

Pirate's Temptress

By

Maryse Dawson

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Chapter One

A Dish Served Cold

Cape Inn, Nassau, 1714...

"Will you take wine, Captain?" Tara Flanders eyed the handsome pirate before her. He was leaning nonchalantly against the bedroom door frame, his broad arms folded, his dark eyes assessing her lustfully.

"Nay, milady. I'll have rum."

Tara's heart quickened at the tone of his voice: deep and powerful. He was not a man to be played with, and yet, that was exactly what she intended to do! Taking a deep breath, she sauntered over to him, swinging her hips enticingly, and handed him the glass.

"Your rum, Captain," her voice purred softly as she looked up at him. God, he was huge. He made the room at the inn look tiny in comparison. Long, dark, shoulder-length hair framed a chiseled jaw and compelling eyes. His body was strong and lithe from years at sea; his long, muscular legs were encased in tight britches. The man was a handsome devil, she admitted to herself grudgingly. She acknowledged her attraction to him, yet abhorred it.

Many a time when their paths had crossed, she'd found herself unable to tear her eyes away from his masculine form. His even, white teeth and hearty laugh drew her in like a moth to a flame.

His eyes never left hers as he accepted the glass and took a deep draught of the fiery liquid, smacking his lips appreciatively when the drink hit the spot.

Despite her brave facade, Tara felt a flush steal across her cheeks as he continued to assess her. Was she really going to go through with this? She'd been planning it for years, but now, standing before him, her nerves began to desert her.

Suddenly, without warning, he threw the glass into the fireplace, and she found herself in his arms, his lips claiming her own. Despite her misgivings, fire seared through her belly as his hands moulded her bottom to his groin, his kiss leaving no quarter.

He broke away briefly to pull her towards the bed. She went willingly.

"You're a fiery wench, Tara. 'Tis about time you became mine!" he growled as he pushed

her back on the bed.

Tara's chest rose and fell with heady excitement as he lowered his britches. God, he was big. She'd had a few men over the years, but not one of them compared to Captain Nathaniel Butler. He was one hundred percent solid muscle, and she couldn't wait to have him inside her. Eagerly, she wriggled out of her own clothes and waited to receive him. She was willing, and oh, most definitely ready for him.

* * *

Nathaniel Butler couldn't believe his luck. Fiery, red-haired Tara Flanders was his for the taking. A notorious female pirate, he'd wanted her for months, but she'd always pushed him away, refusing to even consider his advances. What had changed her mind, he didn't know. But suffice to say, he wasn't going to let the opportunity slip away. Her long legs opened for him when he pushed his pulsating length inside her moist core. He sighed with undisguised pleasure as her body encased him, and her soft voice mewled beneath him. She arched her back as he began to thrust deep inside her.

Reaching forward, he parted her blouse and cupped her ample breasts. She was beautiful. A goddess. He lowered his mouth to hers and demanded that she respond to him.

* * *

Any qualms Tara had previously felt soon disappeared under the experienced hands of Captain Butler. He knew exactly how to please a woman, and it wasn't long before she was lost to him. His large, masculine hands kneaded her bottom as he thrust into her again and again, his manhood leaving her breathless with want.

His mouth caressed her lips, moving lower to her breasts as he pulled out of her. Tara cried out at the sudden loss, but Nathaniel quickly rolled her over onto her front and raised her hips to receive him. She felt him at her entrance, and then he was inside her once again, thrusting deeply into her. Never having been taken in such a position, Tara was a little unnerved, but as she felt her orgasm build, she lost all train of thought. She cried out as she reached her pinnacle at the same time that she felt Nathaniel stiffen as he released himself inside her.

Satiated, they both fell sideways onto the bed, still joined, his body spooning hers.

When her breathing returned to normal, Tara lazily trailed a hand down his thigh behind her. "We have the room all night, Captain."

"Aye, milady pirate, and I intend to make full use of it!" He pulled out of her and rolled

her over to face him. "You, milady, will be begging for mercy by the morning!"

"Am I not already, Captain?" she murmured, nipping his lower lip with her small teeth.

Nathaniel growled and captured her wrists above her head. "Not enough, milady, not nearly enough!"

Any words she would have uttered were lost as his lips once again claimed hers for his own.

