

BRANDED ANN

by
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CHAPTER ONE

From the aft rail of the merchant ship, the glittering blue expanse of the Pacific rippled toward the horizon in an endlessly shifting landscape. Sunlight gilded the tips of the waves as if teasing the shadows below, and a salty breeze tossed stray wisps of dark hair into Violet's eyes as she leaned over the ship's rail. She looked up at her husband with excitement dancing across her face. "Tell me again about this place we're going."

"You've heard it a hundred times already," Isaac Watts replied with amusement.

"Please?"

He could not refuse her when she turned those huge jeweled eyes on him. Violet had the most unusual eyes he'd ever seen: an intense dark blue, so luminous he could swear they were as purple as the flower for which she was named. As if that weren't enough, her small, delicate features made her appear even younger than her nineteen years and effected an unintentional air of innocence, ironic and perversely charming considering her coarse upbringing. Isaac sighed and gave in without argument.

"Well, as you know, the Crown has granted us two hundred acres of sugar plantation in the West Indies, on the southern coast of Jamaica." He grinned as Violet's expression turned dreamy. "It's beautiful country, covered in royal palms and coconut trees, hibiscus, orchids, poinsettias—brilliant color everywhere you look, and the air perfumed with exotic flowers and the salt of the ocean. Our land is just a few miles from the coast, and less than a half day's travel from my office in Port Royal. You, my dear," he planted a kiss on her temple,

“will rule over it all as mistress while I am away in the city on business. It’s going to be a new life for both of us.”

Violet squeezed his hand, and Isaac knew she’d understood the gentle implication of his words. A chance to start over in a new world, where no one knew her past, where no one could judge them. This move to the West Indies was an expensive venture, and he had undertaken it almost entirely for her benefit. But the happiness on those pretty features was well worth every single shining crown he’d spent.

“It’s like a dream,” Violet breathed, clasping her hands. “Oh, Lord of Heaven, how I thank thee for thy generous blessings and divine provision.”

Isaac was accustomed to his young wife’s spontaneous bouts of prayer, though he was not a particularly religious man himself. Violet was the kind of woman most men could only dream of marrying— young, pretty, graceful, devout—and only he knew how hard she had worked to become so for his sake. However, he feigned cheerful indignation and chucked her beneath the chin with a finger. “Hey, now, what about *my* blessings and provision, eh? Or don’t I deserve any of that gratitude of yours?”

Dismay spread over her face. “Oh, Isaac, you know I hold nothing but the deepest gratitude for you and everything you’ve done for me. You’ve saved my life in so many ways, I can’t even—”

He pressed a finger to her mouth, and she flushed when she realized he’d been teasing her. She kissed the finger against her lips earnestly. “I’m so unworthy of your generosity.”

“Nonsense,” he replied firmly. “That a pretty young thing like you would marry an old goat like me is a miracle in and of itself.” Isaac saw her eyes widen, and he could guess what her next argument was going to be. He shook his head. “Let’s just agree that we rescued each other from our respective unhappy situations, shall we?” Violet’s lips curved into a slight smile, and he could not resist bending to capture them with his own.

“Shall I rescue you again?” she mumbled provocatively into his kisses, and he pulled back with no small measure of regret.

“Not now, I’m afraid. I’ve already been away from my duties too long. The captain’s apt to toss me overboard for shirking my work.”

“That might be difficult, seeing as you own this vessel he’s sailing,” Violet pointed out wryly, then straightened the shoulders of

his jacket. “Tonight, then,” she promised in a much quieter tone, and gave a little wink before pushing him gently toward the deck steps.



As she watched her husband descend to the lower deck, Violet marveled for the hundredth time at her incredible fortune. Though Isaac Watts was nearly three times her age, she would have married him all over again in an instant. Isaac was her savior, her benefactor, and her dearest friend. True, she might not be passionately in love, but she was certainly very fond of her doting husband, and after all Isaac had done for her, she was determined he should never want for anything in a wife so long as she breathed. Violet turned to look over the back end of the ship again...the *stern*, Isaac called it. She stared down into the water, mesmerized by the white foam-tipped waves that danced in their wake.

