

**Rackety Kate  
and  
The Pirates  
by  
Denise Rossetti**



*With the kind assistance of the Newsletter Readers of the deniserossetti newsgroup.  
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/deniserossetti>*

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## Chapter One Help Yourself

Kate's lips twisted as she glared at bright procession of books on the shelf. "Laugh Your Way to Wealth", "Perfect Love, Perfect Life".

Bah! Written in snake oil, not ink. No such thing as perfect. No such thing as love.

She should know. She'd been looking all her life.

Sex though – there was plenty of that. Kate ran a perfectly manicured nail over the cheerful, glossy covers while a spasm of longing tightened her belly.

She'd been thrilled with Raoul, so certain he was The One, all Latin charm and flashing teeth. And he'd actually managed to make her come. Well, once.

But then she'd discovered he'd been lying from that first smouldering glance across the bar. He was just Dwayne – ordinary, married Dwayne from Smalltown USA who sold cisterns and sinks. Nothing wrong with plumbing – every home needed an S-bend – but somehow, the magic sprang a leak right there.

What an idiot! She should have known from the start. No one real was called Raoul. Hell, she'd never been able to say the name without sounding like she was gargling with mouthwash.

And the worst thing? She was a *consistent* idiot, drawn to the wrong man like iron filings to a magnet, time after time. The slightest whiff of complete bastard and she was gone. Hopeless.

Totally depressed, Kate shifted her feet in the red, high-heeled pumps and pressed a hand to the ache in her lower back. The impeccably tailored suit in charcoal gray and the cream silk shirt, she was prepared to tolerate, but the shoes were her own less than subtle way of giving Law the finger. Rossetti shoes, her friend Alice had called them, but then Alice was definitely a bit crazy. Crazy in love with Will. Kate squeezed her eyes shut against the burn of tears.

She shouldn't be jealous. It made her a crap friend. But she'd never seen Alice so happy. Shit, she'd never seen *anyone* as happy, period.

And, oh God, how she wanted that for herself!

Not Will though, she didn't want Will. He belonged to Alice. Wistfully, Kate thought of the expression in Will's clear gray eyes when they rested on her friend. All of him was in that look – body, heart and soul – a future for two.

Glancing at the thin, dainty watch on her wrist, she bit her lip. Not a Rolex, but very nearly. Five of the six partners at Windsor, Nott and Choke, Attorneys at Law, sported Rolex watches and wore Armani. Also aftershave, but that was because they were men.

Damn, her lunch hour was over. Time to get back to the office and resume her career as Potential Junior Partner material. Conscious of a tremendous reluctance, Kate cast a last look at the cover photo on "Corporate Piracy for Do-Gooders". A smile tugged at her lips. Now that was the sort of self-help she could do with.

It was a Caribbean beach scene, with sand like a field of fine, white sugar and an azure ocean stretching clear to the horizon. A comfortable sunlounge sat slap bang in the middle of the beach, a tall, frosty drink and a pair of sunglasses on a small table by its side. The lounge was vacant save for a laptop computer, the lid open. Kate's grin kicked up a notch. The whole setup was shaded by a big beach umbrella – a black one, with a skull and crossbones on it. She loved that kind of dark humour.

But her brows rose when she picked up the slim volume. \$39.95. Now that really *was* piracy. A closer look startled a chuckle out of her. The drink had one of those little tropical umbrellas stuck in it. And it too was a Jolly Roger, a teeny, weeny one.

Kate turned the book over and her smile congealed. All the breath left her lungs with a whoosh. The author's photo was captioned, "Jack Cavanagh, Corporate Raider and Forbes Lister" and God, he looked it, every inch of him. He'd been posed like a cover model on a romance novel, one booted foot propped on a treasure chest, a puffy white shirt open to show a wedge of tanned chest. In one hand, he carried a sword, in the other, a laptop case. The only men Kate knew who could have carried off a costume like that were gay. Or Johnny Depp.

But she'd swear Jack Cavanagh wasn't gay, not with that amused, to-hell-with-it glint in his dark eyes. Every hormone in Kate's trim little body sat up and shrieked, "Bad boy! Gimme!" Her eye slid down the line of his broad back and swept over breeches pulled tight over taut, powerful buttocks. He was clean-shaven, but his hair was a little longer than regulation for a CEO, long enough to flirt with his collar. Squinting, Kate tilted the book, trying to catch a better light. It had a rich auburn undertone to it, enough to shine chestnut if the sun struck it the right way.

Holy shit. Hands trembling, Kate put Jack Cavanagh back on the shelf – where dreams belonged. *Don't worry*, her practical self whispered. *You memorized the website, there might be more pictures there.*

"May I help you?" said a woman's voice.

Kate jerked around so quickly, she almost broke an ankle in the process.

The clerk stared hard at Kate's handbag. "You've been looking at the same shelf for half an hour."

What the - ?

Oh yes. Kate's eyes narrowed. This must be the woman who'd been so rude to Alice, the day she met Will. Right in front of the erotic romance section. On the other hand, Alice hadn't made a whole lot of sense, babbling about dreams and fairies and a giant beaver, for God's sake.

Kate thought of the gleam in Jack Cavanagh's eyes and drew strength. She kept her cool with opposing Counsel and difficult Judges, didn't she? No one got the better of

Kate O'Reilly in Court. Therefore no dried up prune of a clerk was going to faze her in a bookstore. With a long, lonely weekend ahead, why not indulge? Chocolate ice-cream and gin and an erotic romance. She'd pick up some extra batteries too.

There was a particular author Alice had mentioned, in between the laughter and the tears. Now who - ? Kate trawled through her memory. Ah yes. "Got anything by a woman called Rossetti?" she asked.

The clerk stiffened. "Oh," she said, and sniffed. "You mean *those* books. Just over there." She stalked off in an almost perceptible cloud of disapproval.

Full of evil satisfaction, Kate moved to the area the woman had indicated. She blinked. Goodness. What incredible covers. Enough hard male flesh to keep a girl in fantasies for months. And there were the Rossetti books, right on the top shelf. Kate stared, everything feminine in her rising up with a PHROARRRR!! of appreciation. God, what a totally gorgeous man! He reminded her a little of Jack Cavanagh, even though he had an amazing dragon tattoo and his face was hidden. Cursing her lack of inches, she went up on tiptoe, but despite the heels, she finished up scrabbling with her fingertips.