* * *

Nathaniel awoke to the sound of the hustle and bustle of Port Nassau. God, what a night. They'd made love several times. The woman was insatiable. Rolling over in bed, he was surprised to see it empty, apart from a note placed on the indented pillow.

Frowning, he sat up, and after running a hand over his sleep-filled face, he picked up the note and began to read:

Good day, Captain Butler. I thank you for a wonderful night and even more for the key. Oh, and I told the innkeeper that you'd be paying for the room.

Yours,

Tara Flanders x

Nathaniel's face fell as he clapped a hand to his chest, feeling for his neck chain. *Bitch!* She'd stolen the key from around his neck! How hadn't he noticed? His eyes fell on the bottle of rum. Of course! The rum! Now he knew why she'd been so insistent that he have another glass during their bouts of lovemaking. Rum dulled the senses. He cursed aloud and stood up. So all along, she'd played a game to get her hands on his key, and ultimately, his treasure. But there he had her – or did he? His treasure trove was hidden on a small island, and only a few members of his crew knew where to find it. They were a loyal bunch, and he doubted they'd be easily bribed.

His hands curled into fists as he pondered what to do. Did she have knowledge of its whereabouts, or was she just playing a game? But then why bother stealing the key to the chest, otherwise?

Angry beyond belief, he leapt from the bed and began to dress. No one got the better of Captain Nathaniel Butler. She would rue this day!

Aboard the Tempest...

Tara stood on the poop deck of her ship and looked out to sea. The horizon was a shimmering shade of blue; calm and tranquility surrounded her. She smiled to herself as she thought of Captain Butler. She'd bet her last guinea that aboard his ship, life was certainly not tranquil. She'd bet he was livid.

Would he give chase? Maybe, maybe not. Either way, she was intent on stealing his treasure before he could get to her, and whether he realised it or not, she knew where it was kept. It had taken a few months, but with the help of her twin brother, Thomas, they'd managed to find out the secret location.

Thomas had, under false pretences, gained a job aboard Nathaniel's ship, the Devil's Horn. It had taken him a lot of courage and nerve, but he'd finally found the map showing the whereabouts of Nathaniel Butler's treasure. Memorising the location, he'd reported back to his sister, and they'd finalised their plans.

Now, they would take back what was rightfully theirs! Nathaniel Butler had plundered several of her father's ships, and in the process, left them penniless. Her father had taken to his bed and had never recovered. Seventeen-year-old twins, Thomas and Tara, had been left heartbroken and penniless and with only one thing on their minds – revenge!

They'd taken to piracy a few months after their father's death, and now, ten years later, they were joint owners of the Tempest: a sleek frigate. Revenge was a dish best served cold, and theirs was colder than ice.

Tara sucked in a lungful of salty sea air and smiled happily. She hadn't felt this good in years. All her plotting and scheming had finally paid off, and now she was on her way to steal his treasure from under his very nose, and he couldn't do a thing about it!

Small Island in the Caribbean...

"Are you sure this is the one, Tom?" Tara's voice held a note of doubt as she looked through the spyglass at the little island before them.

Tom rolled his eyes at his sister. "Of course. Do you take me for a fool? All we have to do is find the hut. I scrutinised that map closely. We only have one shot at this, Tara. We have to find it!"

Tara lowered the spyglass and nodded grimly. "All right, Tom, lead the way."

Tom called out commands to the members of crew that would be accompanying them, and after lowering themselves into a small cock boat, they rowed ashore.

Securing the boat along the sand, Tara, Tom and two other members of crew, Sully and Jerome, made their way into the forest. Bird song echoed loudly through the trees as they cautiously moved single file along a meandering path. Sully ducked nervously as a startled bird took to flight in front of him.

"I don't like this, Jerome," he hissed over his shoulder. "If Cap'n Butler gets a 'old of us, we be dead meat!"

Jerome spat out a wadge of his tobacco before replying, "Where's ya backbone, Sully? 'E ain't gonna get us. We be way ahead o 'im. Now get movin'!"

After a few more minutes, Tom suddenly stopped, the others falling in behind him. He looked through his spyglass and smiled. "We've found it. It's got to be the one!"

Tara grabbed the spyglass off him and looked for herself. A lone hut sat in a clearing ahead of them. "It looks deserted. Do you think he keeps a guard there?"

Tom shook his head. "No. I doubt anyone would willingly come to such a remote island. But to be on the safe side, we'll be as inconspicuous as we can and be ready to fight." He placed a hand on his cutlass, ready to withdraw it at a moment's notice. The others followed suit, including Tara.

