only venture out when they knew a prize might be heading their way. Luke preferred to play a more cunning game, hiding out in the little bays and islands of the Caribbean, and surprising galleons not expecting to be raided so far out on the high seas. Luke loved being on the *Christabel*, so it was no hardship to provision to be at sea for months at a time. They could always stop in little backwater villages on remote islands if they wanted to go ashore, dropping anchor in the bays and sending little boats in to land.

It was a fine life, and one Luke loved best. Yet now he lived even more for the nights, when he had his boy to himself and could ride him senseless. Sebastian never once refused him, or spoke of being too tired or not in the mood for their bedtime sport. He looked forward to the nights as much as Luke, his eyes gleaming with pleasure the minute they were alone and his captain reached for him.

One morning, as they lay sleepily in bed preparing to face the new day, Sebastian drew a finger over the scars on Luke's back.

"Where are these from, captain?" he asked, tracing their jagged edges.

Luke brushed his hand away. "I'm an old seadog, boy. I have the scars to show for it," he said brusquely.

Sebastian pressed his lips gently against one of the scars. "But they pain you still," he murmured. "I see it sometimes on deck, when you must stand straight and proud for your men so they don't doubt your strength – the skin weighs on the muscles and pulls them down; it makes you tired."

Luke glanced over his shoulder, startled by his boy's insight. "They ache, but we all have our aches," he said.

"Hmmm." Sebastian smiled gently and kissed another scar. "I could help," he offered quietly.

"How?" Luke sat up, uneasy with this conversation.

"The pots in the bag you found me with... they are medicines, made of a mix of herbs. They've helped many people. They could help you, too, if you'd allow me to soothe an unguent into your skin?"

Luke slid from the bed, frowning. "You want your bag returned to you?"

"Not for my own sake, but yours." Sebastian sat up. "My uncle, the one in England I am to be apprentice to – he's an apothecary. These are medicines he taught me, sending me letters telling me how to make them. I've found them of use."

Luke wondered what harm it could do. He had no use for the bag of potions – he'd originally intended to hold it hostage against Sebastian's good behaviour, but there had been no need for that. It seemed churlish to withhold it now. He went to his closet, found the bag, and threw it at his boy.

"There. Let's see if they work then," he said.

Sebastian bade him lie still on his front, then opened one of the pots and carefully smeared a greasy substance into his skin. It smelled of herbs, but was not unpleasant. Luke tensed all the same. He didn't like his scars being touched or remarked upon. Most seadogs had scars, either from the cat or from working on a boat, so nobody usually paid them any attention, which suited him well. He had no wish to recall the circumstances by which he'd gained them.

"Ssh... it's okay," Sebastian whispered, soothing his skin gently. Luke relaxed and began to zone out. It was so easy to lie here and allow Sebastian to minister to his skin. He felt a warm sensation flow through him, as though he were floating on a golden cloud.

"There... all done," Sebastian said, from what seemed like a great distance. Slowly, Luke came back to himself. His body felt heavy, but his back... his back didn't hurt, for the first time in nearly twenty years.

He glanced in the mirror – the thick, knotted lines of the scars still snaked across his back... and, maybe it was a trick of the light, but they seemed less jagged than before.

Sebastian put the pot back in the black leather bag and returned it to the closet. "The unguent should give you relief for awhile, but the pain will return. Let me know when it does, and I'll apply it again," he said.

Luke grunted and pulled on his shirt. "Thank you," he said gruffly. It was one thing to fuck the boy, another to have old wounds tended to so sweetly by him. Luke wasn't sure how he felt about that.

Sebastian loved being on the deck with him, sitting near his side, or just watching as he strode about the ship, giving orders. Sometimes, Sebastian drew pictures of the birds they saw, or the strange sea creatures they glimpsed in the depths of the water. He had a good eye, and the pictures were pleasing. Other times, he read from Luke's motley collection of books, collected from various ships over the years – Luke had always loved to read. Then there were the times the lad simply stared into space, smiling dreamily. Luke found him hardest to resist at those times, and often tousled the boy's dark hair or pressed a little kiss to his cheek when his crew weren't looking.

Sebastian also loved helping out on the rigging; Luke noticed he'd grown more confident, climbing to the very tip of the yardarm and back down again, often in competition with one of the other young lads aboard the Christabel.

They were becalmed for several days, and the crew became bored and restless. Sebastian became the opposite, growing giddy and reckless. He scooted around the ship, getting underfoot. When Luke bade him sit to one side and stay there, Sebastian obeyed him, but with a sulky look on his fair face.

Luke was busy with his maps, talking to Marc about where they should go when they finally had a fair wind in their sails, when he was startled by a shout from his men. He looked up to see Sebastian climbing the rigging as fast as he could go, like a monkey, in a race with little Nicky Kneebone. Sebastian easily beat Nicky to the top, then, euphoric from his win, he stepped out onto the yardarm and began to walk across it, his arms outstretched for balance, dancing a little jig as he went. Luke's heart skipped a beat. The lad was a fool! If he fell, he'd surely break a limb or two – if he even survived the great drop.

"Boy! Get down here now!" he yelled.

Sebastian scrambled down the rigging, a big grin creasing in his face. Luke could feel a frenetic, jangly humour emanating from him. It was misplaced, and Luke itched to quell it. Sebastian jumped down onto the deck, and Luke strode over to him, a thunderous frown creasing his brow.

"Are you simple?" Luke roared. "This is not a place to play games! A fall from there could kill you."

"I'm fine," Sebastian riposted. "I wasn't going to fall. Don't fuss so!"

Luke felt a surge of such fury he could not contain it. He picked the boy up bodily, threw him over his shoulder, and strode back to his cabin with him.

When they were alone inside, Luke slung Sebastian down on the bed. Sebastian sat up, an expectant look on his face, clearly hoping for ravishment. Luke intended to give him no such reward. He sat down next to Sebastian, grabbed the boy's arm, and pulled him over his knee. Then he ripped the lad's britches down and spanked him hard with his hand.

"A child's punishment, for a childish act," he fumed as he spanked. Sebastian wriggled and mewled, but Luke held him firm and did not let him up until his bottom was good and warm.

When he was done, he flipped Sebastian onto his feet, took hold of his shoulder, and parked him in the corner of the cabin.

"You can stay there, with your arse on display, until I say you can move," he growled.

Sebastian's odd, discordant humour seemed to dissipate. He made a sound halfway between a sob and a sigh. Then his body relaxed, his shoulders hanging loose and free, and he wept softly to himself, his face buried in his arms. Luke gave a sigh of relief that the tension had lifted.

Luke returned to the deck to fetch his maps and then retired back to the cabin to plot his course. He sat at the table, ignoring his gently sobbing boy, although he did look up every so often to enjoy the sight of that glowing arse.

There was a knock at the door an hour or so later, and Marc poked his head around it.

"Have you set our course yet, captain?" he asked. Luke waved him into the room, chuckling when he saw Marc's expression as he caught sight of Sebastian.

"The boy required correction," Luke explained.

Marc nodded. "Aye, I reckon so. He was a fool. You'd do well to keep beating some sense into him if he's to stay alive. You struck him well on the arse by the looks of it."

Sebastian rested his head against the wall with a little choke. The humiliation of Marc witnessing his state of undress clearly smarted, but not, Luke suspected, as much as his sore arse. Luke and Marc discussed the course for the next couple of hours as they pored over the maps. Luke spared Sebastian no quarter, making him stand there the entire time as his warm arse cooled.

Only when Marc had gone did Luke stand up and cross over to the boy.

"Very well then," he said, not unkindly. "You can pull up your britches now and come to bed."

Sebastian turned. His eyes were downcast, and there were tear tracks on his cheeks, but he had lost the wild, giddy look he'd had earlier.

"I'm sorry, captain," he whispered. Luke had expected him to be surly about his punishment, but instead he wrapped his arms around Luke's waist, rested his head on Luke's shoulder, and swayed there, happy and content. Luke puts his arms around the boy and held him tight.

"Tis only because I'm so fond of you that I tanned you so hard," he murmured into Sebastian's hair. "It would have broken my heart to see you crash down onto the deck."

Sebastian drew back, a golden gleam in his eyes. "I'm mighty fond of you too, captain," he murmured, leaning in for a kiss.

Luke kissed him back, feeling that warm glow in his belly again. This boy would be the death of him! He took Sebastian to bed and fucked him gently, sweetly, kissing him deeply as he moved inside him. It was a new thing to be so tender in bed, but it only made that glow in his belly warmer still.

Later that night, he woke to find Sebastian sitting by the porthole, gazing out, wrapped only in a blanket.

"Are you well, lad?" he asked, sitting up.

"I am, sir," Sebastian said dreamily. "I was just imagining a world where a man as fine as you took a lad like me to his bed and made love to him tenderly, as if he had special meaning to him. Then I realised I had no need to dream, as it is real." He turned to give Luke a wide, happy smile. "You were right to warm my backside, captain. I was taken up with strange imaginings. I get that way sometimes. The world feels too much at times, and I grow wild and rash. You took me in hand, and now I am right with the world again."

"Why, you are the strangest creature." Luke smiled. He slid out of bed, went over to Sebastian, picked him up in his arms, and carried him back to the bed. The boy's blanket fell away, revealing his beautiful long limbs, and plump, pretty bottom. Luke stroked it to find it was no longer warm, not even a little, nor even tender to the touch for the boy didn't cry out; maybe Luke had not spanked him as hard as he thought.

Luke snuggled in beside him, feeling his cock grow stiff again. Sebastian opened his arms in welcome, and kissed him. They lay there lazily, kissing and stroking. There was no urgent need, just a sense of hazy happiness. Sebastian caressed Luke's naked arse, his fingers so deftly petting his flesh that Luke's cock was soon hard. Sebastian grinned in delight, and rose up so that he was straddling him. He slid his hand up and down Luke's hard cock, his lips wet and his eyes gleaming. Then he pushed Luke's legs apart and reached for the oil on the shelf. Luke grabbed his wrist firmly, stopping him.

"What is it you intend to do?" he demanded.

"Only what you do to me. I'm good at it, too," Sebastian said proudly. "I'll make you quiver and scream, my captain, as you do me. I promise."

"No," Luke growled.

Sebastian paused in confusion. "But it feels so good. I'd love to make you feel the same way I do. It's beautiful, captain, you'll see."

"No," Luke said again. He pushed Sebastian away, his cock wilting, and swung his legs over the bed. He sat up, his back to the boy, fighting the rush of feelings that threatened to rise up from deep within and choke him.

"Hush now." Sebastian gently kissed his neck. "I'm sorry, sir. I thought only to please, for it's always you giving me pleasure in that way. I did not want you to find me selfish."

"I do not. You are not. By the gods, boy, you offer yourself to me in a way no lad has ever done before. I could not wish for a better boy in my bed!" Luke exclaimed. "But do not ever seek to fuck me in the arse like a two-bit whore on the docks. Not ever. Do you understand me?" Luke shot a dark glare over his shoulder, to find Sebastian staring back, with a startled look.

"I do, sir, and I will not try again. Is that how you see me though, captain? As a whore for enjoying it when you take me in that way?"

"It's not the same!" Luke roared. "You're a boy. I'm a man." He struggled to find the words to explain what seemed clear enough to him, yet was obviously mystifying to Sebastian. "I do not see you as a whore, but as a very fine boy indeed," he said finally. "Let's leave it there and speak no more of it."

"Very well. Now please, come here. You are shaking, my dear." Sebastian wrapped his arms around him, and Luke felt as if he couldn't breathe. He cried out and pushed Sebastian away, then jumped off the bed and strode over to the table, fighting memories that rose up, unbidden. He'd been just a little lad, held down, unwilling. The pain was seared into his soul, the sensation of being ripped apart, and later, crawling into his hammock, his body raw and tender, his heart sunk in shame. He would not feel that way again. Whatever pleasure Sebastian took from being used so was not something Luke could feel. He was sure of that.

Luke breathed in great gasps of air, trying to calm himself. He could feel rivers of sweat running down his back, and was aware of Sebastian's curious gaze upon him. He hated himself for his weakness. He should go over there and throw the boy down, fuck him hard and make him forget what he'd seen here tonight... but he found he could not.

Sebastian tiptoed carefully towards him and gently wrapped a blanket around his shoulders. He did not touch Luke save to drop a gentle kiss on his hair. "None shall ever hear of this from me," he said softly, as if knowing what Luke most feared. Then he held out his hand. "Come back to bed. You are too dear to me to see you suffer in this way. Come back. I can warm you."

Luke took Sebastian's hand gingerly, still afraid that he might lose control again. Yet the touch of Sebastian's skin against his own gave him that strange, warm sensation in his belly, soothing him. He allowed Sebastian to lead him back to the bed and gently draw him in beside him, so they were lying there, face to face. Sebastian placed a careful hand on Luke's thigh and rested it there, lightly. His eyes were as beautiful as the ocean, glowing gold in the light from the lantern.

Luke was suddenly aware that Sebastian was as tall as he, with hard, strong muscles. He wasn't a boy at all, but a grown man. If he wished, Sebastian could resist all that Luke did to him – he could have refused to be spanked and displayed like a child in the cabin earlier. He could fight Luke away when he came at him with a stiff cock and a need to bury it in his boy. He had done none of those things – indeed, he'd done the opposite, matching Luke fire for fire, desire for desire, taking all Luke wished to do to him and wanting more. Luke traced a finger over Sebastian's firmly muscled arm.

"You can refuse me if you wish," he whispered.

"I do not wish," Sebastian replied.

"You let me do such things to you, take such liberties with you..."

"You do not take from me. I give to you," Sebastian said. "For the pleasure of us both – yes?"

"Yes," Luke whispered, surprised by his own thoughts. It made it even more thrilling, knowing Sebastian could stop him but did not, knowing he offered himself up to Luke as a prize, an offering, a gift, bestowing on him something beautiful, for him and him alone.

"What are you?" Luke asked, his voice croaking in wonder.

Sebastian laughed. "You know what I am," he said. "I am your boy."

There was a simple truth to that, and it brought Luke a great sense of peace. He held Sebastian fast against his breast and fell into a deep, blissful sleep.

Chapter Two

Sebastian had arrived with nothing save the clothes on his back, which had been dull and plain enough. Luke loved dressing up fine, showing himself off to best effect, but Sebastian seemed to have no notion of how to do the same. From the start, Luke had shared his clothes freely with the boy, yet he frowned at the combinations Sebastian put together: a waistcoat that did not match a shirt, a belt slung too high or too low, and the wrong colour neckerchiefs for his skin.