No way would she ask the clerk for help. Kate set her jaw and gave a little jump, just managing to snag the book. But as it dropped into her hands, the shelf wobbled. Open-mouthed, she watched it tilt toward her, seemingly in slow motion. An avalanche of beautiful men with dragon tattoos bounced off her head and shoulders and she opened her mouth to scream. With a kind of awful inevitability, several million of words of hot sex toppled over and onto Kate. Something incredibly solid struck her temple and everything went away in a shower of sparks.

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Jeez, this had to be the worst hangover she'd ever had. The whole room was *still* swinging and her head was full of a strange rushing noise. Kate fumbled a hand to her forehead, stifling a groan. She usually drank plenty of water on a night out, but Lord, she was thirsty! Better get up and -

She opened her eyes and blinked. Nah. Couldn't be. She squeezed them shut, but now her nose was aware of strange smells. Something salty and also musty and strangely spicy. Huh?

Cautiously, Kate cracked one eyelid open. The room was dim, but it wasn't her bedroom - not unless it had shrunk to the point that all her furniture had disappeared into some dark vortex. On the other hand, the pathetic whimpering noise was probably her. Which was a strange sort of comfort. The bed lurched suddenly and the whole room creaked, the unlit lamp swinging in a crazy arc. Kate shot bolt upright and banged her head.

"Ow! Shit!" Automatically, she rubbed the spot and hit her elbow a painful blow on the wall. God, it was a bunk! She was sitting in a bunk, no - a hammock, in a room with a very low ceiling, panelled in dark wood, containing nothing but a stout wooden chest

banded with leather. And the sound of water swished along outside the walls, which meant she was on a sh...

No. Couldn't be. This was nuts.

Cautiously, Kate swung her feet to the floor, the coarse rug prickly on her bare feet. *Bare feet?* Where were her killer heels? She looked down.

Because she seemed to have forgotten how to breathe, the full-blooded scream emerged as a kind of pained yelp. All she was wearing was a thin, loose shift. Frantic patting confirmed a dreadful suspicion. No underwear. Not a stitch.

Wait a minute. Kate rubbed her forehead. She'd been in a perfectly ordinary bookstore, in the mall, the same place Alice had met Will. That's right. And she'd been about to buy a book by that Rossetti woman, the one Alice said had sent her the weird dreams. Rossetti and her readers, making choices for Alice. What absolute nonsense!

From outside, she heard the brisk thump of approaching boots, a heavy, masculine stride. Her eye fell on a chamber pot in the corner. It looked solid, utilitarian. A good weapon. Over the sound of the footsteps and the rushing of the sea, another noise insinuated itself into Kate's consciousness.

*Tap, tap. Tap, tap.*

Jesus! Her blood congealed and her heart stopped. As vividly as if Alice stood beside her, she heard her friend's voice. "I'd hear her tapping at the keyboard, writing the story. Writing my *life*, Kate." Alice had shuddered. "She's crazy, you know, that Rossetti. If it hadn't been for her readers..." Alice shook her head, swallowing.

*Tap, tap, tap.*

Holy shit!

The door rattled and Kate set her jaw. Rossetti would find Kate O'Reilly a very different proposition from sweet Alice!

The door banged back and a giant of a man filled the opening. White teeth flashed in a bushy beard. "C'mon, ye lazy wench!" he roared. He ducked his head under the lintel. "Yer mistress is callin'. Though..." A big hand rose to rub his nose and his eyes twinkled, though the room was too dim for Kate to make out their colour. "Ye're a fine, tasty little piece." He surveyed her in a leisurely manner, lingering on her breasts and hips.

His masculinity was overpowering in the small space. Kate gasped, her senses swamped with the smell of sunwarmed flesh and sandalwood and leather. To her irritation, her breasts tightened and her belly clenched. But the sword and dagger thrust through his belt were obvious enough and so was the healthy bulge in his breeches. In fact, it was growing healthier by the second.

The man propped himself against the doorframe. "Her High an' Mightiness can wait, I'm thinkin'." He grinned again. "While we get better acquainted. What's yer name, pretty lass?" Taking a step into the cabin, he pulled the door shut behind him with a decisive snap. "I never kiss a wench less'n I know her name."

**What should Kate do?**

- A. Throw the chamber pot at his head. (Guess we'll find out later if there's anything in it!)
- B. Stay cool and ask *his* name.
- C. Kiss him so she can steal the dagger from his belt.



## Chapter 2

### A Man and His Cat

*The story so far:*

*Kate O'Reilly, up-and-coming attorney at law and Alice's friend, discovers that Rossetti's books pack quite a punch. Felled by a toppling shelf of erotic romances in the local bookstore, she wakes to find herself all at sea – literally. And standing at the cabin door is the biggest bad boy of her dreams. All nautical and oh-so-not-politically-correct...*

"Who the hell are you?" Kate propped her hands on her hips and refused to take a step backward. Which was fine in theory. In practice, it meant the giant stepped right into her personal space, smelling delightfully of fresh, salty air and warm man.

Her nose was about level with a chest a mile wide, the top couple of buttons of his shirt carelessly undone. *Oooh look, Katie*, her hormones caroled, *just how we like it. Tanned and hairy, but not a rug.*

Jeezus! The Hormone Harlots. "Shaddup", she gritted.

"Eh, ye got a mouth on ye, lass." A broad palm cradled her jaw, tilting it so that she had to meet his eyes. Straight white teeth flashed in the brown beard and eyes as blue as her own twinkled down at her. The voice lowered to a happy rumble. "Aye, that ye have." A brawny arm slid around her waist, his head dipped and his mouth slanted over hers.

"Mmpf!" mumbled Kate, wriggling furiously.

Oh, but his lips were warm, the whiskers surprisingly soft. And though his chest was as solid as a teak bulkhead against her, he wasn't invading her mouth, just crooning under his breath and nibbling, while a huge hand clamped right across one buttock to hold her still.

*Yum, yum, yummy!* shrilled the Hormone Harlots. *Go, Katie!*

The man's tongue licked the seam of her lips and Kate's hand clenched in the fabric of his shirt. God, when had she grabbed him? She hauled her eyes open, just as his tongue flicked inside her mouth to flirt with hers. He was watching her. Absurdly long eyelashes fluttered over one blue eye in a saucy wink.

Oh. Well then, just for a minute.

Kate relaxed in his hold and smiled into the kiss.

A delighted grunt and he surged right in, swamping her senses. Lord, the man was good! The Harlots were in hormonal heaven. So was Kate.

And he was so solid, so hard. So damn big. Her free hand flapped about, coming to rest on his belt. She curled her fingers over the hard leather, hanging on.

And common sense returned, like a deluge of icy water. Kate froze, while her brain creaked back into gear.