Quietly, they made their way to the hut, keeping as low as possible and not making a sound. The insects buzzed loudly around them, and the birdsong echoed throughout the canopy of trees. Other than that, there seemed no sign of life.

Reaching the edge of the copse of trees, they hunkered down and again surveyed the area to make sure they were alone. Satisfied, Tom stood back up and beckoned the others to follow.

The hut was locked, but with the use of a nearby log as a battering ram, they were soon inside. Tara's face fell as she found the hut bare of any treasure. All it contained were two wooden chairs and a small table with a couple of plates and several tankards on it.

She slammed her hand on the table angrily. "Where is it, Tom? It has to be here!"

Tom scanned the room, looking for clues. "Well, he ain't going to leave it on display, it's got to be hidden here somewhere." He tapped a finger on his mouth as his eyes roamed around the hut until, suddenly, with a calculating look, he fixed his gaze on the mat below the table.

"Sully, give me a hand to move this table."

Between them, they lifted the table and moved it to the side of the room. Tom leaned down on his haunches and lifted the woven mat up, giving a low whistle as it revealed a trap door beneath.

"Looks like we could've found our treasure. Stand back a bit, I'm going to open it. Don't want no rats coming out and frightening Tara."

"I think I'd be more frightened of seeing Captain Butler than a damned rat, Tom!" Tara declared. "Hurry, please!"

"We've a night's sailing between us, Tara. Quit your worrying."

"Easy for you to say. 'Twasn't you that stole the key!"

Tom stood upright and placed his hands on his hips. "Don't tell me you're having second thoughts." His voice held a note of dismay. She immediately reassured him.

"No, no, of course not! This is the main reason we turned to piracy. Just hurry. I have a mind to keep as far away from that man as possible." Her thoughts turned to their lovemaking, and a shot of desire ran through her. Yes, it was best they never met again.

Tom raised his eyebrows. "And I, also. Now, stand back, and let me lift the cover."

With a lot of heaving and pulling, Tom and Sully managed to lift the heavy wooden door. It fell back onto the floor with a loud thud, scattering a layer of dust around the hut.

Tara waved her hand around to clear the air and then peered down into the opening. "It's awfully dark down there, Tom." She turned to Jerome. "Where are those torches, Jerome?"

Jerome reached into the large sack he was carrying and pulled out several wooden torches. He quickly took two outside, and with a practiced hand, he lit them, using sparks from two flints. Satisfied they were fully alight, he took them back to Tom before returning to keep a look out at the door.

Tom leaned down and swung the torch around. "Yes! I can see a chest. That's got to be it!" He stood back up and held his hand out to Tara. "Where's the key?"

Tara reached into her cleavage and pulled out the key she'd stolen from Captain Butler. Slipping the chain it adhered to from around her neck, she handed it to Tom. "Please God, it fits!"

"Aye!" echoed Tom.

Quickly, he turned around and descended the narrow wooden steps. Sully immediately followed.

Tara waited nervously for them to reappear, clutching her hands and willing them to make haste. With a lot of heaving and struggling, Tom and Sully managed to lift the heavy chest up into the hut. They slid it forward onto the wooden floor and climbed back out. Tom looked triumphant.

"The key fit! Take a look, Tara. There's a fortune inside!"

Tara lifted the heavy lid and peered in. She gasped. It was full to the brim with gold coins, pearls, bracelets and goblets. Their plan had worked!

Jerome called over from the doorway, a note of alarm in his voice, "There's a fair wind brewing, Cap'n. Reckon ye should 'urry. I don't like the look o' it!"

Tara walked to the door and stood beside him. What had previously been a clear blue sky was beginning to darken rapidly. She turned back to Tom. "We have to hurry. We need to get back on board before the storm hits. Our little boats won't stand a chance if the sea turns angry!"

Tom relocked the chest and handed the key back to Tara. "Guard that with your life, Tara."

She slipped it back around her neck and tucked the key back into her cleavage. "Don't worry, Tom. I intend to."

She followed them as they made their way back into the surrounding trees, leaving the hut bereft of its treasure. Tara sighed wistfully. What she'd give to see Captain Butler's face fall when he realised his treasure had been stolen.