It was a strange experience, being on a ship. Isaac had given her the full tour before they’d left port, spouting off so many nautical terms that they made Violet’s head swim. Still, she found that the more time she spent on board, the more she became familiar with words like “forecastle” and “mizzenmast.” No one was more surprised than Violet herself to find that she possessed a blessedly strong stomach. They’d been at sea for nearly a month now, and she had only endured the misery of seasickness for the first two days before her body became accustomed to the feeling of the rocking decks. The captain had been less than thrilled with the idea of bringing a woman on board his ship, but since Isaac Watts was his employer and intended to relocate permanently to his West Indies office, the captain could hardly refuse.

Her husband’s business, the British Indies Security & Trade Company, was one of the most successful merchant trade industries in all of Europe. Violet didn’t know much about commerce, but from what she did understand, Isaac succeeded where many others failed in transporting a wealth of goods between the lush West Indies and the lucrative seaport of London.

Piracy was the biggest culprit for most. The sea was full of thieves who set upon any ship carrying valuable cargo, and the closer one got to the West Indies, the more dangerous the waters became. She wasn’t sure of the details, but she knew that her husband somehow managed

to run a trade line that avoided encounters with such undesirables. How he did it was not a complete mystery. Violet had known Isaac Watts almost all her life, and she remembered a time when he'd been close in arms with those very same undesirable men...as had she, though she preferred to think of that as little as possible.

Trailing her hand along the rail, Violet crossed the stern to the right side...*or rather, the starboard side*, she corrected herself. She paused at the edge of the deck and leaned over the rail again, marveling at the sheer vastness of the water surrounding them. It was beautiful, this ocean that seemed to change moods as often as a person, shifting color and texture from one minute to the next. There was something very desolate and lonely, yet deeply spiritual about this place, adrift on an elaborate contraption of wood and canvas in the center of a barren sea. *Oh, Father, what miracles thy hand doth work*, she mused, tilting her face upward, heedless of the danger the afternoon sun posed to her complexion. Isaac found her freckles charming, and how could anyone hide from such glorious sunlight?

Violet suddenly straightened a bit and shaded her eyes as something on the horizon caught her eye. At first she thought it was only the white crest of a wave, but it was far too defined for that. She turned and called to one of the men scurrying around on the main deck. "Sailor, there's something out there."

He shrugged without bothering to follow the line of her pointed finger. "Probably a gull, Missus Watts, the sky's full of them today."

"It's too far away to be a seagull," she insisted.

He gave an impatient sigh and trudged up the deck steps to join her. "Where?"

She pointed again, and this time he did actually take more than a cursory glance at the starboard horizon. A frown creased his brow then, as he, too, spotted the little white object. "Wait here, missus." He found a small brass spyglass in a nearby chest and pressed it to his eye, twisting the metal tube until the object came into focus. His frown deepened and he gave a grunt.

"Well?" Violet asked, and he scratched his head.

"Looks like a ship," he replied, "but I ain't never seen one all white like that before. I'll get the captain. He probably ought to see this."

Violet watched the little white spot on the horizon for several minutes before the sailor returned with the captain in tow, followed closely by her husband. "I think it's getting bigger," she said, pointing it out once more, and the captain took the eyeglass from the sailor and looked through it himself.

A hiss of air escaped his teeth. "It can't be." Turning quickly, he bellowed at another of the sailors. "You there, Marks, take this glass up the mainmast. Look out there and tell me what you see."

Obediently the man took the instrument from his captain and hopped down to the lower deck, where he climbed the narrow rungs set into the thick mast. When he'd topped the mainsail and had a clearer line of sight, he put the glass to his eye. "It's a ship, Captain. Headed this way, moving fast."

"I know that, you bilge-eating vermin." The captain spat on the deck before suddenly remembering there was a woman present and blushing abashedly. "Your pardon, Mistress Watts."

She gave him a dignified nod, resisting the urge to laugh. Such language was hardly foreign to her ears, but these men believed her to be a proper lady, and she didn't want them thinking otherwise. The captain cleared his throat awkwardly and returned his attention to the man on the mast.

"Sailor, tell me, what color is yon vessel?"

"She's white, Captain. Never seen anything like it, white from the tip of the mast down to her hold."

The captain's face blanched. "What colors does she fly?" he shouted up, and waited for the sailor to refocus on the ship in question.

"Her flag is red, sir. Hard to tell from here, but looks like there's a skull on it, and..." The eyeglass suddenly fell from the man's hand, striking the deck with such force that the glass inside cracked audibly. Violet frowned in confusion. The sailor was shaking so badly she feared he might fall right off the mast.

"And what, man? Speak up!" Isaac demanded, and the sailor looked down at them with a face white as death.