"God's beard, Sebastian, for a beautiful boy you have no sense of how to dress yourself to best effect!" Luke announced one day, upon seeing Sebastian in a motley array of garments that Luke would never have put together.

"You are the strangest pirate in the world, to care so much about your apparel!" Sebastian retorted.

"I like to make the best of myself. You could learn from me," Luke chided. It was true – Luke spent a fair amount of coin on new items of clothing whenever he was back in port. He loved the swish of a fresh cloak, or the fit of a new red waistcoat, loose shirt, or tight britches. He had two pairs of long, leather boots that fitted him true as he'd had them made to his feet.

He took hold of Sebastian's shoulder and stood him in front of the mirror in his cabin.

"Look at how clothes can be put together. Not just pulled on anyhow, but made to work pleasingly in unison," he said, dressing his boy in a white shirt with a blue waistcoat that matched the colour of his eyes. "See how good this looks on you?"

Sebastian laughed at his reflection. "I see it when you do it. I cannot see it for myself," he said. Luke sighed. This would clearly be the work of more than one lesson, and maybe it was a skill the boy would never learn.

As the weeks passed, Luke noticed his cabin boy was better at some of his duties than others. Sebastian was never less than enthusiastic and inventive in bed, and he was sweet and willing to help on deck, but he was hardly attentive to his captain's cabin. He preferred climbing the rigging to tidying. Luke had always been a neat man, yet now he was sharing his cabin with Sebastian it was the messiest it had ever been. Sebastian would drop his shirts on the floor, leave his boots where he'd removed them, and scatter pots of medicine all over the table. One evening, Luke tripped over a pile of old plates Sebastian had failed to clear away. He fell against the table, scraping his thigh, and exploded in rage.

"Boy!" he yelled. "You are failing in your duties!"

Sebastian scrambled off the bed where he'd been reading one of Luke's old books, and rushed over to him. "You're right, captain." He scabbled around on the floor, picking up the plates. "I'm sorry!" He took the plates and left them outside the door, then returned, his eyes downcast. "You should punish me, sir," he said, standing, ashamed, in front of Luke.

"Hmm. I should. No rum for a week!" Luke snapped.

"I think I deserve worse." Sebastian placed his hands on Luke's waist and fingered his leather belt. "A few slaps from this might set me to rights?"

Luke stared at him, a familiar heat rising in the pit of his belly. He'd noticed Sebastian's fascination with his belt before. Now he sensed there was something here that might please them both.

"A few slaps?" he growled, placing his hand on the buckle. "If I take my belt to you, I'll decide how many licks you take, not you."

Sebastian's eyes glowed, spurring Luke on; he undid the buttons on his shirt sleeves slowly, one by one, then carefully folded them to the elbow. Then he undid the buckle of his belt and removed it from around his waist with one long, slow swoosh.

Sebastian's eyes were wide, his gaze fixed on the belt. "Please, go easy on me, sir," he said, in a throaty kind of voice.

"I don't think I will." Luke reached out his free hand and grabbed Sebastian by the arm, then in one smooth move he placed his foot on a nearby chair and pulled Sebastian over his knee. Sebastian gave a gasp of shock, but before he had time to recover Luke pulled his britches down to his knees, exposing his fine white arse. He could feel Sebastian's cock, half hard against his thigh, and that made him smile. Sebastian played a dangerous game, but the devil take him if he thought he could outsmart Luke. He'd get what he wanted... and then some.

Luke doubled over the belt and rested it against Sebastian's buttocks.

"Count," he instructed, drawing back his hand. He brought the belt down with a sharp whack on Sebastian's backside. He paused, a thrill coursing through him to see Sebastian flip like a fish caught on the line. A red stripe appeared on his white bottom. His mark. Luke had placed his mark on his boy. It filled him with a sense of pride and possession such as he'd never felt before. "I said count!" he bellowed.

"One!" Sebastian choked out. Luke slapped him again, harder this time, making Sebastian squawk. "Please! Sir, it hurts so much!"

"As it should." Luke put his arm around the boy and pulled him in close to keep him in position. "Count!" he commanded. "Don't make me ask you again, or I'll give you double!"

"Two," Sebastian whimpered, but his cock was now as hard as rock against Luke's thigh.

Luke spanked him hard for the next few minutes, turning his pale bottom bright red and hot. Sebastian gasped and panted his way through the count, occasionally begging for a mercy that Luke suspected he did not wish to be granted.

Luke was sure he'd know when the boy had endured enough, for he felt so keenly attuned to him. There was a warm glow that flowed from Sebastian to him and back again.

When that glow was white hot, Luke threw the belt to one side, pushed Sebastian over the table, and seized his buttocks. Sebastian let out a strangled cry, which Luke ignored. He grabbed the oil and slicked his fingers into Sebastian's dark heat, then pushed himself inside, longing for the blessed tightness of his boy's hole. There was something even more blissful about entering his boy this time, feeling his flaming arse cheeks against his belly as he fucked him hard. When at last he finished and allowed Sebastian to stand, he saw the cheeks on his face were as rosy as those on his rear.

"You thought to play me," Luke said, wiping away the boy's tears. "I hope you learned your lesson."

Sebastian gazed at him from heavy-lidded eyes, an expression of worship on his face. Then he sank to his knees and kissed each of Luke's boots. "I did. Thank you, sir," he whispered.

Luke petted his hair gently. "Keep the cabin tidy," he ordered. "If you want a dose of my belt, then I'll give it to you, with pleasure, but I like a tidy cabin."

Sebastian looked up at him with a wry grin. "I think you have the measure of me, sir," he said.

Thereafter, their cabin was always spotless... save for those occasions where Luke returned to find a single dirty plate left on the floor. Then his hands went to his belt, and his naughty cabin boy would smile and squeal as he was slung over his captain's knee and whipped until he begged for mercy.

They fell into an easy routine. Some nights they would eat on the deck with the crew, but most times they ate alone in their cabin. Sebastian liked to talk – about the crew, the ship, the books he'd read, the lands he'd visited, the stars in the sky – about anything and everything. Luke had never known such a talkative boy, and he loved it. He liked making Sebastian laugh with a joke, and to see him nod, thoughtfully, with an insight. He liked the easy way they talked, back and forth, sometimes for hours on end without stopping. Sebastian was a fascinating boy, and Luke yearned to know more about him.

"How do you know so much?" he asked, one night. "You are young to have read so many books and travelled to so many places."

Sebastian's blue eyes were as deep and unfathomable as the sea. "I started young," he murmured. "My family..." he paused, and his eyes were suddenly wet. "They left me when I was a child. I don't know why. One day they were there, loving me as if I was the most precious thing in the world, and the next they were gone – and I was alone." Luke's breath caught in his throat. He placed a hand over Sebastian's, and squeezed. "I went where the mood took me after that," Sebastian said. "I learned to read and write. I travelled the world, making friends along the way."

"You ran away to sea?" Luke asked, keenly.

"You could say that," Sebastian replied, glancing away.

"And what of your uncle?" Luke asked.

"Who?" Sebastian frowned.

"Your uncle in England – the apothecary who paid for your passage there?"

"Ah yes. My uncle. I did not know about him for a long time... but he made... enquiries about me, found me, and sent me my fare." Sebastian waved a hand around, airily.

"Can you settle to life on the land after so many adventures around the world?" Luke wondered.

"I don't know. I suppose I'll find out," Sebastian said.

"Or..." Luke hesitated. "You could stay?"

"Hmm." Sebastian pulled his hand away.

Luke felt an old bitterness roil inside him. "Or go. It's all the same to me," he said brusquely.

Sebastian rested his hand in Luke's once more. "It's a tempting offer. Oh, my captain, it would be so easy to stay here and let you love me. I can see all too clearly how that would turn out. A man as fine as you... "

"But your uncle waits for you. I understand. You have kin who need you," Luke said shortly. He found that a more agreeable reason than the fear he might not be man enough to make Sebastian change his plans.

Sebastian put his head on one side, gazing at him thoughtfully. "If any man could make me stay, it would be you, captain," he said.

"Yet you'll go? When we next drop anchor at Port Royal?" Luke asked, his voice sounding a little hoarse to his own ears.

"I must. Or..."

"Or?" Luke pressed.

Sebastian leaned in and kissed his cheek. "Or you will cause me great heartache, I fear," he said softly.

"I never would! You are the best boy I've ever had, or likely ever will," Luke admitted. "You'd find me true. I'd never throw you over for another."

"No. I do not believe you would." Sebastian gave a slow, sad smile. "And neither would I you. But still, there would be an ending, one day, and the longer we are together, the harder it would be."

"Oh lad! That's called living!" Luke exclaimed. "If that's your only fear, then cast it from your mind. Think of the adventures we could have together! Let us make the most of our time in the sun, for it ends soon enough for everyone."

Sebastian shook his head. "Losing you would break me too much, I fear," he whispered. "Let us not talk of such sad things. Let's do what pleases us both the most!" He stood up, took Luke's hand, and led him to the bed.

"What of you?" Sebastian asked, as they lay happily in each other's arms a few hours later.

"What of me?" Luke asked.

"I've told you my story – what is yours?"

"There's little to tell. I ran away to sea as a lad, and here I am now," Luke said stiffly.

Sebastian laughed. "So much living reduced to so little. What of your accent, captain? I love the way you speak. The way your voice lilts is pleasing to the ear. Where are you from?"

Luke grinned. "I hail from God's own country!" he announced proudly. "A little place called Cwm Drysor in the valleys of Wales."

"Ah! Wales! I was there once, a long time ago," Sebastian mused. "It was beautiful."

"Then you should know the accent," Luke chided.

"As I said, it was long ago." Sebastian rested his chin on Luke's shoulder. "And what of your parents? Did they mind you running away to sea?"

Luke turned and pressed a finger over Sebastian's fine lips. "Hush – it's time to sleep," he said firmly.

"There are murmurings, captain," Marc said one evening, during his usual evening rum with Luke in his cabin. Sebastian sat on the bed, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders, reading a book.

"Discontent?" Luke raised an eyebrow. Sebastian glanced up.

"Aye. It's been awhile since we stripped the *Santa Ana*. The men are restless. They want to know why we're hiding. They think we should either find another Spanish ship to take, or dock in Port Royal so they can spend their spoils from our last victory."

"They want to whore away their money," Luke growled. Marc shrugged, making a little face. "What is it?" Luke demanded, getting to his feet.

"Tis true they want women," Marc admitted. "They say tis not the same for you, as you have yon lad to satisfy your needs. They say tis no wonder you are in no hurry to make port, for you have a fine boy to ride every night."

"Damn them!" Luke flung his glass at the wall. It shattered, leaving a long stain of rum on the wood. He did not like his affairs being talked about in such crude terms. Sebastian was more to him than just a boy to warm his bed. Much more.

"We have been creeping and hiding for some time, captain. Is there a plan?" Marc asked.

"There is indeed," Luke snapped.

"Then perhaps you should share it with the men," Marc suggested. "To quell the ugliness of their mood?"

"Very well." Luke took a few deep breaths to calm himself. The plan had been secret long enough, and there was no purpose keeping it so any longer. "Gather them round at noon tomorrow, and I'll remind them why I am their captain."

Marc nodded and left. Sebastian slid off the bed, came over to Luke, and wrapped his arms around his shoulders.

"Will all be well?" he asked.

Luke felt calmer just for having his boy close. "Aye. Pirates are like this. I kept my plan quiet because I don't trust one of my men, but it seems I must speak plain now."

"One-eyed Jim?" Sebastian asked quietly.

"Aye. Most of my men are loyal, but not him. I'd throw him overboard, but he's never yet crossed me to my face."

"If you cannot quiet them?" Sebastian asked. "Would they...?"

"Kill me? Probably not, but I hold this ship by common consent. They stick with me because I treat them well, and we make good booty. If that fails, they'll vote me out soon enough."

"A pirate captain leads a precarious life," Sebastian murmured.

"Aye." Luke turned and kissed the lad. "But I'd not have it any other way."

The next day, Luke strode onto the deck with a decisive step. The men gathered around him, as ordered, and he spoke out, loud and sure.

"A fishing vessel will travel through these waters in the next few days. She'll be carrying Castilian treasure in her hold. No pirate will think to raid her, for she'll look ever so humble, yet I've heard tell she be full of booty," he said.

A low murmur went up amongst his men. "How did you hear of this, captain?" Jake asked. "We'd look mighty fine fools when next we dock at Port Royal if we raided a ship full of fish!"

"You can imagine the jokes," Tom Thorne said. "We'd never live it down!"

"I speak true," Luke told them firmly. "When last I was in Port Royal, I installed my old cabin boy, Jamie Bellwether, to be my eyes and ears there. He reported it to me."

"I thought he stayed there to be near some tavern wench," Tom said.

"That too." Luke grinned. "But I decided I should get some good out of losing a fine cabin boy, so I charged him with this new purpose."

"And supposing he's wrong? Or telling you a yarn?" One-eyed Jim spat. "Sounds like a made-up tale to me. I'll tell you what, lads..." He got to his feet and addressed the men direct. "I'll tell you how we can make a small fortune, with far less trouble than chasing fishing boats."

The men leaned in close, calling to hear more. Luke sensed he was losing them.

"You know as well as I that the captain here has a tidy bounty on his head." Jim jerked his thumb at Luke. "Killing the Admiral of the Fleet's brother will do that for ye!" He grinned at Luke. "I'm sure it felt good to sink your blade into that lily-livered fat belly, captain, but we all know you're a liability to the Christabel. Ye can hardly move in the whorehouses and taverns of Port Royal for notices proclaiming the bounty on your head. I say we turn him in and claim it for ourselves!" Jim cried, turning back to his audience.

Luke saw Sebastian take a sharp intake of breath, but he knew his men better than his cabin boy did. There was an uneasy muttering; the thought of handing a fellow pirate to the Royal Navy didn't sit well with his men. Luke would be hanged for sure, and his men liked him. Luke stepped forward, his hands outstretched, a grin on his face.

"We are pirates, for sure, but not without honour. I trust every man among you with my life, save perhaps bloodthirsty Jim here, who, I think, would make a fine footstool for some Navy captain to rest his boots on!"

The men roared at that, and Luke knew he had them back. It was far better to treat Jim as a joke than a serious threat – and that gambit had worked. "If I'm wrong about the fishing vessel, then vote me out and do with me as you will, but I believe I'm right. What do you lose by trusting me? I've led you true many a time before."