What the *hell* was she thinking? She had to get out of here, out of whatever this was - a dream, a nightmare, a book by that weird Rossetti woman. Oz. Real life was back there somewhere, waiting. A hard palm slid up and down her spine, caressing and comforting and warm. Kate's head swam. Her tiny apartment, always spotless, sterile even. Echoing, empty.

The heel of her hand brushed something hard. A hilt. Slowly, she closed her fingers over it.

Nothing and no one told Kate O'Reilly, Attorney at Law, what to do. No one took advantage. Not even if she was enjoying the hell out of it.

With one hand, she grabbed his hair, finding he had it tied back. Very convenient. With the other, she ripped the blade out of his belt and dug the sharp point into his lower back. Jerking his head back, she hissed, "Let me go!" She wiggled the weapon for emphasis. Hopefully, she had it over his kidney, or somewhere vulnerable.

The man didn't seem particularly fazed. He grinned. Lord, his eyes were the exact shade of blue of a noonday sky. Clear and bright and guileless. "Careful with that now, lassie."

"I am *not* a lassie," snapped Kate. "And who are you?"

"Tom Cavanagh." Almost casually, he clamped a huge paw over her fingers and pushed the dagger aside. "First officer."

What the—? Kate shoved back. Workouts four times a week and a personal trainer had to be worth something. But they weren't.

She might as well have tried to budge a mountain.

Tom Cavanagh pried the knife out of her grip and thrust it back into the scabbard on his belt. He chuckled, his face alight with anticipation and boyish pleasure. "Fierce as a fishwife," he rumbled. He winked again. "Good."

The great lump. She wouldn't smile. She *wouldn't*.

Someone scratched at the door. A high imperious voice said, "*Perrrowww!*"

Tom chuckled, easing the door open a crack. A sleek gray tabby eeled in to rub herself against his boots. "Mornin' sweetheart," said Tom.

"Purrrrrrt," replied the cat, head-butting his calf. Then she sat, neat and tall, her tail wrapped securely around his ankle.

Huge golden-green eyes glared at Kate and the cat's ears went flat.

Weird.

Flexing her numb fingers, Kate took a wary step backward. "I have to go home."

Tom frowned. "Yer place is with yer mistress, lass." He shrugged his massive shoulders. "The Indies ain't so bad, once ye get used to the heat. And the rum's bloody fine."



Kate's mouth fell open. She had so many questions they jostled each other on her tongue. *Mistress?* What mistress? The Indies? "Just tell me..." She licked her dry lips. "Where is this?"

"Surely ye know?" Tom cocked his head to one side, his gaze suddenly shrewd and hard. Not such a buffoon then. "Well, s'pose ye might not, since ye been so seasick ye hardly came out o' the cabin." After a beat, he swept her a bow, surprisingly graceful for such a large man. "This is the *Lady Meroe*, little one."

"The what?"

"The ship, lass." He waved a hand, beaming. "The *Meroe's* an East Indiaman, purpose built. The best, the fastest... She's got the prettiest pair o' heels."

"*Merrrowwow!*" said the cat insistently.

"Oh aye, I ain't forgot ye, love," said Tom. "This dainty piece is also the *Lady Meroe*. Senior ship's cat."

Kate struggled. She had enough distractions without an idiot who was besotted with his cat. "Heels?" she asked, returning to the matter at hand. "A ship has heels?"

Tom's mouth thinned. "Aye. Twice now we've given Bloody Jack the slip." He smiled, but those pretty eyes didn't warm. "I'm bettin' he ain't pleased."

Putting a hand to her head, Kate sagged against the wooden chest. "Bloody Jack?" she faltered. "Who's he?"

Tom stared. "Only the worst pirate in the Indies." His mouth twisted. "For all he calls hisself a privateer."

*Tap, tap, tap.* The sound seemed to come from above and to the left.

Their eyes met and Tom's brow creased. "Ship's carpenter," he said, but he didn't sound convinced.

The cat rose, stretching.

*Tap, tap, tap. Clatter.*

Her tail rose, a vertical flag. Stalking to the door, she raised a small paw and scratched. "Perrroww!"

"Aye, *Meroe*, you're right," said Tom. He held out a big hand. "Time to go, lass. And what *is* your name?"

"Kate." She backed away. "And I'm not going anywhere except home."

This time, Tom's grin was blinding. "Oh, but you are."

He swooped, big hands firm around her waist, and hoisted her over his shoulder, driving the breath out of her in the process. "Lead on, darlin'" he said, apparently to that damned cat.

Kate hauled in a breath and shrieked, pounding her fists against his broad back as he ducked out into a narrow passageway. He paid no attention whatsoever except to chuckle, banding a heavy arm over her thrashing legs. "Such language." He swatted her on the bottom and Kate choked. Shit, he had a heavy hand!

Neanderthal. Idiot. Bastard.

Nimbly, Tom climbed a short ladder, as if her weight was of no significance. They emerged into a light so bright Kate blinked. A chorus of catcalls and whistles broke out. Tom came to a halt.

Kate's guts turned over. Oh God— She clutched at his back, hanging on for dear life.

"Lookit thet arse," growled a rough voice. "Better'n any cabin boy."

"The first man to touch her feeds the fishes." She hadn't thought it possible for the genial Tom to sound so cold, so deadly.

The silence was absolute.

"*Understand?*"

The mumbles of assent ran together. "Aye, Sor." "Aye." "Right, Sor."

"Good."

Gently, Tom tipped her right side up, the wooden deck hot against the soles of her feet. "Go on, lass." He gave her a little push. "Across the quarter deck and follow Meroe."

Kate cast a single terrified glance at the circle of hungry eyes, the weather-beaten faces and grasping hands. On the periphery of her vision, she was aware of forests of ropes and canvas flapping, an aching blue sky and a few fluffy white clouds. A couple of gulls screeched overhead. With a gulp, she turned and darted across the deck, diving down the set of steps in front of her, as close to Meroe's elegant tail as she could get. Behind her, she heard Tom's firm tread. God, she was actually grateful for his presence! She shivered.

"Keep going," he said.

"Where are —?" She turned, halting him with her hands braced against his chest.

"The Captain's cabin. Yer mistress is takin' a bath." He gestured at the wooden door ahead of them on the right.

From behind it, Kate heard the sound of languid splashing, a low musical laugh. Was that a man's voice, murmuring low? The cat reared up against the door, elongating herself in the way of felines. She sniffed at the keyhole, whiskers fanning forward.

"Aye," said Tom. "We could, at that. What d' ye want to do, pretty Kate?" A pause and he went on thoughtfully. "'Tis a wicked thing to spy. And yon keyhole is so low a body'd have t' kneel right down."

