CHAPTER 1

The traveler has tales to tell.

— Irish Proverb

Seven Stars, St. Croix

23rd January, 1801

"Master Blair." An insistent knock pierces through the fog of James's sleep. "Sir," Hughes begs.

The planter's eyes blink open to early gray light. "Yes?"

"An urgent message from Mr. Shea. The *Resolute,* sir. She's been spotted."

James's heart takes off like a shot, and he throws the covers back. "My carriage," he barks while he stumbles hurriedly to dress.

"Being harnessed as we speak."

Minutes later, James flies out to the courtyard and bounds into his carriage. Once the driver sends the horses into motion, it thunders down the road at a breakneck pace, riding into the tangerine line that separates gray-blue sky from midnight land. Still, it's much too slow for James.

What do I want? the man wonders even as he knows that's an absurd question, for he knows what he wants. Charlotte. Two years have passed since the woman was presumed dead and nothing has changed; despite all logic, he wants her. Yet if Charlotte is found on that ship, she stole from him and humiliated him. Took *lives* from him.

James knows he should execute her, that justice requires it, that a letter of marque can easily be lost. Or he could return her to Ireland for trial. He has little doubt it would be a sensational guilty verdict. Yet then James thinks of what he's kept from Shea and is reminded what he promised Jenny, and a sluice of shame and fear washes over the man. In nearly every way, it would be easier if Charlotte were found to be dead.

Two hours later, the carriage rocks to a stop, and James leaps out. The *Resolute* is nearing the dock but hasn't yet lowered her anchor. Finally, after almost an hour of anxious waiting, the ship slips neatly into her berth. James stares impatiently at the crew until they drop the gangplank, then he races onto the ship, and sailors dart out of his way as he heads for the captain's cabin.

There the big man emerges and the planter stops with terrible hope squeezing his chest. When Keogh nods, James swallows an anguished cry and rushes into the cabin.

A slight person with soft features lies sleeping on her side. She wears a man's cambric shirt; her face is brown with dirt, has painted-on whiskers, and heavily kohled eyes; and her mane of auburn hair is littered with knotty braids. James drops to his knees and finds the telltale JB scarred into her palm. Heat floods behind his eyes, and his shaking hands hover.

"I don't know what to do." James's breath leaves him. "I want so desperately to hold her and… at the same time"—he shakes his head—"I want to bring her to her knees." Eventually his hands rest on the bed beside her, his fingers poised to touch her. "It makes no sense."

"It makes perfect sense."

"She sleeps. Is she…?"

"Perfectly fit, only drugged. A salty meal and heavy pours of wine dosed with some of Billy's valerian."

"Why?"

"She's not exactly resigned to her fate and tried to remedy the matter herself. I thought it would be easier, until you decide what to do with her, to steal her away from the ship like this."

"'Remedy the matter'? She hates me so much?"

"She believes you intend to kill her."

"A murdering pirate? I *should* kill her." James looks at Keogh.

"We both know you don't want to do that."

“I don’t know what I want.” James runs the backs of his fingers along Charlotte’s lips, feeling her even breathing.

“Jamie, she’s hale. I promise. She’ll wake soon enough, likely kicking and spitting at you.”

James chuckles while his gaze ranges desperately over her. “She’s filthy.”

“Part of her disguise.”

Tentatively, James pulls back the sheet, then turns to his captain.

“Let’s get her settled,” Keogh says. “There’s much to tell. Where shall we put her? In the village?”

“Do I dare let her out of my sight?”

Keogh shakes his head.

“Then put her in my bed.”

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Charlotte feels herself lifted and carried, handed over into strong arms and solid chests. All the while, voices murmur as she wakes slowly. Every bone in her body, every muscle feels weighted, every sight and sound, weightless. Her eyes are heavy, and as soon as they open, they close again. Finally, she smells a luxurious fragrance that makes her open her eyes and fight to keep them open—primrose.

Sitting up, Charlotte swallows a parched throat and blinks raw eyes. She spies familiar milk-white walls and warm mahogany, the large four-poster and hinged globe. Charlotte throws back the covers and swings her legs over the side, and the room swims. Closing her eyes, she goes still and breathes slowly, praying she doesn’t retch.

When the walls stop moving, Charlotte staggers to a window and throws open the shutters. Steam trails from the boiling house stacks. The great canvas arms of the windmill turn while cane-laden wagons climb to its ramp. Charlotte takes a gulp of fresh air, smelling tropical fruits and flowers, manure and heat, and always the

sweetness of sugar cane—the distinctive bouquet of Seven Stars. A scent she never thought to smell again.

"Well, now," Celine says, striding into the room.

When Charlotte turns, the room spins again, and she grips a chair.

"You all right?" the housekeeper asks.

"I think so. I just—"

"Let's get you in de bat'." Celine indicates the tub. "And get you somet'ing to eat. You feel betteh."

"Thank you, no. I need only my boots, then I'll be on my way."

"On your way?"

"I hope you didn't go to too much trouble with the bath."