He had, too, and his men knew it. Luke was a leader to his bones, and his men had followed him through thick and thin so far. He didn't doubt them now. Sure enough, their grumbles of discontent soon turned to cheers, and he knew he was safe – for now.

"Are you sure about this fishing boat carrying treasure?" Sebastian asked, when they were alone in his cabin that night.

"Not sure, no." Luke saw the worried look in his boy's eyes and pulled him close. "Who can be sure? I take gambles and risks every single day, lad. Tis who I am – what I am. This is no different."

"But your men..."

"Chose me over Jim today."

"And if tomorrow they change their minds?"

"Then they do," Luke said firmly "I can't fret about tomorrow. I won today, and that's enough."

"Is it true there's a price on your head?" Sebastian asked, gazing at him intently. "Did you really kill the admiral's brother?"

"I did." Luke shrugged. "He cried like a stuck pig when I pushed my blade into his soft belly. I twisted it hard, making him cry out some more, and took great pleasure in it, too."

"I never took you for bloodthirsty," Sebastian said quietly, drawing back a little.

"I am not!" Luke retorted, feeling stung. "I've been in many a fight and never felt more than the satisfaction of a job well done. This was different."

"Why?" Sebastian asked.

Luke felt the darkness that always lurked within threaten to do its sorry work again and rise like a tide around him. "It's not for you to ask or know!" he snapped. "Now get on your knees and hush your mouth – it has other work to do."

Sebastian did not move. He remained there, his eyes dark, studying Luke as if weighing his soul. Luke stood his ground, holding steady and looking his boy direct in the eye. If Sebastian refused him now for being a murdering monster, then so be it. He had no regrets. He'd answer to no man for that particular crime, if crime it had been. Maybe one day he'd stand before God and explain it, but that was the only judgement he'd accept. Sebastian's expression changed, as if he had his answer. He gave a crooked little smile and sank to his knees.

The Christabel caught up with the fishing boat a few days later. She was a lowly vessel, not worth any pirate's time – but wasn't that the point? Nobody would guess she held any treasure in her hold.

"She doesn't look like much of a prize," Marc murmured, gazing at her through the spyglass.

"Look again." Luke pointed at the men on the ship's deck. "Those men are Castilians for sure – and armed, too. Why arm a fishing boat?"

He gave the order to go alongside and board her. This was the best time of any pirate's life – a raiding party!

"May I come?" Sebastian asked.

Luke considered it. It was dangerous work, but if they failed Sebastian might not be any safer on the Christabel than on the deck of yon fishing boat. He nodded his agreement and handed his boy a cutlass.

"Do you know how to use it?" he asked. Sebastian waved it around – he had some moves, but Luke wondered if he had the stomach for battle. "Stick close to me," Luke ordered curtly.

A raiding party was Luke's favourite kind of game. He and his men roared onto the fishing boat with ease – to find a well-armed party of men awaiting them. They fought hard and true for an hour or more, neither side gaining ground. Luke kept his boy by his side throughout, keeping an eye on him. Sebastian was a clumsy fighter, but he made plenty of noise, and the Spaniards were not to know he lacked a true fighter's steel. Whenever he looked up, Luke saw Sebastian beside him, his eyes bright with excitement as he laughed, shouted, and roared his way through the fight.

Luke's men prevailed in the end, as Luke had known they would. He had the vanquished Castilians tied up and guarded while he routed the ship with Sebastian at his side, looking for its treasure. They found nothing. Only fish. Crates of 'em, piled high in the hold. Luke took apart every single crate looking for the treasure, but it was not to be found.

"Damn it." He knew his men would take the Christabel from him for this, and rightly so. "I was sure she held treasure." He straightened up, squaring his shoulders. "You should not stand by me now, Sebastian," he said. "I'll not be captain for much longer. You might choose to stay with this Spanish ship – find shore with her after we've left, and passage to your uncle."

"No." Sebastian spoke keenly. He took hold of Luke's face. "I'll stand by your side, whatever they do to you."

"You're a good lad. Better than I deserve, no doubt," Luke said wryly.

Sebastian leaned in and kissed him, then drew back. "Let's search for the treasure one last time," he said, closing his eyes.

"Tis not searching if you can't see," Luke said, puzzled.

"Sometimes, I see better this way," Sebastian murmured. A glimmer of sunlight penetrated the hull and settled around Sebastian's shoulders, making him glow gold and silver in the dark hull. He looked more beautiful than ever, bathed in that pretty light, like some ethereal creature from a different dimension – the kind Luke had read about in books.

Sebastian's eyes opened and seemed to catch that same glow from the light. "This way," he said. He led Luke down a flight of stairs to the bowels of the boat.

"We already checked here," Luke reminded him.

"I know. Just... I remember something felt... different... in this one place... Here," Sebastian said, stopping beside a crate. He pushed the crate aside and began pulling at the ship's boards. Luke joined him. They tore up the boards to find a large wooden chest beneath. Luke looked up at Sebastian, and they both broke into wild grins at the same time. They

hauled out the chest between them for it was heavy, made of sturdy oak. It was locked, but Luke soon beat the chest open with the handle of his cutlass. Then, he took a deep, shaky breath and lifted the lid.

Both he and Sebastian gasped at the same time. Inside, glowing bright, they found gold and gems of all kinds. The chest was full to the brim with treasure – there was gold of such quantity it would take a man years to spend it all. Sebastian gave a roar of triumph, his eyes awash with wild joy. Luke felt as Sebastian looked. He guffawed, allowing a measure of gold coin to slide through his fingers.

"You are a lucky charm for sure, boy," he said. "What made you think to look here again?"

"I remembered she sounded hollow when we stood on her," Sebastian said, standing up.

"So, t'was not witchcraft?" Luke asked, laughing.

"Do I look like a witch?" Sebastian grinned.

Luke remembered his mother taking him once to a cottage in a dell, a little way beyond the edge of their village. He could not have been more than five years old. There, an old lady sat by her fire. What was her name...? Tangwlyst! That was it! It had been many years since he'd thought of her. She'd made him drink a bitter tea, then stared into the cup and back at him. His mother had held her breath and clasped his hand tight, although he'd railed against that, feeling himself too old to be coddled, little lad though he was. Tangwlyst sighed and shook her head. His mother frowned in worry. Tangwlyst bade him throw a handful of tiny bones on the table and then stared just as intently at them. This time, she smiled.

"He will travel through the stars!" Tangwlyst exclaimed.

"See, Luke bach!" said his mother. "You will go to sea! Mind you come back now."

Tangwlyst quickly pocketed his mother's coin as they made their way out. Luke turned to look at her, and her eyes twinkled at him. She'd been old and wrinkled, with eyes like the little black currants in a bara brith. She had looked every inch a witch. This boy? Definitely not!

Luke pulled Sebastian close and kissed his laughing lad. They were both giddy with excitement. It was all Luke could do not to tear his boy's clothes from his body and take him hard over the chest. Sebastian, pressed against him, was clearly of the same mind.

"Later," Luke said regretfully, putting his boy down.

They left the fishing boat behind them, with her men tied to each other. They'd escape soon enough, but the Christabel would be long gone by then. That night, they drank rum enough to drown in, while Luke went through the treasure chest, logging every coin and jewel within meticulously, as his men watched.

"Is she there, captain?" Nicky Kneebone asked eagerly. "The Eternal Emerald – is she there?"

"No." Luke shook his head sadly. "She's not here, lad, but we'll find her one day – I promise!"

"The Eternal Emerald? What's that?" Sebastian asked.

Luke looked up, smiling, his face lit by the many lights from his men's lanterns. "She's a legend, boy, only talked of, never seen. A huge emerald, the size of Nicky's fist. She is said to give eternal life to any who can win and keep her – but if you lose her, you die, in the instant she is lost."

"Right." Sebastian grinned.

Luke glared at him. "She is out there somewhere, boy, and I've pledged to find her."

"Eternal life?" Sebastian's eyes glowed gold in the lanternlight. "Who would want such a thing?"

"Are you mad, boy? Most men would kill to live forever!" Luke exclaimed.

"To what end? When all you love will surely die before you, and you can only stand by and watch? Not once, not a hundred times – but a thousand or more – until your heart can bear the sorrow no longer. All family, all friends, all lovers... all lost to you, and yet you go on living. Alone." Sebastian's voice was low, his face cast in shadows as he spoke. His words were oddly moving – maybe it was the rum, but they all felt it. Luke felt suddenly cold and a shiver ran through him.

"You've been reading too many books, Sebastian lad," he said.

Sebastian smiled, sadly. "Maybe it is so," he murmured, taking a tankard of rum and downing it in one go.

"I will find the Eternal Emerald one day!" Luke announced to his crew. "I will not stop looking until I've made her mine!" His crew cheered and raised their tankards in approval.

Luke laughed and stood up. His men crowded around expectantly as Luke opened his mouth and began to sing.

*"It's ho! For a brave and a gallant ship
And a fair and a favouring breeze
With a bully crew and a fine captain too
To carry me over the seas
To carry me over the seas, me lads
To my true love far away
For I'm taking a trip on a pirate ship
Ten thousand miles away."*

Luke had a true Welshman's voice – deep, strong, and pure of pitch, with a rolling timbre. He had no false modesty – his voice was pleasing to the ear, and he knew it. His men laughed as he changed some of the words to suit himself. Luke laughed too, raising his tankard and taking a big swig of rum before starting the chorus.

*"So blow, ye winds and blow and a-roving I will go
I'll stay no more on England's shore
To hear sweet music play
For I'm off on the bounding maine and I won't be back again
For I'm taking a trip on a pirate ship
Ten thousand miles away."*

Luke looked at Sebastian as he began the next verse. He sang it just for him, never once taking his eyes off his cabin boy.

*"My true love he was beautiful
And my true love he was young
His eyes were like the diamond sprite
And silver was his tongue
And silver was his tongue me lads
as the big ship left the bay
As he said "Will you remember me
Ten thousand miles away?"*

Luke felt a wave of melancholy, for he knew that soon enough Sebastian would leave him. Luke would sail away, leaving Sebastian far behind. How was it possible to get over such a boy? He'd known him but a few months, yet it seemed impossible to imagine life

without him. Sebastian held his gaze, his eyes bright with tears. Luke hoped his voice and the truth of his song might affect him so much that Sebastian would change his mind and stay.

Luke's men laughed and groaned as he changed the song's lyrics. Pirates were generally accepting of men who loved men. Many pirates on long voyages away from their women or the whores of the docks would take up with another man to ease the long, lonely nights, and some, like Luke, preferred men to women at any time. Pirates were different to those whoresons in the Royal Navy – as long as Luke found them treasure and treated them fair, they had no interest in his choice of bedfellows.

It was nearly dawn before Luke and Sebastian returned to their cabin. Sebastian was still giddy and high with the day's success. He pulled Luke to him the second they were alone and began to sing, his eyes bright as he gazed into Luke's eyes.

*"My true love he was beautiful
And my true love he was young
His eyes were like the diamond sprite
And silver was his tongue..."*

The song seemed to mean something else in Sebastian's voice – it made a different kind of sense that Luke couldn't fathom.

*"And silver was his tongue me lads
as the big ship left the bay
As he said "Will you remember me
Ten thousand miles away?"*

"Hush." Luke placed a finger over Sebastian's lips. "You must never sing, my love. You make a terrible sound."

Sebastian giggled, his body shaking in Luke's arms. "It's true!" he agreed. "I cannot carry a tune. Not like you – your voice is made of pure, dark honey, my captain. So, let us dance instead!"

He pulled Luke close and danced with him around the room. He might not be able to sing a note, but how Sebastian could dance! His feet were fleet, his body lithe, and he made such moves as took Luke's breath away. As they twirled and spun around the room, it was as if their bodies were one. There were no clumsy steps, or missed beats – they moved in perfect time, step for step, each knowing when the other would spin, move in, or turn this way or that. Luke had never felt so completely at one with any man. It was as if they shared the same body, the same mind, and were merged completely. There was a song playing in his head as they danced, and it seemed Sebastian could hear it too, and was dancing to the very same tune. That could not be, as neither of them spoke; they just gazed into each other's eyes as they danced around the room. Then, finally, they came to a stop, both at the same time, and looked at each other in stunned silence.

"Today was the very best day of my life," Sebastian whispered.

"And mine," Luke replied.

Luke was filled with a sudden need – and saw it reflected in Sebastian's eyes. He lifted the boy in his arms and pushed him against the cabin wall. Sebastian threw back his head, and Luke kissed his beautiful white neck. Luke held Sebastian against the wall while he stripped the boy of his britches, then took a moment to release his own aching cock. It stood up, strong and proud, longing to be buried deep inside the boy. There was no oil to hand.

Luke looked around for it and saw it by the bed. He didn't want to go there, for it would change the mood. Sebastian seemed to agree. He took Luke's hand and spat on it, and that made the act all the more exciting. Luke prepared him slowly and went in gently, but Sebastian was ready for him and cried out not in pain but in pleasure. He wrapped his long legs around Luke's waist, pulling him in deep. Luke took Sebastian's cock in his hand and stroked it in time to his thrusts. Sebastian rested his hands on Luke's shoulders, crying out with each long stroke. Then they moved as one, as easy, smooth, and perfectly in tune as their dancing had been.

Before long, Luke had no notion of where he ended and Sebastian began. It seemed to go on that way for many hours, but that was surely an illusion. Yet the sun was high in the sky by the time they finished and collapsed against each other. Luke rested his head on his boy's white breast and stayed there, panting, while Sebastian stroked his hair. Then Luke picked him up and took him gently to the bed. He slid in beside him and they lay there, facing, staring into each other's eyes.

"I'm too proud a man to beg," Luke murmured, stroking a lock of hair from Sebastian's forehead. "You know my wishes. I don't believe your destiny awaits you on some cold English shore. Stay."

"You could keep me here, by force," Sebastian said. "I've heard of many a pirate ship taking Royal Navy surgeons against their will and keeping them."

"We keep no such surgeon here," Luke said roughly. "Men kept by force aren't loyal. I'd have none here that did not wish to be. You know my rule, lad, for I told you the first night you arrived. I will never take an unwilling boy to my bed."

"I know. Hush now – I was jesting." Sebastian stroked his thumb gently over Luke's cheek. "Why do you have such a rule, captain, when you could do as you please out here on the high seas, with nobody to tell you any different?"

"Why do I have honour when I'm a pirate, you mean?" Luke growled. "There's more honour in most pirates than you'll find in the belly of the finest officer of the Royal Navy – let me tell you!"

"Yet surely, a pirate takes what he wants – another man's treasure, or his wife, or even the man himself – what's the difference?" Sebastian pressed.