"The skull and burning cross," he managed to croak out, and simultaneously Isaac and the captain cursed violently.

"The *Ice Queen*," the captain breathed. "God preserve us, it's Branded Ann. And she's flying scarlet." He suddenly spun to stare

coldly at Isaac. “What are we carrying on board this ship, Master Watts?” Isaac shook his head, and the captain’s glare only darkened. “Branded Ann does not waste her time with mere textile cargo, and you know it. She wouldn’t be chasing us if there wasn’t something she wanted on this ship. Now what is it?”

Violet laid a hand protectively on her husband’s arm. The captain’s tone was dangerously angry, and Isaac shook his head again. “God’s honest truth, Captain Gates, I don’t know. She must have us mistaken for another ship. All we have in this cargo are silks and linens bound for the Indies.” He bit his lip. “I specifically chose this ship for my wife’s safe passage. As you said, textiles don’t generally make for a very interesting prize.”

Violet’s gaze moved between the two of them quickly. “I don’t understand,” she said with confusion. “What’s happening? Who’s Branded Ann?”

“Only the bloodthirstiest bitch ever to sail the Caribbean,” the captain shot back before again realizing his lack of decorum in the presence of a lady. He flushed. “Pardon, Mistress, but ever since she got her hands on a ship of her own, Branded Ann’s become the most dangerous pirate on the sea these days, in spite of how she’s a woman. Her kind don’t have much respect for the fairer sex, but even they don’t dare lay a hand on her. It’s said she’s mistress to the Devil himself.” He turned and began barking out orders.

“Look sharp, men, we’ve got the *Ice Queen* coming up on our starboard side and she’s flying scarlet! Man the guns! Hoist every sail we’ve got and see to your arms!” He strode down to the main deck as sailors scattered in all directions to follow his instructions, and Violet turned anxiously to her husband.

“Is it really that bad?” she asked, and he nodded, his lips pressed tightly together.

“When pirates fly a red flag, it means they’re offering no quarter, no mercy. They’re out for blood. It doesn’t make any sense. We don’t have anything she’d want.” He turned to watch as the sailors pulled bales of cargo from the hold and dumped it overboard, and Violet saw him wince. She guessed that less weight meant they could sail faster, though it had to be a terrible financial loss for her husband’s company. Maybe they’d get very lucky and Branded Ann would be happy with the

floating goods? But from the gravity of Isaac's expression, she doubted he was holding any such hope.

And then another more disturbing thought occurred to her. "She's not... Isaac, you don't think she's after you?"

Isaac shook his head. "I doubt it, my love. I retired as a privateer years before Branded Ann was old enough to set foot on a ship." He pulled a pistol from his belt and checked the powder, stuffing the barrel with shot from a pouch at his waist. "Take this."

The weapon was strangely bulky in her hand, but she made no comment, tucking it into the waist of her skirts. Uneasily she followed him into the captain's quarters beneath the poop deck. Whenever Isaac sailed, the large cabin was divided to allow him, as owner of the ship, a comfortable berth alongside the captain himself. Violet watched her husband dart about the room, searching through chests of their belongings and pulling out various weapons and papers. He strapped a cutlass to his waist and rummaged through a pile of clothing looking for anything else he might need. Violet reached up to the shelf above their little bed and pulled down her thick leather-bound Bible, clutching it to her chest. The solid feel of it in her arms was comforting. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.* The Psalm blossomed into her memory, steadying her nerves.

Isaac gave a sudden sharp intake of breath as he pulled a piece of paper from the bottom of a heavy wooden chest. Violet couldn't see what it was, but her husband's hand shook suddenly. "It couldn't be," she heard him mutter.

"What is it?" she asked.

"An old regret," he replied evasively, his attention drawn to the Bible in her arms. He reached for it and she handed it to him obediently, watching as he folded the paper carefully and tucked it into the book's leather cover. He returned the Bible to Violet with a steady gaze. "Hold on to this." Isaac stood and gathered up the armload of guns and knives he'd piled on their narrow mattress. "Violet, I want you to get below, into the hold. No matter what happens, no matter what you hear, don't come back abovedecks until I come for you, you understand? If anyone comes within arm's reach of you, shoot him between the eyes. Shoot to kill, Violet."