### **What should Kate do?**

- A. Knock briskly and throw the door open wide.
- B. Insist Tom kneel down and look through the keyhole.
- C. Kneel down and peer through the keyhole herself.



### Chapter 3

## Nobility in the Raw

*The story so far:*

*Kate discovers that First Officer Tom Cavanagh is as stubborn as he is gorgeous. Not only that, he talks to his cat, the Lady Meroe. The elegant feline's named after the ship - or is the other way around? Willy-nilly, Kate finds herself poised at the keyhole of the Captain's door, with the most intriguing noises coming from within and Tom suggesting she take a look. . .*

Kate shot Tom a look that spoke volumes - with an addendum for the cat. "Don't be disgusting," she snapped.

*Make him do it,* hissed the Hormone Harlots.

Kate blinked, assaulted by the vision of big Tom Cavanagh down on his knees, the breeches tight as loving fingers over the taut curves of what was clearly a first-class ass.

A little squeal reached her ears from the other side of the door. The man laughed again, sultry and wicked. All the hair stood up on the back of Kate's neck.

Gritting her teeth, she grasped the door knob with one hand and rapped her knuckles in a brisk tattoo on the wooden panel in front of her.

Then she flung the door open wide.

She hadn't known what she expected, but it wasn't this.

Behind her, Tom whispered, "Holy Mary, Mother of God." Fabric rustled as he moved his arm. Had he crossed himself?

In a copper hipbath, a woman stood naked, her back to the door. She had a figure like a glowing alabaster venus, all lush, sweeping curves, from her smooth white shoulders to the mouth-watering flare between waist and buttock.

Kate was staring at a living breathing definition of the word *voluptuous*.

Her eye traveled the length of a sleek, rounded arm to the man stroking the woman's palm with wet sponge. He lifted dark, shining eyes and met Kate's fascinated gaze.

The Hormone Harlots gave a shrill, concerted shriek and fell silent.

Holy Mary Mother of God was right. Because this man was danger personified. He was lean and slim, perfectly proportioned, but as he straightened up, he reminded Kate of nothing so much as a black panther. No, no, that wasn't quite right...a snake, that was it, sinuous, strong and deadly. The impression was enhanced by the pallor of his skin and the contrasting blackness of his hair and eyes.

Pinning Kate with his dark, hypnotic stare, he pressed a leisurely kiss to the centre of the woman's palm. "She's here, my dear Duchess," he said softly. "And a tasty morsel she is indeed." Water glistened on his lips and a pointed tongue crept out to whisk it away. The Harlots went into a flutter of terrified delight, low in Kate's belly. The man transferred his attentions to a rosy fingertip, nibbling at it. "Now, why did you say you wanted her?"

The curtain of damp golden hair swung across the woman's back as she turned her head. Grasping the man's hand, she shuffled `round carefully in the tub.

Kate took such a rapid step backward that her shoulder blades smacked into the breathing wall of muscle that was First Officer Tom Cavanagh. He grunted and a warm heavy hand came to rest on her waist.

That long elegant nose, the dark eyes and pouty mouth, the self-assurance conferred by wealth and celebrity. She'd seen that face on a hundred magazine covers. Kate's head spun. "Paris?" she squeaked. "*Paris?*"

"What?" The woman's smooth brow puckered. "Have you been drinking, you wicked gel? We left from Southampton."

The voice that emerged from those blush-pink lips was thin and nasal, the accent solidly upper-crust, with cut-glass consonants. Kate stuck her little finger in her ear and wiggled it. A British accent. She must be going mad. Scratch that. She was certifiably insane. Right now, she must be tucked up safe and sound in her straitjacket in a nice comfy padded cell.

Oh well. Kate tried again. "No, no. For a minute I thought... You look a bit like someone I know, that's all. But I can see you're older and not as prett-- Uh." She ran down.

The woman drew herself up, breasts quivering, which had an interesting effect on the sinister man standing at her elbow. His black eyes gleamed and his lips drew back from his teeth, revealing pointed canines.

The blonde said, "I am Venetia, Duchess of Dorchester - as if you didn't know, you hussy. And what are you doing, standing there in your nightrail?"

Good lord, droplets of water glistened in the golden thatch between the woman's plump white thighs. "I'm wearing a damned sight more than you are," pointed Kate, her voice curt.

"*Ooooh!* You filthy trollop! You doxy! Comte, did you hear that?" The Duchess choked, a scarlet flush sweeping up from her quivering breasts to her hairline. And God, those breasts were perfect too, as round and high as if they'd been purpose-built for pleasure, crowned with tender strawberry nipples. She glared at Kate, breathing hard. "How dare you speak to me like that?"

Kate propped her hands on her hips. "Why not? It's a free country."

*Tap, tap, tap.* It sounded almost gleeful. *Up yours, Rossetti,* though Kate viciously. Surreptitiously, she gave the ceiling the finger.

A big warm hand fell on her shoulder and Tom's breath stirred her hair. "Tain't nothin' free about bein' a lady's maid."

"A *what?*" Kate twisted to stare up into his pretty blue eyes. "But I'm not a—"

*Tap, tap, tap. CLATTER!* Uh-oh. Perhaps the finger had been a mistake.

"Don't argue, lass," said Tom.

"But--"

A cool fingertip skimmed over the side of her neck. When Kate jerked around, her nose grazed the pit of the dark man's throat. Inadvertently, she inhaled and her head reeled with the exotic spicy smell coming off his skin.

"It's foolish to anger her, my dear," he murmured, and for a moment, Kate wasn't sure who he meant. Instinctively, she shot a glance toward the roof of the cabin, but all was quiet.

When she shrank back, pressing into Tom's massive chest, the corners of the other man's elegant mouth turned up. "Ah," he said, "Finally some discretion. Very wise, little one." He had the faintest trace of an accent, something central European. He glanced over his shoulder at the woman in the tub, still interestingly pink with fury. "I'd be delighted to switch her for you, Your Grace. There's the sweetest little cat o' nine tails packed away in my bag, made of hardened velvet."

The Duchess stiffened and her nipples peaked, Kate saw them. "Yes!" Then she frowned, rubbing her hands up and down her arms with a theatrical shiver. "No. I'm cold." She pouted. "I need a towel."

"W-who," stammered Kate, struggling to maintain her composure. "Who are you?"