"You took that gold today as sure as I did," Luke retorted.

"I did. It was exciting. I've never stolen treasure before. It was new." Sebastian gave a dreamy smile.

"Each man must make his own rules as best fits his conscience. I will never take a boy against his will – that you can be sure of," Luke said firmly.

"I believe you," Sebastian said softly. "And I love you all the more for it, my captain."

Love? It should have melted his heart to hear such words on this boy's tongue, but it was hollow when Sebastian would not stay.

"You speak of love, and yet you are set on leaving! Don't tell me any other man could love you more, satisfy you more, or show you more adventure than me," Luke said forcefully. "You love adventure, Sebastian – I saw it in your eyes today. I don't pretend it's a safe or easy life, but with nights like these as the prize – what does that matter?"

"You are right," Sebastian whispered. "No other man has ever made me feel this way. That is all the more reason I should leave."

"You make no sense," Luke said, hurt.

"I'm sorry, my love." Sebastian pulled him close and kissed the hurt from his heart. Luke felt his anger and wounded pride slowly ease, and yet a shadow of sorrow remained, lingering on behind.

Luke made a great show, as he always did, of sharing out the spoils of their raid. He called all the men about him on deck, shouted their names, one by one, and handed them their share. He kept the lion's share for himself, but that was the captain's right; he had provisions to buy and a ship to run, to say nothing of the timber and tools required to keep her seaworthy.

"Nicky Kneebone!" he called, and the slender lad with hair like straw came proudly to the front. He barely reached Luke's waist, but he took the same share as any full-grown man for Luke treated all his crew the same. Luke had a soft spot for little Nicky, who was always eager to do his bidding. He'd taught the boy to read, and Nicky loved to sit by him on lazy afternoons and show how well he'd taken to his lessons. Another man had once done the same for Luke, many years ago. He had fond memories of his first captain; that man was the only officer in the Royal Navy he'd salute, if he were still alive.

Luke went down his list of men, calling out each name. When he reached the end, he grinned. "Sebastian Smith!" he called.

Sebastian looked up, with a surprised smile. "Me?"

"For sure! You boarded that ship by my side, fought by my side, and it was your hunch that led us to the treasure. You'll get your share like the rest of my crew."

Sebastian was popular, and the men laughed and chanted his name as he went up to Luke for his share of the spoils. Sebastian flushed red, and grinned shyly as he took the little sack of gold. Luke roared with laughter and tousled his hair proudly.

"You're one of us now!" he proclaimed, and a great cheer went up from his men.

They drank the afternoon away, but the great mood did not last beyond morning the next day, when a sore commotion went up among the men. Luke strode over to find Jake and Jim exchanging blows, while the other men crowded around, urging them on.

"What's this?" Luke charged into the fight, grasping each man by the neck and holding him fast. "I'll suffer no fighting amongst my men. What's the cause?" He looked to Jake who glared daggers at Jim. Luke shook him soundly. "Jake – what is this about?"

"The spoils are to be shared equal among us, but they were not!" Jake spat. "I saw Jim take coin from the purse of one of the Castilians, but it was not in the pot you shared out yesterday. He didn't hand it over!"

Luke felt a wave of fury as he turned to the one-eyed man. "Jim? Is this true?" he demanded, shaking him in turn.

Jim spat onto the ground. "Tis not. He lies."

Luke let Jake go and turned full to Jim. He was a big man, about Luke's age, with a squat shaved head and a black patch over his missing eye. He glared at Luke balefully from his good eye.

"You won't mind if I check then?" Luke didn't wait for an answer – he moved forward and routed Jim's pockets – to find nothing save the bag of spoils he'd given him the day before.

"See!" Jim crowed. "Jake is a lying whoreson!"

Luke turned to Nicky. "Go to Jim's hammock and search it," he ordered quietly.

"Why do ye all take orders from this matelot?" Jim spat. "Ye all know what he does to yon boy at night." He nodded towards Sebastian, who was standing by.

"He does nothing to me that I do not care for!" Sebastian said heatedly. "What business is it of yours?"

"Easy," Luke warned. An argument like this could easily get out of hand, and he had no wish to fight half the crew to restore order.

At that moment Nicky returned, carrying a small leather pouch. He handed it to Luke, who opened it to find several Spanish coins within.

"These were not among the spoils we took yesterday," he said, studying them. "It seems Jake was right."

"Why should I share?" Jim demanded. "I took those spoils fair and square."

Luke replaced the coins in the pouch and threw it to Marc, who caught it in one hand. "See these are shared out evenly," he instructed.

A silence fell over the crew as Luke drew himself up to his full height and turned back to Jim.

"I have but one rule," he said quietly, "and you all know what it is. Even little Nicky knows. Nicky?" He turned to the lad.

"We must obey your orders, sir," Nicky said, in his high, piping voice.

"That is right." Luke turned back to Jim. "This speaks to the trust you have in me – if, as a crew, you vote me out, then so be it, but while I am your captain, you'll obey my orders or face the consequences. And my orders are that all our spoils be pooled – you knew this, everyone knows it – and yet you concealed this coin from me."

The men had grown restive, angry with Jim for trying to cheat them out of their share of the prize. A low grumbling went around. Luke knew that none here would stop him if he threw Jim overboard. He did not like the man, yet he would not take his life for this. It was a fine line to walk being a pirate captain; if he went too hard on his crew, they'd resent him for it, but go too easy and grudges would fester. He instinctively knew the right path to take.

"You'll take a dozen lashes from the cat," he said, holding out his hand. Marc had the cat ready, anticipating his command, and slapped the cat into his hand. "After that, as you sinned against the crew as much as me, you can run the gauntlet."

A great roar of approval went up among the men. "But listen to me true," Luke said, holding up his hand. "If you disobey me again, I'll throw you to the sharks and not look back."

Jim gave a grunt and spat on the deck. His one dark eye spoke of a deep, angry hatred; Luke knew he'd always be trouble.

Jake and Marc strung Jim up to the foremast, while Luke unfastened his shirt sleeves and rolled them up his arms. He turned to see Sebastian staring at him intently. Luke turned away again. He took no pleasure in this, but Jim knew what he'd face if found out; he deserved his punishment. Luke could have asked Marc to wield the cat, but Luke was a leader to his bones; if he was going to sentence a man to the lash, it was his responsibility and his alone to carry out the deed. Anything less was shirking.

Luke strode the deck, shaking out the nine knotted thongs of cord in the cat's tails as he walked. He rarely had call to use her, but by God he knew how. Luke delivered the lashes firm but fair on Jim's back, all the while aware of Sebastian's gaze fixed on him, as if the boy had no other interest in the proceedings save for the role his captain played in it.

When he was done, Luke ordered Jim be cut down and to run the length of the deck, while the men showered him with blows and lashes from their belts. Running the gauntlet was no small punishment in itself, but Luke judged that the men needed their vengeance, too.

Finally, it was done. Jim retired below decks to lick his wounds, while Luke ordered a tot of rum for every man. The men shouted and laughed, enjoying their extra riches from Jim's haul, each of them feeling justice had been served. Then it was over, and good riddance to it. Luke knew he'd kept his men happy and dealt with the matter fair.

When he retired to his cabin that night, he found Sebastian sitting on the bed, holding the cat in his hands, stroking her tails thoughtfully. He looked up, his face flushed, when Luke entered the room.

"No," Luke said firmly, knowing what was in Sebastian's mind. He sat down on the edge of the bed. "This is not my belt, my love. You saw Jim's back when I was done with him. The cat tears the skin. It's brutal."

"I know," Sebastian said softly. "I've seen the scars on your back, remember. I can guess how you came by them. How many lashes did you take, captain?"

"Two hundred," Luke replied. He'd never forget the Navy captain who'd had him flogged like a dog, nor forgive him, but that whoreson had gone to Davy Jones's locker long ago, and the devil could take him for all Luke cared.

"Two hundred..." Sebastian stared at him in shock. He reached out and took Luke's face between his hands. "Oh, my love. No wonder your back pains you so."

"It's been much better since you rubbed your unguent in." Luke shrugged.

"How old were you when you were flogged?" Sebastian asked.

"Fourteen," Luke replied. "I had thought to make the Royal Navy my life for I loved it so, but after that I jumped ship and found my way to the Christabel and the company of pirates instead. The Royal Navy be damned." He spat on the floor. "The pirate's life is more honest and more honourable."

Sebastian sat back, gazing at him intently. "Will you tell me why you were flogged?" he asked quietly.

"I'll tell you it was not deserved," Luke replied. Sebastian reached out to stroke his hair, but Luke caught his hand and kissed the palm, stopping him. "I do not want or invite your pity, boy," he said. "I have my pride."

"Oh yes, I know all about your pride," Sebastian sighed. He rose up and wrapped his arms around Luke's shoulders, ignoring Luke's attempts to push him away. "I wish I'd been there to stop it," he whispered into Luke's hair.

"You'd have been four years old," Luke growled. "Much use you'd have been!" Sebastian kissed his hair gently, petting him as if he were a child. "I need no comfort. T'was years ago," Luke chided, trying to push him away again.

"The scars remain," Sebastian replied, holding him fast.

Luke surrendered, for his boy seemed set on giving him succour, though he needed none. In truth, it felt nice to be held and rocked against his boy's hard chest. Luke felt something he had not felt since he was fourteen years old. He felt... loved.

"I loved a lad called Adam, and he loved me," he said at last, surprising himself, for he'd never spoken of this to anyone before. "When they found us together, they tore us apart and the whoreson captain sentenced us both to the lash. That's why I bear these scars on my back – for doing with Adam what I do with you every night. That's all."

Sebastian's breath caught in the back of his throat. He held Luke tighter, and the pain of the memory seemed to ease a little.

"What happened to Adam?" Sebastian asked.

"His wounds turned foul. He died of a fever a few days after the flogging."

Beautiful Adam. His first love. His only true love until Sebastian had landed in his life a few short months ago. Luke could see Adam still when he closed his eyes. He'd had thick dark hair and golden brown skin. His eyes had been so dark, his teeth so white, and his laugh so bright and merry. Three years older than Luke, and far more worldly-wise, he'd shown him all the ways to please a man in bed. Luke hadn't been touched before save by the whoreson captain when he was in his cups, and that had been nothing but shame and pain. Adam had taught him it didn't have to be that way. He'd loved it when Luke had ridden him hard across a barrel in the ship's hold; Luke could still remember the soft cries of joy he'd made.

"I was a cabin boy once, too, just like you," Luke murmured, resting his chin on Sebastian's shoulder. "My first captain was the best in the whole world. As kind, and true, and good of heart as you can imagine. The second was the devil himself. He flogged me for doing to Adam what he did to me most nights against my will. At least Adam took joy from it. I did not."

"So, you took a sword to his belly and twisted it hard," Sebastian said, stroking his hair gently.

"I did, and I regret it not at all. Nobody liked that bastard, but he was the admiral's brother, and I knew I'd be hanged for sure. The men liked me and knew what I'd endured at the captain's hands, night after night. They helped me jump ship, and I fled. There's been a price on my head ever since, but they haven't caught Luke Jenkins yet, and I'll be damned if I'll hang for killing that beast any more than the butcher hangs for slaughtering a pig." Luke drew back and looked at his boy. "So, now you know me true – do you like me any less?" he asked defiantly. "I've told nobody my story before, but you have a way of teasing the truth from me."

"I like you more, for I understand you better," Sebastian said softly. "You were but a lad, and badly used."

"Good." Luke exhaled a deep breath. He had a horror of being seen as weak and mewling in front of his boy. "For I am strong and proud and would not have you see me any other way."

"Always, my captain," Sebastian said, dropping a kiss on his head.

"That's well then. Now... what are we to do here?" Luke picked up the cat. "You want to taste her still, I think, despite everything I've told you."

"I do." Sebastian nodded, his eyes bright. "For you have no idea how strong and proud you looked to me today, as you walked the deck with the cat in your hand."

"You are the strangest boy." Luke kissed his cheek. "But the cat is not for you, my love. She gives no kisses – only bites."

Sebastian sighed. "I could not take my eyes off you this afternoon. You looked magnificent!"

Luke felt a thrill of pride. Sebastian's words restored some sense of himself after the dark memories he'd dredged up this evening.

"Have you heard the phrase 'kissing the gunner's daughter'?" he asked.

Sebastian's eyes danced. "I have not."

"Take off your clothes and lie on your front," Luke instructed. "I'll tell you a tale."

Sebastian scrambled eagerly to obey. When he was done, he stretched out his long, pale limbs, his white flesh so perfectly laid out that Luke felt his cock press hard against his britches.

Luke stood up and slowly undid his shirt sleeves, then rolled them up to his elbow; he knew by now how much Sebastian loved it when he did this. Then he took the rope handle of the cat in his hand and shook out her tails, striding around the room as he did so. Sebastian followed his every step, his eyes dark with arousal. Every so often, his pink tongue darted out to wet his perfect lips.

"Young lads in the Royal Navy do not earn the cat when they misbehave. Do you know why?" Luke asked, as he strode about the room.

"No sir," Sebastian said breathlessly.

"Because they are but boys and the cat is too harsh, but also because they want to take her, as a mark of bravado, to impress their friends. That would not be punishment but a badge of honour." Luke returned to the bed and flicked the cat's tails onto Sebastian's bare back. Sebastian shivered. Luke trailed the tails down over Sebastian's skin, very slowly.

"So, instead, they make those cocky young bucks take a different punishment. They are stripped of their britches to bare their fine young arses, and bent over the gun barrel, hence the name, kissing the gunner's daughter." Luke stroked the cat's tails over Sebastian's arse, lingering there. Sebastian held his breath, and Luke knew he was waiting for him to bring the cat down hard upon his skin. He did not.

"A lesser cat is used, with only five tails of smooth whip cord, or a cane, or perhaps they will taste the sting of the birch." Luke flicked the cat with a light snap onto Sebastian's skin, making him jump – then laugh at himself for his over-reaction to the cat's gentle caress.

"The punishment comes as much in the baring of the arse as the sting of the lash. There's no pride in facing your friends when you've been up-ended over a gun barrel, arse on display, and taken a boy's punishment, not that of a man. Men are flogged on their backs – boys on their lily-white bums. May you never find yourself kissing the gunner's daughter, Sebastian."

Sebastian sighed as if he was imagining it... and that was the moment Luke struck. He flicked his wrist and brought the cat down hard on Sebastian's arse. Sebastian squealed and jumped up from the bed, clutching his backside, an accusatory look in his eye.