She shuddered, but nodded her understanding and allowed him to lead her back onto the main deck, where the men were scurrying frantically to load their guns and arm themselves. Small groups clustered around each of the starboard cannons, stacking heavy iron balls of shot and barrels of powder where they would be in easy reach. The white ship had drawn closer; Violet could see it clearly now, delineated starkly against the dark water. A strange, rhythmic pounding filled the air, and she was startled to realize that it seemed to be coming from the pirate vessel. She turned a questioning gaze on her husband and he gave a humorless laugh.

“It’s called ‘vaporizing.’ They’re trying to frighten us. We can’t outrun them, Violet, even if we throw every bit of cargo and half the crew overboard. There’s no use surrendering, either. That red flag means they intend to kill everyone on board, God knows why. We’re going to have to stand and fight.” He brought her to the hatch and opened it. “Get below now, and remember, don’t come back up until I come for you.” Isaac pressed a kiss to her forehead, but Violet took hold of his collar and pulled him in for a real kiss on the lips.

“Be careful,” she said, and he nodded.

“I love you, sweet Violet.” And then he was pushing her gently toward the hatch, and she descended the ladder carefully, her heart pounding in her throat and the Bible hugged tightly to her chest with one arm.



“We’re almost upon them, Captain,” the quartermaster grunted as he approached the tall pale-haired woman at the gunwale. A cold smile spread across her face as she turned to look at him, bloodlust sparking in her ice blue eyes.

His gaze twitched uncontrollably to the scar marring the left side of her face, the sun-lined skin there puckering into the distinct shape of a crucifix. It began right beneath her left eye, only a fraction of an inch from her lower eyelid, and trailed all the way down to her jaw. She’d never explained where the brand came from, though there were rumors amounting to legend as to its possible cause. The most popular theory was that she’d violated a nun and God himself had marked her as one of the damned.

The quartermaster found that unlikely; in spite of her infamous appetite for pretty girls, any man who sailed with Branded Ann became quickly and intimately familiar with her opinion of those who forced themselves on women. He'd heard the suggestion that she'd made some sort of pact with the Devil, or that she was the blood sister of Satan himself. However it had come about, that cross brand on her cheek was Ann's most recognizable feature and added a touch of fearsomeness to what would otherwise be considered too pretty a face for violent intent.

"Is the crew ready, Barclay?" Her voice, crystalline and frosty, sent a little shiver down his spine no matter how many times he heard it. He nodded.

"All ship-shape 'n Bristol fashion," he replied briskly, then dared to broach the subject they'd all been wondering about for the past hour. "Captain Ann, this ship we're after is a textile transport."

"So?" A glint entered her eye, and he swallowed but pressed ahead quickly.

"Well, the crew's a mite perturbed, Captain." Ann lifted one silvery eyebrow as he continued. "The men don't understand why we're chasing it down, or why you gave the order for no quarter. A cargo like that hardly seems worth blinking at."

"You're saying they don't trust me?"

Barclay shook his head. "It's not that, Captain, the boys'd follow you into the mouth of Hell itself on your orders, you know that. They're just a bit...curious."

She turned her attention back to the ship on the horizon. "Do you know who owns that ship?"

"I heard it was the British Indies Securities."

"Precisely. And do you know why most privateers stay clear of the B.I.S.?"

He scratched his neck. "They're better armed and better manned than other merchant vessels. Dangerous to confront."

"The B.I.S. employs pirates, Barclay. Every last one of their ships is swarming with them. And why is that? Because the owner and founder of British Indies Securities is none other than Ironsides Isaac Watts. And I have it on good authority that he happens to be on that very ship."

"The old turncoat himself, eh? You got something against him?"

Her smile was predatory. “You could say that.” She rested a slender hand on his shoulder. “Never fear, Barclay, I assure you I wouldn’t take the *Ice Queen* into battle on a personal grudge alone. This is the first step toward taking the finest prize any of you sea rats have ever laid eyes on.” She turned and strode from the bow to the helm, and shouted down at the crew below.

“Look alive, boys, we’re coming up fast. Vapor her loud and strong, and when we’re in range, spray her decks with everything you’ve got so we can grapple her. Barclay!” He sprang to her side. “Lead the boarding party. Do whatever you like with the rest, but I want Isaac Watts brought to me alive.”

“Aye, Captain.” The hungry look in her eyes almost made him feel pity for the unfortunate Master Watts. He marched down to the main deck to see to any last-minute preparations, and the pirates set up a heavy thumping rhythm on the ship’s rails with a chant of “Death, death, death!” that was deliciously ominous.