As the small group walked back, they made slow progress because of the heavy chest. The wind began to increase in intensity around them, wildly blowing the tree tops and scaring off the birds. They approached the beach and looked out to sea in dismay. The sky was an inky black on the horizon, and jagged streaks of lightning could be seen. The waves, that had been so gentle earlier, now crashed menacingly against the shoreline.

"We ain't gonna get back to the ship tonight. We'll have to stay put," declared Tom.

"We can't, Tom!" Tara shouted above the noise of the wind. "If the Devil's Horn gets here, we'll be looking at Davey's Locker before we know it!"

Tom grabbed Tara by the shoulders. "And if we go out in that, it'll be the same! Look at the sea, you know I speak sense!"

Tara held her hair back with her hand as it whipped about her face and looked at the foaming sea. White frothy waves almost obliterated the view of their ship. To take the little cock

boats out in such weather would be sheer madness, but then wouldn't staying put be just as bad?

Tom tugged on her arm. "Come on, we have to take shelter. Captain Butler ain't going to make it here...not in this storm," he reasoned.

Reluctantly, but knowing she had little choice, Tara followed her brother and the rest of the party as they made their way back towards the hut – its underground room their only shelter from the oncoming storm.

* * *

Several hours later, the storm finally abated, leaving a clear blue sky as though nothing had occurred. They had been safe below the hut, which was now reduced to shredded walls that were barely standing, and Tara couldn't wait to see the back of it.

Tom, Sully and Jerome took turns heaving the treasure chest back to the shoreline. As they approached the opening onto the sand, Tara stopped suddenly, her eyes opening wide with alarm. The Devil's Horn was docked alongside her own ship!

Before she had time to even think how it had managed to ride the storm, she spotted Captain Butler and several of his crew heading their way along the beach.

She gasped aloud and ducked down. But it was too late. They'd been spotted.

"Run!" she yelled, heading back the way they had come. Tom and Jerome dropped the treasure chest and ran for their lives, Sully quickly following. Their lives were now in acute danger, and the only thing on their minds was evading the enemy.

Tara could hardly breathe, such was her fear. He truly was a devil, like his ship's namesake, appearing out of nowhere. How had he ridden that storm? His ship was bigger than hers, but even so, in that storm? She cursed aloud. The devil truly was on his side!

She could hear yelling behind her as they closed the space between them. Oh, Lord, give her the strength to get away. If he got hold of her, there was no knowing what he could do! Quickly, she withdrew her cutlass, ready to fight. Suddenly, she felt a hand clamp down on her arm, stalling her progress.

"Gotcha!" snarled Captain Butler, his deep voice sending tremors of fear through her body. She swung around, her cutlass pointed straight at his midriff. He immediately stepped back.

"So, milady, it's a fight you want!"

"Stay away from me, you devil!" She swiped her cutlass through the air menacingly in

warning. "I have no compunction in using this!"

He smiled wickedly and withdrew his own blade. "Neither do I, milady." They circled each other, their eyes locking in battle. "You stole my treasure, and I intend to retrieve it!"

Again, she swung her cutlass at him. This time, he retaliated. Steel clashed against steel. His sword arm was much stronger than hers, and she realised she was going to have to fight hard to win. She jumped back, breathing hard. Just then, she heard Tom cry out. She spun round just in time to see him overpowered by two of Nathaniel's crew. That was her undoing. Captain Butler struck like lightning, knocking the cutlass from her hand and wrapping his strong arms around her body. She tried to shrug him off, struggling valiantly against his superior strength. But he held her fast.

"Stop struggling, you ain't going nowhere except where I tell you!"

"Get your filthy hands off me!"

"That's not what you said the other night," he hissed, close to her ear. "In fact, I distinctly remember you asking for more."

"Shame on you, you impertinent bastard," snapped Tara, pulling her head as far away from him as was possible.

"Shame on you, milady pirate, for your duplicity!" His hand closed on the key chain around her neck, and he wrenched it off, ignoring her cry of protest. He looked up as his men returned with the other members of Tara's crew.

"We got 'em all, Cap'n," said his first mate.

"Aye, and the treasure," growled another crewmember as he and a fellow pirate swung the chest down onto the sandy ground.

"Take the culprits to the cock boats, and you can lock 'em up in the hold when we return to the ship. I'll deal with this one!"

Tom looked at Tara and went to say something, but she silently warned him to keep his identity hidden. Understanding, he hung his head and allowed himself to be led away.