"Damnation, captain! That was infernal!" he yelled, rubbing at his buttocks to ease the ferocious sting.

"I know." Luke tossed the cat to one side with a smirk. "And that was barely half the force I used on Jim. You see now why I will not beat you with her, no matter how much you beg?"

"I do." Sebastian nodded slowly, still rubbing his bum.

"Now turn around – let me see the mark I placed upon you." Luke twirled his finger, and Sebastian bared his arse instantly. There was a long red flame imprinted in Sebastian's flesh; the sight of it made Luke's cock harden more.

"I do love to see my marks on your skin," he murmured, running his finger over the mark. Sebastian whimpered. Luke bent his head and licked the red flame, gently.

Sebastian sighed. "I love to take your marks on my skin, sir," he whispered.

"Good." Luke took hold of Sebastian's thighs. "Then take this." He bit down on Sebastian's juicy arse, away from the mark he'd made with the cat, to create a new mark. He started slow and gentle, holding Sebastian firm, so he could not get away. Then he deepened the bite. Sebastian yelled and hollered but could not break free. He wriggled though – how he wriggled! He squirmed and twisted until Luke slapped his arse hard and drew back.

"You'll take my marks without trying to escape, boy. If I choose to bite your fine arse and leave my print upon your skin, I will."

Sebastian gazed up at him, his eyes heavy-lidded with excitement, his breath catching in his throat. "Yes, sir," he whimpered, obediently.

Luke pushed him down on the bed and held him there as he trailed a line of kisses over the boy's fair skin. Sebastian trembled in anticipation, but Luke enjoyed the game far too much to put him out of his misery. He kept him on edge for several minutes, just kissing and licking his beautiful skin... before pouncing again and biting him hard. Sebastian cried out, but he did not try to get away this time. Luke could feel every muscle in his body bunch and strain with the effort of staying in place, yet he didn't move. Sweat was running in little rivulets down his back, but still he stayed there, accepting Luke's deep bite on his bottom.

Finally, Luke thought he'd tormented the boy enough. He drew back and admired the fine red marks he'd placed on him.

"Look." He brought the mirror over, and held it up. Sebastian's eyes sparkled when he saw the bite marks on his skin. He reached back a finger to trace them, his tongue wetting his lips.

"They are beautiful, captain. For they mark me as yours – and yours alone," Sebastian said softly.

It was too much. Luke gave a roar and set upon the boy. He placed Sebastian on his front so he could gaze at the marks he'd imprinted upon him as he ravished him mercilessly.

Luke woke at dawn to piss and could not resist drawing back the sheet to see those marks on Sebastian's skin again. He was disappointed to find them much faded. The boy had the bloom of youth upon him and healed far faster than Luke would have liked. Luke sighed.

"Is there a problem, captain?" Sebastian asked drowsily.

"There is. The marks I placed upon you are all but gone," Luke replied, climbing back into the bed beside him.

"Well, there's an easy remedy for that." Sebastian turned and smiled at him saucily.

"And what's that?" Luke asked, with a raised eyebrow.

"You must make them again!" Sebastian retorted, and then he dissolved in a fit of giggles as Luke grabbed hold of him and began to do just that.

Chapter Three

A few weeks later, Luke woke one morning with a heavy head. He slid out of bed and found his legs wouldn't hold him up, so he fell onto the floor.

"Captain?" Sebastian was at his side in seconds.

"I'm fine. Help me up."

Sebastian put a hand on his forehead. "You're not fine. You're burning up."

"I'm fine I tell you." Luke forced himself to stand and get dressed while Sebastian gazed at him from worried eyes.

His head was pounding and sweat poured down his back as he made his way up on deck... to find he was not the only man down. Marc's pale skin was red and feverish, and little Nicky was barely able to stand.

"Tis the pox!" Marc said.

"If only we had a surgeon onboard," Jim growled, swaying so much he had to sit on a barrel, his one good eye glinting darkly. "But our captain refuses to steal one for us."

"I'll not have any man here unwillingly," Luke snapped. He was in no humour for a fight right now. "How many are afflicted?" he asked Marc quietly.

"Half at least," Marc replied. "It's going round fast."

Over the next two days the pox raged around the ship, and man after man fell victim to it. Luke forced himself up on deck, but all he could hear were the moans of his men calling for help, and begging God to take mercy on their souls. At first, he did his best to offer succour, taking water to those most in need, but on the third day he couldn't even walk. He lay on his bed, seeing double, watching as two Sebastians came to his side and placed something cool on his head.

"This will help," the Sebastians said, smoothing back his sweaty hair.

"Are you not ill, too?" Luke croaked, trying to grab Sebastian's hand and finding only thin air.

"I'm fine." Sebastian smiled down at him gently, but Luke could see the worry in his eyes. "I'll look after the men, don't worry. Just stay here and rest." Luke watched him open his little pots of medicine, then gather them up and leave the cabin.

He didn't remember very much about the next few days. He lay in his bed, sweating and crying out. One minute he was burning up, the next freezing cold. His head ached, his tongue was swollen and dry, and he couldn't keep any food down. At one point, a golden dragon in the shape of a man tried to tug him from his bed, but he cried out and fought the dragon until it let him be. Sometimes, he could smell strange scents, and feel something smooth being rubbed on his breast and head. Other times, he tasted cool water on his parched tongue, and cried out for more.

On the morning of the fifth day, he fancied himself back in Cwm Drysor, in the tiny cottage he'd shared with his Mam and Tad and his brothers and sister. His little sister, Nerys,

was crying for water. He rolled out of bed and crawled across the mud floor to the water barrel, scooped some out, and crawled back. He tipped the water into her mouth and watched her swallow, crying as it hit her scorched throat. Her face was red and blotchy, and she was as hot as burning coal.

"Please, Luke... annwyl..." she whispered, reaching out to him. He tried to lift her, but he was too weak, so he laid down beside her and held her gently. She died like that a few hours later, her big brown eyes still wide open, gazing at him sightlessly. Nerys, his naughty little sister, gone forever. He thought his heart would break. His little brothers Rhys and Cai were next. He didn't know how to tell his Mam that they were gone, but he didn't have to, for when he crawled to her side, he found that she'd left him, too. Luke lay beside her, weeping for his sweet, funny mam, until he fell asleep again.

When next he woke in that tiny dark cottage, he felt weak and light-headed, but the terrible fever had gone. He sat up and looked around for his father. Tad had left to get help days ago. Why hadn't he come back? Luke walked, unsteadily, to the door, only to find he couldn't open it. Weak as a kitten, he leaned against it, pounding it with his fists to no avail. He slept awhile against it, and when next he woke he had a little more strength, and could push it harder this time. Something moved outside, and he climbed out through the small gap he'd made... to see a man's big body lying in front of the door. That was why it hadn't opened! Luke approached the man, his heart in his mouth. He reached out and pulled the man to face him... to find it was Tad. His face was blue, and he'd clearly been dead some time, probably as soon as he'd left the house to seek help.

Luke sat on the porch step and wept. Only a few days ago they'd all been sitting around the table, laughing as Tad told stories. Tad was a big, strong man who'd loved them all dear. Now he was gone. Now they were all gone – his entire family. What would happen to him now?

A hand held blessed water to his lips, and he gulped it down, gasping for more.

"Nerys?" he whispered. Maybe she wasn't dead after all. Maybe he'd got it wrong, and it was she who'd brought him water, not the other way around.

"Sebastian," a voice said softly. "Hush, my love. You must rest."

Luke blinked, wondering who this person was. He reached out and gripped Sebastian's hand tight.

"Mam's dead," he whispered, choking for how much it hurt to say it. "And Cai, and Rhys. All gone. Even my naughty little Nerys..." Her name broke in his aching throat. "And Tad. My wonderful tad."

"I'm sorry to hear it," Sebastian said, from far above, so far that he must be very tall. Luke didn't know him, but he sounded kind. "Oh, my poor love." Luke felt a cool hand brush his sweat-soaked hair gently from his forehead.

"They've all gone and left me," Luke whispered. "They were here, and now they're gone." He squeezed Sebastian's hand tightly. "I don't know what to do. I have no other family. Where do I go?"

"How old are you, Luke?" Sebastian asked gently.

"I'm eight," he whispered, feeling very small beside this tall man.

"Ah." Sebastian's voice was so sad. "You poor, sweet child."

"I'm all alone. Will you help me?" Luke asked.

"Of course. I'll look after you. Don't worry, little one. I'm here."

"Thank you," Luke whispered gratefully. He tried to open his eyes, but the light hurt them too much. He closed them again. "I cannot see you, but you seem tall. Are you a grown man? Old enough to take in an orphan child, sir?"

"Yes, I'm old enough to care for you, my dear," Sebastian replied. There was silence for a moment, and then a little sigh. "I am full grown now indeed."

Sebastian placed a cool cloth on Luke's eyelids and covered it with the light pressure of his hands. That soothed the stinging in Luke's eyes. When the cloth was removed, Luke found it was easier to open them. He gazed up at Sebastian and caught sight of a man shrouded in a golden haze, his eyes glowing a deep shade of amber, like fire on a winter's night.

"You are aflame, sir," he croaked.

"You have a fever, Luke," Sebastian said gently. "You do not see true. Hush now, little one." He drew Luke to him and pressed his cool lips to Luke's forehead, calming him. The golden light emanating from him seemed to grow greater and greater, until it enveloped Luke completely. It bathed him in its warm glow, lapping against his skin like a soothing balm, slowly washing away the pain. Luke slept.

He dreamed he was on a hillside, a scrubby place with olive trees growing wild. He was a child, roaming free. In his feverish imagination it seemed as if he could fly through the air, or take the shape of a leaf, or a flower, or become water and whoosh down a river, at one with all around him. He giggled with delight at his freedom, and when it was time to rest, his family brought him close and held him to them. They loved him dear. He was so happy, so innocent, and full of joy. Then, one day, he woke to find himself alone, his family gone. Luke cried out, for it reminded him of seeing his Mam and Tad, lying dead and sightless.

"Hush, love," a warm voice beside him said. "It's just a dream."

Night had fallen when next he woke, and his fever had broken. His head ached, and his mouth was dry, but he was no longer delirious. He felt hollow and empty inside. He was alone in the cabin. He sat up, slowly, then heaved himself onto the side of the bed until the stabbing pain in his head from the exertion subsided. He took a long draft of water from the pitcher by the bed, which helped a little. Then he got to his feet, holding onto the bed as the room swam around him. It took him awhile to move, but then he staggered across the cabin, holding onto the walls as he went.

He had to stop many times on the way, but he finally managed to make it onto the deck. The ship was eerily quiet, with no sign of his men. Had they all succumbed to the pox and been thrown overboard?

There was a light glowing from the direction of the hold. Luke made his way towards it. He climbed slowly down the stairs towards the men's quarters, the light beckoning him on. He held onto the walls again as he finally made it down the stairs and stepped into the light. He stopped short at the sight that greeted him there.

The men's quarters had been transformed into a hospital. Each hammock held a sick man, and each man had a damp cloth on his head and a blanket over him. The crying was constant, an endless croaking wail for water, water, water... Some men were sobbing for their mothers or sweethearts, while others, bodies slick with sweat, were clearly delirious, gibbering nonsense in their sleep.

The room was lit by several flickering lanterns, and there, in the middle of all that glowing golden light, stood a man. To Luke's tired, pained eyes, it looked almost as if Sebastian was flickering too.

"Sebastian?" Luke rasped.

Sebastian looked up from where he was standing beside one of the men, holding a cup of water to his mouth.

"Luke? You shouldn't be out of bed!"

Sebastian was by his side in an instant, which was all to the good because Luke's legs would not hold him up anymore. He would have fallen if Sebastian had not placed a strong hand under his elbow and guided him onto a nearby chair. Sebastian knelt down in front of him.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, placing a hand on Luke's forehead. "Ah, you're cooler now – that's good. I check on you every hour, then return here. At the outset, I tried to carry you here to be with the rest, but you cried out and fought me, so I thought it best to leave you be."

"Are all the men afflicted, save you?" Luke asked, peering around the room, wishing his eyes did not ache so.

"Yes." Sebastian nodded. "I set them up in here and organised a makeshift infirmary, as best I could." He gestured to the pots of medicines on the table. "Some of the herbs in these help – I smear some on the men's heads and chests, and others I add to their drinking water. I did so with you."

"How did you escape the pox?" Luke asked, his head thrumming as if he had his own private drummer living inside it.

"I have no idea. Maybe I've had this pox before and that gave me protection?" Sebastian shrugged.

"And you knew what to do?" Luke glanced around the well-organised infirmary, with the men laid out in their hammocks.

"Yes. I've travelled a lot – I've encountered many a pox before."

"I think you've been wasted cleaning my boots and tidying my cabin," Luke said wryly.

Sebastian grinned. "I've loved every second of it." He leaned in and pressed a kiss to Luke's cheek.

Luke caught a good look at him as he came close. Sebastian's face was drawn, his eyes heavy-lidded, with dark shadows beneath them. His fair skin was grey and lined.

"Dear God – you must be exhausted from tending us all!" Luke exclaimed. "Have you had any rest?"

"A half hour here or there," Sebastian said wearily.

"You'll fall over yourself if you carry on like this. You must rest!" Luke commanded.

"Not yet. It's not over yet," Sebastian replied.

"I could make it an order," Luke said.

Sebastian smiled, wryly. "You're about to fall over faint again. I don't think you'll know whether I obey you or not!"

He was right. The room suddenly lurched around Luke and then went black.

Luke woke many hours later, feeling much better. He was lying in a hammock; Sebastian must have heaved him into it after he lost consciousness. Luke looked around to find that his men were all starting to come to, able to stand and walk for the first time since the pox took hold. The crisis had passed. Luke searched the room anxiously and finally saw Sebastian, sitting beside a rickety old table, his head in his hands, looking utterly spent. Luke lurched to his feet and went over to him.

"Now will you rest?" he asked.

Sebastian looked up at him, wearily. Luke's heart ached to see how tired and wretched he looked; the pox had aged him ten years in as many days.

"Yes. Now I will," Sebastian said softly.

Luke pulled him to his feet and the two of them held onto each other for support as they staggered back to their cabin. Sebastian collapsed onto the bed the second they were inside and closed his eyes.

"How many did we lose?" Luke asked, his heart in his mouth. "How many are gone?"

Sebastian's eyes flickered open, and he gave a little smile. "Why, none," he said, reaching out to caress Luke's face. "I knew you'd take it to heart if you lost a single man – well, except maybe Jim – so I saved them all, even him."