Ann smiled to herself as she returned her gaze to the ship they were pursuing. They had tossed their cargo overboard, large bales of canvas-wrapped fabrics bobbing here and there on the ocean’s surface, sinking slowly as they absorbed the seawater. Watts was no fool, willing to sacrifice his merchandise for more speed, though he had to know it was hopeless to think the *Ice Queen* could be outrun. This would be a nasty battle, if past encounters with the B.I.S. were any indication, but well worth it. Ann patted the twin flintlocks tucked into her sash and checked to be sure her cutlass, dirk, and boot daggers were all safely in place. She’d dressed for the occasion, in a pair of snug black breeches and a loose white shirt open at the collar. A wide scarlet sash girded her hips and a festive calico kerchief held her unruly hair out of her eyes. One golden hoop glinted from her right earlobe. She’d chosen her garments with care, for this day would be a momentous one. Today, she would finally be putting some of her demons to rest. Picking up her musket, Ann tapped the helmsman’s shoulder.

“Bring us along their starboard side!” she shouted above the din of the chanting men, and Barclay nodded his understanding. Until they pulled alongside, they had a greater advantage: less exposed hull for

their intended victims to shoot at, while their own chase guns mounted at the bow could fire off the initial volley. The trick was to give the firing order at exactly the right moment, when they were close enough that the shot would hit its target, but still far enough that there would be maneuvering room to swing alongside as they approached. Ann waited, judging the distance repeatedly, and finally gave a sharp nod.

“Chase guns, fire!” she bellowed, and the order was followed by an immediate lighting of the forward cannons, a quick hissing noise as the fuses burned, and then several deafening booms in succession. She shaded her eyes to judge the impact and grinned at the large holes that had formed in the rigging. That ought to slow their prey down, and they’d have time for another round. “Again! Bundle shot across her decks!”

The pirates scrambled to reload, stuffing the powder down the muzzles followed by the packs of short metal bars known as “bundle shot.” The ammunition was designed specifically to clear the decks of a ship to be boarded, and it usually did its job with impressive efficiency. They were closer now thanks to the slowing effect of the first volley, and Ann didn’t even wait for the smoke to clear before ordering the helmsman to swing them alongside. She put her musket to her shoulder.

“Have at her, boys!” There were booming sounds from the merchant ship as their cannons fired at the pirates. Ann took careful aim down the musket barrel, targeting one of the cannon crew and pulling the trigger. The man reeled back, clutching at his chest, and she grinned, pausing to reload. The air quickly filled with the irregular music of battle, musket and cannon fire punctuated by the shouts and cries of men from both sides. Adrenaline surged hotly through her limbs and she took aim again, picking off the cannon crew methodically. The decks began to clear as the pirate’s barrage of shot did its work. She called for the boarding hooks to let fly.

And let fly they did, the wicked iron hooks singing through the air to lodge in the opposite gunwale. Several pirates heaved at each line, lashing the cables to draw the ships together for boarding. Ann continued to lay cover fire as Barclay led the boarding party swarming over the side of the pirate vessel and onto the merchant ship. The gunfire became more sporadic while the clash of swords and screaming grew louder. Cutlasses were far more effective than guns at close range.

Satisfied that the majority of her crew had boarded, Ann tossed the musket aside and climbed onto the gunwale, leaping a space almost two meters wide, landing with a solid thud on the other ship's deck. She drew the flintlocks from her sash, firing them both and taking out the first two men who came at her, then dropping the empty pistols to pull her cutlass. She'd been right. These were not just any merchant sailors. Several of them bore battle scars and the grizzled, unkempt appearance of sea bandits. Still, Ann was not daunted by any man, be he soldier or scoundrel. The blade danced in her hand as she pulled a dirk from her belt with the other.

The deck beneath their feet was already slick with blood. Ann cleared the remaining sailors from the forecandle, then leapt onto the main deck to join the fighting there. A shadow passed suddenly to her right, and without turning her head she slashed toward it. The scream that followed caught her attention, however, with its unusually high pitch. She couldn't help cursing when she saw her adversary. He was no more than a boy, judging by the sparse blond hair just beginning to shadow his upper lip; a thin but well-dressed kid, likely the son of some wealthy merchant who sent his heir off to sea for a little worldly experience before taking over the family business. He was grasping in futility at his stomach, which had been opened in one clean slice. The blood soaking his hands and shirt was dark, almost black, and Ann realized he had been gutted.