Her attention swung back to Nathaniel as he spoke. "You, milady, are going to pay for your deceit. Now, follow me!"

Aboard the Devil's Horn...

"Pig! Swine! *Loathsome dog!*" Tara spat out heatedly, struggling to free herself from Nathaniel's huge arms.

"Be still, wench!"

She struggled some more and kicked out, her heeled boot making contact with his shin. She smiled as she heard him mutter an expletive, rejoicing in his pain. *That'll teach him*, she thought triumphantly. But her elation didn't last long – she quickly found herself flung over his shoulder and a sharp smack applied to her rump. She cried out and beat her fists into his broad back, but his stride didn't alter. "Put me down!"

"Oh, I mean to, milady."

"What do you mean?" Oh, God! What was he going to do? Feed her to the sharks? Make her walk the plank? True fear began to kick in. "Can't we discuss this like human beings?"

"Nay, milady, the time for discussion has passed. Only punishment awaits."

"*No!*" Tara wailed, beating her fists some more and trying to kick her legs. His grip tightened. "Where are you taking me?" she asked nervously as they descended below deck.

"Here!" He put her down, and with a tight grip on her arm, led her into his cabin. She was surprised to see how neat and tidy everything was, having somehow expected it to be akin to a pig sty. He thrust her away from him as he turned and shut the door, locking it so she couldn't escape. He held the key up for her to see. "This key won't be as easy to steal as the last, milady!"

Tara raised her chin and stared at him defiantly, doing her utmost to hide her fear from him. "What do you intend to do with me?"

For a few minutes, Nathaniel stared at her, his face implacable. But then he turned and picked up one of the wooden chairs sitting against the wall. She watched as he placed it in the centre of the cabin and then calmly walked towards her. She backed away, her heart beating fast.

"W-What are you going to do?"

"Punish you, milady, and as far as I'm concerned, there's only one fair way to punish a lady, be she a pirate or not!" His hand clamped around her upper arm, and struggle as she might, she soon found herself face down over his lap as he sat on the chair, his intention clear.

"No! You can't mean to do this!"

"By *this*, I presume you mean spank you? Well, aye, that is precisely what I intend to do. You stole from me, and that, milady, is a heinous crime!"

He unclasped her trousers, and she suddenly felt a cold draft of air as he pulled them

down.

"No! No! You got your treasure back – now let me go!" She tried to wriggle backwards, but his hand landed sharply on her bare bottom, making her shriek.

"Oh, nay, milady, I may have my treasure, but I need retribution. No crime goes unpunished aboard my ship."

She shrieked aloud as his hand came back down on her plump cheeks. Never had she been spanked before. It was awful. His hand felt like it was made of iron, as it rained down smacks on her soft behind, each one echoing loudly throughout the cabin.

"Please, Captain, *stop!*"

Two more. "Nay, milady." Another two cracks of his hand. "You stole something of mine!" Each word was accented by a loud crack of his hand. And he continued...She screamed, she pleaded, *but still it continued*. Each cheek alternatively took the brunt of his hand, the force jolting her forwards.

Before long, she could feel the heat in her buttocks, as if they were on fire. Blast him, and blast his iron hand!

When she thought she could take no more, he stopped, his palm resting on her skin. Her breathing erratic, Tara tried to reason with him once more.

* * *

Nathaniel listened as her small voice rose up to him from beneath her curtain of hair.

"Please, Captain Butler, I'm truly sorry for what I did."

He could tell by her tone that she wasn't sorry at all and was just trying to pacify him. He trailed a finger down one buttock, admiring the plump swell of her heated flesh. She did have a magnificent bottom, even if she was a low-down, conniving thief.

His hand fell once again as his anger leapt to the fore. The smacks began again. "Sorry? I don't think you've even begun to feel sorry, milady. But you will."

Half a dozen more sharp cracks of his hand touched her tender flesh.

He listened to her squeals of pain and relished them. She would learn her lesson. He was the stronger pirate, and if she thought to make a fool of him, then she was a fool herself.

When her cries turned into sobs, he decided perhaps she'd had enough. He stopped and pulled her upright, sitting her on one of his strong thighs. When her breathing finally calmed, he asked her a question.

"Why did you steal from me?"

She raised her eyes to his. "Do I need a reason? I'm a pirate, aren't I?"

