

# A PIRATE'S HEART

*by*

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# PART ONE

## THE PIRATE, 1715

Pirate captains were often vicious and sadistic villains whose careers rarely lasted more than two or three years. They were more likely to drown in a storm or suffer death by hanging than they were to live out their days in luxury on the riches they had plundered.

—David Cordingly, *Under the Black Flag*

## CHAPTER ONE

*1715, somewhere in the West Indies*

Captain Thomasina Farris stood on the quarterdeck of the *Moon Shadow*, widening her stance as the ship rolled beneath her. While a pirate's life was short and dangerous and Tommy longed to escape it, when the *Moon Shadow's* taut lines hummed, her sails snapped, and the waves beat pleasantly against the hull, Tommy didn't care, easily putting aside her burdens.

The *Moon Shadow* was a three-masted merchant ship Tommy'd stolen from a drunken captain, and it could handle both storm and battle surprisingly well for such a large ship. Tommy lifted her face to the sun, soaking up the moist, salty air, the gulls wheeling and calling overhead, the smell of tar and working men, the feel of the wind against her skin. When the tip of her braid whipped behind her like a tail, she draped it forward over her shoulder. Tommy's thigh-length hair, jet black save one shocking streak of pure white, terrified more sailors in the West Indies than the skull and crossbones.

Perched up in *Moon Shadow's* crow's nest, fourteen-year-old Billy Flood had his arms wrapped around the mast, singing some bawdy tune as he watched for sails. The poor pup was madly in love with Tommy, which was why she refused to let him be her cabin boy. After her cabin boy had been killed by a cannonball last year, she'd struggled alone with her hair but refused to cut it since it was as powerful a weapon as her pistol or cutlass. Billy had begged for the job, but since he already

dogged her heels all over the ship, she didn't need his moony eyes in her cabin as well.

Tommy's quartermaster and oldest friend, Ezekiel Sawkins, stood next to a gunner's mate on the forecastle and bawled him out for not doing a proper job of tying down a gun. Pirate ships not only kept guns below deck, with ports cut in the hull for running out the guns, but had guns mounted all along the upper deck to give them every advantage in a battle. Sawkins's already tanned skin glowed hot with anger as he cuffed the boy and showed him the proper way to tie down a gun so it didn't roll around deck and kill someone.

One deck down in the galley, Cookie banged pots and pans, and from the forward hatch beyond him came lighthearted insults from the crew's quarters as two men argued over a bet. She'd get involved only if it came to blows. Three men pounded oakum into gaps in the deck planking, their heavy mallets a chorus of reassuring thuds. Hatley stood mid-deck with the log line measuring their speed, counting the knots as they slipped over the rail. "Six knots," he called. These were the sounds of her world, and God help her, she loved them. She loved the ship, she loved the men, she loved the sea. It was the killing that'd begun wearing her down. That, and this blasted sadness hanging over her like a tropical thundercloud.

Below Tommy, the mid-deck hand pump squeaked as two men worked it. The *Moon Shadow* took on too much water without those damned pumps. Tommy lived day and night knowing the sea was reaching its fingers through the cracks in the hull, seeking to drown the ship and all one hundred souls aboard. Two other ships sailed in her fleet, so one strong storm and a heavy dose of bad luck could claim three ships and three hundred lives.

Sawkins appeared at her side, a compact man nearly thirty years old, and together they soaked up the sounds of their ship. "Noisy ship, ain't she?" Sawkins said.

"Noisy as a Newcastle whore," Tommy replied, and Sawkins laughed so hard he choked. He was a good man, and had been with Tommy since the beginning. When she'd formed up her first band of men, she'd been relieved when they'd voted Sawkins as quartermaster. You needed a fair man to be in charge of dividing up the spoils and running the ship, and there was none fairer or more honest than Sawkins.

Tommy's job on the pirate ship was navigation—without her they'd be lost since none of the crew could do the mathematics required. Her role as captain included inspiring her men, scaring them if necessary, and leading them in battle. Sawkins did the rest.