His eyes closed again, his hand dropped to his side, and he fell immediately into a deep sleep. Luke stared down on him in disbelief. How? How had Sebastian saved an entire crew

of men from a pox this ferocious? He gently pulled the blanket over Sebastian and pressed a kiss to his boy's hair.

"Thank you, my love," he murmured. "Apothecary's apprentice?" he snorted. "I think you are a good deal more than that, my pretty piece of flotsam."

He remembered their talk the night Sebastian had first arrived. Luke had known then that this boy had secrets, but he'd never demanded he give them up. Every man was allowed his secrets. Now, his mind was full of wild fancies. Maybe, Sebastian had been a surgeon on a Royal Navy boat – that would explain a good deal. He might have kept quiet about it for fear Luke would imprison him on the Christabel – a good surgeon was an asset to any ship, and many a pirate vessel had kidnapped them before and put them to work. Sebastian had not been to know that Luke would not do that, and by the time he did know, maybe he felt too deep in the lie.

Sebastian was clearly no cabin boy, nor apothecary's apprentice, and he was also, Luke suspected, older than he claimed, though what reason he'd have for lying about that Luke could not fathom.

Luke gazed down on his love, wondering what course to take. Sebastian was a free man – Luke would not have it any other way. So, in the end, what was to be done but let him decide in his own time what to speak of and what to keep to himself? Luke would rather die than speak of some of his own truths – why should Sebastian not feel the same?

He pressed a kiss to Sebastian's cheek, then left the cabin. After all Sebastian's heroic efforts over the past few days, he'd earned his rest, but Luke was the captain of this ship and there was work to do.

The crew soon recovered, though they tired easily for a few weeks after their battle with the pox. Sebastian seemed restless, though, and out of sorts, intent on uncovering the cause of the affliction that had felled all the crew save him.

"What does it matter what manner of pox it was?" Luke demanded one night, as he saw Sebastian poring over his books and medicine pots 'til well after midnight for the tenth night in a row. "Dear lord, boy – it's over! Let it go!"

"I will not," Sebastian replied stubbornly. "I've seen a pox like this before... it's my belief it was carried by rats."

"Rats? What's to be done about that if it's so?" Luke demanded. "Show me any ship that doesn't have rats!"

"You need a cat," Sebastian told him irritably. "Why do you not have one already? A ship needs a cat."

"We used to have one," Luke snapped back. "Her name was Mog. She was the Queen of the Christabel until she died last year. A fine old cat was Mog." He gave a wan smile.

"Last year? Why the hell haven't you found another one?" Sebastian barked accusingly.

"Why have you turned into such a scold?" Luke growled. He'd loved Mog so much it had felt as if his heart would break when she died. He wasn't about to embrace such heartache again so soon, but he also wasn't about to admit to Sebastian that was the reason he'd not found another cat.

"You are impossible. I can't talk to you!" Sebastian yelled, grabbing his books and his lantern and stomping out of the room. He'd not been himself since the pox. He was tired all the time, and seemed old and slow. He was quick to anger and even quicker to argue. They also hadn't touched each other in weeks. Sebastian stayed up half the night reading, and when he did come to bed Luke was still too tired from the pox to make love to him.

Luke didn't know what to do to make it right between them. His doubts about who Sebastian really was also came between them. There was a little wall of suspicion where before there had been none. Before the pox, he'd easily thrown Sebastian onto the bed and ravished him, or taken him over his knee and spanked his fine white arse, and they'd both

enjoyed those things. Now... was it seemly to treat a learned man that way? It was one thing to chastise your cabin boy, another to take your belt to the man who'd single-handedly saved your crew. Sebastian seemed less a lad and more a man now. His sparkling blue eyes were dimmer now, world-weary and strained, as if he'd lived too long and seen too much. He no longer seemed like the bright-eyed boy Luke had dragged onboard a few months ago.

Even the crew had become weary with Sebastian's moods. At first, they had been full of gratitude towards him, but now, as Sebastian's mood alternated between restless discontent and downright petulance, they avoided him and whispered about him behind his back.

There was another problem, too, and one that Luke hardly dared admit, even to himself. Ever since the pox, Luke had felt no movement in his cock – it refused to get stiff, even when Sebastian touched it, or when Luke saw his cabin boy lying naked on the bed. Luke had too much pride to tell Sebastian this – he'd never suffered from this particular affliction before, and it shamed him deeply. He pushed Sebastian away when he tried to kiss him, for fear it would lead to the discovery of his most private of disgraces. Now they barely touched, not even to offer affection.

It was a sorry state of affairs, and Luke had no idea how to fix it. He was used to taking charge and making things right, but this seemed mired in difficulty whichever way he looked at it. Every day that passed, Sebastian became more sullen, his eyes more sunken, and that fair countenance greyer and more drawn.

The ship fared poorly too. Their run of good luck was over – first, a raiding party went wrong, then they were nearly caught by a Navy vessel. The Christabel took some fire, and they had to cool their heels in a secluded bay while they made their repairs.

Everyone was in a foul mood. Arguments broke out all over the ship over matters so trivial Luke could hardly credit it. He was run ragged exerting his authority, wielding the cat on the worst offenders and generally stepping in to calm his men down.

Sebastian's wild, jangly humours didn't help. He was scaring even the most hardened of Luke's crew. He challenged men to pointless fights, or races around the deck, seeming to need excitement to bolster his erratic mood. After challenging Nicky to yet another climb up the rigging, he took to the yardarm again, as he had months before, but this time he didn't just perform a little jig – he pirouetted. Luke watched him, in disbelief, his heart in his mouth. Sebastian looked deranged up there, dancing in time to a music only he could hear. He had always been a lively dancer, lithe and sure-footed, but now he was like a man possessed as he twisted and swayed from a great height. The men all stopped to watch, their faces dismayed.

"Is he taken by demons?" Marc asked fearfully.

"Taken by lunacy more like," Luke snorted. "Get down, Sebastian, before you fall!" he cried.

"I won't fall!" Sebastian yelled back. He looked exhilarated, but there was a strained, unnatural kind of exuberance in his jerky movements.

"It's not a request!" Luke yelled. "You'll do as I say. Get down now."

"No!" The word was bellowed petulantly. Sebastian, it seemed, was in the grip of some mania and would not listen to reason.

"If I have to climb up there to bring you down, you'll suffer for it all the more!" Luke shouted.

"I don't care. The pox can take you for all I care!" Sebastian screamed. Then he laughed. "Hah – I forgot, it nearly did!"

"Sebastian – listen to me. You will climb down now. That's an order." Luke wished he hadn't said it the second it was out of his mouth. The crew all gazed at Sebastian expectantly, but he made no move to climb down. Instead, he danced on, in a clear act of disobedience towards his captain.

He swirled like a wraith, laughing all the while, and then, just as Luke was about to climb the rigging to reach him, he fell. A shout went up from the crew, but Sebastian snagged his arm on the rigging on the way down, saving himself.

Luke climbed up to seize him, his heart beating fast. He grabbed Sebastian forcefully, and pulled him the rest of the way down. He was full of rage, the more so because of the shock of nearly losing his boy. He flung Sebastian down on the deck and stood over him.

"You little fool!" he yelled. "Go to my cabin and wait for me there!"

Sebastian glared up at him mulishly. The men muttered, shifting from side to side.

"Seems to me, captain," Jim said silkily. "That he disobeyed your direct order. When I was accused of that, you took the cat to me."

"Is that what you all want?" Luke demanded. "This man saved your sorry arses a few weeks ago, and now you want me to take the cat to him?"

"Is it one rule for him then, and another for us?" Jim asked. "Because he warms your bed?"

"No!" Luke said fiercely.

"Then he should be whipped," Jim retorted.

Luke looked around, to gauge the mood of his crew. This was not a problem he had faced before, and he was sore pressed to know what to do. The faces of his men told him what he did not wish to know.

"Nicky?" he asked, looking to the child for guidance as the men were being only brutish.

Nick screwed up his face anxiously. "We trust you because you're fair," he said. "Tis not fair that you treat this one different to us."

Sebastian said nothing. His eyes were aglow with a wild light that Luke feared would burn him up. Luke felt an odd sense of calm wash over him. He could see the way clear now.

"Sebastian," he said quietly. "Take off your shirt and go to the foremast."

Sebastian stared up at him. Then he threw back his head and laughed, like a madman. "Will you take the cat to me now then, captain?" he demanded. "And let me taste her savage kisses at last?"

"I will," Luke said softly. "Maybe she will bring you to your senses. You'll take six lashes."

It was a fair punishment, for the offence had not be so grievous as Jim's. Luke had no wish to hurt his boy, for he feared Sebastian was not in his right mind. Yet, some inner voice guided him now, and he knew this might be what Sebastian needed to shock him out of his strange humour.

Marc brought him the cat, and Luke knew instinctively what was to be done. He stood over Sebastian, feet planted firmly on the deck, looking down on his boy. Sebastian gazed up at him, his blue eyes as dark as the night now, with no light at all glowing within them.

"Take off your shirt. Don't make me tell you again," Luke growled.

Slowly, his eyes cast down with mute rebellion, Sebastian unbuttoned his shirt and stripped it from his shoulders. He seemed thinner, his ribs showing beneath his skin. Luke stayed over him, glaring down on him, until Sebastian was done. Sebastian would not meet his eye, and looked down on the deck instead, but Luke wanted none of that. He must have the boy's gaze on him now, to work his purpose. He tapped Sebastian's head.

"Look at me," he ordered. Sebastian ignored him, so Luke placed a finger under Sebastian's chin and drew his face up so he had no choice but to look him full in the eye. What he saw in Sebastian's eyes made him certain of his path, for they contained an unfathomable sadness and seemed to beg Luke for help.

"Kiss the cat," Luke ordered, holding it beneath Sebastian's nose. His men shifted uneasily, for this was not a normal part of this particular ritual. "Kiss it!" Luke roared, needing to see Sebastian submit before he would use the cat upon him. If Sebastian refused to

submit, he knew in his bones that this would go very wrong. He had to bring his boy to the right frame of mind to take his punishment.

Mutely, angrily, Sebastian leaned forward and pressed his lips to the cat.

"Stay there," Luke ordered, as Sebastian began to draw back. "You'll kiss her 'til I say you can stop."

Sebastian obeyed, and Luke felt the tension in his belly lessen a notch. His boy needed this. He needed all the grounding Luke could give him right now. Luke was determined not to fail him.

He waited good and long before he allowed Sebastian to draw back. Then he gave him another command.

"Watch me!" Slowly, very slowly, he unbuttoned his shirt sleeves and then folded them up to the elbow. Sebastian followed every small movement with avid eyes, eating up the sight of him. That was good. That was what Luke wanted. Luke took a step back, and Sebastian's gaze wavered. "I said, watch me!" Luke growled, and Sebastian's gaze immediately snapped back onto him.

Luke shook out the cat, watching as a dim light slowly returned to Sebastian's eyes. Luke paced around the deck, flicking the cat through the air as he went, making as big a show of it as he could. All the while, Sebastian, kneeling, watched him closely. Luke felt a strange kind of energy passing from Sebastian to himself and back again. It gave him a jolt, and the hairs on the back of his neck rose, making him shiver. Then he felt the faint stirrings of that warm glow in his belly that he hadn't realised had been absent for so many weeks.

Luke finished pacing and returned to Sebastian. He took hold of his hair and pulled back his head.

"You are my boy," he said, in a low, hard tone. "You'll take your lashes from my whip and be glad of it."

"Yes, sir," Sebastian breathed.

"Jake, Marc – string him up," Luke ordered. Jake and Marc stepped forward and grabbed hold of Sebastian. They dragged him to the foremast and tied him there.

Luke went over to him and spoke direct into his ear.

"Six lashes for your disobedience, boy. Six lashes from your captain to tame your unruly heart. Do you submit?"

Sebastian trembled and put his head down. "Yes, my captain," he whispered. His odd mania from earlier seemed to dissipate as he surrendered to the punishment. Satisfied, Luke stepped back and raised the cat.

He did not go easy on the boy – his men would expect nothing else, and Sebastian would benefit from nothing less. Luke gave the first lash with the full force of his strength. Sebastian screamed, wild and loud, as his skin ripped and blood welled up on his back.

"Count," Luke demanded mercilessly. This was also not a usual part of the ritual either, but Luke knew what would best bring his boy back to himself.

"One," Sebastian screamed, half-defiance, half-acceptance. Luke knew he must swing his mood back to full acceptance before Sebastian would be at peace. He shook out the cat again and laid the second stroke lower, just as hard. Another scream, and Sebastian was now quivering in his bonds. The strange plume of energy passing between them pulsed jerkily, erratic and juddering, but there all the same. Luke welcomed it thirstily, craving it.

"Two," Sebastian called out.

The third stroke went lower still, the cat's tails tearing into the boy's skin once more. Sebastian threw back his head and howled.

"Count," Luke ordered sternly.

"Three." Sebastian's voice was shaky now, low and lost.

Luke returned to him and took a fistful of his hair again, needing Sebastian to feel his touch.

"Who am I, boy?" he whispered into Sebastian's ear. "What gives me the right to punish you so? Who am I to you?"

"You are my captain, sir," Sebastian whispered, so low that none but Luke could hear him.

"And?" Luke demanded.

"My man, sir," Sebastian said, and now there was a dreamy tone to his voice.

"And what else?" Luke asked. He didn't know what answer he required, just that one more was necessary.

"Your love, sir," Sebastian said, letting out a little sob. Now the energy flowed freely between them again, and the warmth in Luke's belly was full and strong. He pressed a little kiss to Sebastian's cheek.

"Aye – and don't you ever forget it," he said sternly.

Luke walked away and then turned to deliver another lash, harder even than those that had gone before. Sebastian sighed and seemed to melt against the foremast. If he had not been tied, he'd have fallen.

"Four," he said dreamily, as if he was chanting a prayer and not counting out his lashes. Luke knew he was nearly back to himself, but now was not the time to show mercy. The fifth stroke thundered across Sebastian's shoulders. Luke was no longer aware of the men watching, no longer aware of anything save Sebastian.

"Five," Sebastian counted, in a tone of near ecstasy. He was not fighting the punishment, and nor was he merely submitting to it, either. He was welcoming it – and that was what Luke needed.

Luke took a moment to allow the anticipation to build. Sebastian's shoulders flexed, and tensed, and then relaxed. He was ready. Luke made the last stroke count, delivering it hard and true. Sebastian received it like an old friend, shouting in joy.

"SIX!"