The man took a step back and bowed, taking Kate's hand in both of his. "I am the Comte de Nothos." When he raised it to his lips, he didn't kiss it as she expected. Instead, he slipped her index finger into his warm mouth and nipped the end with sharp teeth. The tingle shot straight up Kate's arm and down her spine. Then he licked it better, those sly, beautiful eyes fixed on her face, and the tingle escalated to a wet surge that swept south to settle between her legs.

Kate gurgled and the Duchess shrilled, "A *towel*, I need a *towel!* Are you deaf, Comte?"

The Comte said only, "Get it, Tom." He waved a negligent hand and Tom eased away from Kate to collect the towel sitting on the top of a wooden chest. Wrapping it around the blonde's shoulders, he loomed over her like a solicitous mountain, making crooning noises in the back of his throat.

Honestly! Men!

Kate caught the slitted gaze of Lady Meroe the cat and could have sworn they'd just had the identical thought. She turned back to the Comte, breathing carefully through her mouth so as not inhale any more of his decadently delicious scent. "I thought you were the Captain," she said.

"No." The Comte smiled like a dark angel. "Just a humble passenger, like the dear Duchess here."

Good God, that accent! Where had Rossetti got him? The Transylvanian office of Central Casting?

"Cap'n Meredith lent Her Grace his cabin for her bath," added Tom, stroking industriously with the towel, his eyes very bright, while the Duchess damn near purred with pleasure, the tart.

The ship creaked, water hissing past the hull. The floor tilted slightly. "Ah," said Tom, his voice a little muffled as he bent to rub the back of soft, white thighs. "Captain's bringin' us about. We'll anchor in Port Royal tomorrow, safe and sound." He grinned, absently patting the curve of a creamy buttock. "Bloody Jack can go whistle down the wind, the bast--"

"Sail ho!" Bare, calloused feet pattered overhead. "It flies the Jolly Roger!" An agonising pause. "Cap'n, it's...it's *The Brazen Hussy*. God save us, it's Bloody Jack!"

The Duchess screamed like she'd backed onto a red hot poker and Tom growled, "Shit!" Galvanised into action, he dragged the blonde out of the bath and thrust her into Kate's reluctant arms. "You two," he ordered. "Come with me and I'll put you somewhere safe."

"My dear Tom, always so...ah...gallant," purred the Comte. "I do not fear this Bloody Jack. Let me hide the women." He gazed up at the First Officer from beneath a forest of inky lashes. "You go do your duty."

Tom wavered, obviously torn.

"Perrrowt!" Something nipped Kate on the ankle. Meroe stalked past her to the door, tail held aloft. There she stopped and glanced over her furry shoulder. "Merrowow!" she said. "Meeeee!"

The ship reverberated to long metallic rumbles, one after the other. "They're running the guns out," said Tom grimly.

Clutching her towel with one hand, the Duchess squealed and grabbed Kate's arm with the other. "Oh my God," she babbled. "Save me, save me. Oh God, pirates. Ravening, ravishing, bloodthirsty. . ." She staggered where she stood.

"C'mon, Kate," snapped Tom. "Make a decision. Who will you go with?"

**Who should Kate choose?** (And yes, Venetia, the Duchess of Dorchester, has to go along too.)

- A. Tom Cavanagh, First Officer
- B. The Comte de Nothos
- C. Lady Meroe, the cat



## Chapter 4 Spoilt for Choice

*The Story so far:*

*Kate discovers she's shipped on the Lady Meroe as maidservant to Venetia, Duchess of Devonshire. The Duchess is bathing, with the assistance of the deliciously mysterious Comte de Nothos, when the ship is attacked by pirates. Oh no! Where to hide?*

Note: For the first time, we had a tied vote! Tom and Meroe, the cat.

Tom slapped the Duchess on her towelled rump. "C'mon, yer Grace," he growled. "Move yer pretty arse."

The Comte shot him a reproachful look. "Respect the peerage, my dear Tom," he murmured. "Especially its peerless rear end."

Tom's cheeks went ruddy beneath the beard, but just as he opened his mouth, the deck tilted beneath their feet and a long rolling boom filled the cabin with reverberations. But there was no crash of splintering timbers, no screaming, just a god almighty splash.

"The warning shot." Tom's face was grim. "He always does that, the bastard. Then he'll just come about and shoot the bejesus out of the sails with grapeshot. After that, he'll board at his bloody leisure."

"But that...that's outrageous," spluttered the Duchess, pink with indignation and fright above the towel.

Tom raised a brow. "Ye'd rather he rake us below the waterline?" He turned to Kate. "Make up yer bloody mind, lass. Time's a-wastin'!"

The ship lurched, recoiling from a deafening series of explosions. Tom didn't so much as twitch. "The port guns," he said. "Cap'n's fightin' back. Not a good idea, irritating Jack like that."

"Perrowwwt!" Meroe the cat nipped Kate on the ankle. When Tom swung the door open, she stalked through, whiskers bristling.

"Aye, sweetheart," rumbled the First Officer, "lead on, we're right on your pretty tail."

The cat moved confidently through the narrow passageways, bounding gracefully down the ladder that led to the deck below. Kate towed the protesting Duchess by the hand, Tom bringing up the rear. The Comte padded along behind them, his presence

making the back of Kate's neck prickle, even with the powerful distraction of the cannon fire.

"I will leave you here." The Comte paused, one long-fingered hand resting against a bulkhead. The other toyed with the hilt of the wicked rapier at his belt. "I am needed above." He cocked his head, listening to the shouting, the pad of bare calloused feet, the rumble of the guns. "He is closer, this Bloody Jack. I can feel it."

A sword? Kate blinked. Where had that come from?

*Scratch, scratch. Rustle. Scratch.*

It came from above, to the left. Oh. Rossetti. Of course. Kate frowned. "What happened to *tap, tap, tap?*" she said before she thought. Lord, they'd think she was mad. She tugged at her hair. Given "they" had to be figments of her imagination, that wasn't too far off beam.

Her eyes met the dark, faintly mocking gaze of the Comte. "Pen and paper," he murmured.

Tom came to a halt at the small dark doorway. "Carpenter's store," he rumbled. "I agree, Meroe love. Not a bad choice at all. In ye go then, ladies." He gestured.

The Duchess dived past Kate, strongly reminiscent of a small beady-eyed animal in search of a burrow, but Kate balked. Swallowing, she stared at the Comte, drowning in his dark eyes. "How – ?" she gasped. "How do you know?"

Giving a rueful shrug, he spread his hands.

*Ah*, sighed the Hormone Harlots in a tone suitable for languishing on a chaise lounge. *How charming he is.*

*Shaddup*, snarled Kate. *You two, you get me into so much tr –*

The Comte took a single smooth step forward and slid a hand under Kate's hair. His lips came down on hers in an unhurried kiss. It was almost chaste, close-mouthed and circumspect, but she hung in his grasp, and her brain unhitched itself and slunk quietly away.