She had no choice. Either the boy would die slowly, and in agony, or she could end it quickly now. Gritting her teeth, she swung again, and there was a grisly thump as the boy's head fell from his shoulders to the deck. Ann looked up as someone nearby gave a cheer. Diego, one of her men, was grinning at her, and she forced a grimace in reply. Ann turned her back to the lifeless body and hacked her way across the deck in the opposite direction, trying not to think about how many other such youths might be on board. In battle there was no time for such concerns. She did what she had to do to get what she needed. The only good thing about killing—if one could call it good—was the way it contributed to her bloodthirsty reputation. A fearsome reputation was often the only thing that kept a pirate alive, and in her case, that was especially true.

The battle was decided in a matter of minutes. She had ordered no quarter, and so her crew surged over the decks, entering the cabins

of captain and crew, pouring into the hold and killing everything in their path without reservation. She noted out of the corner of her eye that Barclay had isolated an older man on the poop deck, the only one who was not being unceremoniously butchered. From the finery of his clothes and his relative age she knew he had to be her target, Old Ironsides himself. A surge of excitement flooded her limbs. She was so close.

The noise died down as the last of the merchant crew were disposed of. One of the pirates stuck his head out of the hatch. "Captain, this vessel's taking on water! We must have punctured her with one of the cannon shots."

"Damn your eyes, Maclairen," she cursed under her breath, though she knew it probably wasn't their Scottish gunner's fault. The cannons could be notoriously inaccurate, especially from chase distance. Still, the general intent was to capture a ship, not sink her. Her attention was diverted by raucous cursing as two of her men, Dipper and Roberts, dragged something out of the hold. Their eager exclamations told her that they'd found an unexpected treasure, and when she caught sight of the young woman they were hauling along the deck she understood why.

"I said no quarter, boys," she hissed impatiently.

"She shot Truman, Captain. Took his face right off, the little wench, with this." Roberts held out a small single-barrel pistol. "So we thought we'd bring her up, and..."

Ann rolled her eyes. She stuffed her cutlass back into the scabbard at her belt and stalked over to them, ignoring their disappointed protests. "And nothing, my hearties. You know the Articles." Ann lifted her dirk to cut the prisoner's throat, but before she could apply pressure to the blade the woman lifted her head and looked the pirate captain straight in the eye.

Ann faltered.

The young woman's eyes were unlike anything she'd ever seen before, enormous and richly hued like gemstones. Her fair, delicate countenance was strikingly beautiful, in spite of the blood spattering her features. For a moment Ann experienced the strangest sensation of being swallowed into a midnight sky. Those huge eyes scanned her curiously, pausing with interest on the brand marring her left cheek.

"Alas, oh Lord God, for I have seen an angel of the Lord face-to-

face.” The captive’s voice was husky and unexpectedly sultry, and Ann felt goosebumps rise on her arms.

“Violet!”

Ann looked up at this cry, coming from their only other prisoner. The old goat was gazing with near desperation at the girl on the point of her knife. Ann looked back at her captive, noting the finery of her expensive gray silk skirts, the elegant mother-of-pearl buttons that marched modestly down the front of her bodice, and the dainty French lace detailing on the sleeves. This was no galley maid. Ann’s attention dropped to the small hands clutching what looked like a big book, and landed on the gold band encircling the woman’s left ring finger. She put this information together quickly and pursed her lips with a delighted grin. “Well, well, Mistress Watts.” She stuck the dirk back in her sash and said to her men, “On second thought, boys, we may have use for her after all.” The way their faces lit caused her to snort. “Don’t look so excited, the Articles still stand.”

The deck beneath her feet swayed dangerously. “All hands back on board the *Queen!*” she barked. “This ship’s going down!” She watched Isaac Watts sharply as Barclay yanked him down to the main deck and over the boarding plank. He never looked back, didn’t eye any part of the ship with regret or anxiety save his pretty little wife. *He has it on him*, she decided, not quite sure how she was so certain, but her instincts were uncanny at times and she chose to trust them. “Bring her,” she ordered without looking back.

Ann leapt lightly onto the boarding plank and took position along the center of the *Ice Queen’s* foredeck as she waited for the rest of her crew to reboard. She could hear the grumbling already. It had been a costly battle. Barclay hauled Watts to the foredeck behind her, and she turned to address the quartermaster in low tones. “Report.”