The men drew away, muttering, unsure of what they had just witnessed, but Sebastian had been punished to their satisfaction, and Luke knew they'd soon forget what they'd seen today.

Jake went to cut Sebastian down, but Luke waved him away with a growl. Nobody was allowed to touch his boy right now. He'd fight any man who laid a finger on him. Luke took his cutlass and cut Sebastian down, lifting him up in his arms when Sebastian fell.

He carried his boy back to his cabin and threw him on the bed on his back. Sebastian cried out as his sore flesh made contact with the hard bed, but Luke was not minded to grant him any soft words just yet.

Luke stripped off his clothes, and found his cock standing hard and proud against his belly. He gave it barely a thought – he was in the grip of something too strong.

He stripped Sebastian of his britches, then climbed onto the bed and lay on top of him, pinning him down. He took hold of Sebastian's arms and pushed them above his head. Then he rested there, taking a moment to feel the joy of skin on skin, of reconnection, and the great sense of peace that came from being naked with his boy again.

Sebastian moaned and opened his eyes to reveal they were full of light once more, after weeks of empty dullness.

Luke claimed Sebastian's mouth with his own, plundering him long and hard in a deep, merciless kiss. He did not stop until Sebastian surrendered everything to him, offering himself up completely. Then Luke drew back.

"Open your legs," he ordered.

Sebastian obeyed, mutely, gazing up at him in wonder, as if seeing him for the first time. Luke grabbed the oil and slicked the boy's hole, but he had no patience to do so for long - he had to be inside his boy, riding him hard, reminding both Sebastian and himself of their true selves.

He entered Sebastian in one savage thrust, immersing himself to the hilt in his boy's tight heat. Sebastian gave a shout, which Luke claimed with another deep kiss.

He held Sebastian's arms above his head as he took him hard, sparing his boy nothing, giving him everything. Sebastian was all sensation; weeping, screaming, laughing, and moaning, all at once.

Luke rode Sebastian as he would a stallion, taming him, making him his own, giving him no quarter. Beneath him, Sebastian was as open and accepting as it was possible for a boy to be. His eyes glowed, his body shook, and skin was slick with sweat.

Luke roared his victory, spilling out deep inside his boy, feeling powerful and strong, like a lion taking down his prey.

Sebastian stared up at him with a gaze of pure wonder. His cock stood, rock hard against his belly; Luke felt a sense of pride that even at a time like this, his boy would not spill without his man's command.

"You may not spill," he said roughly. "You'll take me three more times before you take your own pleasure."

Sebastian nodded, mutely, completely obedient to Luke's will. Luke made good on his word. His cock, which had been dormant for weeks, now made up for lost time. Within a short while, far shorter than it had any right to be, it was hard again. This time he fucked his boy's mouth, holding Sebastian down by the hair as he took him. He slid his cock between those finely chiselled lips and rode him rough and long, each thrust driving deep, until it hit the back of his boy's throat. He drew back and came on Sebastian's face.

Next, he threw Sebastian onto his front, held him down, and licked the marks on his back, making Sebastian shiver. Then he fucked his hole again, longer and slower this time, savouring the way his boy accepted him deep into his body, and the fine sensation of his balls slapping his boy's plump arse. He spilled within him and then rested there awhile, covering Sebastian's body with his own. He threaded his fingers between Sebastian's fingers, holding him down beneath him, and kissed the back of his boy's neck, then bit him, marking him.

He rested there a long time, without speaking. Sebastian was soft and compliant beneath him. He could feel the warm heat of Sebastian's lashed skin against his belly and before long he was hard again. He drew Sebastian up onto all fours and fucked him once more, taking his time, enjoying the sight of his naked boy in front of him, offering himself up to his man's pleasure. He drew out before completion and spilled out onto Sebastian's bare arse.

Then he flipped Sebastian over, took his cock whole in his mouth, and sucked it hard. It didn't take long before Sebastian spilled. Luke held his thighs and swallowed down every drop of him.

Luke had never felt so powerful. His belly glowed with warmth, and he knew Sebastian felt it too. Luke lay back down on the bed and took his boy in his arms.

"My apologies," he said, in a low, gruff voice. "You deserve better than the sorry excuse for a man you've had these past few weeks. You saved my crew, and I repaid you poorly, my love."

"I was adrift," Sebastian whispered. "Depleted. I needed..."

"This. Me. You needed me to be... me." Luke couldn't claim to understand it; he just knew it to be true.

His cock was hard again which was surely an impossibility, yet it was so. He slid it between Sebastian's arse cheeks and parked it deep in his boy's hole. Then, holding him tight in his arms, they both fell fast asleep.

When Luke awoke it was morning, and he felt better than he had in weeks. Months. Maybe ever. He stretched and felt his cock slide out from his boy's arse. He grinned and lifted the sheet... then stopped, frowning. Sebastian was smiling up at him, and he looked as sweet, young, and beautiful as he had the day Luke had fished him from the water. Gone were the worry lines and sunken eyes. Gone the sullen stare and mulish mouth. He was Luke's Sebastian once more, fair and true. Luke gently captured Sebastian's mouth in a tender kiss.

"You are returned, my love," he murmured.

"As are you." Sebastian caressed the side of his face.

"I should tend to you as you once tended to me. Your back must be sore. I could fetch the unguent if you tell me which one?" Luke asked. His own back had ached less since Sebastian had tended his scars. They were still there, as ugly as ever, but they weighed less heavily on the flesh beneath now, and gave him less trouble. Sebastian would heal up fine – six strokes would leave no lingering mark behind; Luke had been careful about that.

"It's not as sore as it was. I'm fine," Sebastian said, pulling him in for another kiss.

"How did it feel? You so longed to taste the cat's harsh kiss; did she disappoint?" Luke asked.

"No. She was magnificent – as were you." Sebastian's eyes were full of a happy light. "I'd take her again if it could be as good as that."

"I'll use her on you any time you wish – just no more dancing on the yardarm!" Luke ordered firmly.

"No." Sebastian had the grace to blush.

"Do you promise?" Luke demanded.

"I do," Sebastian said solemnly.

"Well and good then!" Luke tickled him until he dissolved into a fit of giggles.

Much later, Luke watched his boy slide out of the bed to get dressed. The lash marks on his back were not as deep as Luke remembered. They made perfect pink stripes on the boy's fair skin, but there was no bleeding, and a couple were even starting to fade.

"You do heal fast," he murmured, a little surprised.

"I do. I always have." Sebastian smiled at him. "It's a good thing – it means I'm always ready for the next dark deed you wish to visit upon me!"

"Dark deeds! Pah! Come here, and I'll make you pay for that," Luke said, jumping out of bed and chasing his boy around the cabin.

They spent the next few weeks like newlyweds, luxuriating in each other's bodies for hours every night. Yet, as the time passed, a shadow fell over Luke, for he knew it wouldn't be long until the Christabel arrived back at Port Royal. It was like a foul humour, hanging over them, until finally their sorrowful last night was upon them.

Luke returned to their cabin to find that Sebastian had cooked him his favourite meal. The place was neat and tidy, his cutlass polished, and his spare boots clean. They ate the meal in silence. When at last he pushed his plate away, Luke turned to his boy, and spoke softly.

"I'll not say goodbye to you tomorrow. It will hurt me too much. You'll just leave as if going to the hold, or the cabin, and I'll barely notice you go that way. So, do not expect me to take you in my arms and whisper sweet words to you, for it will not happen."

"I understand," Sebastian said quietly.

"Tonight, I'll say my goodbyes, over there." Luke gestured to the bed. "You'll know me true tonight, as no-one else ever has. When you go, you'll take me with you here." He tapped Sebastian's chest, over his heart. "Aye, the best of me and the worst too, for you've seen both."

Sebastian took his hand and held it. His eyes sparkled wetly.

"You've been the best of men to me, like none I've ever known," he said softly.

Luke did not trust himself to say anything else. He stood, still holding his boy's hand, and pulled Sebastian to him. He held him close and kissed him sweetly, then drew him to the bed.

This was not a night for wild pleasures. Luke undressed Sebastian as if for the first time, taking his time and kissing every sweet inch of flesh he uncovered. Sebastian was soft and willing, moving every way Luke bade, his eyes full of a sad, liquid light.

Luke poured his heart into the love he made to Sebastian that night. He held his boy close and entered him slow, then moved within him gently, gazing at his love the entire time. Sebastian held Luke's face in his hands and gazed back, as if trying to imprint the memory of him forever in his mind.

Luke took his time, for he wanted this moment to last. The gentle swaying of the ship rocked them, like a cradle, soothing them both. Time seemed to stand still, for suddenly it was nearly dawn, and Luke knew that a bare moment ago it had been dusk. He was still inside his boy, making love to him slowly, gently, their gazes still locked. How long had they been this way? Surely not all night? Luke captured Sebastian's mouth in a long, tender kiss. If this boy had to leave, he'd leave with Luke's love branded on his lips.

"Don't you ever forget me," Luke whispered, nuzzling Sebastian's neck.

"How could that ever be?" Sebastian replied, his eyes glazed with tears.

"I'd keep us this way forever, if I could," Luke said, not wanting to hasten their lovemaking to its inevitable conclusion for that would mean the end of it, for all time. He was right where he wanted to be, and he had no doubt Sebastian felt the same. "I love you," Luke said, hoarsely, his voice aching with the truth of it. "I love you, and only you, and always will. There'll never be a lad again who means as much to me as you, Sebastian." Sebastian reached up and gently smoothed his hair from his face. "I'll not ask you to make the same vow," Luke said. "I may be a pirate, but you are a thief, my dear. You stole my heart, and you'll never give it back. Your own heart is wild, and I fear I've not tamed it. Others might, but I damn them all for not one of them will love you much as me, or know your true spirit so well as I do."

"You are right," Sebastian said. "I don't believe it's possible for any other man to fit me so well, like hand to glove."

"Aye, we do fit. For all your strange ways and my jealous temper – we fit." Luke rocked inside his boy a little harder, to prove the point. Never had his body merged with that of a lad so well, to such great pleasure for them both. It was not possible he could find such a lad again. "Then let us part on good terms, and know that if you ever need me, I'll always be yours," Luke said.

He closed his eyes and moved faster now, his hand moving on Sebastian in rhythmic time to his thrusts. Soon – too soon – it was over. He spilled inside his boy for the last time, and a second later felt his boy spill over his hand.

He lay with his boy for a while after, kissing him gently.

"My life has always been thus," he murmured. "I lost my Mam, and Tad, and my brothers, and sister to the pox when I was but eight years old."

"I know," Sebastian said, kissing him. "You told me when you were feverish with the pox."

"Ah. I thought I might. I have never spoken of it to any but you. Then I lost my first captain, the kindest soul, to a Spanish pirate. I made the whoreson pay for it some years later, but a foul pox take any Spaniard who crosses my path now, for I bear a long grudge."

"I've never doubted it," Sebastian murmured, stroking his cheek gently.

"And then there was Adam, taken from me by death, too. I couldn't fight death to keep any of them... and I cannot fight you to keep you, though I would if it were possible. Love always leaves, in the end. I'm used to it, but that doesn't make it any the easier."

"My family left me too." Sebastian sighed. "When I was much the same age as you. What did you do after? Did you have any other family to take care of you?"

"None." Luke wrapped his arm around his boy and held him close. "I was sent to the church, but they beat me so hard I ran away. I have no quarrel with God, but I've had no regard for his minions since then. They grew weary of not being able to break my spirit, and sent me to work for a farmer. He worked me like his poor, sad horses, until I could barely stand. I thought of my proud Tad and what he'd say to me, and I knew he'd tell me that I was no man's slave, and to live my own life. So, I ran away again, to Cardiff, to seek my fortune at sea. A witch once foretold I'd sail through the stars, and I have! At night, up on deck, the stars feel so close I could touch them. I've had a good life, Sebastian, and I've loved my life, sadness and joys both. I took my life in my hands, and by God I've lived it! I could die tomorrow with no regrets."

Sebastian's eyes were glowing. "Yes! I love life, too. I love to feel truly alive – the thrill of it, the spark, the excitement... and none more so than when you take me to your bed, or over your knee."

"Or when you're dancing on the yardarm?" Luke grinned.

Sebastian giggled. "What can I say? It gives me that same wild flow of blood through my veins and makes my heart beat harder. That's when I feel the most alive."

"And what will you do when you leave? Find another who'll sling you over his knee and take you hard and rough from behind?" Luke couldn't keep the tone of jealousy from his voice.

"I don't think any other could do that as well as you," Sebastian told him.

"Has any other before?" Luke asked, hardly sure he could bear to know the answer.

"No," Sebastian replied, and Luke knew he spoke true. "No, my love. Until you, I'd never met one who so clearly understood me and my strange needs and wants."

"Good then," Luke grunted. He'd always have that at least.

"A witch saw you sailing through the stars?" Sebastian smiled at him. "Come then, let us sail through them together, one last time."

They left the bed, pulled on their clothes, and returned to the deck, hand in hand. Only the night watch crew were there, and they paid them little mind.

They went to the prow and stood by the figurehead of Christabel herself. She was painted with blonde hair and a red dress, and Luke saw how much she looked like his Mam. He'd never noticed it before.

There was never a more beautiful sight than the Caribbean Sea on a clear night, with the stars blazing overhead in a milky line, showing them the way. They had sat this way before, many times, and Luke always loved it. He put his arm around his beloved and held him close as they sailed through the stars one last time.

"What of you, Sebastian?" Luke asked. "After your family left – how did you live?"

"People were kind," Sebastian said softly. "I was a child for a long time, stuck in that moment as I think can happen after a great shock or sadness – but now, I believe, I'm full grown."

Luke laughed. "I know I call you 'boy', but you are definitely full grown!" he said. Sebastian giggled. Luke thought there was never a sound he would ever enjoy hearing more should he live to be a hundred years old.

As dawn glowed softly on the horizon, and the light broke over Kingston harbour, illuminating Port Royal in the distance, Luke kissed his boy's neck and whispered in his ear.

"God speed, my love. Go safe and well." Then he drew away and left, never once looking back for fear his heart would break.

Luke was true to his word, and made no time for farewells. He busied himself dropping anchor and telling his men their tasks and timetables. He had provisions to buy and people to see – in particular, he was looking forward to taking young Jamie Bellwether his share of their fine Castilian gold.

Sebastian did his rounds, saying goodbye to all the men. Then he retreated back to the cabin and emerged a little while later holding only his little purse of their spoils and the black leather bag he'd arrived with. He approached Luke, holding out the bag.

"Keep these pots of medicine," he said. "For I can make more."