"Don't ask," he purred against her mouth. "If you make her spill her tea, she'll be angry." His pointed tongue flicked over her lower lip and then he was gone, running lightly up the ladder.

Kate swayed and Tom picked her up bodily and tossed her into the storeroom. "You'll be as safe there as anywhere," he said. He pressed his mouth to Kate's still tingling lips. "Meroe love, you take care." The door slammed and she heard his rapid footsteps receding.

*Tea?* The Rossetti woman was swilling tea while she was trapped in tiny, fusty, dark space with a naked Duchess and a supercilious cat? And some filthy low-life called Bloody Jack was attacking the ship? Not bloody likely!

But before she could move, the tenor of the shouts coming from above changed. First, they became louder, more desperate, then they grew higher, more shrill, cutting off more quickly. The rolling booms died away and the *Lady Meroe* jerked hard, her



timbers shuddering. A pause, and the yelling started again, hoarse with fear and fury. But this time, it was accompanied by the clash of metal.

Kate's guts tightened, quivering. Meroe the cat seated herself on the lid of a big barrel, her tail tucked neatly around her dainty paws. Needing the comfort, Kate dropped her palm to the elegant, silky head, a little surprised that Meroe permitted the intimacy at all.

God, hand-to-hand fighting. Bloody Jack had boarded the *Lady Meroe*.

Behind Kate, the Duchess was breathing like an asthmatic steam engine. In the half-light of the storeroom, all Kate could see was a flashing curve of pale backside as the other woman crouched behind a crate stencilled with the legend, *Buttersby's Best Buttered Buns*.

Her heart flapping about in her chest, Kate eased the door open a crack and stuck her head out. The noises had died away to the occasional bellowed curse. A masculine voice shouted a string of orders, liberally interspersed with expletives. She winced. Such a beautiful, deep, lilting voice to use such ugly words.

The butterflies in her stomach donned hobnail boots and started up a brisk highland fling. Someone was down to the mopping up operation. Question was – who?

Kate thought about all those romance novels she'd thrown against the wall. Was she Too Stupid To Live? She glanced down. She appeared to be wearing a nightie, but at least it wasn't a baby doll. Thank you, God. And just creeping out for a quick peek wasn't the same as rushing down to the Crypt at the stroke of midnight, was it?

Oh shit, she was dying to know!

With the utmost caution, she slipped out into the passageway.

"Where are you going?" quavered the Duchess.

"To see," replied Kate, without turning her head.

"No, no, you stupid gel! Come back here, I –"

Quietly, Kate pulled the door shut behind her, the Lady Meroe slipping out just before it closed on her tail. Together, they crept up the narrow ladder and peeped out at the deck.

Holy shit! Kate stuffed her knuckles into her mouth, her eyes wide.

The Meroe's crew had been herded into a huddled, furious mass towards the stern. She recognized some of the faces, delighted to see that the one who'd jeered at her the loudest was holding his head and groaning. Served him right, the bastard.

Her gaze traveled to the pirates standing over them, cutlasses in hand, and she goggled, her jaw going slack.

God yes, they were villainous, she hadn't expected anything different. She'd seen all the pirate movies, she knew the type. Dirty, sweaty, disheveled, bare-chested, their calloused feet gripping the deck. All that, yes. A perfectly villainous crew.

With the emphasis on *perfect*.

Bloody Jack's men, were, without exception, young, strong and built. Kate's brain reeled. A cross between a Manpower calendar and Pirates of the Caribbean. Her awed gaze skittered over a huge black man cradling a blunderbuss as if it was a child's toy. He could have been an African prince. Next to him was a compact blond with a tail of hair hanging down over his tanned back, so mouth-watering, she had to swallow before the drool trickled over her chin. And further on, a dark brooding individual with "bad boy" written all over him. He looked like he'd misplaced his Harley.

Geez, and that only took her up to March. Jack's pirates went all the way to December.

The Hormone Harlots licked their lips. *That Rossetti's got a damn good eye*, whispered one.

*Yeah, let's forgive her*, agreed the other.

*Shaddup*, snarled Kate, pressing her thighs together and crossing her arms over her tingling nipples.

The cat slipped out from behind her and trotted across the deck, heading for a tight knot of men standing near the helm. "*Perrrowt!*" she called imperiously. And they turned.

Kate was only peripherally aware of an older man, leaning on Tom Cavanagh's shoulder, Tom standing stiffly with his hands tied and a face like a thundercloud. She barely registered the Comte, slouching at his ease, though his wrists were bound too.

All her attention was focused on the man who stepped forward, shoving a pistol into his waistband, so he could hold his hands out in welcome. "Meroe!" he exclaimed in that chocolatey baritone. "Darlin'." The cat leaped gracefully into his arms and rubbed herself luxuriously under his chin, purring like a hive of bees.

Tom fell back a pace, going pale, then red beneath the beard. His mouth worked, but no sound came out.

Kate's brain gibbered. Him, it was *him*. From the book, the corporate pirate. This man had a short, trimmed beard and an emerald dangling from one earlobe, but it had to be, she knew she wasn't mistaken. Jack Cavanagh was Bloody Jack. His hair swung around his shoulders in a disheveled mass, but it had the auburn gleam she remembered from his cover photo. The shirt hung in rags from his shoulders, there was a smear of blood on his cheek, sweat gleamed on his hard chest. But power streamed off him, so apparent there could be no doubt who was captain, commander. She'd never seen a man so effortlessly dominant. Every other male there faded away in comparison.



All the breath whistled out of her. Jack would understand, he'd know how to get her back to the real world. The one with no excitement in it.

Meroe twisted in Jack's arms and stared directly at Kate, her gold-green eyes slitted. "Merrrow," she remarked.

"Ah." Jack let the cat spring down to the deck. "What have we here?" He sauntered forward, all muscular feline grace.

Kate tried to shrink back, but he'd hooked her with his gaze. Resolutely, she shook her head to clear it. *You're an Attorney at Law*, she reminded herself. *You can stand up to any man.*" But she couldn't seem to look away, no matter how hard she tried.

A warm, long-fingered hand grasped her wrist and drew her out of the shadows. Deep voices rumbled in the background, hungry masculine sounds, but Kate ignored them.

She stared up into Bloody Jack's eyes, drowning. "Take me home," she demanded. But it came out more like a whispered plea than an order.

