

KEYS
—OF—
PROMISE
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LOVE'S RESCUE



A NOVEL

Christine Johnson



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Christine Johnson, *Love's Rescue*
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For my husband, my captain





Hope deferred maketh the heart sick:
but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life.

Proverbs 13:12



Prologue

October 11, 1846

The gale nearly knocked Elizabeth Benjamin flat. In all of her sixteen years, she'd never experienced such terrible winds, and Key West enjoyed its share of storms. She held fast to her brother's hand. At eleven, Charlie usually rebelled at her mothering. Not today.

"Maybe we shouldn't be here." His words could barely be heard above the howling wind.

Elizabeth was beginning to think the same, but time had nearly run out. Within days, she must sail for Charleston, where she was expected to secure a prominent match. That meant leaving her beloved Key West and the man who had captured her affections. Today might be her only opportunity to change the course her parents had set out for her.

She and Charlie had nearly reached the harbor, where Rourke O'Malley's wrecking sloop was moored. Just thinking of him bolstered her courage. If he could endure such weather, so could she. Though the rain now pelted down, ruining the fine blue

muslin gown she'd donned just for him, maybe he'd see her as courageous.

"Can we go home?" Charlie asked.

She yanked her brother toward the wharves. "We need to secure our skiff."

The twelve-foot boat belonged to Charlie, but he only went sailing when she bribed him. She adored the freedom of the turquoise seas and seized every chance to improve her seafaring skills. That secret love cost her many an evening helping Charlie complete his studies.

When she'd told her maid this morning why they must leave the house in such weather, Anabelle had shaken her head and proclaimed that Mother would tan both their hides when she found out.

"We will be home before Mother returns," Elizabeth had assured her. She could wriggle anything past the girl who giggled with her every night after the lamps were blown out. "She'll never know we were gone."

The striking, caramel-colored maid grinned. "You're a fool for him."

Elizabeth had pretended she didn't know who Anabelle meant, which was silly, considering their every conversation centered on him. Rourke O'Malley wasn't the richest wrecker in Key West, but he was by far the handsomest and most daring. He wore his sun-streaked dark hair pulled back at the nape in the fashion popular decades before. His bronzed skin and eyes the color of the emerald depths made her stomach flutter. His smile left her speechless. For the first time in her life she'd seen an advantage to being born female.

If only he would stop treating her like the barefoot child she'd once been. At the last dance, he'd chosen older girls for

partners. With her, he talked of the voyage across the straits to his native Harbour Island, or Briland as he sometimes called it, of turtling and wrecking. He inquired after her fishing exploits and noted how she'd sailed Charlie's skiff past his sloop on a perfect beam reach. Her excellent seamanship ought to show him how perfectly matched they were, but instead he'd danced with empty-headed girls. He'd even bowed and kissed her friend Caroline's hand, but not hers. Never hers.

Well, today he'd see her as a woman.

Elizabeth stomped forward, pulling the reluctant Charlie with her. They turned off Caroline Street to take their usual route to the wharves, but the boardwalk across the tidal pond was flooded. Though Charlie begged to go back, Elizabeth refused. By the morrow, Rourke might have sailed or, even worse, begun to court one of those addle-brained girls who whispered behind their fans whenever he walked into a room. The ship to Charleston might arrive to whisk her away. Good things did not come to those who waited.

So she tugged Charlie another block to Whitehead Street, which had a small bridge over the narrow end of the pond. Even there, the water ran deeper than she'd ever seen, nearly to the planks. If this gale continued, the bridge would be underwater too, necessitating an even lengthier return.

After they rounded the corner onto Front Street, the wharves lay ahead, but the two-story warehouses blocked her view of the vessels except for a smattering of mastheads. Usually the harbor was so full of ships that the masts sprouted like grass. Some of the masters must have decided to haul anchor and ride out the gale at sea.

Not Rourke. Please, not Rourke.

Heart pounding, Elizabeth hurried her pace over the coral

gravel. One foot landed in a puddle, drenching her kid leather shoe. The closer they drew to the harbor, the more water pooled on the ground. Soon wet feet could not be avoided. The skies loosed again. Elizabeth squinted into the windblown rain, trying to make out the warehouses that had been so clear moments before.