"That's a fine gift indeed," Luke said.

"The herbs in these potions are good," Sebastian said. Then he hesitated. "But often I wonder if the cure is rather in the belief of their healing power than in the truth of it."

"You're saying these precious medicines are worthless, after all?" Luke asked, in surprise. "Even after they cured us all of the pox?"

"Hmm." The light caught Sebastian's eyes, making them glow a little keener than usual. "Well... who knows?" he said with a shrug. "But even if the belief is the cure, it's worth it!"

Luke took the bag, wondering at Sebastian's strange words. If it had not been the medicines that cured them all of the pox, then what had it been? He'd seen the power of the pox first hand, as a child. It had wiped out all of Cwm Drysor, and some of the surrounding villages, too. Yet, not one man had died of it aboard the Christabel. What reason could there be than that these potions had cured it? Yet Sebastian seemed not to think it so.

"I would leave you with one other gift, though you won't open it until I'm long gone," Sebastian said. He stepped forward and pulled Luke into a warm hug. Luke had not wanted a goodbye, but Sebastian was, as usual, stronger than he looked. He held Luke fast in his arms until Luke finally submitted and relaxed against him. Sebastian ran his hands lightly over Luke's back, caressing him. Luke closed his eyes and held onto his boy one last time. He had that sensation he'd had once before, of being bathed in golden light, and then it was gone. Sebastian drew back. He said not a word, just smiled, then turned and walked down the gangplank and was gone.

Luke did not stay to watch him disappear. There was work to be done – he could sink himself in rum later to drown his sorrow. He would not allow himself to be sunk in sadness now, though – his way was clear.

He gave Nicky an order, and then called his men on deck. Nicky disappeared into the hold and returned soon after, carrying a little bundle.

"Jim!" Luke called. One-eyed Jim stepped forward, warily. "Here are your belongings. You'll not be returning to the Christabel while I'm her captain," Luke said, throwing him the bundle.

Jim caught it with a growl of anger. "I'd not want to come back to serve under a sodomite such as you," he hissed.

Luke gave an easy grin. "You'd drop your britches for me, if I asked. Your grievance isn't my love of men, but that I have no fancy for you. Now go. There are boys aplenty in the taverns of Port Royal, if you can but get over your dislike for your own true nature."

Jim turned beet red, and looked as if he'd like to take his fists to Luke. Luke stood fast, staring him down, and finally Jim's temper cooled, as he acknowledged the truth of Luke's words. He stomped off down the gangplank without another word.

Luke turned back to his men. "You have two weeks, in shifts, to enjoy the pleasures of this town. Do not be late to return, for I'll not hold anchor for any one of you."

Luke went about his business, keeping himself occupied in Port Royal. There was plenty to do – it was the long, lonely nights aboard the Christabel when she set sail that he feared more now that Sebastian was gone.

Two weeks later, the ship was set fair and ready to sail. It was a bright, sunny day, and the Christabel was in good shape following some minor repairs. Luke had overseen her provisioning, the hold was full, the men were back onboard... and he'd had a long talk with Jamie about all the fine Spanish ships he could expect to raid in the coming weeks.

The anchor was weighed, and he was about to give the order to pull up the gangplank when a shout went up from Nicky.

"Wait! Look!"

Luke turned to see a figure running towards the ship, pushing a cart full of bulging sacks. He frowned as the figure drew closer – it was a man, wearing a black cloak and fine new clothes, and... his heart skipped a beat... Sebastian!

Sebastian pushed the cart up the gangplank and onto the ship.

"Another last gift?" Luke asked, going towards him. "I thought never to see you again."

"I have brought gifts, yes. Whether they are the last is up to you," Sebastian retorted, a little breathless from his run. "These..." Sebastian opened one of the sacks. "Are oranges. It's long been my belief that men fall sick on sea voyages for lack of this kind of fruit to eat."

"Hmm." Luke wasn't sure he believed that, but the gift was kind all the same.

"Also..." Sebastian opened his fancy new cloak to reveal a tiny bundle of brown striped fur. "A kitten – it's time, captain, and fewer rats means less pox, for sure."

Luke's heart melted instantly, as it always did when he saw a cat. He scooped the baby up and held her close, tickling her under the chin with his big fingers.

"We will call her Mog!" he announced.

"Wasn't your last cat called Mog?" Sebastian frowned.

"All cats are called Mog!" Luke proclaimed.

"Well and good then," Sebastian said, rolling his eyes a little.

Mog gazed up at Luke from solemn yellow eyes and then bumped her little head against his hand and began to purr.

"She's taken to you already," Sebastian observed.

"Cats like me," Luke said, without false pride. They really did. "So, you brought me someone warm to cuddle at night with you gone. It's a kind thought, though not the same."

"On that subject... could we go to your cabin and talk? If you have time before you sail?" Sebastian asked.

"I always have time for you." Luke led the way to his cabin, holding Mog gently against his chest. He set her to the floor when they arrived, and the little miss began doing what kittens do best – making mischief with all his belongings.

"What do you want of me, Sebastian?" Luke asked, when they were alone.

"I wanted to tell you that I'm a fool, first," Sebastian said.

"Aye, I'm sure that's true!" Luke grinned.

"For saying goodbye to a man such as you, when I'll never find such a one again. I'd stay, if you'll have me?"

Luke felt a giddy wave of joy, but Sebastian's face was serious, so he knew there was more to be talked of first. "What of your uncle?" Luke asked.

"There is no uncle," Sebastian replied. "But I think you knew that well enough already."

"I did." Luke inclined his head.

Sebastian took off his cloak, and Luke gave an appreciative whistle, for he looked mighty fine in his brand new clothes. A pair of black britches, a white cotton shirt, a fancy blue waistcoat to match the colour of his eyes, a shiny leather belt, and polished black boots on his feet.

"I see you took my lessons to heart." Luke grinned. "For a good looking boy, you had little idea how to show yourself to best effect until I showed you the way."

"For a pirate, you have far too much liking for clothes," Sebastian retorted. Luke laughed.

Sebastian sat down at the table and gestured to Luke to do the same. Then he spoke.

"I'm a traveller, Luke," he said. Luke found he missed being called 'captain' or 'sir' but also that it was a new kind of joy to hear his own true name on Sebastian's lips. "Ever since my family left, all I've known is travel. I go from place to place, making friends and meeting new lovers along the way. I thought you were that, nothing more – a new lover to enjoy and part from with no hard feelings, so I could move on to fresh adventures."

"Did I mean so little to you?" Luke murmured, wounded.

"No! That's just it!" Sebastian said fiercely. "I wasn't expecting to find love – just some fun to fill the time. I didn't expect you to be...well, you." He grinned. "So fine a man, so full of the love of life and adventure – and so good with his hands and lips upon my body, bringing me more joy than any man I've known. You made me feel alive, and for a long time I've not felt that," he said sadly. "I'd grown jaded with the world."

"You're too young for that, lad!" Luke scolded.

"But I've been travelling since I was a little child," Sebastian said quietly. "So, I feel weary at times, and old. You brought me back to myself, and made me want to meet each new day with joy again."

"I'm glad."

"If I held back from telling you so, it was only because..." Sebastian looked down, biting on his lip.

"Love?" Luke tipped his chin to gaze on him.

"Because I was afraid of losing you, as I lost my family. You know that fear, because you've lost so many, too. I took to moving on before I fell in love, so as not to suffer the pain of another loss – as if by being in charge of the leaving I could lessen the loss. It was always so before... but then I met you. I stood on the dock yesterday, out of sight, and watched you at work on the deck. My heart beat so loudly I thought you might hear it. I knew then, I'd be a fool to let you go."

"I'll never leave you, as you know, but a pirate's life is not a long one," Luke said with a shrug. "What then for you, love? Could you stand another loss? Or must you always run away?"

"That's just it. I know I should go, but I want to stay. For what is the point of living if there is no loving? I will stand the loss, when it one day comes, for I cannot stand the loss now, knowing it is all of my own making, and that we could have many good years together were it not for my foolish ways."

"Then you'll stay – for good?" Luke pressed his hand over Sebastian's.

"I will, if you'll have me. But first you must hear another part of my story, as it may make you change your mind about keeping me here," Sebastian warned.

"I don't believe anything could, but by all means tell."

Sebastian nodded. Beside them, on the floor, Mog made a squeaky mewling sound. Luke scooped her up and nestled her against his chest.

"I've always had an interest in medicine – the right herbs to treat the right ailments and so on. I've studied it hard, and believe I have some talent in that area," Sebastian began.

Luke nodded – the lad had saved them from the pox, so that was hard to argue with. "I thought you might be a surgeon from some Navy ship," Luke said. "Maybe that you were lying about your age for some reason of your own, for you look mighty young to be a surgeon."

"Well, a good guess for sure, but wrong." Sebastian grinned. "I have had some training as a surgeon – that much you guessed true – but I was not on a Navy ship before you found me. I'd paid for passage on the *Marie-Louise*; I wanted to go to England, as I had a fancy to visit there again. The captain of that ship was a superstitious soul, and when I healed some of his men of their ailments, he grew suspicious. He believed too much in the tales of witches and the like, and thought my medicines tainted by evil. I helped a man who lost an arm when he fell from the rigging; I healed another of some common scurvy; and when a fever swept the crew, I healed them too. T'was not as bad as the pox on the *Christabel*, but he called foul deed on me and decided I was in league with the devil, whatever that means." Sebastian gave a crooked grin. "He said I brought ill luck to his ship, and bade me be gone. He strapped my medicines to my back, for he said he'd have no dark witch magic on his ship, and he threw me overboard."

"The lousy scum!" Luke exclaimed. "He took your money and your services and used you ill." Mog stirred at the vehemence of his tone and took herself off over the table to explore some more.

"So, you see, my dear, I'm not flotsam, but jetsam after all." Sebastian smiled.

"Indeed. Thrown overboard and not shipwrecked. How did you survive without the piece of hull you said protected you?" Luke demanded.

"I used the leather bag to float on – it was actually a good thing they threw it in with me!"

"So, you're not a witch?" Luke asked, gazing at him earnestly.

"Of course I'm not a witch!" Sebastian chuckled. "Just a man with a little learning and a wish to heal and help where he can." He sat back, gazing at Luke. "You'd not throw me overboard for such superstition, I'd hope?"

"Of course not." Luke took his hand. "You cured me and my men of the pox – whatever you are, you're good luck, not bad."

"So, will you have me?" Sebastian asked.

"You need to ask? Where else will I find a boy who likes to play the games we play together, that bring us both such joy?" Luke grinned. "But do you really mean to stay, Sebastian? Forever?"

"For as long as we are both living." Sebastian smiled.

"Do you promise?" Luke hated that side of himself that needed to ask, but he couldn't stop himself all the same.

"I promise. 'Til death do us part," Sebastian said, squeezing Luke's hand.

"Are we married then, my love?" Luke grinned.

"Why not? I'll have you, if you'll have me!"

"In a heartbeat." Luke pulled him close, sat the lad upon his knee, and kissed him fiercely on the lips.

"I have one more gift for you," Sebastian said, when at last Luke released him. He reached into the bag he'd placed upon the table, and drew out a package. He handed it to Luke. Luke stripped away the cloth to reveal... an exquisite black leather belt, thick, wide and finely tooled, with a sparkling bronze buckle. "I feared that if you let me stay, you might wear out your old one on my arse," Sebastian said, with a grin. "So, it seemed only fair to bring you a new one!"

Luke laughed. He folded the belt over and slapped it firmly against the palm of his hand. It was a sturdy strip of leather and made a hard slap and an even harder sting. "T'will hurt," he warned.

"Oh, I do hope so," Sebastian purred.

Luke set Sebastian on the floor and removed his old belt. Sebastian took the new belt and fastened it around Luke's waist. "With this ring, I thee wed," he said, as he buckled it in place.

"It's a strange looking wedding ring, but then we are a strange pair, are we not, my matelot?" Luke asked, drawing Sebastian in close to hold him tight.

"The strangest, my captain." Sebastian smiled.

"You know, now we are wed, you may call me Luke. I like how my name sounds on your lips," Luke told him.

"Luke then." Sebastian kissed him. "Though, to me, you'll always be my captain."

"And you my best boy." Luke lifted Sebastian and carried him to the bed. He then proceeded to make it clear, in no uncertain terms, that Sebastian now belonged to him. Sebastian seemed entirely happy to have the matter made clear, and even happier when Luke tried out the new belt on his bum.

Luke woke in the night to find his best boy beneath one arm, and a tiny purring kitten beneath the other. He did not think it was possible for a man to be happier.

He slid out of the bed to piss in the pot, and looked back over his shoulder to smile at his sleeping boy in the lanternlight. Then he frowned as he caught sight of his own back in the mirror. He'd forgotten about the scars on his back these past few weeks as they'd hurt him so little... but now he could see no trace of them. It must be a trick of the light – no matter how good Sebastian's unguents were, Luke knew of no medicine that could take away scars so deep. He held up the lantern and looked in the mirror again... only to find his back as smooth and unblemished as it had not been since he was fourteen years old.

When Sebastian left, he'd said he'd grant Luke a gift. At that time, his matelot hadn't intended to return. He'd hugged Luke close and touched his hands to his back. Was it possible...? Surely not... and yet, what other explanation could there be? Sebastian had left his medicines behind when he thought to leave, as if their only worth lay in what men believed of them, rather than any power they actually had. Luke had a sudden strange fancy that the healing lay in Sebastian's hands and not any of those pots of herbs and unguents. Maybe he used them only as a kind of pantomime, to disguise the truth, for fear he'd be burned at the stake otherwise. If so, it had not worked with the captain of the *Marie-Louise*. Yet if the medicines were mere show, how did the healing work? Luke remembered a peasant woman back in Cwm Drysor, who was said to have healing hands. T'was a powerful gift indeed, if so, but where did such a gift come from? Was it witchcraft? Sebastian had laughed at such a notion and sworn true that he was no witch. Then what was he?

Luke gazed down on his sleeping lad. Did it matter? He loved Sebastian, whatever he was. What good would come of asking? If Sebastian had anything to tell him, then no doubt it would come out in time. If not, then Luke was content with what he had. Indeed, no man could be more so.

Luke slipped back into the bed and pulled Sebastian close once more, so the lad's chin was resting on his shoulder. Mog climbed up his arm and settled on his chest. Luke stroked her soft fur and lay there, listening to her rumbling purr. Sebastian sighed and murmured something in his sleep. Luke pressed a kiss to his hair and held him tight.

His happiness was complete. For the first time since he was eight years old, he had a family again.

The End