Jack's teeth gleamed as he smiled, a grin full of genuine amusement. "Aye, I think I will at that."

A tiger, it came to her as Jack slid an arm around her waist and walked her over to his men, tucked securely against his side. He had tiger eyes, shot-gold hazel, intent and predatory. Like a big cat, he was self-contained, easy, poised to unleash his power at any moment.

"Well now, lads," he murmured. "Here's a pretty prize." He tilted Kate's chin with one knuckle and she swore at him. The tiger eyes danced. "And not in the common way either. I'm open to suggestion. What should we do with her?" He held up a hand, grinning. "Apart from the obvious."

"Jack." The black man scratched his head, the slabs of muscle in his chest moving beautifully under the dark skin.

"Aye, Duka."

Kate tensed. The top of her head wouldn't reach the level of the gold rings in those tight black nipples. A man that size would kill her.

*Yeah, but what a way to go*, whispered the Harlots.

"She's such a little bit of a thing. Give her to Peter first." He nodded at the short blond with the pony tail. For the first time, Kate noticed he was wearing gold-rimmed spectacles. They gave him a sexy intellectual air.

He smiled shyly, his blue eyes brightening. "Aye, I'd like that."

Jack laughed. "Of course you would. I say we hold an auction. Highest bidder, in goods or services."

Kate's nerve snapped. "For chrissake," she snarled, "Will you stop it! I am not an object for sale!"

Jack grasped her shoulders and drew her up to her tiptoes. "No, you're not," he said seriously, the beguiling lilt very evident. He brushed his lips over her jaw in the lightest of caresses. "But those pretty tits are hard and you're wet," he whispered, his breath puffing warm against her ear. "I can smell you. This is what you want, darlin'."

"Let her choose." Tom stepped forward, his lip curling. "If ye're men enough." He hauled in a breath. "Let her choose and ye can do with me as you will."

"Now that's what I call an offer." The Comte de Nothos smiled easily, showing the pointed canines.

**What should Jack do?**

- A. Give Kate to Peter, as Duka suggests
- B. Hold an auction, highest bidder in either goods or services
- C. Take Tom up on his offer to let the pirates do with him as they will if they'll let Kate choose



## Chapter 5

### Rousing Challenges

*The story so far:*

*Bloody Jack and his crew of hunky pirates capture the \*Lady Meroe\*. Kate is amazed to discover that Bloody Jack is none other than Jack Cavanagh, modern corporate raider. Jack is about to put Kate up for auction when Tom offers to sacrifice himself if the pirates will let Kate choose her own fate.*

The silence was so profound Kate could hear the water rushing along the sides of the ship, a distant gentle booming that might have been surf.

The *Meroe's* First Officer cast the Comte de Nothos a look of terrible scorn. "Aye well, you would think it a good offer, ye faggot."

"Ah, but so do I," said Bloody Jack gently. "And I am not a faggot. Not precisely."

The pirates laughed, every last one of them, the giant Duka's amusement rumbling along beneath all the others.

"So then, Tom," said Jack. "You'll take it like a man - whatever it is - if I allow Kate here to choose her own fate? Do I have the right of it?"

Tom's jaw bunched. "Aye."

Handing Kate into the eager arms of blond Peter, Jack sauntered over to face Tom, in no way diminished because he had to look up an inch or so to do it. Exquisitely slowly, he reached out and gripped the big man's elbow, running his hand up over Tom's biceps to his shoulder. "Let us seal the bargain."

Tom backed up until he hit the rail, his blue eyes very wide, his cheeks ruddy, but Jack kept coming, closer and closer. Kate's knees shook so badly, if it hadn't been for Peter's comforting grip, she would have slipped to the deck. Despite the light breeze that lifted her curls from her sweaty cheeks, the air felt so thick she couldn't breathe.

*Will ya look at that?* shrilled the Hormone Harlots. *He's going to, going to... Oooh!*

Jack's elegant smiling mouth hovered a breath away from Tom's, those tiger eyes deliciously predatory. Tom's cheeks were still scarlet beneath the beard, but his lashes swept down and he swallowed hard, his lips parting. The Hormone Harlots gave Kate's clit a tweak that nearly felled her there and then.

The Comte said smoothly, "You should give him to the Duchess."

Jack froze.

Then he turned, just his head. "Who?"

"Why, you slimy –" spluttered Kate, completely incensed. She wouldn't think about why she was so angry, she absolutely wouldn't.

"Sshh, sweetie." Peter nuzzled her cheek.

The Comte's smile broadened. He leaned against the mast, completely at ease despite the bound hands. "There's a naked Duchess below," he murmured. "And she'll know exactly what to do with Tom here." The point of his tongue flicked over his lips. "As do I."

"I have no doubt," said Jack dryly.

Tom came off the rail with a roar, incandescent with fury. Kate wasn't sure which man he intended to dismember with his teeth, but the Comte was nearest.

Jack didn't stir. "Duka."

The huge black man took a single step and suddenly, he and Tom were chest to chest and eye to eye. Duka clamped ham-like hands on Tom's shoulders. The sun gleamed off the hard, beautiful shape of his shaven head. "Easy," he said in a soothing rumble, "easy, man."

When Tom growled a response, Duka laid a thick finger lightly against his lips. "Shush now."

Much to Kate's surprise, Tom subsided, his chest heaving with agitation and fury. When Duka stepped back, her gaze dropped and she gasped. The Harlots could only gurggle, rendered incoherent. With his hands bound behind his back, there was no way he could hide the rude bulge in his breeches. Lord, his face was so red. Distractedly, Kate hoped he was too young for a heart attack.

"Merrowowow!" announced Meroe the cat, stalking back to the hatch.

"Traitor!" hissed Kate.

Meroe threw her a look that said, \*Sentimental fool!\*

"In the carpenter's store," remarked the Comte helpfully.

Jack retrieved Kate from Peter and drew her into his side. She couldn't believe how comfortable it felt, Jack's firm, muscled torso pressed all against hers. Kate stiffened her spine and eased away.

"Duka." Jack indicated the hatch with his chin, simultaneously stepping behind Kate so that his chest was sealed to her back, her head nestled below his chin. As Duka disappeared down the hatch, moving like a big black panther, Jack nuzzled Kate's hair. "What do you like, pretty one?" he murmured. "This?" One hand tilted her chin to the side and warm lips nibbled a trail from her ear to her shoulder.

It was extraordinary. Everywhere his mouth touched, his silky beard brushed, sparks like tiny fireworks sizzled under Kate's skin. They swept down her spine in a brain-melting wave of sensation. She gasped for breath, fighting not to whimper, not to reveal her pleasure.