The wind shoved each breath back into her chest, which was already aching from the stays she'd insisted Anabelle cinch particularly tight. Only when they reached the lee of Tift's warehouse could she take in enough air. Though this warehouse was built solidly, the old one nearby creaked and moaned. Charlie pointed fearfully at its roof, which had already lost a few shingles.

Elizabeth could not be deterred by a shaky old building.

She pulled Charlie around the corner and into the full force of the wind. The seas, whipped up by the northeast gale, crashed over the piers and sprayed high into the air. The water, ordinarily several feet below the docks at high tide, now overran them. Charlie's tiny skiff, once moored with the other dinghies at the base of the nearest pier, was gone. The few vessels left in the harbor strained against their anchor lines, barely visible in the howling mists. With the water so high, they looked as if they could sail straight onto Duval Street.

Charlie's hand gripped hers even more tightly. Perhaps he'd been right.

She couldn't see Rourke's sloop through the rain and sea spray. He must have left with those who chose to weather the storm at sea. All her preparations had been for naught. If he did not return once the storm passed, she had no choice but to sail for Charleston. He would return. He had to return.

"We'll go home," she shouted, but the wind carried her words away.

Charlie clung to her. Terror danced in his eyes.

She motioned back toward the way they'd come. This had been a bad idea. Best return while they could. But before she could move, a terrible blast of wind caught her voluminous skirts and shoved her to the ground. She lost hold of Charlie, and the slight boy fell to his knees.

She reached for him, but her fingers brushed just short of his hand. "Charlie!"

He could not hear.

She tried to rise, but the wind pressed her down. It suffocated like a blanket pressed over her face. Only by lowering her mouth to the crook of her elbow could she draw in a breath.

Her brother struggled to his feet only to tumble farther away.

She crawled toward him. The rough coral rock ripped at her lace and bows, and sand ground into the fine muslin gown.

Then she saw the waves. They'd crested the wharves and rolled toward her, turning the land into a shallow sea. The first wave dampened her hands and knees. The next rolled in deeper. She tried again to stand, to get to Charlie.

He stared at her, his eyes wide. He could not swim, had refused to learn.

Oh, that she had not donned six petticoats and a bustle. In the murky water, the garments tangled around her legs and weighed her down. Oh, that she'd listened to Anabelle and stayed home where she belonged. If anything happened . . .

Elizabeth could not allow doom to seize a toehold. This moment required courage.

She cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled, "I'm coming for you!"

Charlie showed no sign he'd heard her.

With all her strength she rose to her hands and knees and

inched toward her brother. He'd reached high ground near the old warehouse and was safely out of the water. If he could get into the lee of the building, he could stand. If he had the strength. If the water didn't rise higher.

Again she attempted to stand. The swirling water knocked her down. She cried out. Seawater filled her mouth. She gagged on the brine and coughed it out. When she'd regained her balance, she noticed the surging sea had carried her even farther from her brother.

Despair knocked, but she could not let it take hold. She must reach her brother, but how? Another wave rolled past, and she struggled to hold her ground.

The sea! Rather than fighting the waves, she could use them to her advantage. If she allowed each one to push her forward and angled toward the warehouse, she could reach her brother and bring him to safety.

Crack!

The sharp report came from above. Looking up, she saw with horror that the warehouse roof heaved up and down. Shingles swirled like a maddened flock of gulls. A piano-sized section tilted upward, a giant flap of heavy wood, and then a gust ripped it free. For one agonizing moment the chunk hung in midair. Then it began to spin. Down, down, down.

“Charlie!”

He did not hear.

She waved her arms.

He did not see. The section of roof struck him on the back of the legs. He flopped to the ground like a rag doll.

“Charlie!” This cry proved as useless as the first, for he did not move so much as a finger.

Fear drove her limbs through the churning waters. He could

not be dead. God would not let an innocent boy die. Charlie hadn't even wanted to come to the wharf. She'd talked him into it.

Please, God. Let him live.