He studied her as she stared back at him. "Aye, but I can see in your eyes that you're hiding something. Tell me!"

"No!"

"Then I shall find out by other means!" His look had turned fierce, and Tara's eyes widened in alarm.

"What other means?" Without a word, he pushed her off his lap and strode to the desk. Tara quickly pulled up her trousers, fastening them at the waist just as he returned. Grabbing her by the shoulders, he pushed her back down on the chair and put her arms behind her back, fastening them securely with rope. She winced as her sore bottom hit the hard seat, and she struggled to break free. "What other means? I demand that you tell me!"

"You are in no position to demand anything, milady!" The door slammed as he left the room, leaving Tara's angry expletives to fall on deaf ears.

* * *

When her temper calmed, Tara sat limply in the chair. Her bottom was burning, and the wooden chair did nothing to alleviate her tender buttocks. She shifted position, but that only seemed to fire up the pain more. She grimaced and uttered a pitiful moan.

Damned man! Despite herself, though, she couldn't help but admire him for his strength. Not only was he a damn fine lover, but he was a man who brooked no disobedience. She licked her lips and gasped as a wave of desire swept over her. She immediately admonished herself. What was wrong with her? The man was a heathen, a swine! How could that turn her on? He'd just spanked her, for goodness' sake. She pulled in her bottom lip with her teeth, as she fought to control another wave of desire. Closing her eyes, she wondered what was happening to her. How could she admire a man like that? Angry at her situation, and more so at her reaction to it, Tara sat and brooded.

Much later, and with Tara's temper foremost, Nathaniel returned to his cabin. Tara glared angrily at him, as he watched her from the doorway. His eyes coolly assessed her.

"Still fighting, milady? I'd have thought you would have resigned yourself to your fate by now."

"Ha! What gave you that idea?"

He came and stopped in front of her, an evil smile lighting up his eyes. "Why, milady, because I have your brother captive in my hold!"

Despite herself, she gasped. "My brother? What makes you say that?" She held her breath, waiting for his reply. How had he discovered Tom was her twin – had he tortured him?

"Oh, you may think of me as a – what was it now? Aye, that was it, a pig and a swine, but I do have a good memory for faces. Did you seriously think that devoid of his beard, I wouldn't recognize him as one of my crew? Under a little interrogation, it didn't take long for him to tell me his real name."

"What did you do to him? If you've hurt him, I'll slaughter you myself!" Tara spat, her lip curled back angrily.

"Have no fear, milady. Your brother is as yet unharmed, but as to his future, well, that all depends on you."

She stopped struggling and stared at him. "Me?"

"Aye. In exchange for his freedom...I would have yours!"

"Mine?" Her chest rose and fell, as the implication of his words set in. "You want me?"

"Aye, for all your sins."

"What about Sully and Jerome? Are they still alive?"

"Aye. They would be released also. But if so much as a finger is raised against this ship, you, milady, will be the one to suffer!"

Tara stared at him, a mixture of emotions rushing through her. If she stayed aboard The Devil's Horn, her fate was sealed. She would be at the mercy of Captain Butler. Her heart fluttered uneasily at the thought. But what choice did she have? She knew the answer to that before she even thought it: none. Her brother's life was as precious to her as her own. She raised her chin valiantly.

"It would seem, Captain Butler, that my fate is sealed. Do I have your word that they will be released unharmed? May I see them?"

"Upon my honour, milady, they will be released without harm. Do I have your word you will obey me in all things?"

All things? *Never!* Tara thought. She kept her face straight as she replied, "Of course."

* * *

As Nathaniel untied Tara's wrists, he silently laughed to himself, knowing by her face

that she wouldn't comply. He admired her resilience and had expected no less from her, which was one of the things that intrigued him about her and set her apart from other women...and one of the reasons he wanted her all to himself. He had a mind he would be spanking her pretty bottom again very soon, with her attitude.

He watched as she rubbed her wrists to renew the circulation, all the while avoiding eye contact with him.

"Before I take you to your brother to bid farewell, I would have the truth as to why you stole my treasure."

She looked at him, her face showing a range of emotions, and then she suddenly blurted out, "Because you caused my father's death!"

Whatever he had expected to fall from her mouth – it hadn't been that. "Your father? What was his name?"

"Tobias Bartholomew, owner of the Bartholomew fleet!"

"Tobias Bartholomew was your father?"