“We lost seven men, Captain, and have twelve more pretty bad carved up. Two prisoners. No booty to speak of, a few gold crowns from the captain’s quarters and whatever they could rifle from the crew’s bodies as they lay.” Ann nodded, and Barclay’s brow contracted. “The boys ain’t happy, Captain Ann. That was a lot of blood and brawl for nothing.”

Ann patted him on the shoulder. “Not worth divvying the loot this time, Barclay, so tell the crew they can keep whatever they snagged. I’m after a much bigger prize.” She gestured to the two men who’d

brought the girl—Violet, was it?—on board, and they shoved her up the deck stairs to join her husband behind the captain.

Waiting until the last of the surviving crew had assembled on the lower deck, Ann could hear the grumbling grow louder as the pirates realized just how very little they'd gained from this venture. She put two fingers in her mouth and gave a sharp whistle. "Pipe down!" she demanded, and after some rebellious muttering she was obeyed.

Ann arched a brow and glared. "All right, my hearties, you're wondering why we just went to all that trouble to take a ship with no real profits." This was answered by a chorus of affirmative and rather hostile grunts. Ann stepped back and seized the lapel of Watts's jacket, hauling him forward and licking her lips with anticipation. "This here is Master Ironsides Isaac Watts, owner of the British Indies Security and Trade. You may have heard of him. He turned against his fellow gentlemen of fortune," she gave a wry smile at the epithet pirates liked to use to describe themselves, "so the bloody Crown would line his pockets." Someone from the lower deck threw a rotted cabbage, probably looted from the merchant ship's galley, and it struck the prisoner on the shoulder with a gooey, smelly thud. Ann chuckled. "Easy now, boys, we're getting there. Master Watts, you want to tell them the real treasure we've just liberated from your ship?"

There was no doubt the man was a former buccaneer. Ann could see the defiance in his eyes and felt her own blood heat. When he spoke, the words were tightly controlled. "I don't know what you're talking about, woman."

She drew her lips back in a snarl and lifted one hand, turning the ruby ring on her middle finger until the large jewel lay against her palm. Then she slapped him, drawing the sharp facets of the stone against his cheek and drawing blood. "Your tone lacks proper respect, I'd say." When he glared sullenly without reply, Ann held up her hand again, and in one smooth movement she seized his groin in an iron grip. This time Watts yelped as she deliberately ground the ruby into the sensitive flesh. The crewmen below hooted with laughter.

"That's why they call her the Ice Queen, boys!" she heard Dipper cackle, and gave her men a grin before turning back to her prey. She could tell that he was not going to be easy to break, which meant this was likely going to be a very unpleasant afternoon.

"Indeed. Did you know, Master Watts, that when my former captain

gave me this ship he christened her with one of my nicknames? I have so many I can scarcely keep them all straight. Most of them shouldn't be spoken in the presence of a lady," she cast a roguish wink in Violet's direction, "but Ice Queen's always been one of my favorites. Has a nice regal sound to it, don't you think?" She dropped the conversational tone then. "Since your memory seems to be troubling you, Master Watts, let's see if I can't sharpen it." She tightened her fist even more and he shuddered.

"Eighteen years ago you served as quartermaster on board an English privateering vessel. Does the name Daniel Goddard mean anything to you?" Understanding dawned on his face, and she knew he was aware of her intent now. "I see your memory hasn't completely failed you, Master Watts. Enough games. I want the map."

"I don't have it," came the reply, followed quickly by a near whimper as Ann squeezed him again, this time adding a slight twisting motion.

"I have very little patience for liars, Master Watts. And if I have to, I will cut you into pieces an inch at a time, until you give me what I want." She let go of his crotch and made a show of wiping her hand on her trousers in disgust before waving at Barclay. The quartermaster wheeled up with a small iron cart. "I don't know if you've heard of my branding station, Master Watts. It's a rather ingenious trinket of mine that's proven quite useful in conversations such as these." Barclay lifted the cover of the cart to reveal a deep concave depression in the iron surface; this depression was filled with burning coals. A grill above them prevented spills, and several long pokers had ends buried among the coals. Barclay drew one out. It had a broad, flattened end that was glowing red.

"The idea's a simple one, really. We cut something off, and then cauterize the wound so you don't bleed to death and we can keep playing. A particularly nasty way to die. It can last for days. Lots of fun for us, not so much for you, savvy? So I'll say it again: I want the map."