She hoped her fervent plea would be enough to capture divine attention. Yet as she drew near and saw the pallor of her brother's face, she knew that her words had blown away on the wind.



1



Four Years Later Off the Florida Keys

Crack!

The sharp report jolted Elizabeth from the muddle of dream and memory.

A quick survey of her surroundings confirmed she was indeed aboard the schooner *Victory*, not battling the hurricane that had devastated Key West. The dull light from the gimbaled oil lamp revealed little of the cabin's mahogany paneling, but it illuminated the worried faces of her maid and great-aunt. The lamp squeaked and tilted with each pitch and roll of the vessel. Aunt Virginia eyed it with the same suspicion she'd harbored since Charleston.

"This voyage will be my death." Aunt fluttered a plump hand before her pallid face.

Elizabeth gritted her teeth rather than point out that her great-aunt was the one who had insisted on joining them. Instead she forced a smile. "Soon we will reach home."

Home. Her stomach knotted at the thought of what awaited

her there. Charlie. The terrible void that Mother's death had left. She took as deep a breath as her stays would allow, but neither the pain nor the stale cabin air could remove the crushing numbness that had gripped her since they'd received the news.

She brushed at the wrinkles in the black crape skirt and then grabbed the bunk's frame when the ship pitched sharply forward. Her chair scraped an inch or two across the plank floor before the vessel righted.

"We're going to drown," wailed her great-aunt, who occupied the lower bunk. The sixty-five-year-old woman had kept company with a bucket from the moment they'd left Charleston harbor. Other than the stop in Saint Augustine and the brief pause at Fort Dallas to take on a pilot, she either moaned or complained for every one of the six hundred miles.

Elizabeth had lost patience five hundred and fifty miles ago.

"We're perfectly safe." She said the words automatically now. Her mother—Aunt Virginia's niece—had suffered the agonies of yellow fever. What was a little tossing about on rough seas?

"But those terrible noises. It sounds like the ship is going to break to bits."

Though the noise that had jolted Elizabeth out of troubled slumber *had* sounded unusual, admitting it would send Aunt Virginia into hysterics. So again, she consoled. "Those noises are normal aboard ship." Two sea voyages might not have made her an expert, but she had heard the creaks and groans of many a moored vessel when she was a girl. "A seafarer grows accustomed to such things."

"Perhaps sailors do, but not us poor women." Aunt launched into the next part of her endlessly repetitive argument. "I don't understand why the captain didn't offer us his quarters. We

would have been much more comfortable there. If Jonathan knew, he would dispense with the man at once.”

Elizabeth tried again to emulate her mother’s patience. After all, that was the entire purpose of the voyage, to prove to Father that she had matured into a proper young woman. “We are fortunate the mates offered us their room.”

“You make it sound as if they gave up fine accommodations.” Aunt Virginia swept a plump arm to encompass every corner of the cabin. “Two bunks!” She sniffed. “Straw mattresses full of fleas.”

“It’s better than sleeping in hammocks with the crew.”

“They wouldn’t dare. My nephew owns this ship.”

“I understand he owns a share of it,” Elizabeth corrected, “along with other investors.”

“Well, that’s neither here nor there.” Aunt Virginia heaved a petulant sigh and dabbed at her mouth with a lace-trimmed handkerchief. “I simply hope we arrive before I perish.”

Elizabeth’s maid, Anabelle, rolled her eyes, the whites stark against her caramel complexion. “Ain’t no one be doin’ no dyin’.”

Anabelle spoke flawless English and could read and write, but Aunt Virginia looked suspiciously on any Negro who had learning. After the first whipping, Anabelle had chosen to play the role of a simpleton in front of Aunt Virginia. Elizabeth had been indignant at the rough treatment, but Anabelle begged her to let the matter rest. Raising a fuss would only make her life more difficult.

“When will this end?” Aunt moaned.

“It won’t be much longer.” Elizabeth offered her a sip of lukewarm tea.

“I don’t want any of your tea. It’s dreadful, probably moldy.

Heaven knows how they keep anything dry on this ship. Why, water is running down the wall.”

Elizabeth’s gaze shot to the wall behind the bunk. “Impossible.”