"No trouble."

"I just need to go. My boots?"

Charlotte thinks James just the man to deliberately hide them until Celine pulls them from behind the tub. When she puts them on, she feels them empty inside, and panic seizes her. "I'm missing a rolled parchment from inside these boots. It's very, *very* important."

"I don't know anyt'ing 'bout any parchment."

"You're certain?"

"Maybe Masteh Blaih know. He took dem off."

Charlotte wants to slip out unseen, but she *needs* that letter of marque. Cursing him, she slips down the stairs, approaches James's office, and with her heart thumping wildly in her chest, knocks on the door.

"Come."

Inside, Keogh sits across from James, sharing a drink, but Charlotte scarcely notices him. She's too busy devouring the planter with her eyes.

Two years is a long time, and in all that time Charlotte never thought to see James again. Each time she found her mind drifting to him, each morning she woke dreaming of him, she set about rolling up her feelings like a ship's sheet she dared

not allow to catch wind. Yet now, seeing him again, suddenly all of Charlotte's feelings unfurl and fill, dragging her back again to that July hilltop with so much promise, to James's office in the fort amidst all the raw anger and hurt and desire. Her heart beats faster.

"I'll leave you to it." Keogh swallows his drink and goes to leave. When the door latches behind him, it seems to echo.

At long length, the room is deathly quiet while the planter and the pirate remain rooted in place. Eventually, James utters, "Did you think you'd get away with it?" Finally, he looks at Charlotte, and his countenance is so glacial she takes a step back. "Did you think it glorious, stealing treasure and lives? What in the bloody hell were you thinking?" James slams his drink down and stands.

"I have—"

"No. Right now, you'll listen. You and your crew killed five of my men. *Five men!* Perhaps more if the gravely injured don't pull through." James pulls Charlotte's file and places it on his desk. "And nearly fifty thousand pounds of lost cargo and destruction to my ships, not to mention the uncounted cost of damage I saw today. The good Catholics of County Mayo shall be taxed to make up these damages."

"No."

"Yes. Did you think the *Liberté* the first to attempt such a scheme? There are consequences to what you've done."

Charlotte shakes her head.

"The rest of the crew of the *Liberté* is dead," James continues. "I made certain of that. You're here to stand punishment in their stead." The man slaps a lurid tear sheet with Charlotte's image on his desk. "The Crown seeks the pirate Back from the Dead Red. Should I give her to them?" For a long moment, he measures her with his gaze, but she gives him nothing. "I think they'd be delighted to know that she and Gentleman Johnny's Murderer are one and the same—Charlotte. *Dillon.*" He raises a

brow. “Yes, I discovered your clever little deception. The daughter of the republican agitator Charles Dillon. Where is he, by the way?”

“My father?”

“No. We’ll get to him. We have a lot to get to, you and I.” James stalks toward Charlotte. “First, tell me why. Why did you leave? Why did you do it, my little tory?”

“They kidnapped me. I had no hand in it, I swear. But it was a woman of some acquaintance, and I owed her. When she offered me my freedom—”

“You took it, though you were bound to me.”

“But you were so unforgivably cruel.”

“Do *not* think to blame this on me.”

“You asked me why I left, and I’m telling you. If you’d like me to lie or remain silent, I can do that just as well. Only tell me what you want.”

When James says nothing, Charlotte continues. “You no longer cared for me, but I never imagined you could hate me so much. I’m guilty of many things, but I knew nothing of the attack on your family’s estate. Believe me or no, I shall deny it to my dying breath.”

James’s enraged mask slips.

“And as long as I’m denying my crimes, this whole term is unjust. I don’t care what you think of me anymore, for it’s clear you already hate me, but I did *not* murder Lord John. I swear it. He died by my hand, but it was no murder, no political act. He was trying to rape me. Would have had I not… I did not intend to kill him, only to get him off me.”

“What does it matter, one man, when you’ve killed so many since?”

“Under a legitimate letter of marque. I’ve a right to see the inside of an admir—”

“This letter of marque?” James crosses back to his desk, picks up the blood-smudged roll, and dips it in the flame of his lamp. “Is as legitimate as the government that issued it.”

Terror flares in her mind, and she grabs for it, but he lifts it out of reach. Still, she climbs his limbs. “You’re condemning me!”

When James drops the remains in his rubbish bin, Charlotte dives for them, but he holds fast to her. “You condemn yourself.”

Defeated, she slumps in his arms. Her voice is filled with despair when she says, “That was all the rights I had left.”

“The Directory Government…” James lets go and clears the thickened emotion from his throat. It’s still heart-wrenching for him to hear the hurt in her voice. “The Directory Government of France was overthrown a year after that letter was issued. It’s worthless, Charlotte.” She shakes her head. “Yes,” he continues. “Believe me or no, it’s true.”

Charlotte plods to the door, and alarm races through James. He darts to overtake her, caging her there.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asks.

“You can kill me now.”

“Yes.”

“Will you?”