

Chapter Five

THE LETTER—AND ITS REPLY, WHICH SHE had sent that afternoon, returning the compliment about their time together and extending an invitation to dine with them at Crestmont a week hence—was still on Belle's mind two days later, only gone now were cushions and tea sandwiches and Empire dresses, replaced by oiled wooden railings and hard tack and trousers. Though she missed Abigail's sunny company, Belle had to admit she preferred the scenery here on the *Deadshot's* deck—especially now, with a fat French merchant ship floundering in their sights.

"Ahoy, the ship!" she heard Quince shout as they pulled up alongside the *Mère de Nacre*, their warning shot having snuffed out any fight the poor traders and sailors might have possessed. "Stand down and prepare to be boarded, or suffer the consequences!"

A tall, skinny man with a high forehead and a long face, presumably the captain, stomped over to the railing, hands raised to show them empty. "We surrender," he called back, his English heavily accented but easily understood. "We offer no resistance, and ask only for mercy."

"And mercy ye shall have," Belle announced, wrapping one hand around a line and swinging up onto the railing to face her fellow captain across the narrow gap. "Behave, do as you're told, and you'll all be free to go soon enough, and unharmed."

The captain nodded and gestured his men back as the grappling lines were tossed across and made fast. The gangplank followed,

and soon her crew was over and beginning to haul goods up from the hold.

They had only brought a handful of items across, however, when Belle heard the cry she'd been half-expecting. "Sails!" shouted Isaac from the crow's nest. "Three-master, to starboard!" That was out at sea, and she cursed as she yanked free her spyglass and scanned the horizon. There! It was a frigate, sure enough, and she did not think it her imagination that its ensign was white quartered by red. Damn! How had he found her again, and so quickly!?

Quince was already hurrying up to join her near the rail. "It's that commander again, has to be," he agreed to her unspoken question. "And this time he's got the wind at his back, driving him on. No chance to outrun him, or dart past toward the open water. We'll have to go shoreward, but he'll be here afore we can get safely away, even if we cut ties now."

Her first mate had already turned and taken a deep breath, preparing to give that order, when Belle stopped him. "No," she said, her mind racing. "You're right, we can't outrun him, not this time. So we'll outthink him instead." Quickly she outlined what she had in mind, and Quince's sour face split into a rare smile.

"Aye, that might do the trick," he said. "And if not, well, at least we'll have given it a rum go!" Then he was leaping over to the *Mère de Nacre*, calling the rest of their men over there to him as he went. Belle grinned and turned her attention to the merchant captain, who had since identified himself as one André Laurent and who was watching the commotion with a bemused look upon his long face. "I must beg your patience a while longer, good sir," she told him, making sure her voice carried across the water. "But I assure you, we still intend to leave you and yours in peace—only a little later than originally planned."

That seemed to satisfy Laurent, at least, for he did not interfere as Quince took command of the other ship's wheel and the men scaled the riggings and began playing out the sails. A handful of others continued the work of unloading, only now they were doing so across two moving vessels instead of two anchored ones. The two

ships ground against each other, scraping both hulls, but thanks to echoed commands they were able to keep both sails trimmed to match, and though the lines strained, they held.

The *Mère de Nacre* was not a particularly fast ship—which was how the *Deadshot* had caught her in the first place—and so even at her swiftest pace they had not advanced far before the frigate pulled up within hail on the merchant's far side. "Ahoy!" came the shout from that vessel, in a voice Belle had already begun to know well. "This is Commander Reid of His Majesty's *Diligent*. Yield the ship and surrender yourself for judgment!"

"No thank you!" Belle shouted back, perching high up on the *Deadshot*'s rail so that she could make out Reid on his own deck beyond the *Mère de Nacre*'s. She took care to keep her voice as deep and rough as possible, and was glad the wind was strong enough to send her black braid whipping about her head. They were so near that she saw his eyes narrow in recognition, but trusted that it was merely the famed pirate Cannon Belle he saw, and not his recent dance partner.

He seemed surprised by her open defiance. "Surrender," he insisted again. "Or—"

"Or what?" she retorted. "You'll open fire through innocents? Even if they are French, I think not."

When he visibly fumed she threw her head back and laughed. It had worked! She had thought that a naval man, and especially one as honorable as Reid, would not be willing to fire upon a civilian ship, even if England and France were still battling in the War of the Sixth Coalition. Which was why, rather than doing the expected and cutting their target loose so they could run, she had instead ordered the *Mère de Nacre* hauled in close. The two ships were sailing as one now—and as long as they continued this way, with the *Diligent* on their far side, the merchant acted as a shield, keeping the *Deadshot* safe.