"Crikey, it's a sail!" Billy cried from fifty feet above the deck. Young Billy was almost always the first to sight a sail skimming the horizon. For pirates, a new sail was either a potential victim or a potential threat.

At his shout, Tommy's heart sped up a knot or two. "All hands make sail!" she cried. The men sprang into action, scrambling up rigging to unfurl the highest sails. Tommy raised the signal flags to her other two ships, letting them know she'd sighted a prize. The *Tiger Eye* and the *Windy Queen* followed to help as needed, but the plunder was shared three ways.

"Mr. Sawkins, let's be doing this quiet-like, shall we? No use giving the poor labbernecks a fright until we be right on their arses."

"Aye, Captain." Sawkins barked a command, and although excitement pulsed through the men, the pounding and singing and arguing stopped as they squared the ship for battle.

They followed the ship at a safe distance until Tommy could see that the small French sloop was cut for only six guns, hardly a match for the *Moon Shadow's* twenty-four nine-pounders. Tommy moved quietly to mid-deck. Captains on pirate ships were elected, and all the men shared in the decisions about where to go and which prizes to pursue. "Listen here, you unhung rascals, there be a sloop ahead. It's floating low in the water, so it be loaded with goods, and an easy prize. What say you?"

The men raised fists in assent but kept silent.

Tommy grinned. "Well, then, methinks you'd better let the French dunderheads know we're here."

The war whoops began, and men streamed up from below to line the decks, pumped for a fight. Tommy ordered more sails raised, and soon the *Moon Shadow* had closed the distance to her prey to a mere one hundred yards. Gun ports slammed open and the deck rumbled as the *Shadow's* guns were run out on the lower deck. Men began loading the guns, and the closer they drew to the sloop, the louder Tommy's crew yelled bloodcurdling promises of horrid tortures. Cookie stood near the

hatchway banging two pans together. Hatley stood on the forecastle blowing on that infernal bagpipe. He couldn't play a note, which made him all the more effective.

Winching at the shrill sound, Tommy moved past Hatley to the bow and rested one foot on the gunwale, two loaded pistols jammed into her sash. A sailor undid Tommy's braid so the black hair billowed out behind her like a velvety sail. Captured sailors often said that when they looked back at the *Moon Shadow* pursuing them and saw Tommy standing in the bow, it was as if the Devil's own shadow bore down upon them.

Even in the heat of the chase, Tommy registered that her ship was responding with the sluggishness she dreaded. After months at sea, the *Moon Shadow's* hull had once again become encrusted with speed-killing barnacles and other marine life, not to mention the planks that had pulled away from each other to let the seawater in. After this chase, there was naught to be done but find a quiet cove and careen the ship for maintenance.

The captain of the French sloop couldn't have missed their black-and-white flag, which declared Tommy'd give quarter if her prey yielded, but the fool took flight. The French crew yelled in fright as their captain shouted orders.

Sawkins handed Tommy her spying glass, a long monstrosity they had taken from a prize three years earlier. Through it she could see the French crew pointing toward the *Moon Shadow*, waving their hands to mimic her hair. Fear creased their sunburned faces, but the French captain sadly thought he could outrun them.

Sighing, Tommy returned the spyglass. "Sawkins, my musket."

"Aye, Captain. By my blood, these sacks of entrails'll be regretting they've run."

Tommy nodded. Nine times out of ten, captains chased by pirates surrendered in fear of the black pirate flag, the decks of pirate ships packed with bloodthirsty men howling like animals, and pirates' reputation for torture. One out of ten, however, thought he could outrun Tommy. He quickly learned how difficult it was to stay upright on a deck slick with his own blood.

The *Moon Shadow* drew up close behind the sloop but stayed out of her line of fire. Tommy didn't want to injure the ship with her cannon; some pirates believed in blasting holes in the ships they pursued, but

Tommy didn't unless necessary. While her men were hungry for a fight, she wasn't, so she took aim, noting the rhythm of the ship as it rose and fell under her feet, then she shot the poor helmsman of the French sloop.