“Don’t you believe me?” Aunt harrumphed. “The bedding is positively damp.”

“But that’s an interior wall.” She reached across her aunt and did indeed feel dampness. That wasn’t good. She needed something to distract everyone from this disturbing discovery. “Let’s read from the Bible. I’ll fetch a lamp.”

Aunt waved a hand. “Have your girl bring it.”

While Elizabeth pulled her aunt’s Bible from her trunk, Anabelle unfastened the lamp from its holder. With sure steps, she carried it to Elizabeth.

“Would you be wantin’ me ta hold it for you, Miss Lizbeth?”

“I suppose you must.” She was grateful her aunt didn’t mention again the inconvenience of not having a lamp near the bunks. “Bring your stool near.”

Once everyone was situated, Aunt Virginia suggested a passage. “Shall we have the parable of the prodigal son, Elizabeth dear?”

More like the prodigal daughter. No doubt her aunt had chosen that particular parable to point out Elizabeth’s faults. After all, she was now returning home without having accomplished the one thing her parents had insisted upon—marriage. She regretted adding yet one more disappointment to her father’s heavy burden.

“Perhaps the wedding feast at Cana would be better?” Aunt hinted with a gleam in her eye.

Even worse. Elizabeth had discouraged every suitor who’d called at her aunt’s house. Aunt scolded that she was too par-

ticular, but none could compare to Rourke. Elizabeth had tried, truly she had, but the men of Charleston paled alongside a daring wrecker.

“Cana it shall be,” Aunt decided. “A wedding always lifts one’s spirits. Soon you’ll be out of mourning and able to accept suitors, though with one exception I can’t imagine there being a single respectable gentleman in such a godforsaken wilderness.”

“It is not a wilderness, and there are plenty of respectable gentlemen.”

Aunt lifted an imperious eyebrow. “That is not what your father wrote, and considering his . . . well, we shall leave it at that. Your father would know as well as anyone the quality of eligible suitors in Key West. That is why they insisted you come to Charleston. Poor Helen.” She sniffed and dabbed at her nose. “She would be so disappointed.”

The mention of Elizabeth’s mother cast a pall over her spirits. She had indeed disappointed Mother, who had encouraged her to make a good match. Yet her parents had dismissed as frivolous the only match that mattered.

The wind howled and the seas battered the hull, but nature’s tempests could not surpass the storm in Elizabeth’s heart. For four years she’d tried unsuccessfully to forget Rourke O’Malley. Soon she would set foot in his home port. There she could not avoid him. He might appear on the wharves or any street. One look into those green eyes and all other suitors would fade into the background. Once again she would be at odds with Father.

He did not like wreckers as a rule. He opposed them in admiralty court. But he didn’t truly know Rourke. He didn’t know the strength of his character. He didn’t know what Rourke had done for her.

Shame colored her cheeks.

The ship rolled violently, throwing Elizabeth out of the past. Anabelle fell off her stool. The lamp tipped and wobbled when her elbow hit the floor. Aunt Virginia clutched the counterpane to her throat, her eyes wide and cap askew. Elizabeth grabbed the teapot, ready to douse the flame, but Anabelle regained her balance and set the lamp on the desk.

Elizabeth took a shuddering breath and set down the teapot.

“Best get that lamp back in the holder before you drop it,” Aunt Virginia commanded.

“Yes, Miz Virginia.”

“A well-trained girl is sure of foot,” Aunt said to Elizabeth. “Training and discipline are essential. Remember that. The mistress must take command.”

“Mother always had the servants’ respect without barking out orders.”

“I’m sure she did, dear.” Aunt patted her hand. “But you haven’t had the benefit of her instruction. Follow my lead, and you will do well.”

Elizabeth could not read in such poor light. She put Aunt’s Bible back in her trunk. “But things are different in Key West.”

“Nonsense.” Aunt smoothed the counterpane. “Servants are the same everywhere. You must show your Mr. Finch that you can manage a household.”

Elizabeth cringed. Aunt considered him the only eligible suitor in Key West, but she found the man insufferably dull. “He is not my Mr. Finch.”