"I ask you to reconsider putting these good people in harm's way," Reid tried again, clearly exasperated by this strange turn of events. "It is highly dishonorable."

“More or less so than piracy?” Belle countered. “And I am not putting them in harm’s way, for I am not the one threatening them. You are.”

That caused “her commander” to jam his bicorn down more firmly on his head and turn away from her to spit orders to his crew. A moment later, the *Diligent* let her sails fill again and the frigate leaped forward, racing ahead of the paired ships.

Her crew cheered at this, but Belle silenced them with a gesture. “We’ve not won free yet, lads,” she warned. “That was just the first step. There’s more to come.”

Sure enough, the *Diligent* heeled about, jibing to swing wide and circle around in front of them so that it could approach the *Deadshot* from its unprotected side. The frigate’s square rigging was not ideal for such maneuvers, however, and it was going from windward to leeward, making such a turn a slow and cumbersome process.

At the same time, Belle signaled Quince, who nodded and swung the rudder over a notch, Gregor matching him so the *Deadshot* and the *Mère de Nacre* both jibed as well, wearing ship to angle farther toward the shore. This forced the *Diligent* to widen its arc, lest the paired bowsprits pierce it broadsides before it could complete the turn.

But while the *Diligent* was describing a wide arc, the *Deadshot* and the *Mère de Nacre* were executing a much tighter circle, using the *Deadshot*’s hastily dropped anchor to help hold them in place as they wheeled about together. It did not hurt that even the *Mère de Nacre* was smaller than the frigate now trying to loop around them.

Still, Belle held her breath, gauging her own ship’s position and speed against that of the frigate. She had the weather gauge but it would be a near thing indeed.

At last the *Diligent* completed her semi-circle. Now she was facing them and on their shoreward side. But the frigate soon discovered that it had another problem, or at least the same problem as before—thanks to her own maneuvering, Belle had kept the

Mère de Nacre between herself and Reid's vessel. All three ships were now more or less in a row and facing into the wind, with the *Deadshot* on the seaward side and the *Diligent* caught between the merchant ship and land.

That was what Belle had been hoping for. Of course, if she ran the frigate would give chase—except she had a plan for that as well. “Now!” she shouted. Quince and the boys leaped back across, tossing the grappling lines over first and tugging the gangplank after. Then Gregor spun the wheel and the *Deadshot* turned, falling behind its two escorts as its sails no longer caught the wind—and then tacking hard across the wind, toward the shore.

Which ran the pirate ship straight behind the backside of the frigate that had been pursuing it.

Quince glanced her way, a question evident on his sour face, but Belle shook her head. Even with their smaller guns a solid broadside from them now, straight up the *Diligent's* unprotected stern, would devastate the naval vessel. She could not bring herself to do it, however, and told herself it had nothing to do with Reid being aboard the ship. No, she just didn't believe in butchery, or unnecessary violence. Yes, that was the only reason.

As they passed behind the frigate she saw the helmsman haul on the wheel, trying to bring the *Diligent* about, and tensed. If they managed the turn they'd be in a position to fire a full broadside at the *Deadshot*, and at this range there was no way they would survive such an onslaught.

But the *Diligent* had been too focused on her prey. She had not paid attention to other details—like how close they'd drifted to shore, or the depth of water. Belle winced instinctively when she heard the crunch of a hull grinding against sand and rock, but then had to repress the urge to cheer. This was why she'd angled them so close to land. She'd known there were shallows lying in wait here.

A pity Reid had not.

With its shallower keel, the *Deadshot* skipped easily across those same shallows, gliding past the *Diligent* close enough they could almost touch. The crew rushed to the stern and opened fire

with their muskets, and their commanding officer followed behind, claiming a space along the taffrail. Despite the hail of bullets Belle hopped up on the *Deadshot's* rail and grinned as she passed Reid, who had the decency to call to his men, "Belay firing!" Then, as the firing ceased, he tipped his hat. "Well played, madam," he called out. "Your reputation for boldness is well deserved."

"You are too kind, commander," she shouted back, and swept off her hat in a bow—though carefully, so that her long black wig remained in place. "Thank you for the dance!" Then they were clear and the *Deadshot* continued on, leaving the lightened *Mère de Nacre* to slowly correct its course and the *Diligent* to carefully kedge off the shoal, using small anchors on boats to pull itself out of the shallows and back to deeper waters.

The crew all let out a cheer then. "Here's to Cannon Belle," Quince shouted. "Cleverest captain in the German Ocean!"

Belle bowed and spun about. "Thanks, boys!" she told them all. "Now let's be off before the good commander comes looking for another round!"

There'll be time enough for that, she told herself. After all, Reid had made it clear he was up for a race. And as long as he let her lead, she was optimistic about her odds of coming in first.