The helmsman's death brought shouts and confusion on the sloop. The French captain ordered another man to the helm, but all hands refused, knowing Tommy would continue to shoot whoever stood at the wheel. Finally, the captain marched another poor devil there only by pressing a pistol to his back.

Shaking her head, Tommy accepted the reloaded musket from Sawkins and once again took aim. She considered shooting the new helmsman, then realized there was a better way to end this ridiculous flight. She shifted her aim slightly and shot a goodly-sized hole in the captain's back. The helmsman dropped as well and crawled behind the mizzenmast.

Within thirty seconds, the French crew struck its colors, lowered its sails, and came about. Sawkins brought the *Moon Shadow* alongside the sloop and put out the longboat so they could row over and board their new prize.

The French ship's first mate bowed deeply as Tommy stepped onto the deck, apologizing in halting English for his captain's folly. Sawkins shouted orders, as it was his job to record what they took so it could be split among the crew later. The gunner Coxon and his men collected weapons and discussed how to best pass the captured ship's six cannons over to the *Moon Shadow*, bringing her total guns to thirty. Sawkins reminded Coxon that Billy had earned the best pistol they found.

"That drooling puppy has more pistols than the Royal Navy," the gunner growled, but he would comply since the punishment for cheating another pirate was death. Ten of the French sailors decided to join the pirates, so Hatley took them back to the *Moon Shadow* to hear and sign the Articles.

As her men worked, the thrill of the chase still pounded through Tommy, an energy that didn't cease with the capture, so she climbed five feet into the rigging and looked out over the French crew, huddled around the mainmast.

Upon boarding a new prize, while Tommy's crew took stock of the provisions and booty on board, she took stock of the men and chose among them the most handsome, or at least the one with the most teeth,

and took that man back into the captain's cabin. She'd learned, through unhappy experience, that intimacies with her own crew only led to jealousies, discipline problems, and lovesick sailors.

This prize was no different than others, so to the amused and lewd shouts of her men, Tommy chose a tall, slender Frenchie with freckles who blushed violently, obviously in possession of enough English to know her intent. She pulled the man into the captain's cabin and put her pistol down on the bunk, motioning for the man to do the same. "Don't be trying anything sudden, or I'll be blasting your head off." He nodded, and she reached for him. None of the men she'd chosen had ever resisted, and the Frenchie was no different.

A few minutes later, Tommy rearranged her clothing and returned on deck, wondering why the act held less pleasure each time she performed it.

"Here be the plunder, Captain," Sawkins said, waving his arms toward the material her men had begun moving to the *Moon Shadow*: two mizzenmasts, a mainsail, extra rigging, two canoes, about a hundred bags of flour, beans, and peas, five barrels of sweetmeats, a goodly amount of marmalade, dried beef, and a barrel of seal oil. That was it. No gold or silver or medicines. Or books. Tommy loved books. "Sorry, Captain," Sawkins said. "The sloop's riding so low because its holds are fillin' with water, not because it carries cargo."

Tommy nodded, but said nothing. She knew what her men would say. After a string of three highly prosperous years, Tommy and her crew had gone months without taking a decent prize. Few large ships had blown across their path, and as Hatley was fond of remarking, "no prey, no pay."

"Strip the ship and leave her," Tommy said. "Last thing we be needing is another ship to keep afloat." Inside an hour, they left the French crew with enough water and provisions to safely reach land, provided the sloop didn't sink first.

Tommy returned to the *Moon Shadow* and informed her men of the booty, attempting to make the marmalade seem as worthy as silver. Coxon scowled when she finished. "We ain't seen a decent prize for months. We're doing naught but chasing worm-ridden scum. Mebbe we be needing a new captain of this here ship."

Tommy, heart pounding, sauntered as close as she dared to the man's fetid breath, then rested her hand on her sword hilt. In her five

years as pirate, it'd been necessary now and then to bash on a man's skull with her sword hilt to remind the crew she was captain not only by their choice, but because she could keep the crew in line.