“He soon will be, if I’m not mistaken.”

Percival Finch had paid numerous visits to Aunt Virginia’s house last winter and spring. Though he was perfectly mannered and possessing passable looks, Elizabeth had found him

even more devoid of spirit than other callers—and utterly unlike Rourke. All eyes turned to Captain O’Malley when he entered a room. If not for Mr. Finch’s gaudy waistcoats, a person could forget he was there. His departure had been a relief until she learned her father had hired him as clerk.

“I wish Mr. Finch hadn’t left before you decided to return to Key West.” Aunt Virginia sighed for what must be the hundredth time. “He is such pleasant company and so dedicated to your comfort. He would have made an excellent escort on this voyage. He will make a fine match for you. Your father agrees. I’m certain you will get reacquainted in no time.”

“My father agrees?”

Aunt nodded. “Your mother did too.”

Again the ship pitched forward, but that was not nearly as alarming as Aunt Virginia’s news. If Mother and Father approved of Mr. Finch, she would never be rid of the man.

Aunt Virginia pressed her handkerchief to her mouth. “I do wish this were over.”

“Mr. Buetsch indicated we might well arrive in Key West by morning.”

“Morning! We’ll be dead by morning thanks to this terrible storm.”

Elizabeth rose, irritated at the thought of facing Mr. Finch again. “It’s just an autumn squall.”

“Like four years ago? That was no squall, was it?”

The painful memory of that day came back as vividly as if it had just occurred. Once she’d reached her brother, she’d tried to wake him, had held up his head as the waters rose, but she could neither rouse him nor pry his legs from under the heavy piece of roof. The water had risen higher and higher until it lapped against Charlie’s shoulders. She’d given up hope. Then

out of the mists Rourke had appeared, strong and valiant, like a knight of King Arthur's court.

"That wasn't a squall," she whispered. "It was a hurricane."

That hurricane had ripped apart the island and their lives. Only a handful of buildings had survived unscathed. Their house had lost its roof, and many of their belongings had washed away. But the greatest damage could not be measured in missing boards or rotted clothing.

After depositing Elizabeth on high ground, Rourke had gone back to get her brother. Though she clung to the mangrove trees through the night and into the next morning, neither one returned. Only when the clouds retreated and the full devastation could be seen did she learn he'd taken Charlie to the now-roofless Marine Hospital. There doctors saved his life but not the use of his legs.

The ship lurched again, this time with a grinding crunch, but Elizabeth barely felt it. Her aunt's mouth moved, but she didn't hear it. She heard only the sobbing of her mother as she'd held Charlie's motionless hand.

"Why would he have gone to the harbor in such weather?" Mother had cried.

Elizabeth had stood silent, unable to admit her guilt. The seconds had stretched on, broken only by the whistle of wind and muted sobs. She tried to confess but could not bring the words to her lips.

Then Rourke answered. "He came to see me."

Elizabeth squeezed her eyes shut. Rourke had taken the blame, and she'd let him. She drew in a ragged breath and blinked fast to keep back the tears.

At first she'd felt relief. Then the repercussions had begun. Father directed his anger at Rourke. Mother spent her days

nursing her son back to life. Elizabeth sailed to Charleston as planned. She'd gone gladly rather than face the truth of her choices.

Now the truth waited for her, poised like an eel ready to strike.

Yet as she felt water soak through her cloth slippers and heard the hull creak ominously, she wondered if she'd ever have to face it.



“Fool,” Rourke O’Malley muttered, spyglass to his eye. “They’re heading straight for the reef.”

Either the schooner’s master hadn’t hired a pilot, or he’d secured an incompetent one. Any seaman familiar with these waters knew better than to set that course in heavy weather. The schooner was large enough to carry both passengers and cargo. Against the backdrop of the last gasps of light along the western horizon, he could make out that her sails were tattered. The foremast had snapped off, and the vessel was sitting low. Either her holds were filled with heavy cargo, or she was taking on water.

He tensed with the familiar rush of fear and exhilaration. A wrecked vessel could bring riches to the wreck master—the first to reach the foundered ship—but it also brought danger. Many a wrecker had perished salvaging a ship. Some slipped overboard and were crushed between the two vessels. Divers drowned when the wreck shifted and pinned them in the submerged holds.