"Promising," chuckled a deep voice in her ear. "Very promising."

Bastard! Beautiful, patronizing bastard!

Kate drew her elbow back and rammed it into his gut as hard as she could, simultaneously stamping on his instep with her bare foot.

The only response was a huff of laughing breath. "You all right, sweetheart?"

Growling, Kate hopped on one foot. Hell, that hurt! "No," she snarled. "I'm not all right." *Idiot!*

Bloody Jack went very still.

Shit, shit, shit! She'd said it aloud.

"Kate." He stepped around to face her, long fingers cupping her shoulders. Gravely, he stared into her face, studying every feature, one by one. The emerald in his ear sparkled a deep lambent green against the auburn of his hair. His gold-shot eyes gleamed and his elegant mouth tipped up at the corners.



*Tiger, tiger, burning bright*, whispered one of the Hormone Harlots, her voice thin with awe.

*In the forests of the night*, chimed in her sister.

*Shaddup*. Kate's brain seemed to have turned to oatmeal porridge, all creamy - and thick. *I can't think... Ohgod,ohgod,ohgod, what have I done?*

"Do you challenge me, pretty Kate?" asked Jack mildly.

Before she could rearrange her scrambled thoughts, Peter touched her arm. "Careful," he whispered in her ear, his breath very warm.

And from over her head, she heard it again. *Tap, tap, tap*. The Rossetti woman.

No one told Kate O'Reilly what to do, *no one*. She could run her own life just fine, she'd been doing it forever. The wave of fury burned up her spine and took control of her mouth. She drew herself up and glared into those tiger eyes. "I demand to go home," she said, clipping out the words. She gestured at the sunny deck, at Jack's calendar of beautiful pirates, a dozen of them. "This is ridiculous." She narrowed her eyes at Jack, the look opposing counsel had learned to dread. "*You are ridiculous.*"

Jack said nothing, only ran a thoughtful forefinger over her eyebrow. When Kate jerked away, he smiled—a slow-dawning, genuine smile of

pleasure. It lightened his face, made him look like a mischievous boy. Kate could no more have looked away than she could have sprouted wings and flown to the top of the mast.

"Done," he said. He took her hand in his and shook it solemnly. Then he lifted it to his lips, turned it over and pressed a kiss into her palm. Kate's head spun with the oddest mix of emotions - excitement, irritation, reluctant admiration, apprehension - all underpinned with a helpless surge of attraction. She gritted her teeth.

*Now you've done it, chorused the Harlots. Goody!*

Tom took a step forward. "Jack," he growled. "You promised. Is this how you keep your word?"

Jack raised a cool brow. "I said she could choose her own fate," he said. "And she has. Our bargain stands. Don't question me again, Tom."

He raised his voice, addressing the *Lady Meroe's* crew. "What do ye want, lads? I've got an old long boat, a compass and provisions if ye want to take your chances. Or ye can sign on with me. Your choice."

From below decks, came a shrill scream. Jack's lips twitched, but he made no comment. He waited tranquilly while the men sorted themselves out, half of them electing to go with Captain Meredith in the long boat, the others stepping up to blond Peter to give their names. His tongue peeping out with concentration, he rested his papers on a barrel, pen scratching busily.

The screams increased in volume. And frequency. Jack shot a glance at the brooding bad boy type, the one Kate had tagged for March in her Pirate Calendar. "Harley, you're in command of our prize. Get your crew sorted and sail the *Meroe* to the Isle."

*Harley?* God, and he'd be perfect in leathers with a big bike rumbling between his thighs. It was more than a little disturbing to think she and the crazy Rossetti were on the same wavelength.

"Aye, Jack." Harley's dark eyes flashed with pride. The he glanced across the deck and a blinding grin crossed his tanned face.

Duka was emerging from the hatch, the Duchess slung over one shoulder, all pink kicking legs and streaming blonde locks. She was uttering short breathy screams, her fists beating a futile tattoo against his broad mahogany back. "Put me down," she gasped. "Ye great black brute. Put me down!"

Duka just smiled, his teeth gleaming. One big hand was spread across her thrashing thighs, her cushiony bottom exposed for all to view, together with a plump cleft furred lightly with golden hair. A natural blonde. Kate cringed in sympathy.

Placidly, the big man slid the furious Duchess down the front of his muscular chest, steadying her until her bare feet hit the deck. At least she wasn't completely naked anymore. Duka had given her the vest he'd been wearing and now she was standing, the hem of it brushed her thighs.



Not that she appeared to be grateful. Her pretty face red with rage, she waded into him with her fists, her breasts wobbling delightfully under the vest. "You...you...*animal!*" she shrieked, while Duka stood, looking amused.

After a few minutes of breathless abuse, he captured her wrists in one big hand. "Sshh," he rumbled. "What's yer name, sweet?"

"How dare you!" The Duchess lunged up with her knee, but Duka swayed back out of reach.

"Tsk, tsks," he said, shaking his head in sorrow, still smiling.

Jack stepped forward, his mouth a grim line. "Answer the question."

"Go to hell," snarled the Duchess. "And take this pig with you."

"This," purred the Comte, "is Venetia, Duchess of Dorchester. At your service." His smile was full of pointed teeth. "So to speak."

"Indeed." Jack's tone was arctic. Kate shivered. "She needs a lesson in manners."

"Manners?" spluttered the Duchess. She raked Duka up and down with a scorching glance. "The Dorchesters were innkeepers to William the Conqueror. You're not fit to muck out my stable, ye great black--"

"Enough!" Jack propped his hands on his hips. "Insult Duka and you insult me. He's my First Mate and second-in-command. Worth a dozen of a spoiled bitch like you."

"Oh, but Jack--" Duka shifted uneasily. "Don't--"

"I won't have it, Duka." Jack pinned the big man with his tigerish gaze. "You were always a sucker for a pretty face, but I'm not so forgiving. First the punishment, then I'll give her to you. If you still want her, that is."

Duka stroked the Duchess's fair cheek and she tried to bite him. "She's awful sweet," he said. "Aye, I'll still want her."

"I have a cat o' nine tails in my bag," offered the Comte.

"*What?*" Duka took a threatening step toward him and the Comte dodged behind the mast.

"A mere toy," he added hastily. "Made of hardened velvet."

"Hmm." Jack stroked his beard with one hand, gathering Kate up again with the other. "What would be best? Something poetic and pleasurable?"

Which option should Jack choose?

- A. whipping from Duka, using the Comte's cat o' nine tails,
- B. A spanking from Duka
- C. A spanking from Jack