Coxon was of ordinary stature, rawboned, very pale with dark hair. He was deaf in his left ear from cannon blast and was missing most of his right ear, also from a cannon mishap. He and Tommy were of the same height, but he outweighed her by a great deal.

"Who be captain of this ship now?" She tipped her sword back and ran the scabbard tip all the way up the inside of Coxon's thigh, stopping just shy of the Coxon family's disappointment. His jaw twitched, but he didn't jump back as she'd hoped.

"Ye," he muttered.

"And I'll still be captain when your rottin' corpse washes ashore. So quit the mutinous rumblings, keep that tongue behind your teeth, and stand off." Tommy kept her hand on her sword. Coxon was new, but surely even he realized if Captain Tommy unsheathed her sword, she wouldn't return it to its scabbard until she'd used it.

Coxon stomped away, and Tommy and Sawkins exchanged a cool glance. Sod it all to hell. There were bloody few benefits to being captain, yet she'd managed to cling to the job this long. She got two shares of the plunder, the quartermaster one and a half shares, and the rest of the men one share apiece. She ate the same weevil-infested hardtack they did, and had she been a man, she would have slept in the crews' quarters with them. The only allowance for her sex was that she could use the captain's cabin for privacy.

Being captain was all she knew. It was her only way to remain on ship and at sea. Were she voted out as captain, she'd lose the respect and fear that kept the men at bay. Her life would deteriorate faster than a dead fish in the sun until the men grew so bold that neither her bunk nor her body would be her own. No, being captain of a ragged horde of pirates was the only way she could continue to live free. She hated London, hated cities, and would die if she couldn't stand on the deck of a ship and see the horizon in every direction. She'd be a pirate until her death, which was coming soon enough.

"Great guns, Captain! Another sail!" Billy scampered down from the nearest yardarm.

Relieved to be done with Coxon, at least for now, Tommy climbed up into the rigging and shielded her eyes. Damn it. Avery Shaw's ship,

the *Sharktooth*. Bloody bastard. For every man Tommy threatened to kill, Shaw killed ten. For every man Tommy tortured, Shaw tortured twenty. Tommy lived to feel the sea beneath her feet and Shaw lived to cause others pain.

She still cursed herself over Shaw because it'd been her fault he'd gone pirate. Three years ago she'd caught a small British sloop and had chosen Shaw for the visit to the captain's cabin. Most disappointing five minutes of her life, yet in his little mind he became the Chosen One. Tommy'd stripped the ship as usual and sailed away, since the last thing she needed aboard the *Moon Shadow* was a lover, especially such a clumsy one. But she'd ignited Shaw's interest in piracy, and within a few months he'd taken up the sweet trade as well. Tommy did her best to avoid him but heard of his exploits through the gossip.

As a pirate, Shaw was a total cock-up. The man couldn't navigate his way out of a barrel. He made stupid choices that got his men killed. Only his habit of letting his men rape any woman they came across kept his men from flaying him. That, and his dumb luck at taking rich prizes.

"He be raising a flag to talk," Billy said, opening the worn wooden chest storing the *Moon Shadow*'s flags.

"By thunder," Tommy snapped. "I'll do no such thing. Raise the flag that says 'Kiss my arse, you mealy-mouthed maggot.'"

Billy looked up, bewildered, then down at the assortment of colored flags in his hands. "Which one—"

"That would be no flag at all, ye little whelp," Sawkins said. "Helmsman, easy as she goes."

If she just ignored Shaw, he'd go away. Tommy stood on the quarterdeck as the *Shadow*'s sails snapped overhead. She disliked killing the captain of the French sloop. She took no joy from her snog with the Frenchie. She worried about being voted out as captain, and she was avoiding Shaw.

Bloody hell. Was she losing her nerve? How the hell would she hold her men together if she did? And if she lost her role as captain, what work could she do? Once she was off the water, she'd either be stuck working some hellhole of a pub or spreading her legs for a few coins. Only a blooming idiot would give up the sea for that. But God's blood, she was tired. What was the matter with her?