An active wrecker’s career was short, and Rourke had already spent over a decade in the trade. He needed just one good award to set up as a merchant and ship owner, where the most profit

could be earned. One valuable wreck would give him enough to build his own warehouse. Then he would collect the fees, rather than hand them over to the men who currently controlled the wharves and commerce in Key West.

“She be sittin’ low,” called out John Malley, his longtime chief mate from back home in the Bahamas. Upon emancipation, John had taken a shortened form of Rourke’s family name rather than that of the master who’d cruelly abused him. “Prob’ly holed.”

Rourke wasn’t willing to concede. “The hatch covers might be loose, making her take on water.”

John grinned, his teeth white in the gleam of the lantern. No words needed to be exchanged for Rourke to know that his friend also dreamed of treasure. Few Negroes could ever hope to gain wealth. Even after emancipation, only the most menial jobs were open to them. Across the Caribbean, slavery and the lack of opportunity had driven many to piracy, including the infamous Black Caesar. Though Negroes were prized as divers, most wreckers paid them a pittance. Rourke paid each man according to his skill and effort, not the color of his skin.

Some in Key West, like Charles Benjamin, suggested a Negro hadn’t the wits to serve as mate, but Rourke wouldn’t have any other man. John knew these waters. He could read the skies, and he wasn’t afraid to dive wrecks. Once Rourke stepped down from captaining his ship, John would make a fine master.

Rourke squinted into the wind. Though he’d anchored the *Windsprite* in a sheltered cove, the swirling tempest whipped even the shallows into peaks. This was shaping up to be the storm of the season.

“She be goin’ down,” John said. As if in answer, the schooner

lurched oddly. “She hit da reef.” If she wasn’t taking on water before, she would be now.

Rourke held his breath and watched. “I think she’s still moving.”

John shook his head.

Rourke couldn’t give up hope. He peered through the glass. The schooner’s deck and cabin lights still bobbed forward. Darkness would soon swallow all but those lights. If the reef got her, even the lights would vanish. “We’d best lend assistance. On that heading, she’ll only get in worse trouble.”

“All hands on deck!” John rubbed his hands together. “We be gettin’ fed tonight.”

Fed. The distasteful term had circulated aboard Rourke’s ship for years. When a vessel foundered and broke up, Rourke and his men stripped the cargo and rigging from its bones and ferried off any survivors.

Please, Lord, let them all live.

Rourke swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. With every passing year it got harder to witness the drownings, especially the children. No child should die before his time, and drowning was the worst death of all. To gasp for air and draw in only water. He shuddered as the pale form of a motionless boy flashed through his mind. Little Charlie Benjamin.

Rourke, you’re getting soft. Maybe it was time to retire. Just one big salvage award and he would. Maybe this would be the one.

He scanned the charcoal-gray horizon for other wreckers.

“We be alone,” John confirmed.

He was right. Rourke couldn’t spot a single twinkle of light or splotch of black that marked a wrecker in pursuit. He lowered the spyglass. If the schooner wrecked, he’d be wreck master. He

would garner the largest share of the prize in wreckers' court. He gripped the gunwale as his pulse pounded.

His crew prepared to haul anchor and set sail. The sloop rocked wildly despite its sheltered anchorage. After all these years afloat, Rourke barely noticed it, but the new man, Tom Worthington, clung to the gunwale as he inched his way aft.

"Lights out, Captain?" Tom called out with eager anticipation.

"No!" Rourke barked. "We don't do things that way on this ship."

Some masters and ship owners claimed wreckers used lights, or lack of them, to lure vessels into danger. That might have been true in the lawless era two decades ago. But times had changed, and every wrecker was now licensed and had to abide by the rules. Break them, and the judge would yank that license and leave a man to fishing and sponging to eke out an existence. Poor exchange for the chance at wealth.

"Flash the danger warning," he commanded. "We'll caution the schooner to change course and steer clear of the reef." It might be too late, but he had to try.