"If you know about the map, then you must know it's useless," he argued.

"To you, perhaps. But you see," and she leaned forward until her lips were nearly touching his ear, "I have the other."

He pulled back to stare at her, disbelief written all over his face. “The...the other? That’s impossible.” Ann only grinned and he shook his head. His gaze flickered nervously to his wife and then back again. “I tell you, I don’t have it.”

Ann caught the brief shift in his attention and decided to take a risk in the interest of shortening this interrogation. If she was very lucky, perhaps things wouldn’t have to get messy after all. Of course, if she wasn’t, she’d have no choice but to make good on some extremely distasteful threats. Hoping her instincts were right, Ann gave a theatrical sigh. “Really, man, you said yourself the map’s useless. Is it worth dying for?” She took Violet’s elbow and drew her closer, running a hand appreciatively over the silky dark hair and trailing fingers down the side of her neck. It was more for Watts’s benefit than his wife’s, but Ann felt a shudder run through the other woman’s body and her brow twitched as her own irrepressible libido responded with instant, reliable enthusiasm. She took a deep breath and shoved those feelings away. What came next was pivotal, and for the girl’s sake she had to be as terrifying as possible. It would be best if Watts could comprehend immediately that Ann was not bluffing. Pulling one of Violet’s hands by the wrist, she held it up before the old man. The dirk came up in her other hand, and she tapped it playfully against the pads of the young woman’s fingertips.

“Perhaps, Master Watts, you would be more cooperative if I were to start with these pretty fingers, rather than those gnarled stubs of yours. One at a time, of course, we wouldn’t want to be cruel.” She stroked the satiny pale skin of the woman’s wrist with her thumb.

“Violet...” His mouth fell open as he looked from one woman to the other.

Violet appeared astonishingly calm, holding the Bible to her chest with one hand even as the other was threatened with amputation. Isaac was regarding his wife almost frantically, and Ann was startled to hear that breathy voice again. “*Though I speak, my grief is not assuaged: and though I forbear, what am I eased?*”

“Job 16,” Barclay interjected with an amused snort, then met Ann’s questioning gaze. “She’s quoting the Good Book, there.” He indicated the Bible.

“Well, what do you know? Seems we have a real lady of God

amongst us, boys.” Ann’s declaration carried over to the men on the lower deck, who broke into laughter. “Well then, Sister Violet, care to share what all that flowery talk means?”

Violet looked up at her evenly. “It means you’re going to kill us both anyway, whether he tells you what you want to know or not.”

“Smart girl,” Ann murmured, then tore her gaze away before those luminous violet eyes could prove any more hypnotic. “She makes a good point, Watts. It’s not a question of whether you die, but of how you die. We could alternate between the two of you, I suppose. A piece of her, then a piece of you, until there’s nothing left. Or you could give me the map now, and you have my word I’ll make it quick.” He still appeared undecided, and Ann knew she’d have to press her point. “Have it your way.” She pressed a mocking kiss to the tip of Violet’s first finger, and then laid her thumb on one side with the blade on the other as though she were about to slice up a carrot. She was mildly impressed that the young woman did not so much as whimper. Ann paused for as long as she dared. *Come on, come on...*

“Wait,” Isaac Watts finally croaked, and Ann felt a jolt of triumph when she looked into his face. She’d broken him. Careful to keep her own expression neutral, she pressed her lips together expectantly.

“Yes?”

He heaved a sigh and nodded toward the Bible under his wife’s arm. “It’s in there.”

Ann released Violet’s wrist and took the heavy book from her, fanning the pages. “In the cover,” Watts directed, and she slid one finger beneath the leather cover, drawing out a folded paper. She opened it and scanned its contents, and let out a breath of genuine delight, dropping the Bible, forgotten, to the deck.

“At last.”

“Just tell me one thing,” Watts said in a defeated tone, and she looked up. “Who are you?”

Ann curled her lip. “When you see old Dan Goddard in Hell,” she snarled, “you tell him his daughter Annie is keeping her promise.” She returned her attention to the map, so overwhelmed with excitement that her fingers trembled. Greedily she took in every line, every shape, every scrawled calculation. She’d waited so long for this.

Barclay asked, “All done here, then, Captain?”

“Aye,” Ann replied absently without looking up.

Something warm suddenly spattered her face, and she cursed when several drops of red liquid stained the paper in her hand. Barclay had slit the prisoner’s throat.