She nodded. "Aye, Tobias Bartholomew Flanders! And you stole every last penny we ever had! It ruined him – left him a broken man. He took to his sickbed and never recovered." She flew at him and beat her fists against his chest. "I was only taking back what was rightfully ours!"

He captured her hands and held them to her side. "Yours? I think not, milady. Your father was no honest man, as you seem to think. As hard as you may find this, your father was just as much a brigand as we are. Do you think he came upon his fortune entirely by fair means?"

Tara nodded. "Of course, he did! How dare you imply otherwise!"

"Oh, I dare, milady! For I know it to be the truth. We came upon many a merchant ship with high expectations of what treasures it may hold...only to discover that one of your father's ships had been there before us. He may have been trading under an authorised business name, but believe me, he was just as much a pirate as you and I!"

"That must have been a mistake. Perhaps the other ships attacked him first, in which case if he'd won, then their ill gotten gains were his for the taking!"

"Nay, milady. They never attacked. Your father came upon them in the night, silent as a sea serpent. They never had a chance. His ships were mighty and armed to the teeth."

"As are yours," she pointed out.

"Aye, like mine, but he took too much, milady. He was greedy. I merely took back what he had plundered himself."

"You're lying!"

"Nay, milady, I am not. That's why I took vengeance upon him." He paused and stared at her intently. "You see, we are akin to one another. Both our hearts were full of vengeance."

He pulled her resisting form to his, her small fists doing little to hinder him. "So I understand what beats beneath your breast." He placed his large hand against her bosom, and Tara gasped at his touch. He ran a thumb over her nipple, which hardened in response.

"You know nothing," she breathed softly, her senses spiraling out of control. "Y-you ruined my father...us. We were left with nothing."

"Aye, 'tis true, but I am not sorry for it. I believe that what will be, will be. Fate makes us what we are today, and you, milady, are now mine."

His lips covered hers, and all thoughts of vengeance disappeared as she relinquished her body to his.

* * *

Later, out on the main deck, Tom glared up at Captain Butler as he stood watching him from the poop deck. He'd been led up from the hold with Jerome and Sully and had to blink rapidly to adjust his eyes to the bright sunshine.

"Tom!" He found Tara racing towards him. He embraced her warmly before setting her down.

"Tara! You are unharmed?"

"Aye, Tom. All's well. Did Captain Butler harm you?"

"No. We've all been treated as well as can be, under the circumstances. Why have we been let go?"

Tara took a deep breath and revealed that she would be staying aboard the Devil's Horn, and he would be leaving without her. Tom gasped, and she continued, trying to reassure him. "Tom, worry not for me. I-I have feelings for Captain Butler, and although I know that may come as a bit of a shock, 'tis true."

Finding his voice, Tom replied, astonished, "But Tara, he's Nathaniel Butler! *The* Nathaniel Butler!"

Tara placed a finger on his lips. "I know, Tom, but 'tis fine, truly. 'Twould seem there are

many things our father kept hidden from us, Tom. I will explain all when next we meet, but just know for now that I am to remain aboard this ship, and I will be quite safe."

He searched her face for signs of fear, but there were none. Grabbing her hand, he held it to his breast. "I know not what has happened between you, but I can see you are resolute. We are twins, Tara. What you feel – I feel. I shall know if you're in danger, and I shall come for you. You have my word!"

"Aye, Tom, I know it. But go now and with a good heart. I do this willingly." She smiled, putting on a brave face. The last thing she wanted him to do was pick a fight with Nathaniel. She knew who would win. Nathaniel was adamant that her father had brought his downfall upon himself, and she knew, somehow, she had to get to the bottom of it. She needed to know the truth – for Tom and herself. For now, she intended to keep her brother safe, and if that meant staying aboard this ship, then so be it.

Satisfied that his sister was truthful, but nonetheless a little perplexed at her change in attitude, Tom left with Sully and Jerome in the small cockboat. Once aboard the Tempest, he gave her one last, long look before ordering his crew to set sail.

Tara watched the Tempest as it sailed away before turning to find Captain Butler standing behind her. He stared at her, his eyes deep and intense.

"'Twould seem, milady pirate, that you now belong to me!"

He led her back to his cabin, and as she stepped inside, she decided that although she didn't know what her future held, one thing she did know was that her fate lay in this man's hands, and that thought sent a tremor of excitement coursing through her body.