Tom shouted out, "Aye, aye, Captain," and proceeded to obey orders.

Rourke smiled at the young man's eagerness. Soon enough Tom would learn that a wrecked ship brought tragedy and heartache, not just adventure and riches.

"Repeat until they acknowledge the signal," he said before heading below deck.

If the schooner didn't heed his warning, he'd have a long night ahead of him. Best prepare for survivors.



Elizabeth took deep breaths to still her pounding heart. The cabin was situated topside aft. A wet cabin floor did not mean the ship was sinking, merely that the seams weren't well fitted or caulked. Yet the creaking and grinding of the hull did not sound normal. She knew too well the hazards of the Florida Straits. Wreckers patrolled these waters for a reason. Ships frequently ran aground on the reef. Sometimes people died. She leaned against the cabin door and braced herself as the vessel pitched again.

On the other side of the door, several crew members shouted frantically.

Prickles danced up and down Elizabeth's back. Ordinary seamen should not be outside her door. In addition to the mates' cabin that she and Aunt Virginia now occupied, the great cabin contained the captain's quarters and officers' dining saloon. Those shouts had not come from any of the officers. The presence of crewmen meant that the structure was badly compromised.

Her throat tightened. For the first time in six hundred miles of catastrophic predictions, Aunt Virginia might be right.

She ran her hand down the varnished mahogany door to the brass latch. If she could look out that door for just a moment, she could tell what was going on.

Anabelle slipped close enough to whisper, "Don't let Miss Virginia see what you're doing."

That only made Elizabeth's pulse pound faster. Anabelle had heard the shouts too. She also suspected disaster. If Aunt knew, she would go into hysterics. But Elizabeth had to risk it. She needed to know what they faced. She took a deep breath and drew the latch.

Anabelle put her hand on the door as Aunt Virginia bent over the bucket again. "Send me to fetch the first mate."

“Mr. Buetsch would be busy.” Elizabeth pushed aside Anabelle’s hand. She would never again risk anyone’s life but her own.

Before Anabelle could react, she flung open the door. Water sprayed through the opening, beading onto her crape gown and dampening the curls Anabelle had so carefully pressed this morning. The cook had protested that the galley stove was not to be used for hair tongs, but Anabelle had insisted until the cook gave in. No one would scold them now, for at the end of the passageway the outer door was ripped off its hinges. Water rushed over the deck. Sailors lugged a canvas knotted with cord to starboard. It could have only one use: to plug a breach in the hull that could not be reached from inside the ship.

“Where are you going?” Aunt Virginia cried from behind. “Don’t leave me.”

Elizabeth closed the door and pressed her forehead to the smooth wood. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Though Anabelle ran a comforting hand down her back, Elizabeth could not forget what she’d seen. Barring a miracle, the ship would not last the night. The crew was too busy to consider the plight of three women. Their lives depended on her.

What could she do? Until the captain gave orders to abandon ship, they were expected to stay in the cabin, but Elizabeth could not sit and wait. She knew how to sail and swim. She understood the workings of a vessel and what happened when a ship sank. She must act, but how?

She paced the length of the narrow room, pausing only to glance out the darkened window, through which the lamplight illuminated the spray of the waves.

Anabelle moved to close the shutters.

Elizabeth waved her off. “The air is too thick to close them.”

“Why don’t we play whist?” her great-aunt suggested. “It will take our minds off this dreadful tossing, and we can take turns playing the extra hand.”

Games at such a time? If the worst happened, they needed to be ready. There would be no time then to gather their belongings.

She faced her aunt. “We must prepare ourselves.”

“I’ve already gotten out the cards.” Aunt held up a deck. “Your trunk can serve as a table. Have your girl move it closer.”

“I wasn’t speaking of cards.” Elizabeth didn’t want to terrify her aunt, but ignorance could prove deadly. She could not lose one of the last female blood relations in her family. “We need to prepare in the event the ship founders.”

“Founders?” Aunt Virginia paled, but no hysterics yet.

Elizabeth didn’t give her time to gather steam. “We need to put our valuables into something small enough to carry.”

“What are you talking about, dear? The stevedores will take care of our trunks.”

Elizabeth choked back frustration. Her great-aunt thought she was talking about their arrival in Key West. She looked around for something small and light that would hold their most important possessions. “There are no stevedores aboard ship.”

“Of course not. The crew will bring our trunks onto deck.” Aunt Virginia rearranged the pillows behind her back.

Pillows. Of course. “A pillowcase would work beautifully. Hand me one of your pillows.”

Aunt eyed her suspiciously. “What did you see out there?”

“I’m simply saying that we should prepare ourselves to walk calmly to the ship’s boat if we are instructed to do so.”

Aunt Virginia sucked in her breath. “The ship’s going down?”

“Hopefully not, but in the event of trouble, we should be

ready.” She threw out the one reason her aunt would accept. “You would not want to lose your pearls.”

Aunt’s eyes rounded, and her jowls shook. “Call for Captain Cross.”

“We can’t call for the captain. He is busy with . . . more pressing matters.”

“I won’t hear of anyone thieving about Jonathan’s ship.”

“I didn’t say there were thieves aboard. I simply want us to prepare in case we must abandon ship.” There, she’d said it.

Her aunt leaned back in disbelief. “You’re exaggerating. Jonathan would never send us on any ship but the best.”

Elizabeth growled with frustration. “All I want is a pillowcase.” If only Aunt hadn’t taken every pillow in the room to prop herself up on the bunk, Elizabeth could have gotten one herself.

At that moment the oil lamp sputtered and died, plunging them into darkness.

All three women gasped.

“Don’t move.” It took a moment for Elizabeth’s eyes to adjust to the darkness. Nothing had changed. The sea still crashed against the hull, and the ship still plowed forward. Perhaps the crew had managed to plug the hole in the hull. Perhaps they would reach Key West as planned.

“What do we do now?” Aunt Virginia whispered.

“We wait.”

Aunt apparently thought she meant wait for death, for her whimper was followed by a series of poorly suppressed sobs. “I don’t want to die here, away from family. At least poor Helen had her husband and son at her side.”

Her words tugged at Elizabeth. Aunt Virginia was terrified—not of what might happen to them but of being alone. That was how Elizabeth had felt from the moment she learned of

her mother's death. Never again could she ask her dear mama for advice. Never again would her mama comfort her past a nightmare or disappointment.

"It's all right." Elizabeth navigated to her aunt's side. Sitting on the bunk, she embraced the elderly woman. "I won't leave you." She choked back a strangled sob of her own.

"Poor dear, I wasn't thinking. I should never have mentioned your mother's passing. Try to remember her beauty and grace."

Tears stung Elizabeth's eyes. "I've nearly forgotten her appearance." She fingered the tiny miniature she kept in her watch pocket. That image had been painted when the bloom of youth colored Mother's cheeks. She had aged over the years, losing that bright flush and adding lines of care around her eyes and mouth until she bore little resemblance to the girl on the miniature. "She was beautiful, wasn't she?"

"As pretty as they come." Aunt Virginia patted her back. "You remind me of her. I seem to recall that she had a handsome portrait painted upon her wedding day. Surely that still hangs in your father's house."

Elizabeth wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "It suffered damage in the storm, but I believe Father sent it for repair." Her attention was drawn to a light blinking outside the open window. Not only blinking, but in a very specific pattern, like a lighthouse. Had they reached the Key West light? Caroline had written that it was the only light that had been rebuilt thus far.

She rushed to the window. "Look! Lights. We're safe!"

At that moment the ship shuddered, pitched, and shuddered again before rolling severely to starboard. Aunt Virginia screamed. Wood splintered. Elizabeth went flying. Her hands smacked against solid wood, and the impact shivered all the way to her shoulders. Everything, including Elizabeth, slid toward

the interior bulkhead. The teapot rolled over her hand and crashed against the wall. Something large scraped past her leg, landing with a thud.

Then all movement stopped.

The wind still howled. Rain and sea spray pelted the ship, but the creaking and scraping of the vessel took on an ominous tone.

“What happened?” Aunt cried.

Even as Elizabeth struggled to right herself, she had no doubt. They'd struck the reef.